

Children's Films: Secondhand, Second-rate or Second Wind?

JULIE CUMMINS

FILMS ARE AN ACCEPTED and expected part of library service. However, the quality of children's films has recently come under attack — and rightly so. Marilyn Berg Iarusso's article, "Children's Films: Orphans of the Industry,"¹ points out the mediocrity existing in the field and the need for films made with conviction and creativity. Maureen Gaffney, executive director of the Children's Film Theater, has stated: "There seems to be a conspiracy of mediocrity, of niceness in children's media."²

The blame for the second-rate quality of children's films lies not only with the film industry producing them, but also with librarians and media specialists who accept and purchase mediocre films for a variety of reasons. Purchase for curriculum needs, the lack of media training in graduate school, and the rush to meet deadlines for use of specially allocated funds are all explanations of why inferior films get purchased — but these are poor excuses.

Although there is a wide variety of children's films available, it is important to be aware of a good variety. One of the most enlightening experiences that a librarian can have in regard to film is to serve on a committee which is charged with producing a "select list" of children's films. Any structured group that evaluates films, whether within a local system or statewide, finds itself confronting widely divergent opinions, prejudices and reactions — which results in disagreement on a final decision. This writer served as chairperson of the committee responsible for the fourth revision of *Films for Children* (published by the Children and Young

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Adult Services Section of the New York Library Association).³ The five members of the committee often found themselves tangled in heated discussion over whether or not a particular film, for example, was sexist; was lacking in quality, but had proved to elicit tremendous response from children; or whether it promulgated stereotypic attitudes.

Criteria which had already been established by the committee for the evaluation of children's films included:

1. The film should offer the child an aesthetic experience.
2. It should have respect for the child's intelligence and taste.
3. It should be authentic and original.
4. It should have beauty of language.
5. It should have integrity and appeal to the age and interest of the intended audience.
6. Films for children should allow the child to explore the world and his relationship to it.
7. Stories that are adapted from book to film should retain the original spirit.

With these guidelines in mind, the committee began to review films for selections. Despite the fact that these goals had been carefully defined, the committee members still found themselves faced with questioning:

This film (*Zlateh the Goat*, Weston Woods) is beautiful, but will it speak to children? (The committee decided in its favor.)

Why is the dialogue in *Annie and the Old One* (BFA) so stilted — because it's true to cultural speech patterns, or because of second-quality acting?

Paddle-to-the-Sea (McGraw-Hill) has been around for years; does it still hold interest? (The writer believes so.)

Is a television presentation of *Really Rosie* (Weston Woods) a stamp of approval, or an obligatory selection to include on the list?

Is the animation of *The Little Mermaid* (Pyramid) too commercial and slick in relation to the delicacy of the story?

Does the documentary *Taleb and His Lamb* (Barr) reinforce sexist roles for American children even though it accurately depicts the culture's attitudes?

The intricacy of the plot of *Aucassin and Nicolette* (National Film Board of Canada) requires an audience of older children — but will that age level appreciate the sophisticated silhouette puppet technique?

Regarding *The Case of the Cosmic Comic* (Weston Woods), the live-

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action dramatization of the time period will require an introduction for children, and will the slow pace hold their attention until the villain movie sequence?

In order to arrive at the final list, the committee held thorough and serious discussions, taking into consideration recommendations from practical experience of children's reactions, weighing elements of quality, and even bartering. With the finish and satisfied sigh of achievement came a valuable interaction of what makes up a "good" list of films for children.

The advantages of relying on prescribed lists, such as the "Notable Children's Films"⁴ list published each year by the Association for Library Service to Children division of the American Library Association, *Films for Children* published by the New York Library Association,⁵ and *Films Kids Like* by Susan Rice⁶ include: (1) the chaff has been weeded, (2) there is the reliance that children somewhere have responded to the films, and (3) the titles have merit. The primary rule to follow in coordination of film activities is to preview the films before they are shown. However, many librarians may simply not be able to do so, e.g., the sole professional in a small library who is responsible for everything, the adult volunteer planning a showing for a children's group, or others without the opportunity (or access) to preview. Reputable "filmographies" should be invaluable in such cases.

Based on years of experience of this writer and other children's librarians and media specialists, the following guidelines may offer practical direction in the establishment of film programs. In planning the program, the first task is to identify the projected audience. The ages of the children and the physical setting are factors which will determine the length of the program; thirty minutes for five- to eight-year-olds and forty-five minutes to one hour for older children are suitable approximations.

The quality of the program depends on both the quality of the films and the organization. The program should be planned with an eye to balance and rhythm. A straight succession of films should be avoided as should use of only one film technique. Among the different types of film techniques are: iconographic (films made from the illustrations of books), animated, puppets, live-action, and action made by drawing directly on the film. Incorporation of different techniques will offer visual variety, while mood and intensity in the films will vary the pace. Contrasts of realism and imagination and of reflection and humor should be present.

The development of a sense for rhythm comes from knowledge both of the films and of children's reactions to them; however, a librarian

should not hesitate to experiment. For example, if a teenage film-making group exists in the area, the librarian might wish to present a special showing of their films to a mixed audience of older children and adults.

Children put a lot of energy into watching films; because of this, the film shown last can influence their behavior afterward. If the concluding film leaves children excited and restless, the librarian should be prepared for boisterous behavior. It may be much more effective to end a sequence with a slow, relaxed film, such as *Arrow to the Sun* (Texture), or a light-hearted short, such as *Dance Squared* (International Film Bureau).

MULTIMEDIA PROGRAMS

The subject of an individual film will often suggest a coordinated activity, or a program theme may lend itself to a multimedia program. For example, the lively, animated film *Tangram* (Pyramid) provides children with a natural inspiration to try to make their own tangram (a seven-piece geometric puzzle composed of five triangles, one square and one parallelogram). The art-technique film *Play Clay* (ACI) can be used in conjunction with a variety of craft programs. One possible method might incorporate a reading club with a circus theme. *Play Clay* can be shown, and children can make clay animals, clowns, etc. for a model circus afterward.

Stories can be combined successfully with films. Some good examples of a theme program utilizing multimedia are listed here.

TO TICKLE YOUR RIBS (AGES 5-8)

Story to tell: *The Funny Little Woman* (Mosel), or

“The Little Rooster, The Turkish Sultan and The Diamond Button”

Flannelboard story and song: “I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly”

Films: *The Foolish Frog* (Weston Woods)

A Boy and a Boa (Phoenix)

Assorted jokes, humorous poetry and riddles

MONKEYSHINES (AGES 5-8)

Films: *Curious George Rides a Bike* (Weston Woods)

Snow Monkeys of Japan (ACI)

Story: *Caps for Sale* (Slobodkina)

Activity: Make paper bag puppets of Curious George

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DRAGON TAILS (AGES 6-9)

Films: *Fire Flowers of Yet Sing Low* (Sterling)
Dragon Stew (BFA)
Tchou Tchou (Encyclopaedia Britannica)
Stories: *The Judge* (Zemach)
Mr. Drackle and His Dragons (Froman)

GHOSTS AND GHOULIES (AGES 7-10)

Films: *Ghosts and Ghoulies* (Sterling)
The Legend of Sleepy Hollow (Stephen Bosustow)
Record: *Chilling, Thrilling Sounds of the Haunted House* (Disney)
Stories: "Leg of Gold"
"Rap, Rap, Rap"

Marilyn Iarusso points out prime examples of animated, live-action and animal films and also the needs for future children's films. In what direction are children's films going? Maureen Gaffney's pointed arrow of criticism is unquestionably true, but perhaps these controversial barbs can now help to open the paths of awareness in children's media professionals by underscoring the problems and thus lending hope for improvement in the future.

It is true that children's films have been tried on like secondhand garments passed down by the adult media regime; there are undeniably hordes of second-rate films. It is to be hoped, however, that films are getting a second wind. With series such as Learning Corporation's "Learning to be Human," which are producing films like *Big Henry and the Polka Dot Kid* and others, the children's film of tomorrow will enable the child to explore the world with integrity, honesty and humor.

References

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2. Gaffney, Maureen. Quoted in Deirdre Boyle. "Children's Film: 'Conspiracy of Mediocrity,'" *American Libraries* 8:267, May 1977.
3. New York Library Association. Children and Young Adult Services Section. *Films for Children; A Selected List*. 4th ed. New York, NYLA, 1977.
4. American Library Association. Association for Library Service to Children. Film Evaluation Committee. "Notable Children's Films, 1977." Chicago, ALA (1977).
5. New York Library Association, op. cit.
6. Rice, Susan. *Films Kids Like*. Chicago, ALA, 1973.

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