



Studies in Visual Communication

Volume 4
Issue 2 *Winter 1977*

Article 9

1977

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Brian Sutton-Smith
University of Pennsylvania

Recommended Citation

Sutton-Smith, B. (1977). Review Essay: Children's Filmmaking. 4 (2), 140-141. Retrieved from <https://repository.upenn.edu/svc/vol4/iss2/9>

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Review Essay: Children's Filmmaking

REVIEWS AND DISCUSSION

Young Filmmakers. Rodger Larson with Ellen Meade. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969. 190 pp., photographs, index. \$5.95 (cloth); paper by Avon, 1971. \$.95.

Make Your Own Animated Movies: Yellowball Workshop Film Techniques. Yvonne Anderson. Little Brown, 1970. 100 pp., photographs, index. \$6.95 (cloth).

Children as Film Makers, John Lidstone and Don McIntosh. New York: Van Nostrand, Rinehold, 1970. 112 pp., photographs, index. \$7.95 (cloth).

Young Animators, and Their Discoveries. A Report from Young Filmmakers Foundation. Rodger Larsen, Lynne Hofer, and Jaime Barrios. New York: Praeger, 1973. 159 pp., photographs, index. \$6.50 (cloth).

Video and Kids. Radical Software/Changing Channels. Peter Haratonik and Kit Laybourne, eds. New York: Gordon and Breach, Science Publishers, 1974. 72 pp., photographs, \$6.95 (paper).

Reviewed by *Brian Sutton-Smith*
University of Pennsylvania

Although this group of books has a mainly *How to Do It* emphasis, it represents the first accounting of a recent major event in the history of modern American culture. These are the first book-length reports of the movement to put modern media techniques (filmmaking and videotaping) into the hands of children. In general it has been the practice to leave the less sophisticated cultural functions in their hands (games, dominance hierarchies, etc.) and to keep the more abstract functions in the hands of adults (schooling, arts classes, etc.). Perhaps we are indeed arriving at Mead's third stage of "prefiguration," where children teach adults.

Although the varieties of emphasis in this cultural movement (film, videotape) is much wider than is represented by these books, a few of the major figures are indeed represented here. Thus Rodger Larsen graduated from the Art School of Pratt Institute and was running arts programs (drama, dance and art), when he happened on the notion in 1963 that children could also make films. His efforts took off as a result of the War on Poverty, and funded by the Department of Labor became an important happening in New York political life of the late 1960's. As his book so clearly shows, filmmaking became a social elevator for a select few children, who otherwise would probably not have made it into the higher rungs. What is argued by Rodger himself is whether he thus contributed opportunity to the poor or contributed to the cooling of crisis in the streets. Did he do something radical or did he do something conservative? It's an important point because many of those who have worked with children's filmmaking, like Dee Halleck (not represented here by a book), worked largely with delinquent or migrant groups with the aim of bringing beauty, as well as voice to the invisible poor. Like Rodger, she wanted them to be able to find symbolic expression for their needs

as well as to be able to command the respect of others. The new film techniques were to be instruments of radical liberation.

Yvonne Anderson's motives seem to have been both more conventional and more intrinsically related to technique itself. In the sixties she established a non-profit school in Lexington, Massachusetts, and proceeded to support herself from tuition. The tradition here was that of the specialized teacher of the arts. The characteristic kinds of animation produced by her pupils with cut out animations and bright primary colors have become known throughout the States and in Europe. In this, perhaps the most elementary of the books in this group, she explains how it is done. The motive is the familiar Rousseauian thesis that children are "new people" and can see things "in a new way." Children of this age (from five to eighteen years) have special qualities. They can work directly and simply without too much premeditation, making interesting and important social commentary. So she says, as have thousands of other educators before her. Haratonik and Laybourne's *Video and Kids* on the other hand is strictly post McLuhan happening and reflects the considerable influence at one time of John Culkin and the Center for Understanding Media. What is most interesting in this work is that by now the pentecostal fires of the tribal village have pretty much departed for the older contributors although there are still others who feel that children working with videotape machines can change the face of schools, as well as of their perceptions of the world. By and large, this particular book begins with the cynical contributions and moves later to the enthusiastic ones, representing perhaps the "experience" of its editors.

Although, as we have said, the books (with the exception of *Video and Kids*) do not give much sense of the very considerable passion in this cultural happening of film and video for children, there are glimmers of it here and there. (For another view of this "passion" see Richard Chalfen's review of a recent conference on children's filmmaking [1977].)

Apart from the above mentioned orientation of these outstanding teachers towards the *message*, or the *art form*, or the *media* itself, there are many other issues. For example, is it better to approach filmmaking through art forms (Yvonne Anderson), through literature (as in the Teachers and Writers Collaborative in New York City), through drama (as in The Loft at Bronxville), through directorial requirements (as in The Young Filmmakers), or directly through camera work (as in the book by Lidstone and McIntosh in the present group). Unfortunately there is little clarification of these differences in any of these works, and even less attempt to take a point of view. Only Lidstone and McIntosh argue for the superiority of their method, that is, of getting children first into camera work, and only later into editing, shot lists and narrative, which is the reverse way to that chosen by the more adult filmmaker and by Larsen, Hofer and Barrios. In part, at least the difference reduces to a concern for teaching in schools, versus a concern for the production of gifted filmmakers in workshops.

A point that worries all these teachers and artists, however, and many others in the field, is the apparent contradiction between the belief that filming and videotaping give a child great scope for creativity, and the very clear evidence that the films and animations coming out of a particular

school always bear its brand so clearly. As Phillip Lopate (a contributor to *Video and Kids*) says, "The question of manipulation won't go away. The truth is that teaching almost always involves manipulation." But still there are enormous differences in this field. There is the "manipulation" of some of the country's filmmakers, where the teacher is more like a coach and the "children's films" often Disney-like, clearly his own; there are the manipulations of those who under the guise of leaving children to their own naive view have them intrusively filming the activities of others with little ethical concern for their interference. There is the intrusion occasionally of the teacher's own Freudian sophistications. As Michael Rubbo has stated it in another context, film teachers in England tend to have children who make films about how children turn the tables on authoritarian adults; whereas in Czechoslovakia the children make films of their own special and innocent view of the world—both groups of teachers indulging in some indirect way their own nostalgia.

It is a very special pleasure in this respect to record that the two books from *The Young Filmmakers* score a particular success because they have chosen the biographical approach to their accounts. Despite any significance that they might have wished the activity to have for their East Side children and despite their use of narrative, to story board, to shot list, to camera, to editing approach, there is clear evidence in these two books (Larsen and Meade; Larsen, Hofer and Barrios) of a great openness and sensitivity to the directions taken by the children. We get the techniques, but we also get much more of the life of children that comes pouring through those techniques. The basic folk themes of deprivation and villainy are everywhere in these animations and live films as well as the life-long mythic attempt to make sense out of unhinged fate. More importantly, one senses that for some of the children described, the sequencing of images through filming is their first adequate conceptualization of the matters at hand and does indeed precede verbalization. They do not first talk about it (as you and I would) and then film it; but in the filming they discover what it is. Their filming appears to be a first realization—not an embodiment of some other medium. For a psychologist this is perhaps the most important hint conveyed by all these books about the "cognitive" nature of films. While the books are explicit on technique, and often enthusiastic about the way of life, they

are remarkably inarticulate about what it does to a human being to have that kind of experience and skill.

We suspect that this inarticulateness, or should we say, unreadiness to do analytic research on the matter at hand, has led some of the earlier protagonists to a too early defeat and belief that the God of media has failed. Hoping for too much of a paradigmatic shift, they have not been ready to look for the more micro-level adjustments in terms of which most human learning actually occurs. Thus, in *Video and Kids* George Gordon speaks scathingly of "The faded Toronto guru, McLuhan, who liked to fancy himself a 'sparkplug of intellectual electricity,' and turned out, in the long run, to be an embolism in the bloodstream of the serious study of communications" (p. 8). . . "How come a zillion (or more) studies show that kids in general do no better (or as badly) in their schoolwork when taught by television than when given old fashioned textbook, chalk and blackboard instruction" (p. 9). . . "Why did the Ford Foundation and Uncle Sammy have to spend billions to find out that video education cost many, many more billions? Who goofed? Are they still goofing?" (p. 9). Or Phillip Lopate opines: "The portopak as it has been used so far, has a pro visceral and anti-intellectual bias" (p. 19). . . "In portopak circles the deferral of responsibility for artistic quality is subtler. It goes under name of videotape as 'process,' videotape as 'behavioral feedback,' videotape as the 'People's Medium,' videotape as 'folk art,' videotape as 'experience,' or videotape as 'training people to operate videotape.' All alibis. Just many rationalizations for mediocre tapes" (p. 21).

In sum, the cultural movement to put film and video into the hands of children is with us, but judging by the voices in these books, whether enthusiastic or pessimistic, what we have is a movement and not yet the muscle. We have the phonics and the syntax. We are speaking. But in the midst of all this melody of speech, there is not as yet much certainty as to the meaning. We do not yet know what the metacommunications of filmmakers and videotapers sound like.

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