

**INDEPENDENT FILM PARLIAMENT
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**“Expanding Cultural Horizons: the Role of Education”
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If we are serious about film as an art form, then we need policies for audience development that are comparable with those for other art forms. In particular, we need policies that relate to children and film. I'm going to talk about children – and by children I mean people under the age of 12. There's a peculiar resistance to considering this six-and-a-half million strong sector of our population as a distinct and separate category. There's a strange preference for using the phrase 'children and young people' which quickly becomes just 'young people' and before you know it, all that's left on the agenda is sixteen year olds and older – people who might legally be children but wouldn't thank you for calling them that.

Children get to see plenty of visual images every day – do art teachers think that means there is no need to take them to galleries? Music education is not based on the notion that the charts provide all the musical experience that children could possibly need. Theatre education doesn't rely on the idea that if children see loads of TV drama every week why bother to take them to live performances.

Why then do we persist in leaving children's audio-visual education to the commercial marketplace? This is the first point I want to make. There is, surely, only one way in which we are going to significantly influence the cultural climate in relation to film and that is to ensure that children – all children – have some experience of non-mainstream film at an early age. And of course these have to be good experiences – something that awakens their interest and excitement and desire to find out more. In a moment I'll describe an initiative which is actually doing this but first let's consider the barriers to achieving this on a large scale.

Because most of us discovered non-mainstream film in our teens or twenties, there is a persistent belief that it would be impossible for anyone younger than that to make that discovery. So for example the UK Film Council focuses its audience development strategy on the 18-25 demographic: we don't really have a public sector policy for children as a film audience.

Coupled to that we have a profound ignorance in the UK about the range and quality of film production for children across the world: there is a huge range of product, obviously variable in quality but some of it excellent, that never reaches this country except as a one-off festival screening. And if like me you attended some of the screenings of subtitled films in the recent London Children's Film Festival, you'll know that many of their audiences barely reached double figures.

Part of the reason for that is the huge prejudice in this country against subtitles, doubly so in the case of children because no one believes that they can cope with reading subtitles. How many people here have watched a subtitled film in this country with 100 six year olds? Just me? The fact is that if the film engages their attention, even beginning readers will cope – as they do in the Netherlands, Denmark, Hungary and any small language community which can't support a re-voicing industry.

What these barriers mean is that UK distributors will almost never take a chance on world cinema for children, certainly not if it's subtitled. It is seen as hopeless to try and compete with the mainstream family film market.

Quite right too. It is hopeless to try and compete with that level of marketing spend. Which brings me to my second point. There is only one way that we are going to effectively bring non-mainstream film to child audiences and that is through the schools. Teachers are capable of recognising their responsibilities for children's cultural development. They are prepared to take risks that most parents won't take.

However, there are some barriers here also that we can't ignore. Firstly, we have to recognise, firstly, that teachers themselves don't have much experience of non-mainstream film, and secondly, that they are nervous about the status of film in education – that it's seen as merely a treat or a soft option, not as part of the basics.

We also need to situate this argument for children's cultural entitlements within the wider context of the argument for media literacy, which is gaining ground with the launch of the Charter for Media Literacy, a copy of which you have in your delegate packs. The potential problem here is that there is a growing tendency for media literacy to be seen in over-simplified terms: as either the acquisition of critical tools for analysing and deconstructing the media – generally understood in this context as mainstream media – or as the provision of opportunities for creative work with media. What's persistently left out is the essential third strand of learning – actually I'd argue it's the first strand – which is that learners must broaden their knowledge of media and appreciate their potential, if their critical or creative work is going to be any good. That's why the Charter emphasises the "three Cs" of cultural, critical and creative learning.

The only real way of testing these arguments is through practical application, so I'd now like to turn to some real life examples.

At the bfi we are in the process of breaking through these barriers to the establishment of film as a cultural entitlement for children in school. It's an exciting development that I'd like to tell you about briefly. We have developed resources for teaching about film within the context of literacy – not as you might expect, as just a way of stimulating children to write or to give them a film version of a story – but as a way of studying film in its own right and on its own terms. What we use are a range of independent short films, sourced from the UK and around the world, most of them not originally made for children,

but accessible enough for a child audience as well as being rich, powerful and challenging enough to reward repeated viewing and close analysis.

We have produced a resource for each stage of schooling from age 3 to age 14 – that's three in all – and we have five more in development. They're so successful that the National Strategies for primary and secondary education have brought copies for every local authority in England, and are promoting the training of consultants and advisors to help teachers use them properly.

What's more, over 40 local authorities (that's nearly a third) have joined a scheme based on these resources, in which they have each created an action plan for moving image media literacy and have nominated people for intensive, advanced training from us, who will lead these action plans over the next three years. Between them these local authorities have already committed over three quarters of a million pounds to this initiative, and we expect another cohort of local authorities to join the scheme next year.

I think the most exciting thing about this is not the teachers' excitement at the learning outcomes they say they can see from this – higher levels of communication skills overall, greater confidence, increased vocabulary – but their huge enthusiasm for the films themselves.

It's a revelation to them that film can have such a powerful impact – and that's all they need to recognise instantly that children deserve better and more diverse experiences than what they're getting from the mainstream. It's leading them not only to want more short films to teach with, but also to demand feature films that are equally valuable: we already have teachers using *Kirikou et la Sorciere* and *My Neighbour Totoro* in out of school contexts. My guess is that we already have over a million children engaging with non-mainstream film in school each year and increasing numbers of teachers and schools are starting to see film as an entitlement, not as an extra.

So our next project, I hope, is to develop a world cinema dvd label for children, specifically aimed at the Government's new Extended Schools initiative which plans for schools to be open from 8.00 am to 6.00 pm. Once that happens, we will see more parents willing to risk taking their children to non-mainstream films, and who knows, maybe we'd even see some more adventurous programming from broadcasters. Of course this initiative will need sponsorship or public subsidy.

And of course this isn't easy. Of course it'll take time to grow. Those aren't arguments for not attempting it. Let me leave you with some facts, taken from this brilliant study by Jackie Marsh and her team at Sheffield University, *Digital Beginnings*:

61% of children are turning on the television by themselves – by the age of 2.

Nearly 30% of children are going online to access children's websites by the age of 3.

Mainstream American titles dominate the lists of films that children under six state as their favourites: currently Shrek, Finding Nemo, Toy Story and Spiderman.

Can we really afford to wait ten years before starting to try and introduce this audience to a wider range of films? To put it another way: what would be our excuse for not attempting this?