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## Children's Encounters with Audio-Visual Culture: Image Forming in Parental Discourse about the Everyday Life of Children

### KEYWORDS    ABSTRACT

children's everyday  
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visual culture

The paper deals with the issue of the presence of audio-visual culture in the child's everyday life as seen from the parents' perspective. Children spend a lot of time watching television or other screen media. The media reality, by offering a variety of content and forms of communication, ease of reception, image variability, and ludicity, is one which is attractive for children. However, an audiovisual experience of the world is not without significance for developing cultural competence. Parents, guided by concern for their children, usually regulate the accessibility of the media and become involved in family media education. They may take on a variety of roles, perhaps actively introducing the child to the screen culture, or allow them for lonely, hours long interactions with it.

The paper describes parents' perception of television in their child's everyday life based on the author's own study. It was assumed that the meanings attributed to the media reality by parents are determined by the experience gathered by the child. The content of the statements made available on Internet discussion forums was analysed. The analysis was aimed at reconstructing the type of conceptual frameworks held by parents through which they conceptualize the contexts of

the functioning of television in children's everyday life. The author sought answers to the question of what areas of screen culture they make available to children at preschool age, and what might be the motives for the choices made. The analysis revealed the ways in which parents intervene in their children's television viewing and the meanings attributed to practices considered to be appropriate in organizing contact with television. In the discussion, the results obtained were referred to the problem of placing the child in a role usually reserved for the daily practices of adults.

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is an attempt to outline the problem of the presence of audio-visual culture in a child's life in relation to adult activities organizing the space and time needed for the child to gather daily experiences. The discussed issue is interesting from the perspective of the constitution of the image of social reality and actions possible to be taken by individuals. As people's behaviours are less and less predictably based on cultural knowledge and regulated by generally approved definitions, it is worthwhile, in my opinion, to study the meaning that parents attribute to their child's interaction with the audio-visual culture. The conceptual framework for my considerations is the category of discourse (Howarth 2008), which, through the analysis of everyday practices, makes it possible to learn about the diversity of meanings attributed to certain phenomena, and indicates the socio-cultural processes revealed in the way language is used.

Assuming that the social reality in the sphere of a young child's everyday life is largely determined by adults, I assume that the way parents perceive the presence of audio-visual culture in their child's life is the context that determines the socio-cultural experience gathered by children. To begin with, I shall briefly present the issue of the widespread presence of audio-visual culture in childhood. Against this background, I will present a report from my own research which contains a description of how parents perceive television in their child's everyday life based on the content of conversations about it. Then, I shall analyse the content of statements posted on online discussion forums which I consider one of the forms of discourse on children's everyday life. Focusing on the content that can be read in the statements, I shall look for the forms of interpretation in which the presence of audio-visual culture in children's everyday life is intersubjectively presented. In the final part of the text, I shall consider possible reasons for such statements.

## Audiovisual culture as a significant dimension of children's everyday life

The concept of audio-visuality, in the narrow sense, covers new media, but in the broader meaning it is placed in the field of culture and referred to cultural meanings and practices (Wilk 2008: 7). Audiovisuality, as Maryla Hopfinger (1992) emphasizes, becomes the basis for orientation in the environment and the dominant way of articulating culture. This means that culture “imposes and shapes the audio-visual experience of the world, i.e., the focus on joint extracting of audio-visual aspects from the inflow of information and on integrating them into a coherent and meaningful whole” (Hopfinger 1992: 99). Without discussing the term audio-visual culture here, I assume that the audio-visual dimension of culture – defined, among other things, by television, in which the “significant ennoblement of the image” (Hopfinger 2002: 9) has taken place – organises the thinking and actions of individuals in a new manner. The screen is becoming a place of interaction between different media and audio-visual strategies for learning about cultural reality. Audiovisuality, entailing the programming and designing of perception, releases the viewer from the subjective function of perception (Chyła 1999: 94-95), and the experience derived from the media determines the orientation in the surroundings and results in an audio-visual understanding of the world.

Nowadays, one cannot talk about the presence of an isolated media message in childhood. The dynamic and interactive culture of the screen<sup>1</sup> is formed by various media: television, computer games, the Internet, mobile telephones, and many other technologies. All of them are dominated by an audio-visual system of meanings and the use of similar codes and conventions to convey diverse content (Lemish 2008: 208-212). In the context of these reflections, it is important to stress that “this culture offers a coherent reality, characterised by the presence of the same characters and social contexts in different media” (Lemish 2008: 212). David Buckingham (2008: 157-159), while situating the use of new media in the wider context of the influence of social, economic and cultural forces, highlights another dimension of the interconnection of different media. He stresses the commercial imperative that leads to the convergence of the media as signalled above. The new media are not replacing the old, but they extend the range of available consumption options. The convergence of media use - particularly in relation to children's media – creates the possibility of “integrated marketing” in which the new cultural offer is integrated with the media, offering the child a transmedia and multimedia experience (Pulak 2018: 191).

<sup>1</sup> In the further part of this text, the terms ‘audio-visual culture’ and ‘screen culture’ are used interchangeably.

Hopfinger (1992) identifies two reception attitudes in relation to contemporary cultural offers. The first is characterized by holistic perception, a relational style of thinking, a developed communicative competence, and the ability to distinguish the fictional order from the real. The second, called unconscious, passive and thoughtless, is accompanied by fragmentary perception, low communicative competence and poor differentiation of fiction and reality. "An active attitude towards communication offers presupposes the ability and readiness to decipher complex conceptual mechanisms, including hidden instrumental and manipulative assumptions. On the other hand, a passive attitude and the lack of competence make the recipient vulnerable to hidden or merely more complex mechanisms" (Hopfinger 1992: 99). As an incompetent recipient of audio-visual culture, living in the world of electronic media and multimedia, a young child is in a particularly difficult situation. He/she does not yet have the fully developed competence to receive, read and interpret audio-visual messages (Kubicka, Kołodziejczyk 2007: 93-106). Also, they do not participate long enough in television education which, according to Agnieszka Ogonowska (2014), is a form of cultural education and develops specific television competences that foster the active, critical and conscious reception of the broadcast and make it possible for us to influence broadcasters to create channels that meet the preferences and needs of particular audience groups, and to create our own messages.

A child does not understand the code of new media, including television, which is usually seen as an example of a one-sided message, one without interaction, which puts the viewer in the position of a passive recipient of the message. It should be added at this point that an element of direct communication, i.e. the will to communicate, has in fact been noted in the research on the influence of watching television on the development of a child (Valkenburg, van der Voort 1995). There is a broad consensus that there are two models of communicating with the media: the functional and the effective. In the functional one, the information flow is unidirectional: the media directs messages to the recipient who remains passive and becomes an object of influence. In the effective model, the recipient is active, knows his needs and interests, is able to consciously adjust the media offer to them, and decides which forms of communication are important. Although children experience functional communication and remain passive while watching a program, the way in which they refer to the perceived content in subsequent activities, e.g. while playing or speaking, may indicate emotional or intellectual activity (Hopfinger 2002).

The mutual relations between children and television can be considered from different perspectives. Dafna Lemish (2008), a researcher of children's media literacy seen in a global dimension, draws our attention to the multiplicity of possible contexts of perceiving television. Among other things, she suggests looking at television as:

1. A factor that unifies children's daily lives, because "there are not many things that are as certain as the fact that the experience of watching television is common to most children in today's world" (Lemish 2008: 1).
2. The "Messiah" or "Satan," which means that the influence of television must be seen in relation to its ambiguous influence. Noting the developmental potential, the author points out that this medium is extremely important and has many important positive and negative features (Lemish 2008: 208).
3. A didactic potential revealed in all types of programs. In the context of the educational value of television, she stresses that the learning process requires the integration of multimedia systems, hence the visual and verbal type of education should not be treated as mutually exclusive systems (Lemish 2008: 160-164).
4. A medium of commercial content addressed to the youngest viewer, which primarily stems from perceiving the child as a future consumer (Lemish 2008: 83-85).
5. A factor integrating the family, as evidenced by joint planning of television activities, active (on the parents' part) television watching (Lemish 2008: 11-20).

The "displacement effect" described in relation to the culture of leisure, i.e. the replacement of traditional forms of activity with the use of the media, is important for the course of children's games (Lemish 2008: 94-97). Jolanta Zwiernik (2002) claims that adults, by allowing the excessive presence of the media in the life of a modern child, "commercialize the world of the child's life." The use of "civilization gadgets" often results in the departure from traditional games, leads to limiting the need to play, and consequently to the "disappearance of childhood." Many hours of watching television alone replaces the child's direct contact with the parents, which, according to Zwiernik, is further evidence of its colonization of the child's time. Another aspect of media use is noted by Irena Pulak (2018), who, when analysing new trends in toy development, points to the phenomenon of treating media devices as toys. She argues that a technologically advanced toy, used for broadly understood playing, may become an alternative to the passive use of screen media (Pulak 2018: 199).

Nevertheless, the contact of a young child with audio-visual culture is primarily determined by adults. Therefore, according to the thesis of Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak (2011) that the present audio-visual culture is becoming a "world of child's life," it is worth to reveal the parental understanding of introducing children to screen culture.

## Child and audio-visual culture in the context of parents' statements – the author's own research project

In order to show different perspectives on the phenomenon of the intermingling of screen culture and children's everyday life, one may refer to discourse theory. The analysis of the discourse aims at understanding and interpreting socially produced meanings and makes it possible for us to demonstrate the differences in the way the same reality is named and understood (Howarth 2008: 194-200). Here, discourse will be understood as a text created in a specific context, which becomes the analysed material (van Dijk 2001: 10-11). Determining the discourse indicates the sphere of social life which the reconstructed meanings concern. Parental discourse may be understood as a communication event, the idea of which is caring for a child, and the aim of interacting is to exchange the content concerning a particular context of childhood. The category of discourse makes it possible to analyse both the patterns of practices that are indirectly observable in language, and to identify the interpretative framework determining the meaning of the analysed statement. Here it should be noted that in the perspective of each of the previously mentioned contexts of perceiving television, it is possible to construct a discourse presenting the everyday world of children in a different way.

In interpersonal communication, the forms which function between interpersonal and mass communication are particularly important. For example, the Internet creates ways of perceiving reality and becomes the key to learning about various forms of social life (Bogunia-Borowska 2008: 80-82), including human activity in online forums. The information obtained in the forums is meaningful for the interlocutors; the analysis of the content of the statements presented in the Internet forum may allow to describe the meanings attributed to a selected fragment of reality.

In this research project, I only focused on the television message considered to be the dominant medium in screen culture, seen as an important factor of socialization and the most important medium in children's lives (Lemish 2008: 5). As an everyday activity, present in the lives of most children and their families, watching television is considered to be a part of culture that unifies life regardless of the status, the place of residence or the socio-political context. The aim of the analysis was to identify the conceptual framework (cf. Kövecses 2011: 104-107) by which parents conceptualize the contexts in which television functions in children's everyday life. I assumed that the conceptual framework visible in the content of the statements provides an explanation of social and cultural phenomena. Adults play the key role in the child's encounter with the screen culture, so I have focused my attention on looking for the answers to questions such as what areas of screen culture do they make available to a child at a preschool age, and what might be the motives for the choices made.

I used an interpretative approach in the study, utilizing the strategy of discourse analysis to reveal how a given phenomenon is constituted in the statements that concern it (Howarth 2008: 194), emphasizing the existence of common features within the framework of socially shared knowledge. The research material comes from free discussions carried out on Internet forums. Persons who enter into conversations through the media, even though they do not directly interact with each other, become participants in a particular social event. They are linked by an activity, in this case a conversation on a given topic, in which the conceptual framework, taking the form of colloquial theories, is revealed and these “help to (...) explain different ways of understanding the same situation” (Kövecses 2011: 467).

Researchers analysing such statements face the problem of obtaining permission to use the posted texts. In order to solve this problem, I assumed – after Ewa Grzeszczyk (2009: 329) – that the participants of the forum create an online community which belongs to the so-called low-risk group. In such groups, the subject of discussion is usually personal experience, the disclosure of which does not threaten one’s reputation. This is because the protections the participants have established (nicknames and email addresses) are sufficient for the members of the group. The analysed thematic threads concern the presence of screen culture in a child’s life and are derived from the following forums: Rodzice.pl (r);<sup>2</sup> Forum.parenting.pl (fp); Przedszkolak.pl (p); Familie.pl (f).

I have adopted two fields of analysing the material. The first describes the thematic threads present in the conversations, while the second focuses on identifying the conceptual framework that justifies the meanings attributed to children’s television viewing. I have attempted to refer the sequences of statements quoted below to the entire text material, and I have not used them to illustrate, justify or refute the assumed statements. I have also avoided analysing them in a valuing way.

## Analysis and interpretation of the collected material

First of all, I tried to identify the purpose of undertaking the subject of television. On all the analysed forums, I found one common thread – a search for opinions about *valuable*,<sup>3</sup> *educational* or *wise cartoons and programs*. The interlocutors, referring to their knowledge and experience – *From what I have seen on the website; from my experience; as far as I know; as far as I am concerned* – indicate the titles chosen, sometimes asking about the age of the child if the interlocutor has not indicated this.

<sup>2</sup> The brackets indicate the letter marking of a given forum. It was used to indicate the place of origin of particular examples in the analysed material.

<sup>3</sup> Italics were used below to mark quotations from the studied utterances.

Another motive for engaging in a conversation are situations or behaviours that are of concern to parents. In this case, they expect certain, proven, sometimes specialist knowledge, and what they actually receive are subjective guidelines. For example, the asker of the following question: *Maybe somebody could give me some advice: my kid has symptoms of tiredness. He's been afraid of cartoons for some time. Either something scared him or the imagination works too hard* (zora, 7.05.15, f) received the following answers: *Wait through it, just don't get paranoid. We have to rely on our intuition – we will see the effects in a dozen or so years* (alula, 9.05.15, f); *I prefer to restrict as much as I can, and I just explain, explain and explain again that this is a movie, that this is not real* (Mama, 10.05.15, f).

Given the universal course of development and the global spread of television genres, predictable television tastes can be expected to develop that change with age and are gender-dependent (Lemish 2008: 44-46). While parents take into account the age of the child, they do not specify the child's needs and skills. Gender differences in tastes are also not visible. Providing an attractive offer for adults may develop children's individual preferences for selected programmes. It is worth noting that adults do not always share the child's opinion about the attractiveness of specific content (Lemish 2008: 46). The chosen strategy of *explaining as far as possible* suggests referring to an expository method of communication, which is the least effective in the learning process of preschool children.

The analysis of the problem field concerning the presence of audio-visual culture in a child's life shows different approaches to valuing developmental changes related to children's television viewing (cf. Łaciak 1998; Izdebska 2007). I did not take up this subject in this project. However, in the statements, I found the descriptions of changes in children's everyday life which are evidence of the development of cognitive skills that parents associate with watching television. The changes are as follows:<sup>4</sup>

- focusing on the television show – *Now she can sit long and watch. When she gets bored, she walks away. 10 minutes of watching used to be unthinkable* (becia, 24.06.17, fp);
- developing television interests and tastes – *She has her own programs. We let her watch the cartoons she likes* (Jolanta, 3.04.18, r);
- identifying with cartoon characters – *she always plays Peppa* (wawrom, 5.08.16, f);
- development of moral judgments – *We choose fairy tales that teach and show how to behave. (...) Mela often asks: what is he like, good or bad?* (mammel, 1.03.15, fp),
- expanding the thematic field of playing – *Well, I am glad. I don't think anything bad is happening. He's having a good time. He likes this cartoon, you can see him play-*

<sup>4</sup> The selection was made by me on the basis of the description of cognitive abilities as presented by Lemish (2008: 36-50), the development of which is possible by watching television.



*ing it afterwards. He gets all the teddy bears and puppets together and starts inventing adventures* (Asia, 4.11.17, f).

Parents' observations are consistent with the results of the studies on the characteristics of a young viewer. Television preferences begin to form around the age of 2, hence a preschooler watches selected contents with interest. Children value the opportunity to watch a given program repeatedly, which is an expression of their need to see, hear, remember what they did not see the first time (Kołodziejczyk 2003: 103-111).

The value of television programs is also the provision of information stimulating the cognitive and socio-emotional development of the child (Kołodziejczyk 2003). In their search for the relationship between watching television and a child's imagination, the researchers put forward two opposing hypotheses. The first – reduction – assumes that the structural properties of television inhibit the development of certain abilities of the recipient, providing ready-made patterns that do not encourage the creation of ideas. The second hypothesis – that of stimulation – assumes that the message, through its stimulating character, causes the content of the programs that are viewed many times to make the recipient fantasize about similar subjects (Valkenburg, van der Voort 1995).

The analysis of the statements indicates that parents perceive the stimulating value of the television message, which becomes a source of ideas for fun. This is one of the characteristics of the so-called “global kid” – presented by Zwiernik (2005) – in whom the process of building the image of the world is strongly influenced by popular culture. Without presenting a full description of the shape of family life, it is worth noting that this is a child aged 3-13 who spends 2-3 hours a day in front of the television set and freely uses electronic toys, which results in the presence of media threads in his/her various activities. It is worth emphasizing that, in terms of cognitive development, the content of the broadcast is more important than the amount of time spent in front of the television set (Lemish 2008: 27).

Adults do not perceive watching television as a factor that eliminates the need for play. While they perceive the presence of media themes and treat them as something that broadens the playing field, they do not see them as a threat to this form of activity. The phenomenon of colonization of areas of childhood freedom (Zwiernik 2005) noticed by the adults is not a subject of reflection. Meanwhile, by proposing, for example, to watch cartoons, and sometimes also advertisements placed between them, they decide both on the way the children spend their time – including the fun they have in it – and on the selection of the content of the message. The uncritical trust that a child has in the visual message develops consumer attitudes and a lifestyle in which possession is the main criterion for assessing people. This is fostered by the trend towards media processing and commercial exploitation of cultural products targeted at children (Bogunia-Borowska 2019).

In the content of the statements analysed, it is possible to identify the control strategy that is being undertaken, the primary objective of which is to protect the child against the unwanted influence of the message: *Turn it off. TV's not a babysitter* (sisi, 6.09.18, p); *I'm not an orthodox [mum] who eliminates TV altogether, but I prefer to restrict it for the little one* (Ala123, 12.05.18, fp). This theme is present in discussions held in all the forums analysed. But this is not the only form of reflection. From the analysis of the statements, a broader description of the manners of intervening in television watching emerges. I use the term intervention after Lemish (2008: 24), who assumes that it does not only mean imposing restrictions, but also encouraging children to certain behaviours as watchers. Thus, five ways of parental intervention can be identified:

1. Total lack of access, caused by the lack of television at home.
2. The limitation of the time of watching TV, with limits set for daily access as well as for longer periods of time, e.g. during the week.
3. Situational accessibility regulation, which is a complex type of intervention. It is a part of the family's activities, and children are aware of the rule of watching television only in exceptional situations (e.g. while the family is travelling). The second way of intervention is not related to a certain routine, it occurs unexpectedly for a child. These are situations in which parents allow them to watch programs, sometimes encouraging them to break the pre-established rules. For example: *Generally I restrict it, but sometimes I have to cook dinner or clean the apartment, so turning it on is a good solution for me in these situations* (Zwariowana, 15.06.19, fp).
4. Watching TV according to accepted principles, understood as guidelines for certain behaviours, based on a general system of standards and values of the family. *She knows what's allowed and what's not. Sometimes she wants to force something, but the most important thing is consistency* (myioni, 13.06.19, fp). An interesting example is the adoption of the principle of television as a reward or lack thereof as a punishment. This is illustrated by the following statements: *We apply the rule that he can watch two cartoons as a reward* (Alibaba, 10.09.18, p); *Mine got so hooked on it that he causes problems when you don't play him cartoons as a penalty* (zibi, 3.11.17, f).
5. Planning a television activity in advance to draw the child's attention to a program considered valuable: *it is a waste of time, mine and the child's. Not that we're prohibiting him television, he just doesn't reach for the remote himself. Sometimes we suggest something to him ourselves; we plan what to watch together. We make our choices so that we can watch together* (Sabinna, 8.11.17, f). This way of intervening in the organization of time can support family integration. It is worth noting that the lack of planning for this type of family activity, its

randomness, harms family life, leading to the disappearance of other routinely performed activities (Andreason 2001, as cited in Lemish 2008: 15).

## Summary and conclusions

The involvement of parents in their children's television viewing has three dimensions. The first concerns parents' awareness, television-related behaviour – setting an example for the child - and family watching. It may be valuable for parents to note that the mere presence of adults, without verbal interaction, is beneficial for the child. Because the presence of parents is equated by the child as interest in the program, it encourages them to watch it more carefully. The second dimension focuses on supervising and restricting – with respect to time and content – the extent of television viewing. The third dimension is “instructional mediation,” which consists in parents, concerned with their child's good, becoming mediators between the world of television and that of the child (Lemish 2008: 34). The content of the analysed statements shows the parents' commitment at all levels. The material collected shows that parents offer a “good” version of television, protecting their child from what they themselves judge to be “bad.” They should bear in mind that this is only the starting point for developing television competence (Ogonowska 2014).

Studies show different dynamics of child and adult interactions around the television. In addition to the isolation of adults, family television watching may also be observed. The former is usually related to the need for parents to engage in other activities. Random remarks made to the child at the time - often critical of the content or form of spending time – do not encourage reflection and, moreover, “...express a negative opinion about this medium, which can have a destructive effect on potentially positive educational experiences” (Lemish 2008: 31). On the other hand, active viewing may be treated as a form of developing children's communication skills. A television message seen as a “talking book” (Lemish 2008: 29-31) encourages various types of verbal interaction. A parent may answer, explain, ask, remark, encourage conversation. This means that when a child is left as a lonely viewer, the television broadcast remains a book without a commentary.

The question is whether the rules of watching television – which the parents refer to – are known to the child, i.e. whether he/she understands the rules they have to follow? The rules of watching are often informal and invisible and are an expression of “...the existence of agreements deeply rooted in everyday life and never discussed or even spoken out loud” (Lemish 2008: 23). Parents set the standards of conduct, they are clear to them, they use them habitually, they have typologies and routinized grounds for acting. The situation is changing “in the process of transmission to the

new generation” (Berger, Luckmann 2010: 87). The institutional world is passed on to children, for whom it does not become completely understandable. This is because “since they had no part in shaping it, they face it as a given reality which (...) is sometimes impenetrable” (Berger, Luckmann 2010: 88).

Parents exchange the socially shared knowledge which they possess to varying degrees on a given topic; therefore they seek advice from people in a similar situation. This bond of shared experiences is supposed to provide support and sometimes expert knowledge despite the actual lack of such knowledge (Juza 2007). The askers usually receive guidelines that are only interpretable with reference to a given situational context. It can be seen that the subject of the exchange is what we can call “recipe knowledge” (Berger, Luckmann 2010: 61), i.e. practical knowledge that has its own logic. Knowledge of this type becomes useful in situations of solving repetitive problems, in routine activities of everyday life. This means that it may not be useful to solve the problem in a different context.

Parents in this situation, who do not always have a systematized knowledge of the influence of television on children, have to be particularly careful. Referring to the assumption made at the outset that the way parents perceive the presence of audiovisual culture in their child’s life becomes the context determining their child’s everyday reality, it can be said that the complex nature of the relationship between children and television largely determines the context in which parents place their interventions. Despite the presence of many threads in the analysed problem area, I think it is important to undertake research projects aimed at describing the everyday functioning of the family, including the analysis of behaviours related to watching television, which will reveal mediation strategies undertaken by adults. This is because the habits connected with watching television are not the result of personal choices, but of constructing the everyday life of children based on the network of family conditions.

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