



## Transcultural Perspectives in Teaching Children's Horror Films

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### Abstract

*In the light of the internationalisation of both higher education and global immigration transcultural perspectives have received considerable scholarly attention. Thus, the objective of this paper is to open up a discussion on film education, with particular reference to the teaching of children's horror films from transcultural perspectives through an empirical case study among university students in media education. This research concentrates on students' attitudes and perceptions of the children's horror genre from the perspective of film education. The question to be addressed is: How can university students' understanding of children's horror culture be increased through film education? This paper consists of research results based on students' film life studies, interviews and learning diaries during a two-week workshop.*

*The results show that perceptions and attitudes vary greatly depending on cultural background. Students' pre-existing understanding of film culture and film literacy as a pedagogical practice were largely professionally oriented and coloured by an aesthetic perception of film. The most notable impact of the course was characterised by a wider understanding of film as education and the uses of film in teaching. Focusing on the aspects of children's horror in the course was not on line with students' expectations. Dialogic pedagogies created open, safe spaces for reflection and changing students' mindsets. Based on the findings, a situated approach to horror film education is proposed to reinforce pedagogies on multiliteracies with safe spaces for supplementing emotional skills.*

**Key words:** children, film education, horror, school, teacher training, transcultural

## Introduction

Film education has been part of film culture since the early 20th century. Thereafter it has been regarded primarily even since then, film education has mainly been regarded either as art education or closely connected to questions of censorship and child protection. Still later, it was connected to aims of wider media education. Thus film literacy has become an increasingly prominent competence in the current image-saturated society and is an important part of wellbeing (e.g. *A Framework for Film Education*, 2015). However transcultural perspectives and horror films have only received scant attention as far as film education is concerned. It seems that horror in children's culture is little appreciated or understood. It continues to evoke moral panic, and initial reactions tend towards often eliciting a concern to protect children. The study based on this article tries to fill the gap from the perspective of teacher education. What kinds of pedagogic elements should be included in film education on the genre of children's horror? This article aims to understand the position of horror culture from a transcultural perspective among students from different geopolitical contexts with a view to developing teacher education.

Legislation on age ratings is one defining factor when designing film education activities in the classroom in Finland and Europe. This provides the sociocultural environment of the study. Age ratings are of course crucial elements for any discussions of sensitive or controversial issues like the consumption of horror culture or understanding horror as a genre, an understanding of which is crucial for developing film literacy in contemporary cultures. In teacher education and in schools, this theme can be addressed through *the reading of the genre defined as children's horror* (e.g. Lester, 2016). The genre as a starting point has been singled out as a safer way of developing film education on children's horror, although little research has been done in this field. (e.g. Kovanen, 2011, p. 120). In the study this article is based on, the assumption is that the focus on genre supports developing participatory film education at schools that is defined by curricula and legislation. The matter of multicultural classrooms in film education, with reference to children's horror is equally deserving our attention.

Greater scholarly attention has recently been paid to the transcultural perspective due to the internationalisation of higher education and increased immigration worldwide, including Finland (e.g. Koponen & Kotilainen, 2017). For example, international doctoral studies and master's degree programmes in media education have been implemented at the universities of Lapland and Tampere. Moreover, classrooms in schools have become more diverse throughout Europe because of recent developments in immigration. Moreover, Finnish school culture and pedagogy is facing challenges whereby schools' pedagogical framework, legislation and informal education outside of schools is incompatible with increasingly diverse students and their cultures. This accounts for why a transcultural perspective is especially appropriate in a consideration of film education.

This article takes a closer look at the teaching of children's horror films based on a case in which both authors were teachers at the International Summer School of Film Education at Tampere University in 2017. One of the main

objectives of this course was to strengthen participants' film literacy regarding horror films as a genre from an educational perspective. As a case study, the approach adopted here is one of explorative action research approach because researchers were actively involved in its implementation (e.g. Reason & Bradbury, 2006).

There were altogether 10 participants – from China (three), India (two), Iran (two), Italy (one) and Finland (two) – including two males and eight female participants. Their ages varied, and they came from different academic backgrounds with different kinds of basic knowledge regarding film. Film education was an unfamiliar concept for nearly all of them. Mostly, these participants were studying photography, film production and teacher training; they had backgrounds as master's and doctoral students. What they had in common was a general interest in film education because of their education-based studies, film-related research, work as film teachers or hobbies related to film.

This paper, then, consists of the research results based on the course, including students' interviews, their film life studies and learning diaries made during the intensive two-week workshop. The workshop necessitated three to six hours' work every day, as well as assignments, such as short movies. The research was introduced to all students at the outset, including this study and a master's dissertation (Glotov, 2018, in progress). Research consent forms were signed as voluntary-based participation for both studies. All students signed these consent forms. To protect respondents' anonymity, country of origin and gender were not mentioned when reporting the results.

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## **Film Education and Children's Horror as a Genre**

I truly do not agree with horror movies for children and mostly ask myself why children should watch horror movies. (Student 2, Learning Diary)

In recent years horror content aimed at children has been under discussion with the emergence of various kinds of horror games, films and animated series. Film studies scholar Catherine Lester situates horror aimed at children in a generic and industrial context. When speaking of the themes of films she uses the term 'acceptance' but she also refers to understanding horror films as a relevant part of children's culture. Lester discusses movies meant as entertaining horror films for children, such as *Paranorman* (2012), *Frankenweenie* (2012) and *Hotel Transylvania* (2012) (Lester, 2016, p. 22).

Although horror content aimed at children has become an increasingly important field of popular culture in commercial terms, this does not necessarily mean it is a unprecedented phenomenon. Horror elements in films aimed at children can be found also in early children's cinema, for example, in Disney's animated feature film productions. The most classic example is *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* from 1937 (Davis, 2006, p. 22). Since horror has

always been part of children's own voluntary culture, it should be an integral part of an education as well (Kovanen, 2011, p. 110).

Indeed, horror and scary stories have a long history in children's culture. Children's horror culture is a way of dealing with fears, strengthening group identity and pushing boundaries (Tucker, 2008, p. 113). Audiovisual horror has its roots in oral folklore, in which horror stories have long been widespread. The oral horror tradition is thriving also in an urban context. Children still tell ghost stories to each other, even with the arriving of social media as a new channel for children's folklore. Finnish folklorist Laura Hokkanen (2014) calls this new way of transmitting traditions *digilore*, which means 'digitally created folklore'. Regarding film culture, influences go are reciprocal: *digilore* is a source of inspiration and ideas to filmmakers of horror films, and horror film themes exist outside film screens in *digilore*. Hence, it is possible to argue that horror culture of children themselves constitutes of a rich combination of oral, audio-visual and other media traditions (Kovanen, 2016). With other children's culture genres, it can also be perceived as a rebellious counterculture. American folklorist Elizabeth Tucker points out that, for example, Halloween allows children to express themselves fully in an uninhibited fashion as they please, within the framework of tradition (Tucker, 2008, p. 3). Likewise, horror film culture can serve the same purpose (e.g. Kovanen, 2011, p. 114–116).

In the International Summer School of Film Education, there was a short introductory lecture given on the subject of horror genre from a historical film perspective, including horror culture related to children's films. This was necessary since horror as a genre – and especially related to children's films – appeared to be a somewhat unfamiliar concept to most students. Accordingly, horror was first introduced as a broad genre and part of film history and culture in general. The first lecture introduced the more specific topic of children's horror. Next, the children's horror genre was introduced with examples following a discussion. As part of the course, there was an introduction and discussion of age rating systems in different countries and censorship in general. Such an approach appeared to be the most natural and the only way to enable students to engage with the subject of horror for children. It was most difficult for those students who were least willing to accept horror as a part of children's culture. Their discussion on age ratings revealed a range of perspectives regarding suitable and good content for children, goals of education and cultural differences. For example, one student wrote in his text that:

For me, the rating stays behind the need for security and growth for the children and is a good way to give them good content and not a dangerous environment. (Student 3, Assignment 1).

A similar opinion on this subject was expressed frequently in discussion.

Horror as a genre has often been underrated from the viewpoint of education and the ideals of educational children's films. Horror and violence in children's films has also given rise to a great deal of moral indignation, which has resulted in a paradigm that labels all horror and violent elements as summarily harmful for young audiences. This discussion has usually taken place in the context of

the child protection and is related to age ratings. Age ratings and child protectionist censorship is, of course, inextricably bound up with the content of children's films. This is especially evident in the case of horror content. The entire history of censorship, age ratings and child protection are highly characterized by the moral indignation regarding the impact of films on young audiences (Sihvonen, 2009, p. 218–219). Thus it is both natural and instructive to ponder the questions of child protection and censorship in the context of children's horror culture in film education.

### **Multiliteracies as a Framework: Towards Transcultural Perspectives**

Film Education Summer School 2017 consisted of pre- and post-assignments, lectures, academic essays, presentations and videos made by students. During the course, there was a variation between an academic approach and exercises of a practical nature. Children's horror culture was introduced in the framework of pedagogies on multiliteracies (e.g. Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) including dialogic, participatory elements starting from the transcultural film cultures experienced by students through practice-based assignments carried out on their own or group work. The key pedagogic methods in the course were reflective *film life studies*, *learning diaries*, *small group discussions* and *group work continued in class publicity* as well. See Table 1.

<b>Pedagogical methods used</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
Film life studies (personal), pre-assignment	Students deepen their understanding of their own personal history regarding film culture and their film/media relationship to horror as well.
Presentations (in groups and class) during the course	Students familiarise themselves with each other's cultural backgrounds and reflect on their own background. Sense of belonging and understanding of children's horror and film education.
Lectures (in class)	Students receive an introduction to children's horror as a genre and film education.
Discussions (in groups and class) during the course	Students get to know each other's thoughts, ideas and cultural backgrounds and to reflect on their own background. Sense of belonging and understanding of children's horror and film education.
Essays (personal) during the course	Students learn to read an academic paper with a reflection on their essay. They deepen their understanding of children's horror and film education.
Learning diaries (personal) post-assignment	Students deepen their learning and reflect on their learning process.

TABLE 1. Pedagogical methods used in children's horror as a genre.

Special *film life studies* were written by students as a preliminary assignment for

the course. They were asked to reflect on how they felt about their relationship with horror content and scary film experiences and how those experiences had shaped their perception of cinema (on media life study, see Kotilainen, 2001; Koponen & Kotilainen, 2017). In the first assignment after class, the students were asked to read Filipa Antunes' article 'Children and Horror after PG-13: The Case of the Gate' and to reflect on their own feelings and Antunes' ideas regarding horror content for children and age ratings. Students were asked, for example, to reflect on the themes of the article in the light of their own cinema experiences. After the course, students wrote learning diaries in which they analysed their learning process. Discussions in class were intended to deepen the themes of the course and to shape students' perceptions of each other's cultures. The goal for creating a safe space for discussion would have been easier to achieve if there had been more time for group work and discussions without constraints of time.

Regarding intercultural and multicultural classrooms, this article presents them as mixed cultures and cultural understandings. A transcultural perspective looks at cultures as dialogue, for example, mixed user relationships with media between and over cultures (e.g. Nohl, 2007; Domenig, 2007). Related to young people such as pupils and students, the user perspective is essential. Researchers refer to, for example, the cultures of media practice (Nohl, 2007). According to Nohl (2007), this perspective implies to 'habitualized patterns of media practice collectively shared by a specific social group'. Frau-Meigs (2013) has created the term 'transliteracy', which mostly refers to the skills required in order to overcome the diversity of sense-making mechanisms online. It is important to understand the continuously changing media contexts together with changing identifications of the users through the negotiation of their own values. For example, young immigrants face several changes in their media contexts – the first when they enter Western culture and mediated user practices in Europe. Koponen and Kotilainen (2017) are challenging media education, especially in teacher training, in order that the transcultural mediated practices of the young for developing pedagogies as student-centred activities, might be taken seriously. This was considered when planning and implementing the International Summer School as a Workshop in Film Education with a Special Focus on Children's Horror Films. For the purpose of this article, the data were analysed according to the framework of multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

*Multiliteracy* was introduced by the researchers of the New London Group (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). This term, which combines the complexity of multimodal texts and cultural diversity, has been little discussed in media education thus far (e.g. Koponen & Kotilainen, 2017). The New London Group provides 'a theoretical overview of the current social context of learning and consequences of social changes for the content (the 'what') as well as the form (the 'how')'. The authors also state that their book is written as a programmatic manifesto and is meant to be 'the basis for open-ended dialogue'.

The new Finnish Core Curriculum for Basic Education is one attempt to implement this. As defined in The Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014) multiliteracy is based on a broad definition of text. The aim of multiliteracy practices in education is to enhance

students' skills in reading, interpreting and influencing the multicultural, diverse world around them (Halinen, Harmanen, & Mattila, 2015). Thus, new reading and writing skills include skills to understand the complexity of diversity of cultures and different genres, also in audio-visual form.

As a theoretical framework, multiliteracy is a tool to analyse the content of controversial popular culture and meaning-making in a transcultural pedagogical context. The roots of the framework lie in the challenges educators have faced in cultural and linguistic diversity, mostly in the UK. The term was first used in the 1990s among literacy teachers working in multilingual and multicultural classrooms and was first intended to solve the problems of the complex reality in schools. Multiliteracy emerged from the notion that it was no longer feasible to teach one single English language and cultural differences and rapidly changing media were creating new challenges for literacy pedagogy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 3–5).

From the perspective of understanding the genre, especially that of children's horror, the meaning-making and respective skills become important. According to Cope and Kalantzis (2000), the meaning-making process comprises six elements: 1. Linguistic meaning, 2. Visual meaning, 3. Audio meaning, 4. Gestural meaning, 5. Spatial meaning and 6. Multimodal patterns of meaning that relate the first five modes of meaning to each other. Pedagogical tools used in the workshop created a multimodal learning environment where students not only created linguistic meanings –for example, at the Moodle platform – but processed audio-visual meaning by analysing audio-visual material in the classroom and creating gestural and spatial meanings in the context of classroom discussions and presentations. Thus, our aim was that the multimodal patterns of meaning would become a crucial part of understanding and processing the workshop's content.

## **Results: Changing mindsets on horror film education**

The main findings concern students' attitudes: it was common for many participants to have negative experiences with the horror genre. For example, they had seen scary adult content at an excessively young age, or horror elements in children's film without parental supervision. This was reflected mainly in film life studies where, for example, strong emotional experiences were described. For example:

As for my own experience, when I was a kid, I watched a horror film on television without parents, and it left me scared of horror films for a long time. To this day, I still hate horror films and will be easily frightened by the horror elements in films. (Learning diary, Student 5).

To most students, using children's horror films in education was something quite unfamiliar, and therefore their suspicion was aroused. This came across in interviews and written assignments. Most students emphasised the role of age ratings, tighter control, the importance of suitable content (the 'good always wins' pattern in children's films, comic relief etc.) and other guidelines. Some students were brought up taking into account the individual capacities of children in educational settings.

The multiliteracy approach emphasises not only ethnic cultural diversities but also sociocultural and family cultures. This study suggests that, for example, in transcultural settings, family cultures and individual childhood experiences have not received due scholarly attention. It was obvious that childhood experiences with films and horror content influenced students' relationship with film and horror culture. Differences particularly in family cultures were shown in consuming horror content and experiences related to it. Family cultures were also sometimes in conflict with the official age rating system, as is evident in the following comment by a student:

The first film memory that I have is about Emmerich's Godzilla. It was a good film for sure, a new and advanced kind of sci-fi movie that followed the monster film tradition. I remember that I was 7 and I was not allowed to see this movie, but my parents let me see it and I was really scared. I still remember that I ran away from the living room at the stadium scene. This experience gave me a bad feeling about the supernatural and horror movies for a long time. I didn't want to watch them until I became an adult and I understood that nothing is more scary than a university exam in Private Law. (Student 3, Film Life Study.)

Thus attitudes towards film education and horror content stem from very versatile backgrounds. For example, one student wrote of the impact of her family having a religious culture:

Going to the cinema or watching movies was not a very easy task in my family, as it is in most families in India. Coming from a very strong and orthodox Christian family, watching films was considered to be a sin. (Student 8, Film Life Study.)

In the case of many participants who had undergone negative experiences with the horror genre they had often seen adult content far too young or children's film's horror elements without parental supervision. They had to cope with that experience by themselves, without the support of an adult that would have enhanced emotional skills and coping mechanisms.

Seemingly bad experiences in one's own childhood influenced one's relationship with the genre and had a potentially negative effect on the pedagogical understanding of horror content. In the data, one factor that emerged in the context of horror content and child protection (for example, in the context of age ratings) was related to personal experience. For example, one participant wrote the following:

For the scary films, it gave me an extremely negative impact during my childhood. (...) Without correct guidance, these horror films may cause profound negative impact on a child's character. (Film Life Study, Student 6.)

In some cases, official age rating systems were seen as a corrective service:

Without age ratings, I would hardly know which age group the films were suitable for. (...) However, age ratings can provide a reference for parents



when choosing films for their children and prevent children from harmful content. (Student 5, Learning Diary.)

## **Transcultural pedagogies matter**

From a transcultural point of view, it is important to address the question of different policies in countries regarding the age ratings. For example, Chinese students indicated that political censorship in China was a problem because it is based on political ideology, rather than child protection purposes. This point of view is illustrated in the following comment:

Calling for age ratings, we are seeking the adults' right of enjoying more diverse art and a child's right to be protected. (Student 5, Assignment 1.)

One student considered age ratings also from a transcultural perspective:

In general, I'm in favour of age ratings, though I tend to view them as guidelines rather than commandments, due to individual children coping differently with the same material, the general differences between rating systems across nations and differences in what is considered appropriate content for children differing between cultures. (Student 2, Assignment 1.)

Since censorship appears to provide an answer (both governmental child protection censorship and self-censorship of the industry) for many participants, there is need for a pedagogical model to develop film literacy and the emotional skills tied to it. By reflecting on one's own perhaps negative experiences with certain content, it is possible to consider content within a broader perspective as relevant.

The way films used their horror elements was another important factor regarding attitudes towards horror:

The most important point is to let children be aware of what illuminates the darkness and what drives away the demons. (Student 5, Assignment 1.)

To me, in horror films which are for children, the content generally should show positive aspects of horror that shows how children can overcome the fear and scary things. (Student 2, Assignment 1.)

While it was acknowledged that content intended for children might include difficult subject matter and some scary material, it was also common to demand the 'right' way to display such material. Many participants also recognised horror to be a crucial part of popular culture consumed particularly during teenage years.

Because in junior high, as many teenagers, I found life annoying and had plenty of "dark and rebellious" thoughts. Where is a better place to find similar thoughts than the internet? Therefore, I started to watch a very specific type of film. Those films which ground several people in one place with game rules or exit conditions, like Cube, Exam, Misery and the Mist. I was so obsessed with this kind of film that I practically watched as many as I could find during that year. Somehow these films provided me

recognition. They embodied my “dark and rebellious” teenage thoughts and told me it’s ok to have those in my mind. (Film Life Study, Student 4.)

During the course, students gave presentations about characteristics of the film cultures of their native lands. Presentations resulted in open, far-reaching discussions. This is a practice that enhances the awareness of a student’s audio-visual roots and how these are related to other. This can also strengthen the understanding of potentially new and threatening audio-visual cultures and phenomena. As one student put it:

This class included multicultural participants. Students in the class had a different background in the field and experiences. It caused us to find many experiences from different groups. Doing something as a group made us get more familiar with each other’s culture. (Student 1, Learning Diary.)

### **Emotional meaning making and skills at the core**

The main result was a change in students’ understanding of film literacy and education in general. At the outset of the course, the participants considered film literacy a skill for reading pictures and understanding cinematic conventions, so their preconception was professional and aesthetic. At the end of the course, film literacy was understood as a critical literacy practice.

It was clear that attitudes to horror content for children were mixed and characterised by emotion. For example, not everyone agreed that children’s interest in horror was endogenous. In the opinions of some students’ children’s horror culture was seen as a result of commercial entertainment of film industry. This is one case showing the importance of understanding your own relationship with certain media and dealing with emotions it raises. These discussions were also reflected in a learning diary as follows:

I especially liked the ones on children and horror, which is a fascinating topic and merits more discussion (although considering the discussion that arose during the lecture, I can see why it isn’t brought up all that often.) (Student 1, Learning diary.)

Even when film literacy was understood as a critical literacy practice, the understanding of emotional skills as a part of film literacy was lacking. This was evident mainly in the learning diaries and interviews. With this in mind, we would like to add emotional meaning to the aforementioned list by Cope and Kalantzis (2000) on multimodal aspects on meaning making. This is because the emotional skills can be seen to be in the core of film literacy and crucial in the context of horror culture and thus it is important to create pedagogies based on that.

### **Children’s Horror – Developing Pedagogical Practices**

Results show that horror content was considered to be connected primarily with the rebellious phase of teenage years but not something that could be useful from a pedagogical point of view earlier in childhood. *Negative experiences with horror films and lacking guidance* were experienced in childhood, which turned

into a protective attitude toward film education in general, especially children's horror films. Horror as a theme for the course was new, together with a large part of film education as well. As expected, based on the novelty, the course resulted in a change of students' pedagogic mindsets ending with critical, reflective understandings of horror film education as part of media education. This change shows that *transcultural pedagogies matter* in creating increased global understanding and the framework of multiliteracies is useful as a dialogic, participatory vehicle for augmenting the interest and reflection of students. *Emotional meaning-making and skills* were at the core of creating understanding from horror as a genre: these were most visible in students' discussions, interviews and personal assignments in many ways. More research is needed in this field, for example, in exploring the ways (horror) film education might support emotional education.

Developing film literacy for inclusive and participatory practice demands a focused pedagogical approach. The transcultural and multimodal nature of the real worlds of students ought to be approached from a standpoint in which different aspects of those worlds are recognised, horror culture being one specific example of those life worlds. This study has approached this question within the theoretical framework of multiliteracy which seems to convey a large part of this complex field. Audiovisual horror culture can thus be seen as a learning environment of multiliteracies which support the development of *emotional skills and wider multiliteracy skills*.

The results help to reinforce multiliteracy as a comprehensive pedagogical model. In doing so, it stresses the importance of notion of creating safe spaces for discussion, reflection and enhancing emotional skills. One solution to unlock and expand the attitudes and perceptions related to pedagogical uses of children's horror culture could be film life studies related to experiences in horror and the concomitant emotions connected. This could also result in a more *child-connected* education (Räsänen, 2015, p. 34).

Following Kotilainen and Pathak-Shelat (2015), the study calls for *situated approaches to media education in Europe*: more international film education through policy initiatives at the European level and locally. In a specific pedagogical, local setting in schools, an experimental attitude could take place for developing models for transcultural media and film education in which children collaborate, plan and design their own films as agents. In order for that to take place a change is needed in teacher training in favour of more active, agency-based media and film pedagogies. Students from transcultural and versatile backgrounds undergo different experiences which potentially impact on teaching and learning. That is why the creation of a safe space for learning is crucial, including an educator or a teacher who is sufficiently familiar with the student group. Both perspectives, transcultural and horror, call out for an inclusive understanding.

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