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# The Children's Film: Genre, Nation and Narrative

**By Noel Brown**

**Wallflower/Columbia University Press, 2017**

**Reviewed by Peter Bosma, independent researcher**

The experience of watching children's films is an exciting but also mostly unclear demarcated subset of contemporary visual culture. Analysing this segment of the film industry requires first formulating a clear definition of the corpus. In his opening chapter, Brown rightly argues that establishing a classification of children's film is difficult. As a solution he distinguishes five contextual processes that establish a negotiated generic identity of children's films:

1. Marketing and distribution strategies (posters, billboards, trailers, release of multi-language dubbed versions)
2. Merchandising (ancillary revenues outside the film market)
3. Judgments of review boards (censorship and suitability ratings)
4. Critical reception (newspapers, magazines, blogs, aggregated review websites)
5. Exhibition strategies (film festivals, cinemas, television)

Within these boundaries, Brown chooses a rather broad scope. He bravely undertakes the attempt to cover the whole history of the production of children's films in the whole world. His overview is partly a condensation of his earlier comprehensive publications about the Hollywood Family Film and the British Children's Cinema.[\[1\]](#) The only explicit restriction he mentions is to omit the discussion of teenage films. Also the subset of toddler films (for viewers of 3-6 years) is ignored. This is understandable, given the limited space of the publication, but the film supply for both age groups would deserve a separate inventory and evaluation.

Children's film programming has a layered audience of children and their supporters (friends, siblings, parents, grandparents, cousins, teachers). The young members of this audience are all in full personal development, psychological and physical. Preferences, expectations and taste experiences alter rapidly when they grow up. For a film producer there is a choice: to cater for the largest possible audience of all ages, or to focus on a specific target group. Brown gives a historical sketch of the various options.

Chapter 2 covers the dual addressed Hollywood family film, dominated by

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the output of the Disney Studio. It is fascinating to see how the Disney Studio is able to maintain their huge market share world wide and international impact from their start in the thirties through several decades until now. Brown gives a neat explanation based on a selective number of references. This phenomenon would make a perfect question for an exam in film history, testing insight and knowledge. The answer key would contain five elements, situated in the Fifties: “the popularity of its live-action production wing; the release of its live-action spectacular *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (Richard Fleischer, 1954) which addressed an older adolescent-teenage audience; the creation of its own distribution arm; its pioneering partnership with television network ABC; the opening of theme park Disneyland” (p. 52).

Chapter 3 describes state supported European films produced with the aim of matching children’s experiences and their cultural identity. He gives an insightful discussion of three case studies: The popular German film *Emil und die Detektive* (Gerard Lamprecht, 1931) with remakes in 1964 and 2001, the well-known French classic *The Red Balloon* (Albert Lamorisse, 1956) and the undervalued Indian film *The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha* (Satyajit Ray, 1969). In the same chapter the propaganda films in former Soviet Union and communist China are also discussed. They form a particular subset in this category, with an overdose of ideology conveyance and clear didactic intentions aimed at conformism to a regulative worldview.

The concluding chapter gives an overview of the contemporary state of things, dominated by co-productions of national cinemas with Hollywood. Examples include the *Harry Potter* series, the output of the British Aardman Studio, the Japanese Studio Ghibli and the influence of the French company Canal+ among others. Children’s films produced within the framework of a national cinema can struggle to be profitable in the home market and to be sold to film distributors and broadcast abroad. Happily enough, there are some exceptions in each country. Brown mentions among others the Danish film *Rubber Tarzan* (1981) and the Swedish film *Kidz in Da Hood* (2006). Further analysis of these good practices would help to stimulate and optimize the theatrical release of children’s films.

The overview provided by Brown is mostly clear, but sometimes confusing when he uses broad statements (“since the 1980’s”) in combination with very specific statistical data sometimes taken from different years and different periods wide apart. And there remain many white spots on his map (Dutch children’s films for instance). His overview is understandably dominated by a British perspective. Still, he gives the reader a thorough introduction into analysis of the specific conventions and meanings of children’s films in general. Brown formulates the essence of his argument

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as follows:

*“Because of its didactic imperative, children’s cinema is also a profound expression of individual and collective identity – the codes, values, customs and norms that represent society’s claim to civilisation”* (105).

We could start to investigate in more detail how this statement would apply to children’s films we care for. Brown ends with posing a still unanswered question:

*“Who really watches children’s films, and what do people do with their experiences of them?”* (105).

He presents this as an unanswerable question, but I would like to take it as a challenging invitation for further analysis.

## **Notes**

[1] Noel Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film: A History, from Shirley Temple to Harry Potter*. London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012; Noel Brown, *British Children’s Cinema: From The Thief of Bagdad to Wallace and Gromit*. London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016.

## **Notes on Contributor:**

Peter Bosma (1960) studied Dutch Literature and Film Studies at the University of Utrecht. After his graduation in 1986, he coordinated the Open University Introduction Course to Film Studies. His fascination with film art led him to joining the rows of professionals of cinema exhibition as a co-film programmer of arthouse cinema LantarenVenster (Rotterdam), a position he held for twenty years. He focused on presenting film heritage, especially silent films. Eventually he returned to teaching film history, film analysis and cultural management. At the moment he is as freelance researcher eager to explore the field of film exhibition, the presentation of film heritage and its critical discourse. In 2015 his book *Film Programming: Curating for Cinemas, Festivals, Archives* was released by Wallflower Press/Columbia University Press. His most recent publication is the article ‘Some Considerations on the Diversity of Cinema Programs in the Digital Age: Notes and Topics for Discussion’, published at the website of European Digital Cinema Forum (<http://www.edcf.net/articles.html>).