CINEMA FOR CHILDREN IN POLAND – A BASTARD CHILD OF POPULAR CULTURE, AN ELEMENT OF CULTURAL EDUCATION

Abstract. In the mid-1950s, film sealed its place in the world of art with the voice of essentialist theories. At the same time, it did not give up its status as mass entertainment, which it had acquired at the beginning of cinematography’s development. Over the years, it has also developed its position as an educational medium, and its importance and impact on culture created the need for film studies. And although knowledge of film and cinematography is being introduced to school curricula, not only in Poland, the negative view that film is purely for entertainment purposes still prevails. Focusing on the subject outlined, the article refers to the results of research on film knowledge among children and young people, and on the cultural choices (using data on film choices) of parents and caregivers, to analyze the place and role of film in children’s and young people’s development.

Keywords: film, film education, film art, children and young people’s attitude towards film.

Introduction

For some, film represents sheer entertainment, while for others it is an aesthetic and intellectual feast, and sometimes it may successfully combine both of these functions at the same time. Film-making, mainly due to the reflection carried out within the discipline of film theory, had to earn the name of the tenth Muse. Even though film, at first considered tawdry entertainment, guaranteed its place in the pantheon of the Muses in the middle of the 20th century, gaining the status of an art form, the diversity of film genres and the fact that particular film genres have explicit connotations with entertainment have had an impact on the way film and its significance are perceived nowadays.
A cinematic piece of art

In 1936, a headline of the *New York Herald Tribune* read: “A Lecturer at The Metropolitan treats films as genuine art”, which clearly stated the attitude of the media and American society of the interwar period towards film. It was an article regarding a lecture given by Erwin Panofsky at The Metropolitan Museum (Lipiński 2010: 152). The lecture itself provides an example of the reflection, prevailing until the mid-20th century, that aimed to place film in the pantheon of the Muses.

Within film theory we can distinguish two ways of establishing the artistic character of film-making. One of them is based on the creational value of this art form, that is, complying with the requirements of an intentionally built structure (independent of external reality), which is concerned with creating its own language by the means of film, perceived as a medium (Kwiatkowski 1978: 132). The second one sees film as a form of realistic art, whose key artistic feature is the attempt to reflect reality as a carbon copy (Kwiatkowski 1978: 132).

The pioneers of film theory, who do not only hail from the circle filmmakers, but also include many philosophers or literary scholars, attempted to answer the question: “Can film be considered as art, and if so, what is its place in the world of art?”. The answer to this question was sought by comparing film to other art forms. Roman Ingarden (1893–1970) placed film at the intersection of literature, painting and theater (Ingarden 2005: 161). Imitating reality constituted the foundation of an artistic film spectacle. This imitation could not provide viewers with full conviction regarding the reality [author’s note: authenticity] of what is depicted in a movie, as it would disqualify it from having an artistic character (Ingarden 2005: 159). Film, therefore, is a game played between imitating reality and escaping from it.

Ricciotto Canudo (1879–1923), a musicologist, playwright, author of *Triumph of the Cinematograph* (1908), distinguished seven arts, recognizing film as one of them. He claimed that film contains a hint of painting, poetry, music; it is dynamic and static at the same time. According to Canudo, the most primaeval forms of art were architecture and music. The former gave birth to painting and fine arts, while the latter – poetry and dance. All the enumerated forms of art interweave, thanks to the invention of the cinematograph, which constitutes a “total” form of art. The cinematograph merged arts absolutely. The futurists (Helman, Ostaszewski 2010: 16–18) were of the same opinion, acknowledging film as the most significant “tool used in the fight for the new face of art”, as it creates a world free of laws governing true reality and does not bear the burden of tradition, which in futurism was perceived as a great asset. Film synthesizes the arts, engages all the senses, as was argued in *Manifesto: The Futurist Cinema* by F.T. Marinetti, B. Corra, E. Settimelli, A. Ginna, G. Balla and R. Chiti. For this reason, cinema was regarded as the most significant of all arts, a total art, uniting science with art. Film, as the manifesto announced, is a multi-expressive symphony (a filmmaker combines the talents of a poet, painter, playwright and an actor) a joyful, alogical synthesis of
every aspect of life. Futurists were especially allured by motion in film, as they perceived it as a sign of a new era. They also discerned the potential of film as a medium of expression of their manifesto.

The philosopher Hugo Münsterberg (1863–1916), on the other hand, when studying the influence of film on its recipient, proved that the artistic character of film arises from its overcoming sensation of realness. He expounded the doctrine of the purity and specificity of material. The essence of film and the reason for the artistic character of this medium is, according to him, the fact that the deformation of reality is inscribed in the medium. The fundamental condition of art is, as Münsterberg claims, to have a clear awareness of the unreality of an artistic production. Bearing resemblance to reality is contradictory to the idea of film as pure art. The creation of light forms is not a crystallization of the idea of reality. The objective of film is an aesthetic experience (Langdale 2002).

The art theorist Rudolf Arnheim (1904–2007) analyzed film-making through the theory of the “pure form of art”. Pure form, according to him, realizes the principles of the medium. It is supposed to reveal not what is expressed through its agency, but how it is expressed. Works of art should, as Arnheim argues, reveal the specifics of the medium used to create them – the visible features. The core of art is artistic creation, expressing the spirit of an artist creating the form. The more authentic this creative act is, and the purer the art is, the rawer the physical material is. He treated film as a photographic reproduction of art. The raw material of film art is the technological aspects of the medium. The material of film is its limits and the factors that enable an excellent illusion of reality, not reality itself. The artistic capabilities of cinema derive from its reproductive constraints. The constraints may encompass: the projection of three-dimensional objects and forms onto a two-dimensional surface, depth reduction, lighting and lack of colour (black and white films), image and screen borders, as well as lack of time-spatial continuity caused by film editing and lack of the extravisual world of the senses, and a wide range of stimuli. These elements constitute the imperfections of the medium, which are advantageous, as they contribute to deforming the world. Raw film stimuli paired with perceptive predispositions enables perception. The accurate reconstruction of reality is not necessary, as the viewer creates reality from the means available. The art of film-making is a schematizing vision of the world. Instead of reproducing reality, this art form models it (Arnheim 1961).

Jurij Tynianow (1884–1943), a writer, author, screenplay writer, representative of a Russian formal school, also addressed the issue of constraints in film. He compared film imperfections to ancient sculpture. He viewed its poverty, flatness and lack of colour in a positive way, as a convincing medium of expression, just like the imperfection and crassitude of ancient sculpture (Tynianow 1972: 67–68).

The creative possibilities of the cinema as the determinant of its artistic potential was indicated by the representatives of the Soviet montage theory: Wsiewołod Pudowkin, Siergiej Eisenstein, as well as American art house film: Maya Deren,
Stan Brakhage and theorists drawing on linguistic, structural or semiotic premises (Kwiatkowski 1978: 132).

Film as an art form was interpreted through juxtaposition with photography. Boris Eichenbaum (1886–1959) asserted that film, which remains at the same level as photography, is not art, as it is too close to nature. Photography in motion ceases to have any connection to reality and becomes autotelic art, since its material is constructed and collated by the means of various measures. Photography, as he argues, is a colloquial language, typical for everyday life and naturalism. Whereas film is a poetic language, due to its artificiality (Eichenbaum 1974: 7–8).

The possibility of reproducing reality as a factor supporting film artistry occupied the central point of concern in the theories of Andre Bazin (1918–1958) and Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966). Bazin claimed that “the objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making” (Bazin 2012: 227) and “the aesthetic potential of photography resides in its power to reveal reality” (Bazin 2012: 228). Film becomes “something that snatches time for the sake of photographic objectivity”. The mere preservation of objects at a certain time does not satisfy him (Bazin 2012: 227). It is worth mentioning that Bazin constructed his theory in the context of the then novel phenomenon of movies with sound and colour, as a result of which he concentrated on the technical development of film, seeking some artistic merits in its realism. It is not insignificant to note that his theory crystallized together with the development of the French New Wave, with auteur film being a major strand. Auteur theory, on the other hand, placed the greatest importance on the reality filmed. Alicja Helman in her Introduction to Film Theory acknowledges that Kracauer was above all a theorist of a documentary movement, as creative film essentially denied its raison d’être (Kracauer 2008: 7). According to Kracauer, whose influence on the so-called realistic theory of film cannot be called into question, “film will draw close to art, or maybe even become art, only when it does not deny its photographic origins” (Kwiatkowski 1978: 138). Yet, realism constitutes the aesthetic value of photography (Kracauer 2008: 40).

The theoretical film concept described above in order to reflect briefly on the essence and function of cinema developed until the 1950s, and was closely connected with essentialism. It aimed at theoretical empowerment of film as an art form. The abovementioned ideas depict how the artistic character of film were asserted. The importance of this issue gradually faded since systems theories started to develop in the second half of the 20th century. Mass culture had a major impact on the evolution of the cinema, and the issue of its artistic character was discussed once again, firstly in terms of analogue video technology, and later of digital media.
Film and popular culture

Perceiving film as an art form did not exclude its analysis in the context of mass culture, and then popular culture. From the beginning of its existence, cinematography was considered to be tawdry entertainment targeted at the masses who demanded attractions. The interpretation of this fact may have a different, sometimes rather extreme, character. Film is perceived as nondemanding entertainment for everyone, appealing to the mediocre tastes of the recipients. At the same time, it is also analyzed as a magical medium which allows people to escape from reality, to move to a different time and place, or which possesses immense social poignancy and innumerable enthusiasts, which in the field of film studies has been analyzed by system theories (the so-called grand theories), and has been adeptly employed by propaganda films.

Even though film theory comprehensively concentrated on the issue of its interpretation as art, I have the impression that the place of film in culture in a broad sense, has not been directly and unambiguously determined by film theory. It appears to be quite clear, taking into consideration the fact that film theorists have never had to prove its pertinence as an element of culture, however it is clearly impossible to assign it an unambiguous place in this culture (Hollywood film and avant-garde film occupy different places).

Film, on the other hand, has faced a great deal of criticism as an essential element of culture. Apart from attributing it a merely entertainment character, the tendency to oversimplify the message, appealing to the mediocre tastes of audiences, film has been heavily criticized for the automation and technicization of the creative process from which it initially emerged, as well as being treated as a money-making industry. Therefore, film has been criticized for being sheer entertainment for the masses, for breaking away from its artistic tradition, and for being the embodiment of capitalism. Thus, the Frankfurt school treated film as a branch of the cultural industry criticized by them. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno perceived film as a triumph of investment capital, business, and an ideology validating kitsch (Horkheimer, Adorno 2010: 124). Walter Benjamin shared the opinion that the mechanical reproduction of an artwork eliminates its special aura. The reproduction of artworks and films, as he asserted, had repercussions on traditional forms of art (Benjamin 1972: 153). Benjamin viewed the “positive” social value of film with incomprehension, reminding us about its “cathartic”, “destructive aspect”, which “nullifies the traditional value of cultural heritage” (Benjamin 1972: 155).

With the arrival of the age of television, followed by the Internet, film in its cinema form has been elevated and is no longer perceived as only belonging to mass culture. In my view, film, like no other media, has proven that considering culture in two opposing categories – high culture and mass culture – is inadequate, proving that the mass media, taking into consideration its technological dimension, may form a part of elite culture, provide an aesthetic experience and encourage intellectual
effort. My intention in writing this paper is not to describe shifts in reflection on film. I would purely like to highlight the fact that the transformation of perceiving the mass culture contributed to, at least in theory, a change in the approach to film.

Interestingly, however, cinema is not capable of liberating itself from stereotypes. For decades Hollywood was viewed from our perspective merely as a dream factory, unable to provide viewers with any intellectual content, and European film awards were considered to be more prestigious than the American Oscars. This evaluation concerned – and probably still does – the system of film distribution. Elite arthouse cinemas were contrasted with “plastic” multiplex cinemas. This situation has been somewhat verified by the market and increasingly aware recipients. Arthouse cinemas, governed by the law of demand, reach for the repertoire characteristic for multiplex cinemas, and on the other hand, multiplex cinemas have diversified their offer, so that more demanding viewers are able to find something to their tastes.

**Film as an educational element**

Our modern culture could be characterized as having an audiovisual character. Therefore, film education seems to be an indispensable element of functioning in this culture. Within such education we can distinguish film education, which aims at preparing young people to construe film as an artwork, developing film sensitivity, cultivating the analysis and interpretation of film phenomena, as well as education via film, that is, developing cognitive curiosity, sensitivity and active social attitudes.

Recent educational reforms in Poland introduced film education to the core curriculum in primary school and secondary school – which encourages teachers to exploit film materials while teaching other subjects, namely: Polish Language, Foreign Language, History, Social Studies, Culture Studies, Music, Art, Ethics, Philosophy, Family Life Education, and during the Form Tutor Period.

Film education may also be introduced while teaching extracurricular classes – in the form of an educational project, a school film club or a field trip to the cinema. The operative core curriculum does not assign any particular place for this education, but it allows a certain space to incorporate it.

Core Curriculum regulations may make teachers more sensitive to the possibility of using this means of expression in their work. They also regulate the scope of knowledge regarding film that students should acquire. The idea of the abovementioned core curriculum is to prepare students to distinguish the elements

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1 Looking at today’s digitalized, networked culture, shaped by the Internet, film as a medium in its analogue form seems to be outdated. It turns out that film found its feet in the digital world.


of film works, such as being able to indicate characteristic features and genres. Students get acquainted with the techniques that are used in such works in order to strengthen the message and introduce an appropriate atmosphere – the choice of music, shot, scenography or make-up.

Technological development, the availability of tools that enable not only watching but also creating one’s own audiovisual medium of expression, allows young people to acquire competences connected with filmmaking on their own. A study on literacy conducted by The National Centre for Film Culture in 2018 among pupils of Lodz schools demonstrated that over half of the respondents have their own experience with filmmaking – a fact which is not greatly surprising. At the same time, however, their knowledge regarding film is not too wide. Over 80% of the students are not able to name film genres and over 60% of them could not say what a film producer does. However, the competences of these students when it comes to creating their own films is impressive. At the same time, they employ this medium without any awareness of its history or knowledge of the canon. This might be worrying, as film might be on its way to lose its position in the world of art if the next generations will associate film only with websites like YouTube or Tik Tok.

Even though young people build their film knowledge mostly based on their own experiences, which come from both watching films and their attempts at creating create their own pieces, the presence of film in the school core curriculum testifies to the institutional awareness of the importance of film for young people and children’s development.

Film education is also carried out outside school. In the whole country a number of initiatives in this area have been taken. Year after year, we can observe an increase in the number of film festivals aimed at children and young people. One of the most active is New Horizons, which successfully implements a program called New Horizons for Film Education at schools, on a grand scale. Thematic film screenings are organized within this program, with the screenings preceded by presentations regarding the topic discussed. This film association also organizes Kids Kino, a children’s film festival.

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4 In the quantitative part of the research I refer to, a group of five hundred and twenty-three male and female pupils of primary school (grades 4–8), secondary school and high school took part. In an auditorium questionnaire, students answered questions regarding film knowledge and their experience with creating film forms. The children and youngsters were asked about their interests, their technology use and their cinema visits. Two versions of the questionnaire were devised, each encompassed twenty-two multiple-choice questions in the form of a quiz. The quantitative part was conducted by BBS Question Mark. The author led the quantitative research group. The Film Literacy project’s originator and coordinator in 2018 was Michal Pabiś-Orzeszyna, PhD, in 2019 it was Barbara Fronczkowska. Its aim was to devise a comprehensive audiovisual educational programme. This project gathers a group of experts from various tertiary education institutions in Poland, incl. the ones from Katowice, Kraków, Wrocław, Warsaw and Łódź.

On the initiative of the Polish Film Institute, the Coalition for Film Education was established – an agreement signed by institutions, non-governmental organizations and academic institutions working in the field of cultural education and pedagogical education to encourage the film education (broadly understood) of children and young people. This coalition comprises thirty-two institutions. Following the core curriculum in the area of film education, as well as initiatives taken by certain public cultural institutions and the third sector, entails dealing not only with the emerging desire of young people to create audiovisual messages on a mass scale and their love for short clips, characteristic for Tik Tok, but also with the simplified and harmful perception of film-making adopted by parents and educators.

Film in everyday reflection. The perception of film-making by parents and teachers

Since film theorists have recognized the artistic character of film, and popular culture is no longer viewed as inferior, being associated with film should not be perceived as derogatory. Even though film education is gaining in interest and is contributing to the elevation of the art form, film is still associated with infantile mass entertainment and viewed by adults as a form of entertainment for children and youngsters devoid of any educational value.

The results of a study conducted in 2017 for the National Centre for Culture in Poland suggest that when busy with other tasks, parents allow their children to watch films and treat this entertainment as a form of keeping them busy. Showing films to children is viewed as not contributing to their development and resorting to this form of entertainment may even trigger feelings of guilt and remorse. The Internet is the most popular source of films and parents’ choices are often random,
or result from children’s reactions to what is being shown to them. Films on DVD occupies the last position on a list of tools for supporting children’s development, after video games and mobile applications. Yet, going out to the cinema is a form of a family attraction (declared by the respondents as the most common form of family cultural entertainment), which due to its high price needs to be visually overloaded and action-packed. Disney movies, according to the respondents, guarantee this kind of experience. An animated film watched at the cinema should not resemble one watched at home; parents say. The productions shown during the study, which were quite minimalist in their aesthetics, did not meet this requirement.\(^9\) It is worth mentioning that the respondents were not familiar with any of the films presented beforehand. The aesthetics of the animated films presented was not convincing for the parents. Animated films characterized by the simplicity of drawing, as we can find out from the study report, were associated with the production having a low budget, and thus were considered non-cinematic (Żakowska, Kępińska 2017: 21). This study presents a rather pessimistic role and significance of film in the development of children and young people. Parents do not see the educational, pedagogical and taste-enhancing advantages of film art. They are not familiar with the variety of animated films and cartoons, apart from the ones promoted by mainly American production studios. The offer known to them is associated – though often wrongly – purely with its entertainment function, and therefore, they do not make a selection in terms of educational or aesthetic values when they choose a film to play to their children. To put it simply, film at home is perceived as necessary evil (a form of entertainment which guarantees peace and quiet, together with safety, while parents are occupied by household chores), and at the cinema it serves the role of family entertainment.

More worryingly, the attitudes of teachers and caregivers towards this issue may raise more concerns. They believe that since children go out to the cinema quite often with their families, there is no need to incorporate film viewing at school. At educational institutions, going to the cinema is treated more like a form of entertainment or a treat (e.g. Saint Nicholas’ Day) rather than cultural development. Taking part in film classes organized by cinemas, or visiting cinemas as an element of school film clubs, seem to be the only exceptions (Żakowska, Kępińska 2017: 54), which confirms the validity of promoting film education by institutions cooperating with educational institutions. As going to the cinema is not the most common and willingly chosen form of culture when it comes to working with children at schools and kindergartens, teachers – as indicated by the abovementioned report – do not have great expectations connected with film productions. “The key feature of the chosen movie is its attractiveness for children, especially that quite often going to the cinema is treated as sheer entertainment, teachers are not concerned about its educational value. Moreover, the reactions towards the movies presented in

\(^9\) A set of cartoons and animated films recommended by experts were selected for this study.
the study reveal that teachers are not aware of an interesting, valuable film offer for children” (Żakowska, Kępińska 2017: 78). What is more, teachers do not employ films in their curricula, unless these are set books adaptations. There seems to be a similar situation in nurseries and kindergartens, where teachers avoid playing films to children, assuming that they spend too much time at home having contact with this medium.

Schools are not provided with films or cartoons. Teachers make use of materials received from educational publishing houses and, most commonly, the Internet. No budget is assigned for the purchase of films and cartoons, which is further proof of the fact that the educational value of film is not appreciated.

Concentrating merely on the entertainment character of audiovisual culture (film, in this case) does not facilitate the rational and enabling development of pupils and students with regard to how they relate to this aspect of culture. The qualitative study findings cited above do not allow the scale of this phenomenon among teachers and caregivers to be evaluated, however among the six hundred and two parent respondents, the problem seems to be rather common. Most of them consider playing films to children as their pedagogical failure: *Yes, I allow my children to watch films and cartoons in order to have time for other duties and some rest, however I am aware that it is not the right thing to do.* The alternative attitude declared proudly by parents is a total ban on films and cartoons: *I have no T.V. set at home, I do not let my child use a tablet or computer.* Both of these strategies, considering the fact that we are nowadays living in the era of screens, are limiting for the development of children and youngsters. Allowing children to watch audiovisual products that they choose themselves exposes young people to random interactions with audiovisual culture, yet a total ban on them makes it impossible for them to acquire the audiovisual competences necessary for functioning in today’s culture.

**Conclusion**

Film, as I have hopefully demonstrated, has earned its position in the world of art. There has been a shift in the approach towards popular culture and its artefacts, which allows some elements of film-making to be called sophisticated masterpieces, having little in common with tawdry entertainment, and last but not least, some educational steps in this area have been taken in order to facilitate its reception. Equally, public opinion is still dominated by the perception of film as unsophisticated entertainment. Film has not established its position among other forms of art equal to the theatre or classical visual arts (painting, sculpture), the experience of which – independently from their quality – is elevating (in the cited study concerning the cultural choices of caregivers, parents declared that their children go to the theatre in order to learn social graces, learn how to behave in
“places of culture”). Cinema does not belong to this sacredness. Film, on the other hand, has gained countless fans, who, in all honesty, do not always appreciate the artistic value of the cinema, yet they adore or even worship certain productions. It not only became an element of culture but also dominated it for many years and gave rise to its further advancement towards interactivity, multimediality and the transitivity of the roles of creators and recipients, typical for the Internet era. Thus, not only film education, which on the one hand should allow young people to become familiarized with the history and language of film, but on the other – which is of equal importance – should provide recipients with useful competences when it comes to film technology, at least on the level of creating forms posted on internet platforms, but also educational activities aimed at parents and teachers, whose aim would be to create awareness of the value and potential of motion pictures, is crucial for cinematography to endure and stand its ground in the future.

Bibliography


**Online resources**


**Izabela Franckiewicz-Olczac**

**KINO DLA DZIECI W POLSCE – BĘKART KULTURY POPULARNEJ, ELEMENT EDUKACJI KULTURALNEJ**

**Abstrakt.** Film w połowie lat pięćdziesiątych XX wieku głosem esencjalistycznych teorii filmowych przypieczętował swą przynależność do świata sztuki. Jednocześnie nie zrezygnował z, istniejącej od początku swego rozwoju, etykiety rozrywki dla mas. Na przestrzeni lat wypracował sobie również statut medium edukacyjnego, a jego znaczenie i wpływ na kulturę stworzyły potrzebę edukacji filmowej. I choć wiedza o filmie i kinematografii wprowadzana jest do programów nauczania w szkołach nie tylko w Polsce, nadal pokutuje nacechowane pejoratywnie przekonanie o wyłącznie rozrywkowym charakterze sztuki filmowej. Artykuł koncentrując się na nakreślonej tematyce, odwołuje się do wyników badań dotyczących wiedzy o filmie wśród dzieci i młodzieży oraz wyborów kulturalnych (wykorzystując dane dotyczące wyborów filmowych) opiekunów dzieci w celu analizy miejsca i roli filmu w rozwoju dzieci i młodzieży.

**Słowa kluczowe:** film, edukacja filmowa, sztuka filmowa, dzieci i młodzież wobec filmu, stosunek rodziców do filmów dla dzieci.