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Monsters, Adventures and Magic Tricks

Children as Amateur Film-makers

“Children are the first avantgardists with the ways of thinking which we adults have forgotten long time ago”¹

Franka Potente

Children and films

Children and childhood have been an essential part of amateur home movie making almost as long as such films have been shot (Zimmermann 1988, 29-32). In fact, it can be even said that children have been in the core of the whole activity. Thus, amateur films have become strongly associated with the preservation of the image of children and childhood with parents behind and children in front of the camera lens. However, amateur (or family) films have not been designed for children but for parents. It is parents who have decided what to film and what not, they have watched these films (even though quite often together with children) and created the idealized image of childhood, from their perspective. (see e.g. Norris Nicholson 2001, 128-129)

The origins of the present article lie in the notion I have made while writing my dissertation on amateur films and childhood - namely that everything we see, hear or read about amateur films and childhood is from the adult perspective.² I as a researcher, my informants as recallers, their fathers and mothers as film-makers – we are all adults talking about childhood. Where is the opinion of a child?

¹ Krönke 2006, 18. The original text is in German and goes as follows: "Für Potente sind die Kinder die ersten Avantgardisten, mit Gedankengängen, die den Erwachsenen längst verloren gingen."

² There is a long tradition of analysing children's drawings but here I have concentrated merely on moving image.

In the article, my intention is to give voice for children³ through their own films and interviews. The following questions will be discussed: what have children been filming and how? How have they been filming their own life? Can we reach “authentic or real childhood” if we consider films shot by children and not their parents or relatives?

It can be asked why to concentrate on the films of children? Does it bring something new to the picture we have on childhood and children's culture? My answer is that it gives us the very perspective of children. It gives us a glue on how they see their own life and culture. It is interesting to see whether they will – when filming – interpret the culture of adults and imitate it but still make films in their own way – in the way of a child. Maybe we cannot reach “authentic or real childhood” if we analyze films shot by children and not by their parents or relatives but at least we can get a glimpse of it.

The material of my article consists of two main parts. Firstly, I have analyzed the information I have gathered in three different questionnaires: one made in 2003 about amateur film-making in general, the other about children as amateur filmmakers in a Finnish discussion forum in 2005 and the third also about children as amateur filmmakers in an international discussion forum in 2005. They all include questionnaire answers given by former child film-makers who are adults nowadays.⁴ Here we come to the same problem as mentioned in the beginning: adults reminiscing their childhood. This problem will be discussed later.

Secondly, I have analyzed actual amateur films shot by children during various decades. The analysis of these films is based on the interviews where I have watched films together with the film-maker and let him or her recall the film-making process. Even if adults have shot the majority of amateur films during the decades, there are also examples of films made by children. Most of the films are from the 1960's and 1970's and their contents vary from monster movies and magic tricks to documentary-style images of picnics and adventures. The youngest of filmmakers was five years old during the time of

³ Child is considered here as a person of or under fifteen years even though a person at the age of fourteen or fifteen can be considered as a youngster as well.

⁴ Only some of the answers of the questionnaires can be found at the www pages mentioned in the list of sources. Most of the respondents wanted to answer privately so that their memories wouldn't be seen in public. Latter answers are in the author's possession.

filming and the oldest was fifteen years.⁵

Amateur films as visual spaces

Jukka Sihvonen⁶ has pointed out in his book *Kuviteltu lapsia (Imagined children)* (Sihvonen 1987) that children's films (that is to say films made by adults for and about children) can't really tell us what a child is or what a child's world is like but rather how directors and filmmakers have understood the child and his/her world. (See also Wojcik-Andrews 2000, 2) This thought can be borrowed in the context of amateur films. It can be stated that amateur films made by adults cannot tell us what a child is like or what his/her world is like. It can be even stated that the memories of childhood offered by home movies are not memories of children themselves but rather memories of their parents or other adults filming children (Citron 1999, 11).

Also Heather Norris Nicholson has pointed out how our [adults'] memories of childhood are incomplete (Norris Nicholson 2001, 128-129). "Since childhood experience has been documented largely through adults' eyes, the visual record, like other memories, is partial", Norris Nicholson continues. This is the point where amateur films *made by children* may be of help. They, I believe, will tell us about childhood in childrens own terms and through their eyes. According to a German actress and silent film director Franka Potente, children have ideas and ways of thinking which we adults have forgotten long time ago. It is this special way of thinking that Potente wishes to reach in her films and it is what *I* wish to find in my article.

In another publication, Sihvonen does not consider only children's films but takes an individual child under careful analysis. He presents interesting thoughts about visual spaces with which he doesn't mean only physical children's rooms, nurseries, but also spaces within them such as sketchbooks, photo albums, comics, puzzles and different kind of toys. (Sihvonen 1989, 11) A nursery can also be understood as a mental space. Sihvonen considers it as a visual space which is under continuous changes as new elements are added and others are displaced. Simultaneously, objects are moved from

⁵ Here I refer to the footnote number two. In the case of 14- or 15-year-old filmmakers it should be noted that their hobby could also be seen as a way of moving away from childhood. However, also in such a case their films are telling about how they structure their own life.

⁶ Jukka Sihvonen is Professor of Media Studies and has had interests on theatre, film and recently also technology and audiovisions.

one place to another along with changing games, there appears new (audio)visual devices which expand the space of the nursery all at once. (Sihvonen 1989, 11) Here, one could also add films made by children. Along with books, albums, toys etc they are a part of a nursery and part of children's culture. They are formed by children and thus representing children's perspective to their own life.

Sihvonen continues: "The dweller of a nursery expresses himself and build his ego by covering the walls of his rooms with pictures which are within his reach" (Sihvonen 1989, 12). In this thought, we are very close to the idea behind children's film-making: it is all about expressing oneself and building one's ego that has made children so interested in holding a camera.

Sihvonen points out that there are not many movies where children could get their voice heard. Often, they are left in the background. It is in spite of all an adult way of thinking that defines most of childhood – it's values, borders and contents. The child remains an invisible and absent part of the culture controlled by adults. And yet, children's own culture filled with games and plays exists independently from adults' world. (Sihvonen 1989, 30). Children's films made by adults are only able to describe the borders of children's world.

Here we come to the question of power relations which is essential when considering children and amateur film-making. Children have mainly been targets for adults filming. Adults have used power for example when deciding what, when, how and why to film. Most often, children have had no place to decide how filming process will go. According to many articles and writings, this can be seen as a strong ability of using power (Citron 1999, 7-13; Norris Nicholson, 2001/2002, 74-75). It also tells a lot about relationships between adults and children. In this context, children making amateur films have turned roles upside down: they have become the users of power instead of being a target of power. Now they have decided what, when, how and why to film. This can be noticed for example in the following kind of sentences which appear in interviews continuously: "Now here you can see OUR film!"⁷ Sometimes, being able to be in charge and being an observer instead of an actor may have been an impressive and even relieving experience – this happened to the film director Michelle Citron but in her case not until she was grown-up (Citron 1999, 111).

⁷ Int3.

8 mm – cool thing!

But where is the opinion of a child? I have given voice for children through their actual films but also through interviews where I have asked them to tell about their childhood hobby. Of course it must be kept in mind that in the interview situations, there are once again adults commenting their childhood but nevertheless, the informants have managed to reach their childhood attitudes and ideas in a pretty trustworthy manner. The commentaries are not nostalgic but fresh and also critical especially towards adults. Therefore, I have handled their answers as they would be children telling about their hobbies anyhow having the reservations mentioned earlier in mind.

First some short but interesting notions on international experiences to give a baseline for Finnish material. In September 2005, I sent a questionnaire to an international discussion forum concentrating on 8 mm films to ask about their film-making experience in the childhood.⁸ The questionnaire got an enthusiastic reception from former and present amateur film-makers although there were not that many answers given – eight altogether. However, all respondents recalled their experiences positively verbosely and were keen on telling their story. The material offers a general background information on the nature of the hobby.

The majority of film-makers were over 10 years but not older than 15 when they started filming but an interest toward amateur films, cameras and possibilities offered by them may have started earlier. However, the hobby was perceived as being far too expensive for a child to manage with it without parents' financial help and this may have prevented younger children from starting the hobby. Thus, starting filming must have meant real interest as it was often the whole weekly pocket-money that had to be used to get one cartridge of film.

One of the respondents, on the other hand, had another reason than economy for not starting his hobby until at the age of 13. At the age of nine or ten, the boy had discovered his grandfather's Regular 8mm camera which interested him greatly. But the instructions were in Russian – in the language neither he or his father understood – and the camera was complicated and his father had no experience in shooting

⁸ Internet questionnaire *Children as Filmmakers*, 15.9.2005.

moving image. The grandfather had already passed away before the boy's birth so there was no one to guide the eager young film-maker. Thus, the beginning of the hobby was to come only later.⁹

The films my respondents were referring to included many kind of themes and subjects. Most of the films were kind of documentaries with family members, school mates and friends performing in front of the lens and filming took place on holidays, in the school yard, city center or in the wild. Free time activities were a essential part of this kind of film-making.¹⁰ These documentary-style films mainly followed the examples of adults in their choice of subjects but having other children in front of the camera during spare time brought the perspective of a child to the resulting movie. The youngest of the respondents writes: "And sometimes if I have film I'll go shoot some mess around stuff with my friends' downtown getting on top of buildings, by the rivers, at vacant buildings, local sand dunes."¹¹ Top of buildings and vacant houses can be considered as marginal places where adults rarely will go shooting documentary-style films.

Apart from documentaries, children made also narratives including horror movies, action dramas and westerns¹². These movies were more experimental including self-made blood and stunts, turning the camera upside down, timelapse and cut out animation¹³ more often than the documentary-style films did.

After finishing the process, films were watched together with friends and relatives. Sometimes they were shown for amateur film veterans in local film clubs or even for paying audiences. Watching the films was an important ceremony and an essential part of the film-making process. However, childrens films were remained quite private in a way that normally they were shown only for a limited group of familiar people. Only rarely did the films participate in competitions which was much more common among adults. In the international material, only one respondent told that his film had participated in the UK BBC TV young film-makers competition.¹⁴ Naturally, the competition expanded the audience of his film.

⁹ Cf6.

¹⁰ Cf1-8.

¹¹ Cf8.

¹² Cf1 and 3.

¹³ Cf3 and 5.

¹⁴ Cf5.

While in Finland...

In Finland, children followed the same guidelines in amateur film-making as abroad but the influences didn't come straight from foreign children but from their own parents. Here, I will present and analyze film collections of three young film enthusiasts¹⁵. Two of them are boys which was the general trend among all amateur film-makers – I have got information only on two girls engaged in filming activities even though there may have been more of them.

Most of the child film-makers have been boys both in Finland and abroad. This is equivalent to the situation among adult amateur film-makers - most of them have been men. (Chalfen 1987, 60; Zimmermann 1988, 32) The only girl among my interviewees was born in 1964 and shot only one film reel which she got as a Christmas present.¹⁶ Her film includes scenes from playing areas with her sister, brother and friends performing in front of the lens. According to her own words, her film didn't have any kind of a plot even though she enjoyed writing manuscripts in general. In the interview, she emphasizes how it was important to prepare the filming carefully beforehand; the reel lasted for three and a half minutes only so it was necessary to think in advance what to film and how long.

Black Magic

The first of the boys¹⁷ presented here was 14 years old when starting his hobby in the middle of 1960s and his collection consists of 13 edited films. There were even more films but the amount of 13 was what he remembered in the interview. Only one was a documentary film. There he portrayed his parents preparing themselves for the reception of the independence day at the castle of the President of Finland. Other films were all narratives and included themes like toy car race, Tarzan in the jungle and gangsters robbing money. Here, I will have a deeper look at only two of them but also discuss the contents, background and meanings of the other films.

¹⁵ Films 1-3, Int1-2.

¹⁶ Int3.

¹⁷ Int1.

The first film "Musta magia – Black Magic"¹⁸ tells about a girl/a woman at three different ages who starts eating liquorice and gradually becomes a liquoriceaholic. The film is exceptional in terms that there was a professional actress playing the leading role as a liquorice-addicted old lady. Having a skilled actress starring was possible because she was a friend of the filmmaker's mother.

The uppermost impression of the movie is artistic and mature; it includes many beautiful images for example from a summery beach. On the other hand, it is also imaginative which is typical for the other movies of the film-maker as well. One of the best examples is the scene where the camera is shooting from the ground upwards and spectators can see an eager hand hoarding liquorice bars. Another example is a drawing of a human digestive system where liquorice bars are sliding downhill to the stomach. Every new drawing appearing in front of the spectator's eyes shows how the digestive system gradually gets darker and darker because of the overdose of liquorice. The boy used same kind of tricks in other films as well.

Once again too late

The second film presented here is made by the previous boy. The second one shows us clearly how seriously he took his hobby. With the film "Taas liian myöhään – Once again too late" the boy and his crew participated in a national film competition and won it. However, the crew didn't have a tripod and that's why the film wasn't accepted to the international competition.

Despite of the technical insufficiency, the film has an inventive idea which was the reason for the victory. The story tells about a magician whose wand has been stolen by a dog. Wherever he arrives he comes too late: the thief has just made a magic trick and caused severe problems. "We won thanks to the idea. According to the jury, the others were mostly banal descriptions of being late from school and other routines", tells the film-maker who acted as a scriptwriter, director and cameraman.¹⁹ The film wasn't easy to realize; for example having a living animal as an assistant caused some troubles. When the dog was to steal the magic wand it refused to do so until the boys smoothed the wand with a taste and aroma of a sausage.

¹⁸ Film 1.

¹⁹ Int1.

Also the other films of the film-maker in question have been built on a careful thinking and on a manuscript. The same is with many other child film-makers. For example, the boy who answered to the Finnish internet questionnaire wrote about an action film he made together with ten friends at the age of 14.²⁰ They wrote and draw a careful manuscript, tried to find proper places for different scenes and followed certain principals in filming. In other words, he and his crew followed the same path as did the maker of "Black Magic" and "Once Again Too Late". The latter wanted to crystallize his thoughts of the hobby by saying: "When you are truly enthusiastic about something you are always full of fire. You didn't buy any sweets in order to get films!"²¹

An adventure in the wild

The second film-makers – two brothers of 12 and 7²² years – had a portray of an adventure in mind. They were to shoot a film on a sandpit nearby their summer cottage. However, the result was a series of documentary-style descriptions of summer activities and landscapes. This was mainly caused by the fact that the boys didn't eventually edit their films at all. Thus, it looks like as if they had sporadically filmed small creatures in the woods, crossing a river and each others on an expedition.

The adventure film includes many tricks and events. The father of the boys was both an amateur photographer and an amateur film-maker and the older brother had also been engaged in photography a year before the summer 1977 so he was aware of what kind of possibilities a cine camera offered. He knew for example that the sort of magic tricks they made in the end of the second film wouldn't have succeeded without a cine camera. But because they had it they could make the older brother disappear and make strawberries and potatoes disappear from the younger brother's hand. An example of more simple effects was shaking the camera to give an impression of an earthquake.

According to the older brother, children do make different kind of films than adults. Generally speaking, when children make films "they watch the world in a totally different way and perhaps often also in a fresher manner"²³. Also their own film differed from those of their father and mother (both

²⁰ La1.

²¹ Int1.

²² Int2.

²³ Int2.

filmed at home). The biggest difference was that they "were leading up to a fantasy, this wasn't making a documentary. I think here we had more like filmic storytelling."²⁴

The end – children as film-makers

There are several examples of adult film-makers who have had a strong need to share their personal childhood experiences and to tell their childhood story through film-making. Also Heather Norris Nicholson has attested this in her previously mentioned article *Aboriginal Childhoods* (Norris Nicholson 2001/2002, 88). The same kind of tendency can be seen in amateur films made by Finnish children. In Norris Nicholson's article, however, childhood experiences have included more dramatic events and they have had stronger influences on adulthood than in Finnish films but the background ideas are the same. Children have a need to tell about their life in their own words and manners.

The most surprising discovery which was against my presuppositions was that children were ambitious with their film-making. It is often argued that especially family films (home movies) made by adults have been arrant snapshots with no pre-planning, manuscripting nor editing. Such film-makers have filmed just for fun. This seems to be rare among children. Even though results may have looked like snapshots there has nearly always been an effort to make a "real film" - at least in thoughts.

Thus, it can be stated that some child film-makers had a need to be treated as serious film-makers. That's where at least a part of them wished to aim at, that's where carefully written manuscripts, editing, paying audiences, competitions etc were heading to and that's the sort of identity they felt they had. Of course some of them filmed just for fun or because they wanted to see themselves and friends and relatives moving on the screen but even their it was important to emphasize their skills and abilities in making films. However, it looks like that in most cases amateur film-making remained a temporary target for enthusiasm and maybe became a true hobby only later, as an adult. The hobby was given up at the latest on the threshold of adolescence "when girls, music and looking cool took priority"²⁵.

It doesn't matter whether the films were carefully planned narratives or just footage on family picnics, school days, games, plays and nature trips, in other words documentary-style filming. The focus is on

²⁴ Int2.

²⁵ Cf3; see also La1.

what *the children themselves* did in the course of events. The magic of the film was at it's simplest to see oneself moving on the screen just like one of the respondents stated: "It was the thrill of seeing myself and my family and my friends on the screen which kept me using the camera."²⁶ Another informant attested: "In those days the fact [that] one could make a film himself -in color!- was already pretty sensational."²⁷

Children can also be considered as experimental or avantgardist filmmakers. They eagerly use the possibilities which cine film technique offers and aren't afraid of using effects in presenting earthquakes etc. Cine film technique also makes different kind of magic tricks possible. They would be difficult if not impossible to carry out in reality. The films are full of fantasy and dream-like images.

Two more things have become apparent when analyzing the material. Firstly, if children have living performers or actors they are keen on using other children, not adults. Of course there are exceptions but the general tendency is other children who can perhaps follow the film-makers ideas and thoughts easier than adults. Secondly, even if children are inventive they clearly follow adults' way of filming and thinking about filming. Like it has been mentioned above, amateur film-making has been described as being "too expensive for a kid"²⁸ so there was a limited amount of raw film material available. Thus, it was important to think carefully what to film and how much. Also the significance of a pre-planned manuscript is emphasized in many recollections. These ideas follow up the ones of adults'.

In most cases, there was the father, mother or some other grown-up relative in the background of a child film-maker who had been shooting amateur films and thus given an example for the activity. It is pretty rare that a child would have discovered the hobby all by himself. Normally, parents were willing to give their support (financial or mental!) to their son or daughter filming. However, there are examples of very opposite reactions; for example one of the boys answering my questionnaire tells about his father reacting to his filming hobby in quite an unexceptional way: "When my Dad found out how much I had spent on the movie he cut off my allowance saying that I did not need an allowance if I was going to spend it on that kind of foolishness."²⁹

²⁶ Cf3.

²⁷ Cf2.

²⁸ Cf1.

²⁹ Cf1.

How about differences between children and adults then? One of the respondents presented several ideas on the subject.³⁰ Firstly, Secondly, according to him, film-making requires patience which can be more difficult for children than for adults. When shooting film, one cannot see results straight after filming. The films are ready only in a week or two which can be trying (see also Koch 2006, 40). He himself visited the photo store several times a week just in order to ask if the films have arrived. Finally, he states children don't have flair for time insomuch than adults. He doesn't clarify this any further but after having analyzed the whole of the interview I have interpreted this so that children don't make films in order to preserve images of their friend, relatives or living environment for the future. Rather they are eager to test their skills and limits and picture the moment they are living.

Amateur *film*-making wasn't an easy hobby to go in for. Apart from being a costly hobby, cameras and projectors, lighting and editing required special knowledge which had to be learned from adults, clubs or books. Besides, if the film-maker was very young some cameras may have been too heavy to keep it steady-handed³¹. However, if one learned all the technique well enough the results almost certainly rewarded the film-maker even though the quality wasn't necessarily as good as films by adults had. Despite the demanding nature of film, there are new enthusiasts of the present time who wouldn't change film to video. A 15-year-old film-maker born in 1990 crystallized his 1-year-long hobby in the following words: "I love film!"³²

UNPUBLISHED SOURCES

Amateur films

Film 1

Title: Musta magia (Black magic)

Filmmaker: boy, born in 1950

Format: 8 mm

Colour: coloured

³⁰ Int1.

³¹ Int1. The film-maker was seven years old.

³² Cf8.

Time: 1960s

Country: Finland

Storage: private collection

Film 2

Title: Taas liian myöhään (Once again too late)

Filmmaker: boy, born in 1950

Format: 8 mm

Colour: coloured

Time: 1960s

Country: Finland

Storage: private collection

Film 3

Filmmakers: boy, born in 1965 and boy, born in 1969

Format: 8 mm

Colour: coloured

Time: 1977

Country: Finland

Storage: private collection

Interviews

Interviews made for dissertation *Home Movies and Narrated Memories of Childhood (Int)*,

Interviewees:

Int1, boy, Finland, born in 1950, interviewed in August 2006.

Int2, boy, Finland, born in 1965, interviewed in November 2005.

Int3, girl, Finland, born in 1964, interviewed in October 2005.

Questionnaires

Internet questionnaire *Lapset amatöörikuvaajina* (La), 18.8.2005,
<http://www.digivideo.fi/phpbb2/viewforum.php?f=14&sid=97c0259b1cb79db1aa5d5de4adff802b>

Respondents:

La1, boy, Finland, born in 1966.

Internet questionnaire *Children as Filmmakers* (Cf), 15.9.2005, www.filmshooting.com/scripts/forum/

Respondents:

Cf1, boy, United States, born in 1944

Cf2, boy, Belgium, born in 1953

Cf3, boy, Great Britain, born in 1954

Cf4, boy, United States, born in 1955

Cf5, boy, Hong Kong, born in 1961

Cf6, boy, United States, born in 1973

Cf7, boy, Norway, born in 1977

Cf8, boy, United States, born in 1990

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