Introduction: New Perspectives in Children's Film Studies

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The study of children's films is a complex and demanding issue, involving a range of critical, educational, psychological, cultural, institutional, and textual aspects. "Children's films" can be a broad and ambiguous term; there are films aimed at children, films about childhood, and films children watch regardless of whether they are children's films or films targeted toward adults. The rise of an expanding children's film industry (including the accompanying merchandizing products) in the United States and many European countries presents a further challenge to the study of children's films. In some countries, children's films are included in the general school curriculum; this indicates that children's films are a key part of children's culture that requires educational attention.¹ Another fact to which the inclusion of children's films in school curricula points is the crucial role of these films in the development of media literacy, due to the fact that children come to recognize and understand the typical features of films by means of a gradual process which takes a substantial amount of time. The acquisition of a "film language" presupposes the ability to comprehend the symbolic meanings of images, the close relationship, upon which films depend, between a moving image, sound, and speech, and prototypical properties of films, such as shots, zooms, cuts, camera perspective, and voice-over.

The production of so-called family films, that is, films that address children and adults alike, and the increasing complexity of modern children's films demonstrate that the typical properties of children's films are becoming increasingly similar to those of films targeted at an adult audience. This convergence applies to both the themes and the narrative strategies of children's films, as we can observe in their increasingly frequent treatment of difficult, sensitive, or "taboo" subjects, as well as in their directors' use of complex narrative and aesthetic devices such as first-person narration, retrospective, multiple perspectives, the combination of different temporal levels, and intermedial allusions to other films. While children's limited cognitive abilities and knowledge of the world mean that these techniques and devices can only be employed in a restricted sense, they doubtless manifest a growing tendency among those who produce children's films to take the art form and its audiences seriously.

We may therefore surmise that the cultural, educational, and economic significance of children's films is consistently increasing. It is fortunate that this development has been accompanied by a growing interest on the part of a number of academic fields, such as media studies, film studies, research into children's literature, and education, in the investigation of children's films. However, in spite of these developments, we still have to acknowledge that the children's film is still somewhat marginal in academia, with no international journals or regular conferences devoted to the subject. Despite some promising monographs and collections of essays, the history of children's films has not yet been thoroughly investigated, and the field lacks detailed introductions and handbooks that describe the current state of research. Given this situation, it is of little surprise that we do not yet have a fully developed theory of children's films to draw upon in our research into the genre.

In light of this, one of the aims of this special section is to bring together recent research in the area of children's films and develop new ways forward for children's film studies. More than ever, it is not enough to focus exclusively on the content of children's films and their relation to children's everyday lives and to analyze the reciprocal interaction between literature and film; such an approach cannot do justice to children's film as a self-contained art form. The focus of this special section, therefore, is reflection upon narrative strategies and visual aesthetic features of contemporary children's films. Children's films require those who make them to consider the stage of cognitive, emotional, and linguistic development at which the film's intended audience finds itself. Therefore, in order to study children's films properly, we need to adopt an interdisciplinary approach that takes into account findings from film studies, media education, childhood studies, the study of intermediality, cognitive psychology, and literacy studies. Needless to say, the five articles in this section cannot cover all possible theoretical frameworks and approaches to this subject; they nevertheless exemplify the great pertinence of children's film studies to a number of academic fields.

Historically, and indeed to this day, most children's films have been adaptations of literary works, while some are based on original scripts whose story has not been previously published for children. For a long time, film adaptations of children's books were frequently regarded as poor copies of the original work, a view that failed to take into consideration the different narrative and aesthetic strategies used in film as opposed to those employed in literature. Fortunately, the rise of the discipline of intermedial studies, which investigates the mutual relationships between various forms of media and considers their differences and the features they have in common, has brought about a change in this attitude.

The transformation of picture books into films presents a specific challenge to media education. Picture books as multimodal art forms fa-

miliarize children with the interconnection of text and image and therefore may prepare the way for children to understand movies that verbally and visually refer to the picture-book medium. Although films aimed at preschool children are often adaptations of picture-book stories, there is scant research into the intermedial processes that take place when picture books are transformed into films. In her article in this issue, Johanna Tydecks attempts to fill this gap with a detailed comparison of Shaun Tan's picture book *The Lost Thing* (1999) with the Oscar-winning short movie of the same title (2010). Basing her approach on research into visual literacy and media literacy, Tydecks illustrates how each medium calls for specific abilities on the part of the reader/viewer, and how the knowledge of the picture book's plot and imagery might facilitate audiences' understanding of the cinematic techniques applied in the animated film version.

One seminal issue in the investigation of children's films concerns the question of genre. It appears that children's films show a certain preference for specific genres, often revolving around fairy tales, animals, or adventures, and frequently using animation. The investigation of the ways in which these genres interrelate is certainly a promising research task, as is the exploration of the new genres currently emerging in children's film. Ian Wojcik-Andrews draws our attention to an innovative topic in current films for children: a journey or quest undertaken by an elderly person along with a child. According to the author, this yields a new genre called "Kid Quest"—a combination of "Elderquest" and "Kid Venture". Although ethnicity and culture play a significant role in this film genre, Wojcik-Andrews stresses that age-related issues are equally important. Thus the hybrid "Kid Quest" genre challenges mainstream Hollywood movies for children insofar as it scrutinizes traditional ideas about age, personal growth, and education, thus highlighting the genre's underlying ideological and educational concerns.

As Wojcik-Andrew's article indicates, children's films are inseparably connected with images of childhood, which generally govern the films' plots and their presentation of their characters. These images may be drawn from various ideas about childhood, which might derive, for example, from the observation of real children, from childhood reminiscences, or from ideas about possible environments in which children live. Beyond this, images of childhood may also be determined by academic and literary discourses. How these matters bring their influence to bear on children's films is the chief concern of David Whitley's and Anders Wilhelm Åberg's articles. While David Whitley focuses on images of innocence in animated films for children, Åberg engages with issues of nation and ethnicity in two Swedish children's films.

In his thought-provoking essay, Whitley emphasizes the impact of cultural nostalgia on the ideas underlying films from Disney Studios, comparing them to animated films inspired by other traditions, such as the

films released by Pixar and DreamWorks and the French film *Kirikou et la sorcière* (Kirikou and the Sorceress, 1998). He argues that the presentation of innocence in these animated films is double-edged due to the images of childhood and gender perspectives that underlie the films; further, he demonstrates that the ambivalent attitudes thus manifested are strongly marked by anxieties concerning childhood in modern globalized societies.

The impact of nostalgia is also a key topic of Åberg's article, which shows how issues of nation and ethnicity have been dominant themes in Swedish children's films from the 1940s to the present day. By comparing two Swedish films, *Rännstensungar* (Guttersnipes, 1944) and its modernized remake *Förortsungar* (Kidz in da hood, 2006), the author illustrates a change in the conceptualization of "Swedishness", a notion which draws on stereotypical and nostalgic images of Swedish nature and culture. By doing this, Åberg sheds light on the differences between the two films, which mainly consist in the substitution of ethnic conflict, which pervades the film *Kidz in da hood*, for class conflict, as depicted in *Guttersnipes*. Thus these films not only illustrate shifts in images of childhood, but also reflect societal changes that have largely arisen as a result of the development of intercultural societies and transnational interconnections. The 2006 remake, shifting between the celebration and rejection of "Swedishness", modifies the concept of (Swedish) "national cinema". Furthermore, the burning issue, touched upon in the film, of what may emerge out of encounters between different cultures and languages in a globalized world points to the children's film as a site of interaction and cross-reference between issues in intercultural studies and childhood studies.

For a number of years, scholars working in the field of film studies have paid close attention to filmic paratexts and their importance to the comprehension of movies. Since Gérard Genette introduced this concept at the end of the 1980s, numerous studies have analyzed the significance and changes of paratexts in a range of different works of art. Although film theorists have shown that paratexts, such as front and end credits, film titles, logos, trailers, and inserts, appear to influence audiences' reception of the actual feature film, the impact of paratexts in children's films has yet to be investigated. The article by Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer attempts to explore the effects of paratexts in modern children's films and to examine the cognitive capacities required for a thorough comprehension of paratexts. In this context, I demonstrate that the front credits in modern children's films often anticipate the film's plot, while the end credits frequently provide a follow-up or hint at its continuation, and thus prepare the ground for a sequel or encourage the viewer to reflect on possible alternative endings. Since the comprehension of these strategies calls for a meta-critical approach on the part of the viewer, the author suggests that this specific capacity should be called "meta-filmic

awareness", that is, the ability to distinguish between filmic paratexts and the feature film.

The variety of aspects of this topic and the multiplicity of critical approaches to it illustrate the complex issues raised by the analysis of contemporary children's films. This special section, containing contributions by experts in the field, is testimony to international academic interest in children's films and will hopefully serve to acquaint scholars, teachers, and educationalists with the richness and depth of the genre, thus demonstrating that it makes for a highly promising research topic.

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Notes

1. In Germany, the Conference of the Ministers of Education of the Federal States passed a resolution in March 2012 entitled *Medienbildung in der Schule* ("Media Education in Schools"), which explicitly calls for greater support for film education at elementary and secondary schools. Moreover, the existing canon of films used for teaching in schools has been revised in order to better accommodate students' everyday life and interests. In this context, the German Federation of Film Clubs for Children and Young People (*Bundesverband Jugend und Film*) has proposed a canon of children's films encompassing fourteen titles, ranging from Charles Chaplin's *The Kid* (US, 1921) to *Kirikou et la sorcière* (Kirikou and the Sorceress, France 1998, directed by Michel Ocelot).