

Attention, Emotions! The educational embedding of films and moving pictures¹

One of the main topics of debates on school reform and curriculum development in the 1960s and 1970s was to make schools “fit” for the demands of a modern society (cf. Bruner, 1966; Robinsohn, 1967), however these demands were defined in the different places. In the United States, for example, the successful Soviet space mission Sputnik triggered an intensive discussion about the quality of the country’s own school system (cf. Urban, 2010). In Scandinavia, in the state-funded schools in England and Wales, but also in (parts of) Germany, the comprehensive school was introduced with the claim of increasing equal opportunities to implement (more) social equality. Switzerland too could not escape these developments, although here reforms took place less on the level of school organization and aspirations with regard to societal changes but more on the level of school subjects and pedagogy. Film education (Hartmann 1967), programmed instruction (Horlacher 2015), the language laboratory (Bosche/Geiss 2010), or sex education (Horlacher/De Vincenti 2019) were discussed as new medium of instruction or as or up-to-date subjects. All these debates were part of the question of whether, and if so how, the traditional curriculum, which was considered “outdated”, should and could be revised and redesigned in the direction of a “lifeworld” orientation of the subjects and the associated pedagogy. This also involved the question of how to convey the corresponding content in a pedagogically “sufficient” way; a concern that seemed to be particularly virulent in dealing with film and television (see Graff 2015), since the medium of film had something slightly “disreputable” about it (Gertiser 2011, 384; Moser 2015, 14f.), what was justified, among other things, by the strong emotions that films evoke.

However, the association of film with a certain “disreputability” sets the use of moving pictures in the classroom apart from other technical aids or pedagogical tools. The use of film and television in schools was rather part of the so-called trash debate that flared up again and again in particular in German-speaking countries. It was not the film itself that was considered as trash, but only those films that were purely entertaining and thus not of high cultural quality (e.g. Ammann 1931, 47; Bösch 1949, 420). These films were equated with popular fiction,

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crime novels or detective stories, which were also considered as “only” entertaining or just as trash.

Against this background, the paper deals with the question of what fears and anxieties had been associated with film in general and how an educational demand on films was defined so that the pedagogical potential of this new medium could be realized in the classroom. I will argue in two major steps. After a short phase – not further discussed here – in which mainly censorship and bans were propagated as the “right” policy, a pedagogically prepared use of the medium came to the fore and technical questions dominated, which is shown in the first step. In the same time first empirical data were gathered on the impact of school films on children. The second step shows, how the pedagogical question developed into a media-pedagogical question in the 1960s and 1970s, which still saw film and pictures in general at the center of its considerations, but whose aspirations went beyond the right use of films in the classroom and declared to be the up-to-date educational concept for a modern society. This approach echoed demands that had been made in the interwar period on the basis of empirical studies, namely the promotion of film literacy. These two steps lead to the conclusion, that the dealing with the emotional immediacy of film and moving pictures remained the core and pivotal point of a moralizing argument, even if different processing strategies came to the fore over the course of time.

1) Emotional effects and fears about film and moving pictures

As early as the end of the 1920s, the Austrian School Film Association launched a survey on the question of the effects of educational films on children. Two different films were examined, the school film “Timber production” and the very popular silent movie “Simba. King of the Beasts”. The students were asked three questions: What did you like most, what did you not like, and what would you like to see different. It was noted that the children interviewed have experienced the films very intensively, “indeed some impressions worked to the limit of sensory delusions and caused strong illusions”, whereby this was seen as both an advantage and a disadvantage (Langwieser 1931, 66). The advantage was the fact, that the films evoked strong impressions and were thus seen as means of “vivid illustration” (ibid., 67). The compulsion to see the film was described as a positive quality, as well as the attention of the students, which they cannot escape. Despite – or perhaps because of – the emotional involvement, the knowledge of the plot was still vivid after three weeks (Hareiter 1931, 72). The disadvantage was the fact that watching film must be “learned”, both in terms of how it is used in the classroom and how it is processed and followed up by the students (Langwieser 1931, 67).

In contrast, general fears about film and moving pictures are formulated 1948 in an article by Hans Neumann, a Swiss trade unionist and head of the Swiss Workers' Education Center. The text was written on behalf of the Pro Helvetia working group, a foundation established in the context of the spiritual national defense in Switzerland in the interwar period. This text, entitled *Film and the People* with the telling subtitle *Possibilities and Dangers of Film*, makes clear that “technical facilities” are having an ever greater “influence” on the “cultural life of peoples” (Neumann 1948, 1). In Neumann's view the importance of films in leisure culture seriously challenged “the interest of the state.” It was therefore not enough, just to criticize these developments, films had rather to be embedded in social life in a way that they could be “brought to its great destiny” (ibid., 16). However, this was only possible if films do not remain the “work of a profit-oriented entertainment industry” and do not become a “substitute for life” for the broader population.

Thus, the social-moral quality of the individual experience was addressed, which was assessed as clearly less “sustainable” in the case of film than in the case of attending a “good lecture or concert,” because films are, as Neumann argues in contrast to the Austrian survey some 20 years earlier, “usually quickly forgotten” (ibid., 2). Despite the lack of sustainability of cinematic impressions – and this was seen as the main problem – the “experiences conveyed by the screen had a profound effect on the mental formation of the masses” (ibid., 3). The fear was not – at this refers to the discourse on trash – that commercial movies were transporting a “false morality”, but that they do not have “moral standards” at all (ibid., 6). In films, Neumann goes on, far-reaching moral decisions were “trivialized as a matter of course” and offered for entertainment. In fact, this happens also in theater or literature, but is more serious in film because of the immediacy of the action and the greater reach in terms of audience and – what was maybe the main point – is especially problematic for “moviegoers with a less stable character” (ibid.).

Another example for the fear about film and moving pictures is Max Rösner's widely used 1951 published handbook for pedagogy, titled *Teaching Technique* (Bönsch 2006, 16), which deals with the school film from a similar perspective than Neumann's paper, but pedagogically “embedded” and thus more differentiated in terms of content. The issue of school film is discussed in the entry *The Demonstrating Teaching Method (Die demonstrierende Lehrweise)*, which is understood as a potency – and not a substitute – for the use of images in schools. For the appropriate use of films in the classroom, Rösner goes, it must be considered that the latter is “more true-to-life than the image”, as it reproduces “real things” and not “educational” ones. Thus, film brings “real life” into the classroom (Rösner 1951, 243). In contrast to pictures, the

film shows “things in their relationships to other things, ... connects, creates environment, atmosphere,” and is thus able to depict facts in their temporal development. In addition to these strengths of film in the classroom, there are numerous “dangers” to be considered, which, however, can be controlled by the appropriate pedagogical preparation of the lessons and by a reasonable use. Mainly the moment of emotional “excitement”, must be pedagogically controlled, which is achieved by accompanying the fleetingness of the moving image and the intensity of the sensations triggered by the moving images through both preparation and follow-up of the content and by dealing with them educationally. In sum, the “language” of the film must be “taught” in the classroom, making it “transparent” and by that the film loses much of its “seductive potential” (ibid., 244f.). Above all, the educational embedding of films is important for the youth, because “they do not yet have an established world view” (Chresta 1963, 117), even if – and that reflects a more differentiated view of film and youth than in the early days, which had argued mainly with prohibitions – the legal provisions for the protection of children and the youth are sufficient, since “the harmful effects of film are greatly overestimated” (ibid., 128).

2) Moving pictures as pedagogical tool

The fundamental fears that had been associated with moving pictures, film, and television as presented in the first step did not disappear in the next decades, but the discussion started clearly to move in the direction of “correct” handling of the afore-mentioned challenges. Appropriate handouts and teaching aids were developed, and empirical studies were conducted to collect information on the concrete use of film and television in the classroom or on the emotional effect of television on young people. In 1969, a study conducted in various Swiss schools and across all school levels concluded that “television is the least widely used of all technical teaching aids” (Stambach 1972, 15). When television was used in the classroom, it was mainly in the upper grades, namely in the seventh to ninth school years. In the Gymnasium, however, the use dropped significantly. The picture was somewhat different when it comes to the use of films. Here, a significantly higher use became apparent (ibid., 13). Nevertheless, the vast majority of teachers surveyed actually welcomed the use of school television in the classroom, regardless of whether they actually used this tool or not (ibid., 24). One reason for this discrepancy, which seems astonishing at first glance, was – and this too became clear in the survey – the lack of infrastructure in certain schools. It also became clear that the willingness to use films in the classroom was essentially dependent on the quality of the school film programs already seen (ibid., 29). Thus, the better the teacher’s personal assessment of the

quality of school films, the more willing he or she was to integrate these pedagogical tools into his or her own teaching.

All in all, in this time the pedagogical advantages of using films in the classroom started to be emphasized, especially the independence of the depicted objects from space and time, namely that object lessons could be realized even if the object of instruction was either far away or if the changes in the object to be illustrated were too fast or too slow for the human eye (*ibid.*, 51f.). With this pedagogical perspective on film and television in the classroom, it was also obvious that the fears presented in the first step were hardly or even not addressed at all. The content prepared for school purposes could not be compared with films or television produced for the public. In the case of this content produced especially for school purposes, the formulated fears of emotionalization were already taken into account and the films and television broadcast avoided such “emotionalized” content or scenes.

Besides these more technical debates on the appropriate pedagogy for films in classroom, another, related, discussion gained foothold in educational publications of the 1970s, the so-called media pedagogy, which developed from film education, but soon claimed to be more than just film education, namely a pedagogy that meets the requirements of a lifeworld orientation of schooling and instruction. The promises associated with this concept could even take on world-saving features, as media pedagogy understood as communication training – at least in the words of a teacher at a congress on media pedagogy – was supposed to reduce “alienated learning and school stress”. Moreover, media pedagogy grasps the “student in its wholeness” and enables “lively learning”, “by bringing about personal involvement and leaving the learners to constitute meaning.” It provides “insights into social, political, and economic contexts,” and initiates “the development of individual and collective strategies for action to cope with damaged life in a damaged world” (Ramseier 1978, 9f.). Thus, this understanding of media pedagogy covers all requirements that can be placed on pedagogy in a broad understanding.

3) Emotions in film education

These brief glimpses into debates about film, television, and school have shown a two-sided picture about film and emotions. On the one hand, film and moving pictures, were regarded as pedagogical tools that can be used effectively in the classroom. At the same time film and moving pictures require a certain amount of pedagogical support in order to be used meaningfully. In the early days of the school film, this pedagogical support was focused on the collaboration of teachers in the production of school films, whereby this collaboration was not

only limited to the writing of the corresponding script or to the selection of suitable topics, but also included the camera work (Liniger 1931). Later, the focus shifted to the use of films in classroom, what means on the appropriate preparation and follow-up and to the question, of how film and moving pictures could be used best and most effectively in relation to the success of teaching. These considerations then led to the development of comprehensive pedagogical concepts that no longer focused solely on classroom activities, but claimed validity for education as a whole.

What remained constant through all these discussions was a certain moral discomfort with film and television since an immediate and pedagogically hard to control emotional impact was most obvious in the case of film and television. However, this effect – and here the sources show a noticeable difference whether the text is addressed to the public or to an educational context – was not just seen as a problem, but as an empirical fact that had to be pedagogically steered in the right direction. Thus, the emotional dimension of film and moving pictures was in fact a moral dimension, as not the emotions evoked by film and moving pictures were problematized, but the false or the unreflective emotions, they lead to wrong attitudes. The emotions evoked by film and television were thus only a problem if their effect could not be controlled, as in the case of going to the movies. Over time – maybe fueled by the results of increasingly conducted film effects research – the initially rather schematic attributions of the emotional effects of films became more differentiated – both in their positive and negative effects. It was no longer a matter of protecting students from the “harmful” influences of film and television, but rather of educating them to a sensible approach that would above all reveal the seductive potential of film and television.

In sum, film education turned out to be an attempt, to rationalize emotions by knowledge about how the emotions were evoked. Thus, these discussions mainly focused on Swiss sources, emphasized not a Techno Euphoria but rather the other way round, while at the same time the correct handling of this technical tool was stylized as the core of a modern pedagogy that is close to the “real world”. The fact that in the 1960s and 1970s the potential of the new medium was emphasized is not surprising, since this expectation “fits” seamlessly into cybernetically based ideas of the world and fantasies of control and that were concentrated in the concept of media pedagogy.

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