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UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Being and becoming European: imagining European cinema for children

Becky Parry

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This article is dedicated to Terry Staples with thanks for his love of children's cinema.

Abstract

The purpose of this edition of the Hillary Place papers, on new directions for educational research, provides a welcome opportunity to reflect and revisit our own work, but also the wider purpose of education research. The work I want to share is an example, not so much of a new focus, but of an attempt to find ways to ensure that my existing research, into children's film and film education, connects to the constituencies I serve, whether that is academics, experienced educators or those working in the children's film industry. I would like to share with colleagues a provocation piece I was commissioned to write for the Children's Film First conference,¹ which took place in September 2015, the culmination of a two year EU funded programme of activity, focused on film for children and film education.

¹ <http://www.childrensfilfirst.com/>

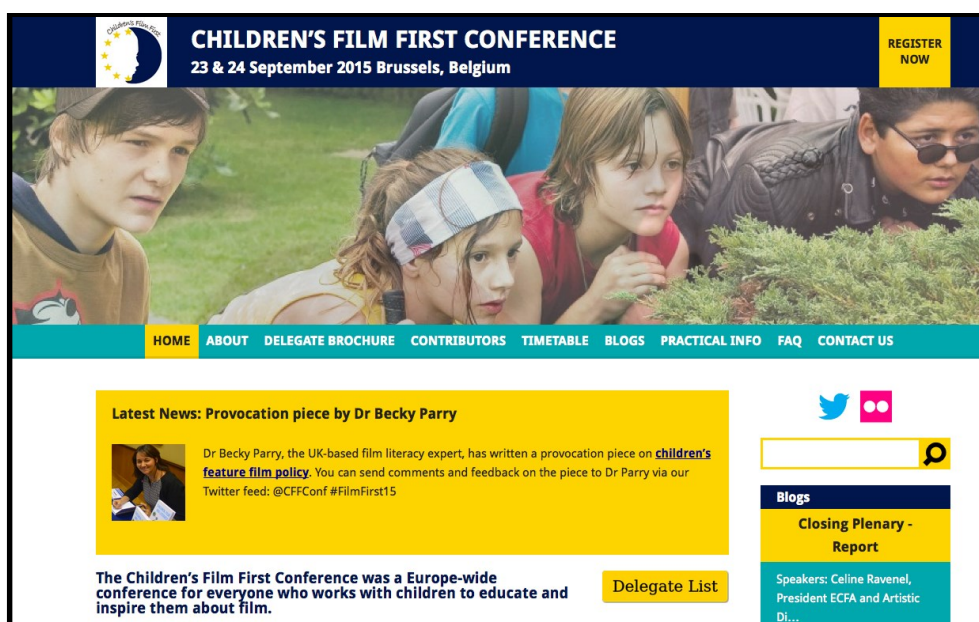
Introduction

In order to make this account more broadly useful, I will reflect very briefly on how the work was commissioned, the process of publishing it and its value. Prior to becoming an academic I was both a teacher and then a film educator in a cinema. My research focus grew out of this professional context. The questions I sought to answer in my, ESRC funded, doctoral research grew from concerns I shared with colleagues in education and in the film and media industry. Following the publication of my rather expensively priced monograph, the number of academic citations I had accrued were modest, no, frankly unimpressive. With the support of a colleague, Alison Moore², in the School of Education, I was able to commission an animated interpretation of my research which was then posted on Vimeo³ and therefore available internationally. It has been accessed by thousands and as a result I was approached by The Children's Media Foundation and The European Children's Film Association, as an authority in the field, to write the piece I share below. For those of you with the time to read it, notice how I have attempted to thread through ideas from the many disciplines which inform my research and my teaching. I have had to relearn to write for a wider audience and I have had to put to one side my more measured, cautious, nuanced approach to writing based on research. Draft upon draft was looked at by colleagues in order to ensure that what was said was compatible with the intentions of the programme of work and informed by recent practice. This was a very different sort of drafting to the tyranny of the minor amendments of journal papers. The paper was then designed and illustrated and made available on the conference website prior to the event. Social media was used extensively to encourage delegates to read and respond.

As a result of this hard work, at the conference itself, delegates from 18 countries referred to this document in their discussions. Although for most of those attending, the aspiration was shared - to provide children with access to a distinctive European film culture - the piece provided a starting point for discussing practical ways that might help us to achieve this goal. Perhaps most important of all, clusters of delegates began to plan new activity, new research, new knowledge sharing and those facilitating the festival were able to connect them to European funders, policy makers and politicians. Although this activity, of itself, may not fulfil the current academic definition of 'impact,' by placing research and expertise within an 'industry' context it became possible to play a role in the growth of new European collaborations, sharing contemporary ideas about children and childhood, education and digital cultures that circulate in parallel circles in research.

² Alison enabled me to use funding I received for consultancy work for this purpose.

³ A video sharing website.



As a woman in academia, I have often found it uncomfortable to appear to promote oneself and I am aware that my text so far may read as a far from modest proposal. However, I have learnt to adjust my thinking and urge colleagues to do so too. It is not ourselves we are, or should be promoting, but our work collectively, the work of our colleagues and of academia generally. Our reputation as a group of professionals is contingent on the links we make and the people we reach out to. It is absolutely incumbent upon us to make our work useful, to situate it in new contexts and not to look too narrowly at where these contexts are. Education and learning, are after all, not exclusive to schools, colleges and universities.

Sometimes in the responsive mode our professionals lives frame for us, we have to look above the parapet of what is a current concern, the buzz from the government based on a dinner party conversation, not least because it will change before we have chance to re-search it. Our current education system is, as we know a problematic construct, and as Alec Clegg predicted in the 1960s only values what we can measure. It may seem rather grandiose, but alongside the inevitable pragmatic approach we adopt to the climate of funding, policy and evaluation of education and education research, it is helpful to take the opportunity to think about the legacy, as humble as it may be, of the work we do. We also should take our direction from the contexts we serve and not through the lens of a particular funding scheme or research policy. In doing so, we considerably raise the possibility for our research to have an impact. What is more, in order for our work to have a legacy we must take seriously the work of dissemination in all the many forms of media the digital era makes available. However, we must also make sure that those who measure the impact of our work in our own institutions and at policy level, also understand that there are new directions for dissemination and making an impact which could be encouraged and valued more.

← Workshop: Teaching the Teachers: iPads and Green Screens – Report
The Children's Film First Databases – Report →

Keynote Report: The importance of film for children in Europe

Thursday 24 September 2015 10:33am by [Dr Becky Parry](#)



After a passionate welcome from UK MEP [Julie Ward](#), who has strong links to young people's film and was until recently an arts practitioner herself, we heard from [Boudewijn Koole](#), director of 'Kauwboy'.

We hope he'll forgive this "92%" summary of his presentation!

Boudewijn asked us to reflect for a moment on our lives, and told us the story of the anthill where 92% of the colony create the anthill while 8% appear to do nothing. Actually they wander off, look at the sky, while the 92% keep busy building.

So who are the 8%? Well perhaps they are the artists...
...who wander off or even "wander off" and can be completely useless through their lives. But they break with the conventions or business of the 92%. And so they come in handy. We need them. They make us think differently.



I can't remember who took me to see 'Mandy'. It was such an intense experience that the cinema could have crumbled around me and I wouldn't have noticed. I was in that film, suffering alongside Mandy. (Wilson, 2007, p.155)⁴

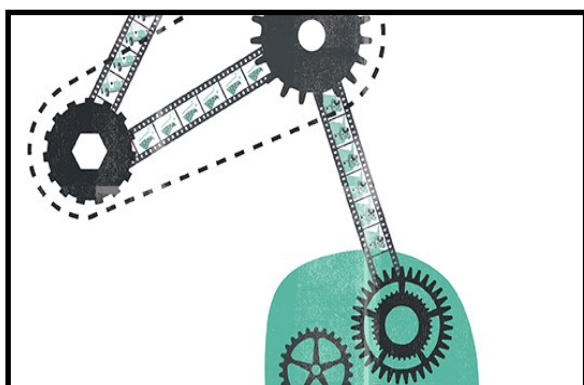


Illustration: Louis Cochrane

In her autobiography, popular British children's author Jacqueline Wilson describes her total immersion in the 1950s films, featuring child star Mandy Millar. She became an avid fan of the young actress and described replaying favourite scenes again and again 'in her head'. The young Jacqueline also used these film melodramas to begin to create her own stories, playing with cut out figures of Mandy and then reinventing a 'third Mandy;' an imaginary friend from

whom she was 'inseparable for years' (Wilson, 2007, p.156). Wilson's adult reflections reveal the way she drew on the films as a resource in her own emerging interest in storytelling, comparing the life of Mandy, also a young British girl, to her own. Her account illustrates the way that film invites children to suspend disbelief, enter a fictional world and walk for a while in another's shoes. When the film was over, Jacqueline's participation in it was only just beginning.

Research confirms that film and television continue to be highly important in children's lives (Ofcom⁵, 2014)⁶ and a central source of narrative impacting on their play and their identities

⁴ Wilson, J. (2007) Jacky Daydream. London, Random House

⁵ Independent regulator and competition authority for the UK communications industries.

⁶ <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/other/research-publications/childrens/children-parents-oct-14/>

(Parry, 2013). Indeed children's right to specialist media is enshrined in the United Nations 'Convention of the Rights of the Child'. Marsh⁷ (2005) observes that children, siblings, parents and grandparents participate in play, talk and stories based on favourite films, which then become a significant aspect of family life.

Films are first and foremost narrative forms and children's films and television programmes are, for very many children, a primary source of narrative, therefore it is vital to care about the sorts of experiences of narrative that are on offer to children. It is also worth reflecting on the fact that in the UK the films children access are predominantly those made in the USA. We know from cinema admissions and DVD sales in recent years that the UK has a sizeable market for films for children and families:

The cinema audience for the top 20 films in 2008 was predominantly young, with the 7-34 age group (40% of the population) making up 64% of the audience. (UKFC, 2008, p.116)⁸

Although cinema audiences have been in slight decline since this data was captured⁹, films which contribute to upward curves in the figures are often those made for children. Yet UK filmmakers rarely attempt to produce home-grown product for children and families. This situation was attributed by the UK Film Council (UKFC) the body formerly charged with the strengthening of the UK film industry, to the comparative success of the US studio distribution system:

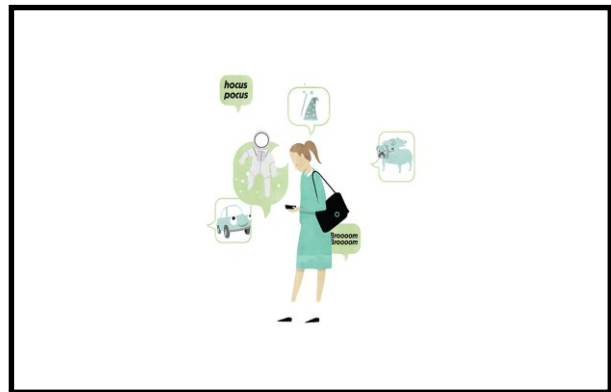


Illustration: Louis Cochrane

The challenges facing UK films are common to other film industries outside of Hollywood, although our shared language with the US is a complicating factor. It can work advantageously by making the two countries obvious production partners. On the other hand, it can be a disadvantage in the home market where English-language US studio pictures with significant marketing muscle often have a competitive edge over smaller, home grown films. (UKFC, 2009 p.10)¹⁰

⁷ Marsh, J. (2005). Popular culture, new media and digital literacy in early childhood. Psychology Press.

⁸ United Kingdom Film Council (UKFC) (2008) Statistical Year Book.

⁹ Current BFI statistical year books do not break down audience figures by age in the detail previously provided by The UKFC.

¹⁰ United Kingdom Film Council (UKFC) (2009b) *Film in the UK: A Briefing Paper*.



Bazalgette and Staples (1995)¹¹ argue that it may not be surprising that children's cinema should be dominated by American companies, but the fact that it seems 'perfectly natural' globally is the result of a long history of 'cinematic cultural imperialism' (Bazalgette and Staples, 1995, p.97). They go on to point out that in Britain: *'it hardly ever occurs to anyone to remark*

that nearly all the films we see are foreign. The Independent Film Parliament's (2007)¹² report 'Are Children Being Served' suggested that too few films for children are exhibited each year and of those 'few if any reflect back to children the experience of growing up in this country' (IFP, 2007, p.2).

In the early 00s the seemingly natural state of American domination led to the UK Film Council, taking what might be seen as a pragmatic stance of encouraging greater inward investment, that is to say American investment into the UK film industry. This resulted in co-production in which a relatively small investment from the UK Film Council resulted in a partnership with a large American studio. This partnership yielded benefits to the UK film industry, for example, use of UK production facilities, locations, crew and cast in films such as the Harry Potter series.



The Contest (2013)

Informally, UK Film Council officers argued that children in the UK were adequately served by American product and that children's film production was not a viable economic option for UK funding. Although this view was never made explicit in writing, there was an absence of any mention of children's film production in policy documents¹³. In the last policy expression by the UK Film Council prior to closing to The House of Lords Select Committee on Communication, 2010 the UKFC made clear an intention to continue to focus energies on attracting inward investment from the USA:

¹¹ Bazalgette, C. and Staples, T. (1995) Unshrinking the kids: children's cinema and the family film. In: Bazalgette, C. (ed) *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences* London, British Film Institute p.92-108

¹² Independent Film Parliament (I.F.P.) (2007) Are Children Being Served? www.filmparliament.org.uk/arechildrenbeingserved.doc

¹³ Children are only referred to in BFI education policy documents and there is currently no policy relating to children in terms of production or distribution.

The UK Film Council is proposing to strengthen the Los Angeles office of the Office of the UK Film Commissioner. (HoL Select Committee on Communication, 2010, p.35)¹⁴

Through this UK tactic of prioritising co-production with the US, boundaries have been blurred and domination is perhaps now better understood as cultural collaboration. As a result, filmed adaptations of British children's books such as 'The Chronicles of Narnia' (Adamson, 2005) the Harry Potter series (Columbus, 2002), and 'The Golden Compass' (Weitz, 2007) are felt by the audiences to be British even when the majority of the funding and rights are held by the North American companies Walden, Warner and New Line Cinema respectively. However, it must be acknowledged that the UK is the less powerful partner in this relationship so that a film can become something of a hybrid - often also carrying with it all the ideas and insecurities of each culture about what is appropriate and appealing to children. In this context it becomes harder for a film to realise its potential in terms of having a distinct national identity with the potential to represent to children their own lives.



On the Sly (2011)

One example of the battle for cultural identity in the process of making a co-produced film is the partnership between an American company, Dreamworks and British company, Aardman. Dreamworks recognised the appeal to children of Nick Park's claymation characters and was keen to fund future films. Although this resulted in two films which Nick Park Aardman's creator of 'Wallace and Gromit' says he was proud of, 'Chicken Run' (Lord and Park, 2000) and 'Wallace and Gromit: Revenge of the Were Rabbit' (Park and Box, 2005) the battles for retaining the characters' identities were described by Park as highly stressful and resulted in the partnership ultimately ending. One example given was the process of notes being constantly received during script development about English phrases that a child in North America just wouldn't get (Gibson, 2008, p.1).

¹⁴ House of Lords Select Committee on Communication (HoL SCC) (2010) *The British Film Industries: Decline or Opportunity*. House of Lords Select Committee on Communication 1st report of Session 2009-2010 Vol 1 report 24.01.10 http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/communications.cfm

Aardman continue to make films for children's television in the UK having previously signed deals with Sony Pictures, a global company originating in Japan with subsidiaries in the USA and UK, to make three further films. Investment from global corporations with strong links to distribution and exhibition is thus demonstrably key to the



Wallace & Gromit: Aardman Animations

development of children's films. However,

within the production process the writers, animators, directors etc. must have a degree of agency over their creative decisions in order to maintain the integrity and identity of the texts they devise. This is clearly the way in which a film is marked by a particular set of cultural influences, as Nick Park explains in an interview with Owen Gibson in relation to *The Beano*:

"I've been a fan of it all my life. My dream was to draw for the Beano," he enthuses. "When I was 10 years old I started drawing cartoon strips with the Beano in mind. I lived in that world. You own a comic, it's yours and adults don't understand it. You could pile them up under the bed and if you were off school ill, you'd go through them all."

And with that, Park is off into a halting reverie about growing up in 1960s Preston, "where everything looked like it was still from the 1950s". About spending the whole of Christmas Day in 1971 sitting in a box reading his new Beano album, hurtling down side streets on homemade go-karts or "trolleys", dreaming up Wallace-style inventions with his brothers, and spending hours in the heat of his parent's loft working on his animations with his mother's home movie camera. (Gibson, 2008, p.1)¹⁵

As can be seen in the most recent 'Minions' film, fun as it might be, Britishness is currently culturally 'cool,' resulting in parodic representations of policeman pouring themselves tea as they pursue the villains in their Morris Minors. Britishness, and British children's literature and television programmes in particular, have always had a value to USA film producers and we should acknowledge that there has previously been a shift away from entirely American filmed adaptations of UK children's fiction to the UKFC model of co-production in which UK funding results in films which could be considered to be cultural hybrids. However, this situation is a long way away from having a strong and long-standing indigenous film industry for children in the UK. And frustratingly, the success of these films mask US dominance, by giving the impression that many films for children are British. Further policy and initiatives driven forward by the UKFC (now BFI¹⁶) policy in relation to children have focused not on pro-

¹⁵ Gibson, O. (2008) *A one-off quirky thing*.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/jul/21/television>

¹⁶ <http://www.bfi.org.uk/>

duction but on exhibition and education activity. For example, Film Club, (now Into Film¹⁷) was set up in order to encourage schools to set up screening opportunities in school. First Light (now Into Film) was set up in order to give young people the opportunity to make films. Through Regional Screen Agencies and now Film Hubs, education activity in independent cinemas and at film festivals was also supported. However, if there are few European films made and a lack of confidence in the market for them then these initiatives will continue to rely on US content as their source. We are effectively witnessing a time when public funding from Europe is used to educate children and develop audiences for predominantly American films.



The Ice Dragon (2012)

However there is cause for great optimism alongside an increased urgency for the cultural sector and the film industry in particular to help define what it means to be European. I suggest co-production may well be the future of films for children being made, distributed and exhibited in Europe. At a time when a small number of European partners have been collaborating to produce a Framework for Film

Education In Europe, I hope the delegates of The

Children's Film First Conference see that the potential for European cooperation, collaboration and co-production is key to the future of European cinema. As Alain Bergala¹⁸ argues in his recent speech at the launch of the Framework for Film Education in Europe (2015) '...through this art form, young people experience life, beauty, a vision of the world that is theirs in the age, country and the era in which they live.' And we have a pertinent and resonant example in the film of 'Paddington' (King, 2014) an immigrant bear escaping death and destruction in 'darkest Peru' and only narrowly avoiding them in London. 'Paddington' in 2014, was the UK's most successful film, grossing £37,000 million at box office, according to the BFI statistical yearbook for 2014¹⁹. Over and above the quality of the film, this success owes a great deal to the marketing and a year's worth of press opportunities and merchandising partnerships. In the future 'Paddington' may come to signal a brighter future for European films for children. Only ten years ago a British / French / Canada co-production and live-action feature film, adapting an out of fashion literary character would have been dismissed, certainly by lottery funded UK film production schemes. Despite the reputation of David Hayman, producer, and the Paddington Bear 'IP'²⁰ (now a fully reenergised brand) it was French company, Studiocanal, who became the key financial partner. The long history of

¹⁷ <http://www.intofilm.org/>

¹⁸ <https://filmliteracyadvisorygroup.wordpress.com/2015/07/21/alain-bergalas-talk-at-the-launch-of-the-framework-for-film-education/>

¹⁹ www.bfi.org.uk/statisticalyearbook2014

²⁰ Intellectual Property

treating cinema as art, as eloquently described by Bergala, also provides strong evidence of the need for a strong commitment to production, distribution and exhibition of film, for children. It is clear we cannot rely on the market to meet children's needs.

And it is in European countries who have taken seriously their responsibility to produce specialised children's media, that is to say media made in children's own national contexts and cultures. In some nations the issues raised by the particular global dominance of American children's films are recognised and countered. Incentives through tax relief or quota systems are used in other European countries, for example Germany and Denmark, and this is also the case for nations such as Iran and Israel. These films regularly add to the admissions figures for the year for the national cinema but more needs to be done to ensure they are seen more widely across Europe.

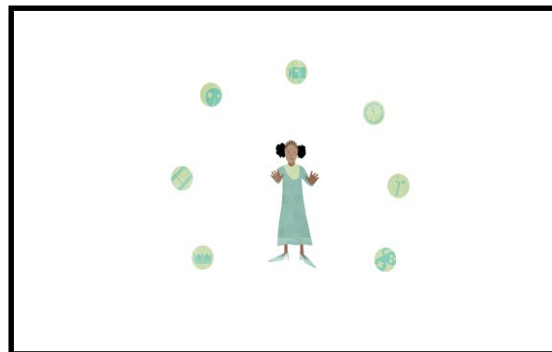


Illustration: Louis Cochrane

There is much that the UK can learn from those countries who have ring-fenced public subsidy for children's film and television production and distribution, who recognise the need to develop an infrastructure for this sector of the creative industries to survive (Brown, 2011)²¹. One example, described by Viola Gabrielli of Kids Regio, is Germany's "Outstanding Children's Film," inspired by the Dutch model "Cinema Junior," which includes a funding scheme alongside support for development and writing. The initiative funded by a union of public German broadcasters, the German film industry, German film funding institutions and organised by a non-profit 'Association for the promotion of German children's film.' The aim of the initiative is to strengthen visibility and profile of children's films in Germany and increase the quantity and quality of live-action children's films, which are not based on a brand or a bestselling novel, but offer original and valuable stories for children from 8 to 12 years.

Of course, the argument that films should be made in the national language is clear and compelling, especially in terms of meeting children's needs. But if we consider the need to nurture new audiences for contemporary national cinema, only the very short sighted would fail to see that European cinema can only thrive if children grow up watching films made in Europe.

²¹ Brown, M. (2011) Report for Children's Media Foundation presented to BAFTA event: *Is there something rotten in the state of children's cinema?* <http://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/>



The Crocodile Gang (2009)

In the UK there is a long history of television broadcasting for children, including a significant amount of indigenous production. In recent years, however, there have been grave concerns expressed about decreasing investment in children's television programming. Perhaps because of the highly prevalent discourse that children should not really be watching films or television programmes at all (they should be playing the parks of some former bucolic idyll), the comparative devaluing of media and popular culture

in comparison to books perhaps accounts for the inertia of those in public office with a responsibility to advocate children's rights to specialised media.

Specialised production for children should be given priority in any policy, support or incentives to support film production in Europe:

Children's films constitute a valid, distinctive, sometimes innovative and challenging form of cinema, which is just as much worth fostering as any other. (Bazalgette and Staples, 1995, p.97)

In the UK, despite highly publicised education policy for film education for children, there is now no BFI policy which makes clear any strategy for the nurturing of young audiences through film production and distribution. The result is that we continue to have a situation in which UK children predominantly watch US films and soon the same might be said of television. These same children will not choose to watch British or European films when they reach the age of eighteen.

As I write I hear on the news of a horrific news story about immigrants found dead in an abandoned lorry. It may seem at these moments that there are far more important things to be worried about. However, the moving image plays a significant role in voicing the concerns of a generation and film and television has a distinct ability to develop empathy, enabling us all to see the world from another person's point of view. Film also has strong links to social justice, combining political action and creative expression and in the digital era increasing possibilities for collective action with our European neighbours. We have a responsibility to future generations of children and audiences to demand funding and support for new European collaboration which draws together representatives of the children's film industry to create a new European policy and strategy for film production to ensure that every European country takes seriously its responsibility to create film which captivates, excites and represents children.

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Full animation 'Stories in My Head' from the Research
'Children, Film and Literacy' project:

<https://vimeo.com/69974898>

<http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/children-film-and-literacy-becky-parry/?K=9781137294326>

