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The Mixed Use of Still and Moving Images in Education during the Interwar Period

Christel Taillibert

From the beginnings of cinema, moving images were seen by educationalists as a new tool that could serve their cause. A production of didactic films covering a wide range of topics soon developed parallel to a vast production of “spectacular” films, as fiction and entertainment films were then referred to. The early period of educational cinema, from the early 20th century to the turning point of World War II, is characterized by an ambiguous and complex relationship with still images. The study of contemporary writings and of the educational films themselves shows that demands and expectations in relation to didactic cinema and the creation of teaching materials resorted to elements of comparison, judgment, and analysis almost always referred to an opposition between the two types of visual media.

The Initial Reluctance of the Teaching Profession

To understand how this very original situation came to be, the strong misgivings of teachers about the integration of cinema in their practices must be taken into consideration. Their distrust mainly owed to the perceived threat of their replacement by the new pedagogical tool. As long as images were still, no matter their content, the educational role of teachers remained central in explaining, commenting, relating elements to one another. With film, it seemed, the moving image laid claim to all these prerogatives, condemning teachers to attend a lesson over which they had no control along with their pupils.

The advertisements of some producers of didactic films did nothing to allay these fears, emphasizing the “pedagogical revolution” which filmed lessons would inevitably bring about in the field of teaching. Most of these concerns were obviously unfounded, yet they endured in a diffuse form until the late 1930s in the debates stirring up the spheres of

pedagogical cinema. The advocates of a didactic cinematography, who argued for the integration of these new tools in the pedagogical materials available to schools, thus set out to demonstrate the senselessness of these anxieties through a number of points.

The History of Visual Education

The first argument consisted in presenting cinema as a logical development in the evolution of didactic materials long used in schools. These traditional, widely used visual aids included models, castings, globes, wall maps, or blackboards and – more recently – photographs, slides, and stereoscopies. The cinematograph should accordingly be viewed by teachers as a continuation of and an improvement upon the visual aids already available to them. The most eloquent and conspicuous expression of this idea was the initiation and the publication of a large study, “Essay on the Historical Evolution of Visual Education,” in the early 1930s.¹ It came out of the Rome International Institute of Educational Cinema, an organization created within the League of Nations and whose mission was to federate research and debates on educational and didactic cinema.² Through a chronological structure that runs from prehistory to modern times, the report tends to emphasize the privileged part images have always played in the transmission of knowledge, supporting its claim with texts by the greatest philosophers and pedagogues in history. The author concludes that “cinema, barely forty years old, is thus but a new means at the disposal of teaching through visual aids, which is by contrast as old as the world, one might say, and all the more necessary as it is the

¹ Luisa Rossi-Longhi, “Essai sur l’évolution historique de l’éducation visuelle,” *Revue Internationale du cinéma éducateur* (Rome), 77 p. The study was published in several installments from February to November 1932.

² The Istituto Internazionale per la Cinematografia Educativa was founded in Rome by Benito Mussolini in 1928 and put under the umbrella of the League of Nations. Its core objective was to foster the production, diffusion, and exchange of educational films between countries, in keeping with the spirit of the League – the pursuit of mutual understanding and collaboration between peoples. Despite the distinct agenda of the Fascist regime itself, which saw it as a part of its diplomacy, the organization soon gained international recognition as a center for thinking and taking initiative with respect to educational cinema. It closed down in December 1937 when Italy withdrew from the League of Nations. See Christel Taillibert, *L’Institut international du cinématographe éducatif. Regards sur le rôle du cinéma éducatif dans la politique internationale du fascisme italien* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1999).

expression of a natural need of the human species.³ If cinema was simply one more element in the gamut of visual aids whose effectiveness had already been tested, any fear about it thus lost its justification.

The Pedagogical Advantages of the Moving Image

The second argument advanced at the time to promote the adoption of the moving image in teaching materials involved showing the pedagogical advantages it had over other media, particularly still images. The element considered as the most evident and convincing was of course the ability of cinema to reproduce movement, as Parisian school teacher Jean Brérault fervently attested in a study devoted to the use of cinema in primary education:

The realm of cinema – this evidence is repeated over and over nowadays – is that of movement. Still, an explanation is in order here. Movement first refers to everything that is itself moving: natural elements, living beings, machines, etc. It also involves what is naturally immobile but may be presented from a mobile point of view. This is the case for panoramic views as well as horizontal, vertical, forward, and backward tracking shots. These tracking shots, so common today, present the advantage of giving represented objects an amazing depth: they make it possible to move around them or to discover their various aspects in continuity. A mountain landscape, for instance, as seen from a car moving on a winding road, is infinitely more evocative than a still image. My pupils always greatly benefited from the screening of films such as “La Route des Alpes” or “La Route des Pyrénées,” which were shot during a scenic trip in an automobile.⁴

³ Rossi-Longhi, “Essai sur l’évolution historique de l’éducation visuelle,” *Revue Internationale du cinéma éducatif* (Sept. 1932): 803.

⁴ Jean Brérault, “Utilisation du cinématographe dans l’enseignement primaire,” *La participation française au congrès international du cinéma d’enseignement et d’éducation* (Paris: Comité français de l’Institut International du cinématographe éducatif, 1934) XVI-XVII.

The second element playing to cinema's advantage was its capacity to represent volumes, masses, and accordingly make the understanding of distances and dimensions easier. These advantages thus enabled the medium to be an effective help in the teaching of arts, as Henri Focillon declared at the International Conference on Didactic and Educational Cinema (Congrès International du cinéma d'enseignement et d'éducation) in 1934:

With the three-dimensional arts, architecture and sculpture, we tend to think that the volume is only the superposition and sequence of a few profiles. We have tried to show somewhere else that profiles are countless, and that even if we were able to capture and project many of them through still images, we would still be missing a fundamental sense of the mass, the relation between parts, and the way they go together and balance one another, which a continuous sequence may render.⁵

Other arguments most frequently put forward included the ability of film, in its discursive logic, to relate isolated information, to take into consideration the specific context for each phenomenon, to create logical links, and therefore to facilitate intellectual acquisition.

Finally, the last advantage which I should mention here is the possibility for cinema, thanks to the playful dimension of the screening, to make it easier for pupils to be alert intellectually and thus to withhold information. "Cinema has a considerable edge over old maps and still projections," an investigation on the relations between the teaching profession and cinema read in 1931, "that of instructing and amusing at the same time. And when you remember that children and adolescents need distraction, you have to acknowledge that the task of educating is made easier by this combination of what is useful with what is enjoyable, by this way of teaching through amusement which, while exhibiting form, interests and instructs children."⁶

⁵ Henri Focillon, "Le cinématographe et l'enseignement des arts" ["The Cinematograph and Art Education"], *La participation française au congrès international du cinéma d'enseignement et d'éducation* LV.

⁶"Le monde enseignant et le cinéma" ["The Teaching Profession and Cinema"], *Revue Internationale du cinéma éducatif* (Apr. 1931): 411.

However, this was not a widespread opinion, and some used the same arguments at the time to prove the opposite, i.e. that cinema was by nature unfit for the needs of teaching. Bessie D. Davis, a teaching specialist in the division of film screenings at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, summed up this commonly shared idea as follows:

For pupils accustomed to attending movie theaters, the screen is now so closely associated with the idea of entertainment and the possibility to approve or disapprove, to observe or forget in whole or in part that even at school the cinema will never appear to them as a means of study.⁷

The Complementary Functions of Still and Moving Images

While the cinematograph did indeed have unquestionable didactic advantages, the advocates of the introduction of the new tool in schools were very careful not to recommend doing away with devices involving still images or using moving images exclusively. In 1934 the International Institute of Educational Cinema issued its own conclusions on the subject: “Still and moving images are two essentially different things. Each is excellent in its sphere, but their respective usages meet completely different ends. Far from mutually exclusive, the two modes of projection are meant to supplement each other.”⁸ This assertion sometimes gave rise to heated debates in order to establish with precision the situations in which one or the other of these technologies was more appropriate. Some teachers even tried to propose a classification of the respective areas for which one or the other technology was better suited, based on the discipline taught, the level of study involved, and the intellectual abilities of the students under consideration. Some surveys even tried to analyze the didactic potential of these two forms of projection according to the gender and socio-professional background of

⁷ Bessie D. Davis, “La valeur comparée des projections fixes et des projections animées” [“The Comparative Value of Still Images and Moving Images”], *Cinéma et enseignement* (Rome: Istituto Internazionale per la Cinematografia Educativa, 1934) 176.

⁸ “Quelques considérations sur le film sonore et parlé” (note by the Institute), *Cinéma et enseignement* 218.

the pupils.⁹ Following these studies, the lists that were drawn up often contradicted one another, definitively ruling out the use of cinema in some disciplines while sanctioning it as an effective teaching auxiliary in others. During the huge conference that brought together the main international figures of educational and didactic cinema in Rome in 1934, participants attempted to bring the debate to a conclusion by putting forward a list of the disciplines from which cinema should not be excluded, but in which it should still be used cautiously: history, religion, mathematics, and modern languages were thus designated as the exclusive domains of still images.¹⁰ This compulsive classification, it should be mentioned, went sometimes very far since an inventory of topics for which still images or moving images were deemed more appropriate was also done within each discipline. As an example, the Office International des Musées drew up a precise list of headings in each of its activities for which moving images should be preferred to still images (current events, to arouse the curiosity and the interest of the public; ethnographic collections, to put objects back in the context of their everyday function; the study of monuments or works of art in their artistic, historical, natural atmosphere; the stages in the production of works of art; etc.).¹¹

The Pedagogy of Moving Images

Parallel to these debates meant to reassure teachers as to the continuity in their practices, a specific pedagogy for the integration of cinema in educational methods was also developed with a similar view to assuaging. Indeed, as already noted, the reluctance of teachers primarily had to do with a feeling of dispossession of their pedagogical role in the face of films presented as self-sufficient. A vast work of propaganda was therefore orchestrated in

⁹ Giovanni De Feo, "Le monde scolaire et le film d'enseignement" ["The Teaching World and the Educational Film"], *Revue internationale du cinéma éducateur* (Aug. 1932): 696.

¹⁰ "Résolutions du congrès," *La participation française au congrès international du cinéma d'enseignement et d'éducation* 23.

¹¹ Office International des Musées, "La cinématographie au service des musées et des monuments d'art," *Cinéma et enseignement* 226-28.

order to bring out the central part the teacher still played in a lesson accompanied by the projection of moving images:

Film may thus be used increasingly in schools, provided its role as a visual auxiliary in the work of the teacher is maintained and reinforced. A position superior to that of the teacher or the suppression of the teacher are theoretical possibilities which practical application should lead to dismiss at this time, just as it has dismissed the hypothesis of a purely mechanical education in which the cameraman may substitute for the teacher. Will this hypothesis prove true in the future? It seems unlikely when one considers the fact that any film, even the best from the point of view of teaching, will always remain cold, arid, and ineffective, if it is not made lively and understandable by the words of the individual whose mission calls upon him to observe and raise the child's soul in life.¹²

To consolidate this stand, many writings made every effort to define the role of the schoolmaster in the pedagogical process specific to teaching through film. They invariably emphasized a central element, the schoolmaster's words, which had to be safeguarded, even during the screening. The resolutions of the 1934 conference thus read,

the use of cinema must not obstruct the educative action of the schoolmaster and the effects of his words [...] He is the one who should formulate the problem, light the way for pupils, comment on the facts, prompt and direct the child's activity. [...] The schoolmaster should be able to intervene during the screening itself to illustrate the points that call for specific information.¹³

Consequently, active pedagogy was mobilized in order to strengthen the key role moving images could play in education. Following its principles, which involved a constant appeal to the pupil's faculties, the schoolmaster had to avoid stating definitive conclusions on the

¹² *Cinéma et enseignement* III-IV.

¹³ "Résolutions finales du Congrès," *Revue Internationale du cinéma éducateur* (May 1934): 402.

projected images, asking instead the right questions, pointing to a few visual elements, and guiding the thought of his students “*to encourage them on the path to discovery.*”¹⁴ Also emphasized was the fact that “the resort to film [must] not leave children to the agitation of a flow of images, but [must] instead be the opportunity to stimulate them in all forms of exercises.”¹⁵ Many descriptions of standard lessons for different teaching subjects were issued at the time to illustrate these assertions.

The Joint Uses of Still and Moving Images

Besides the central role of the schoolmaster’s words in appealing to the intelligence of pupils, the other crucial element appearing in these thoughts on methodology involved the place given to still images within this use of moving images. Meeting points between usages for these two didactic instruments may be noted at several levels.

First, the importance of a recourse to the freeze frame in the course of the film screening was stressed a lot, with the goal of sustaining the pupils’ attention on a specific aspect of the demonstration. “For cinema to be of appreciable help in teaching, a teacher wrote in 1931, the schoolmaster has to be able to emphasize some images as needed thanks to a device allowing him to stop the film.”¹⁶

The possibility supposedly offered by the film projector to freeze a chosen image, providing a pedagogical alternative to the continuous run of the film strip, made it possible to combine effectively the advantages specific to either technology. High school teacher Emile Brucker perfectly summed up the situation when he wrote:

Has the introduction of moving images made the screening of still images pointless?

Dating back to the first experiments with cinema in teaching, from all directions

¹⁴ Adrien Collette, “Les projections cinématographiques dans l’enseignement primaire” [“Film Screenings in Primary Education”], *Revue Internationale du cinéma éducateur* (Dec. 1930): 1425.

¹⁵ “Résolutions finales du Congrès,” *Revue Internationale du cinéma éducateur* (May 1934): 402.

¹⁶ “Le monde enseignant et le cinéma,” *Revue Internationale du cinéma éducateur* (Sept. 1931): 918.

schoolmasters have asked for the possibility of freezing the film. That shows how essential the projection of still images remains; the reason for it is obvious, since the former is fleeting and the latter alone makes it possible to keep the pupils' attention focused on a given topic.¹⁷

That the distinct practices related to the film image and to the still image would be thus intertwined characterizes the way moving images were seen from a pedagogical standpoint.

Some even praised the study of films frame by frame. French schoolteacher Adrien Collette, a member of the extra-parliamentary committee on cinema in schools, wrote the following on a lesson devoted to the mechanisms of rumination:

The examination of the film frame by frame, with the naked eye or a magnifying glass, is necessary in this lesson: it makes it possible to understand the mechanism of rumination properly; it reveals the movement of the tongue that pulls the blades of grass together before the jaws catch hold of them, as well as the lateral movement of the lower jaw while the molars break up the grass. This comparison of successive images of the film takes quite some time, but it is very evocative.¹⁸

The use reserved for the freeze frame came with another prerogative likely to restore still images to favour within the pedagogical use of film. It involved recommending that the teacher and the students draw sketches during or after the screening in order to reproduce on paper or on the blackboard the most significant elements in the mechanisms studied. In his 1932 report on the use of cinema by French schoolteachers, Jean Brérault declared that “the execution of sketches, during or after the projection, is a good exercise,” adding, “this search

¹⁷ Emile Brucker, “Le cinématographe dans l’enseignement secondaire” [“Cinema in High School Education”], in *La participation française au congrès international du cinéma d’enseignement et d’éducation XXVIII*.

¹⁸ Collette, “Les Projections cinématographiques dans l’enseignement primaire,” *Revue Internationale du cinéma éducateur* (Dec. 1930): 1427.

for form and details is also of invaluable help for writing. It demands an effort on the part of children that contributes to the development of their personality.”¹⁹

This similar concern with laying out essential information provided by the film on a stable medium and turning it into a still image explains the nature of debates on the need for teachers to be provided with specific opuscles for each available film. These opuscles would include not only a description of all the scenes in the film, the subtitles, or spoken commentary but also reproductions of the most significant images and diagrams. The rationale was that

Cinema is always useful when it serves as a didactic instrument in the scientific-cultural order, but on two conditions: [...] that the pupils-viewers have at their disposal a few main photographs from the film on which they can later concentrate their thought to reconstruct the film mentally...²⁰

Reflection on the pedagogical use of film thus constantly leads to the same conclusions: the need to supplement filmic material with still images.

Our last point in regard to these pedagogical uses that keep bringing together still and moving images involves the reiteration of the need to resort to the two technologies within the same lesson. Indeed, Jean Brérault – who explored the question at length – defined educational films as “documents which the schoolmaster uses to illustrate a lesson in connection with screenings of still images, observation, experience.”²¹ Exposing the principles on which a standard lesson should be based, the schoolteacher suggested that the following plan be adopted:

The lesson will generally begin with explanations by the schoolmaster and the thoughts of the pupils on the still images or experiments. Already, during this initial

¹⁹ Jean Brérault, “Ce que pensent du cinéma les instituteurs français qui s’en servent” [“What French Schoolteachers Who Use It Think of Cinema”], *Revue Internationale du cinéma éducateur* (Mar. 1932): 253.

²⁰ “Le monde enseignant et le cinéma,” *Revue Internationale du cinéma éducateur* (Apr. 1931): 409.

²¹ Brérault, *Revue Internationale du cinéma éducateur* (Apr. 1931): XI.

work, there will be an attempt to evoke the moving scenes that will be shown at the end. The curiosity of the pupils will thus be stirred up and the film shown in the best conditions. The still image and the film do not conflict; they complement each other. The film projector and the slide projector should always be side by side. Each has a very specific role to play in the lesson as a whole.²²

G.E. Hamilton (U.S.A.) corroborated this thesis, affirming in 1934 that “a lesson [should] first be illustrated with still projections, then, as much as possible, and in a more detailed manner, with stereoscopic views. Finally, one [could] provide a lively representation of the subject with the help of cinema.”²³ His analysis of the evolution of visual education in his country in the first thirty years of the twentieth century is also of interest in that he observes that the introduction of cinema in teaching had had as a consequence a wider use of still images. He thus notes that textbooks have become more lavishly illustrated, that some reading manuals “take for granted the use of stereoscopic views and still images as an integral part of the reading method and the acquisition of vocabulary,”²⁴ that schools have purchased large sets of stereoscopic views and slides, etc. Reading these observations, it thus seems as though the many debates spurring the development of didactic cinema had as their main consequence an awareness – by teachers in the field as well as by public authorities – of the need to reinforce visual aids in education. However, for reasons linked to costs, practicality, and habit, still images gained the most from this attention.

Be that as it may, a fundamental fact to take into consideration when examining the history of educational cinema over the period is that moving images were never seen as self-sufficient. Still images overwhelmingly dominated discourse, even in the case of the most

²² Bréault, *Revue Internationale du cinéma éducateur* (Apr. 1931): XV.

²³ G.E. Hamilton, “Le rapport entre les projections fixes et les projections animées,” *Cinéma et enseignement* 169.

²⁴ Hamilton, *Cinéma et enseignement* 164.

fervent advocates of pedagogy through film. In terms of visual aids, the standard equipment recommended in schools thus involved:

- a standard-format film projector;
- a light-format film projector;
- one or two slide projectors;
- an overhead projector (an epidiascope) to project photographs;
- finally, a projector for microphotographs.²⁵

This was of course a rather utopian vision that rarely became reality in the field. Still, the enumeration shows to what extent still and moving images were considered concomitantly as far as visual aids were involved.

Moving Images... that Move a Lot

I would like to conclude with a few comments on the nature of didactic films produced over the period to try and trace some of the conclusions of these debates in their conception. Indeed, positing a logical continuity with the importance tirelessly given to still images in the use of didactic films, it would only make sense/ to expect that the films integrate “pauses” in their structure through the insertion of still images meant to focus the attention of spectators on an aspect of discourse. As it happens, however, the study of a large corpus of didactic films of the period – that of the LUCE National Institute in Rome in particular, from the creation of the institution in 1924 until the Second World War – seems to bring out a holy horror of stillness, as though the fact that it is a film implied a permanent animation of images. Thus, even when traditionally still images are incorporated in the script – diagrams, geographic maps, etc. –, at no point are they presented to the viewer without the occurrence of some movement: pointers indicate specific areas, diagrams become animated, or arrows signal

²⁵ W.W. Whittinghill, “Organisation de l’enseignement visuel dans les écoles” [“The Organization of Teaching through Visual Aids in Schools”], *Cinéma et enseignement* 181.

elements to observe. And when images provide an object, a tool, etc., for observation, either the camera moves around it, or the object moves in front of the camera, or the background is more or less artificially animated. This frenzy in the animation of images is all the more surprising that it belies the possibility for the teacher to intervene during the screening to comment on them. According to the pedagogical precepts of the time, teachers should be in charge of pointing to some elements on the maps, commenting on the diagrams, providing the explanatory captions at the required moment, etc.

To understand this ambivalence between discourse and the actual products offered for pedagogical use, another aspect of the debates already examined should be taken into account, the necessity to rely on film only when the subject matter at hand made it an absolute necessity and when it was superior to still images in that area. Put differently, the insertion of still images in the continuity of the film was perceived as a potential new factor for rejection: indeed, how could the use of film then be justified compared with the possibilities of visual aids consisting of still images? To animate the films, sometimes to excess, thus appeared as a continuous justification of the medium itself from the viewpoint of the subject treated.

Looking at the structure of these films, a few alternatives to the stillness of images surface when it comes to allowing more time while maintaining a purely cinematographic language:

- the length of some shots, which makes it possible for the eye to dwell on certain details without recourse to a still image;
- the use of slow-motion, which allows to better discern observed mechanisms;
- intertitles, which sometimes seem to function as “pedagogical pauses” to establish an idea, a concept and which, like still images, act as a suspension in the unfolding demonstration.

Even so, the relation of the films themselves to the concept of still image generally proves extremely ambivalent. Strongly recommended in discourses and usages, the resort to still images seems to have been completely rejected in the conception of films. The evolution of didactic films from the early specimens to the Second World War thus attests, against the needs expressed by educators, of a constant search for discursive autonomy. The structure of scripts, *mise en scène*, the role of intertitles, and – from the 1930s on – voice-over commentary are as many elements designed to reinforce the effectiveness of films in transmitting information on their own. Accordingly, a number of questions remain as to the reasons for this discrepancy, all the more since it is well-known that the spheres of production and education were far from hermetic to each other. In all probability, these rich and copious theoretical views, these numerous investigations and conferences organized in the field of didactic cinema primarily aimed to appease education professionals easily rebellious in the face of innovation and change. These rhetorical harangues therefore had very little influence on an autonomous production sector that operated without much concern for what were usual fears in the teaching profession.

Résumé

Dès l'invention du cinéma, l'image animée a été envisagée par les éducateurs et pédagogues comme un nouvel outil pouvant être mis au service de leur cause. Aussi, parallèlement à une vaste production de films « spectaculaires » - selon l'expression qui désignait alors les films de fiction de divertissement -, on a rapidement vu se développer une production de films éducatifs et didactiques recouvrant de vastes territoires thématiques. Cet usage engendra de nombreuses réflexions d'ordre pédagogique. Cependant, si l'utilisation du cinématographe dans l'enseignement et l'éducation a représenté le prolongement logique de l'utilisation dans ce domaine d'auxiliaires visuels traditionnels (modèles, mappemondes, cartes murales, tableau noir, diapositives, stéréoscopies, photographies, etc.), le milieu enseignant s'est montré de prime abord très réservé. Les promoteurs de ce nouvel outil se sont employés à démontrer la valeur spécifique du cinématographe - donc de l'image animée - par rapport à ces autres auxiliaires, et en particulier par rapport à l'image fixe, deux procédés que l'on a appelé à utiliser de façon concurrente. Tout au long de l'entre-deux guerres, les débats qui se sont élevés autour de cette question sont particulièrement éloquentes et offrent un exemple significatif de croisements entre l'image fixe et l'image animée.

Abstract

As early as the advent of cinema, the use of moving images was considered by teachers and pedagogues as a new tool in the service of their cause. A production of educational and didactic films on a wide range of topics soon developed parallel to the production of entertainment and fiction films, which were then referred to as "spectacular" films. This use of cinema triggered a large debate in the field of education. However, while the introduction of the cinematograph in teaching and education represented a logical extension of traditional

visual aids (models, globes, wall maps, blackboards, slides, stereoscopies, photographs...), the teaching profession initially showed much reluctance towards the medium. The advocates of this new tool applied themselves to demonstrating the specificity of cinema – and accordingly of the moving image – in comparison with other visual aids in general and still images in particular, recommending that both be used concomitantly. Throughout the interwar period, the debates around this issue were particularly intense. They provide significant examples of exchanges between still and moving images.