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TO RESTORE THE PROPER SENSE OF EDUCATION  
IN THE FACE OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL THREATS:  
THE EXAMPLE OF THE MEDIA

INTRODUCTION

When a human being comes into this world, they bring with them potential capacities in various spheres: physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and moral. Their development depends fundamentally on education, i.e. the role of the environment, especially parents, teachers and educators. However, the extent of socio-cultural change in recent times has definitely expanded the circle of “educators”. In addition to the family, the school and the Church, mass culture transmitters and media organisations are of enormous importance in the education of the young generation.

The primary aim of the article is to carry out a theoretical pedagogical analysis on the status of education in today’s socio-cultural reality. I will specifically refer to selected films aimed at children and youth, as well as web portals which are currently particularly compelling the attention of young people.

EDUCATION: A CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGE

Man, being *res naturae*, transcends the realm of nature through culture. For in the latter manifests the genius of human reason and spirituality. Culture constitutes a kind of “niche” in which human development is possible. Thanks to it, man “becomes more human” and comes into the richness of his existence (Nowak, 2000).

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The fundamental task of culture is education, and education is, above all, about human self-improvement, it is a process aimed at actualising the fullness of one's humanity by discovering the truth about oneself and the world (John Paul II, 1988). In Klaus Schaller's formulation, on the other hand, education is understood as "the ways and processes that enable the pupil to find their humanity" (Schaller, 1971, p. 248).<sup>1</sup>

Education is specifically about valuing the individual, who is infinite, and thus about recognising formation as a process that is never finished, a work that is prone to failure, unpredictable, yet concrete and alive (Pesci, 2006).

The primary value of the educational work with the pupil-person is their integral development. The anthropological complexity of the human being, who is constituted by reason, free will, the body and the personal dignity of man, must be matched by a pedagogical intention. Man, wishing to somehow go beyond contemporary threats – to overcome them – should develop holistically in it, that is physically, mentally and morally.

Education is an aid to the "unification" of human beings, to their maturation and overcoming human imperfection. It harmonises the manifold levels of man, from the humblest poles of "nature" to the most culturally developed and complex poles of "spirit".

The role of education is to arouse in people the need to make a commitment to live their lives authentically. "A commitment not to let life pass in the superficial anomie that characterises the consumerism of our time, which continues to grow in the globalised world. Above all, education should lead to the choice of an authentic life" (Pesci, 2006, p. 46) with fundamental values placed at its centre. It is only by this route – of values rooted in the metaphysical structure of the human person, built on personal dignity – that man reaches full richness.

Helena Radlińska points out that education is about helping to grow, it protects against pathology and "serves development"; the service in favour of development must not "break and extinguish", but should "help to straighten and illuminate from within" (Radlińska, 1961, p. 325). The author also emphasises that one cannot develop for someone else, but one can support this development and protect the other against disorders. In turn, Father Jacek Woroniecki emphasises that education "consists precisely in transforming a human being who is unaware of their aims and tasks, i.e. an individual, into an independent personality [...]. The human personality should crystallise in the form of character, for it is the only thing that can give it enough strength to both place itself sacrificially at

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are mine.

the service of society and not to allow itself to be consumed and destroyed by it” (Woroniecki, 1986, p. 384).

The culture that educates people conditions their development – it is a set of opportunities and irreplaceable possibilities; if misused, it can lead to threats, disrupt and deform the process of education and destroy it (Ożóg, 2000). Today there is an increasing preference for ease and comfort, success, career, grand profit, attractiveness and youthfulness. The slogans characteristic of this culture are “take advantage”, “seize the opportunity”, “grasp the chance”, “promote”. This is why we should be worried about the peculiar role reversal experienced by contemporary culture, which not so much nourishes the collective consciousness and imagination through beauty, but feeds itself on the scraps of social life and encourages an attitude geared toward materialism and consumerism. The refusal to respect what is genuinely sacred consequently gives rise to false sacredness. Moral emptiness is increasingly caused by the fact that man often loses his ability to control himself and is unable to resist the destructive influences of the scientific and technological civilisation he has created, which bears the hallmarks of a civilisation of death. This, in turn, is a consequence of a negative understanding of freedom, conceived as the absence of orders and prohibitions, taken beyond the categories of good and evil. John Paul II, warning against this danger, urges that freedom be used well: “We need to know how to use our freedom, choosing what is the true good. Do not let people make you slaves! Do not let people tempt you with false values, half-truths, the fascination of illusions, which you will later leave behind with disappointment, hurt and perhaps with your life ruined” (John Paul II, 2005). The relativism or even axiological nihilism experienced by many has shown that absolute freedom, freedom from all constraints, is eventually experienced by man as boundless despair.

The current young generation functions in conditions of relative peace, prosperity and a culture of immediacy. Moreover, representatives of this generation have almost unlimited access to all goods and services – without much (any?) effort on their part (Morbiter, 2014). The consequence of functioning in a culture of speed, ease and convenience is the young people’s increasingly evident lack of resilience to failure and setbacks, no fighting spirit and no sense of responsibility. Therefore, today there is an unprecedented need for educators “passionately dedicated to their profession and convinced that the most interesting process in the world is the development of the human mind and heart, and that the most beautiful occupation is the skilful guidance of this development. *Ars atrium regimen animarum* (‘to guide others is the art of arts’)” (Woroniecki, 2008, p. 125).

## ANTI-EDUCATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Education, in Tadeusz Gadacz's view, is a joint journey of the educator and the pupil towards truth, goodness, beauty (Gadacz, 2005). In today's media and virtual reality this shared path of the guide and the guided faces more and more challenges. Indeed, we are currently witnessing "the degradation of culture, its 'softening' and erosion through the planned destruction of the world of traditional values" (Morbitzer, 2014, p. 138). Social media content and films and cartoons presented are highly questionable from an educational and moral point of view. In addition, an increasing number of individuals – especially young people – spend most of their time in the virtual world – "just browsing" websites or interacting with people on the other side of the screen. Modern society is therefore rightly described as a "network society" (Castells, 2011, as cited in Morbitzer, 2014).

The cartoons and films presented on television and on the Internet, as well as the various social networks – Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest, Snapchat and Twitter – are a particular threat constituting an assault on children and youth's natural sensitivity to beauty, truth, love and goodness. As the Canadian linguist and media expert McLuhan rightly points out, "we shape our tools, and then our tools shape us" (McLuhan, 2004, p. 17). The challenges the digital world poses to educators are constantly growing and the difficulties in the field of education are becoming increasingly complicated to solve. This is because the process of education takes place in a volatile and unstable world that lacks the solid foundations that used to be the world of values (Morbitzer, 2014). "The media have shattered the former stable order. Alongside its many positive features, such as allowing easy and quick access to a real ocean of information, it has also introduced access to educationally harmful and false information and ease of manipulation, both of people and of information itself" (Morbitzer, 2014, p. 139).

The world of cartoons offered today differs dramatically from what past generations knew. Traditional bedtime cartoons had a set duration and a fixed broadcast time in the evening. Their role was to calm children before sleep, put them in a good mood and soothe them. Nowadays, cartoons are very dynamic and full of bright, vivid colours, which means that after watching a single episode the child still has intermingling images in their imagination (Więczkowska, 2012).

Television stations, particularly commercial ones, broadcast countless animated films throughout the day. Some of these are intended for a specific age group, while others should not be viewed by children at all. Many cartoons (*Powerpuff*

*Girls, Johnny Bravo, What's With Andy?*) feature immoral scenes, while love stories are their main theme and they do not always involve the relationship between a girl and a boy. There are also cartoons on TV promoting same-sex relationships (*The Loud House, Adventure Time, Steven Universe*). Cartoons targeted at boys are often saturated with an enormous amount of aggression and violence and promote a model of an easy life, without demands or responsibilities. Animated films aimed at boys include *Gormiti* (monsters that play good and bad roles), *Star Wars, Justice League*. A young person develops an image of the world in which they can do anything they want (Więczkowska, 2012).

The world of cartoons has become a huge business, their creators setting the standards for beauty and ugliness. They do not care about the well-being and proper development of their youngest audience, they decide for parents what is right for children. The line between good and evil is becoming blurred. Objective values fade into oblivion, the traditional family is being targeted and portrayed as something random and impermanent. Instead, cartoons propose a world where everything can be acquired with certain magical skills, with the right spells. The innocent world of children is being filled with scenes overflowing with magic, witchcraft, darkness and death (Kostrzewa, 2013). Among the cartoons watched mainly by girls are *Witch, Monster High, Rainbow High, Shadow High* or *My Little Pony*, which promote magic, spiritualism and vampirism. The powers of darkness and death are also a regular feature of many cartoons designed for boys, e.g. *Dragon Ball, Bleach, Neon Genesis Evangelion* or *Courage the Cowardly Dog*.

In the world of boys, the trend of ugliness has taken hold – everything looks repellent, inducing fear, but it also breeds improper interest and fascination. Cartoon protagonists are not examples to follow; they have been deprived of valuable qualities such as courage, bravery, sacrifice for truth, goodness and beauty. An admirable attitude is ridiculed. What is ethical, pure and neat is scorned. At the same time, what is abhorrent and unethical – whether in the characters' behaviour, appearance or language – is put on a pedestal (*Dexter's Laboratory, Looney Tunes, Watership Down, SpongeBob SquarePants, Open Season, Ed, Edd n Eddy, What's With Andy?, Dragon Ball*). Under the pretext of fighting, behaviour that is in no way exemplary is praised; on the contrary, a picture emerges in which no one is held responsible for their actions (Skiba, 2013).

As far as teenagers are concerned, a particular form of entertainment are the productions offered by the Netflix streaming service. Film series presented there are an important part of young people's lives, especially in the context of entertainment and free time organisation. The themes and stories which are the

basis for these series are parties full of stimulants: cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, and sex scenes. Showing young audiences scenes that feature addictive substances as an integral part of having fun is very risky. Examples of such characters include the eponymous Lucifer from the popular series on Netflix, Jim Hopper from *Stranger Things* and Walter White from *Breaking Bad*.

The schematic and clear division between good and evil characters is very sporadic in contemporary productions. In the characters created, physical appearance and the emotions they convey play an overriding role. Behaviour, attitudes, and actions have become a marginal issue. Examples of such creations include: Tokyo (*Money Heist*), Rebecca (*Elite*) and the protagonists of *Euphoria*. Perfect bodies, fancy make-up and beautiful yet controversial clothing constitute the model of attractiveness. Wiktoria Kiwior points out that “the image of young protagonists of these series is over-sexualised, which according to an *American Psychological Association Report* means that a person’s value is based solely on their sexual attractiveness or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics” (Kiwior, 2014, p. 108). The author notes that the promotion of the ideal appearance of series characters inspires admiration among young audiences, but also provides a basis for judging and objectifying people in real life.

In contemporary programmes for youth, the viewer can observe various behaviours of the characters, including violence and aggression – verbal, physical and psychological. Such attitudes and behaviours can be observed in *Elite* or *Money Heist*.

In addition to cartoons and TV and web series, many educational risks are generated by social media. While its original purpose was related to allowing users to contact people they had previously met, it soon became a trend to have as many friends as possible. This, in turn, contributed to connecting with strangers, and in doing so – getting too friendly, sharing private space and personal problems.

With social media came the phenomenon of *sexting* – sending nude or semi-nude photos and videos of oneself in exchange for small material benefits. The victims in this context are usually young girls. Another danger associated with social media is stalking. The mechanism of this group is mainly based on having multiple fictitious accounts from which they send the victim upsetting, offensive and harassing messages (Goetz, 2012). From an educational perspective, an important issue is also cyberbullying, i.e. peer violence “carried out via the Internet, which can be very intensely felt by the victim, yet difficult to notice from the outside. It can take the same forms as in the real world: jokes, mockery, unpleasant allusions, ironic or openly hostile and contemptuous statements, as well as spreading rumours or intimate information” (Goetz, 2012).

In addition to the above-mentioned dangers of using social media, the negative effects on social or intellectual development cannot be overlooked. A young person who habitually uses social networks feels the pressure to constantly check what is happening on the portal, whether there is a new message, comment, photo or news from friends and strangers. In turn, this necessitates checking their (usually) phone all the time and spending many hours handling a given application. This thesis is confirmed by the 2022 nationwide survey commissioned by the Ombudsman for Children. It shows that social media have become an addiction for children and youth – 13% of younger children and as many as 15% of adolescents are addicted to social media. One in three adolescents spends several hours a day there, and many of them – up to 12 hours (Ombudsman for Children, 2022).

What is it about social media that particularly entices young and the youngest audiences? Above all, “passive consumption of content, entertainment, satisfaction of emotional needs, desire for creative self-expression and pursuit of popularity” (Bucknell & Kottasz, 2020). There is also great interest in seeking information on a variety of topics, interacting and peeking into the lives of others.

Although social media are rife with a variety of fake news, pathological content, violence, content chaos (worthless content mixed with quality content) and questionable profile privacy protection, they continue to grow in popularity. This is because they are designed in such a way as to make users spend as much time as possible on them, so that the owners of the respective sites can multiply their profits.

Research conducted at Harvard indicates that viewing content thus constructed on social media triggers the same areas of the brain that are activated when taking psychoactive substances. The reward system in the brain then influences our behaviour and decisions (Perlmutter et al., 2021).

The magic of television and the virtual world have brought about a number of changes in human communication processes, resulting in the replacement of traditional personal bonds with impersonal formal relationships. In reality, a person is “complete” intellectually, emotionally and, above all, morally thanks to “who they bond and unite with” (Rodziński, 1998, p. 175). In an authentic encounter with another person, one broadens one’s horizons and gets to know oneself and the other, experiencing affirmation.

The pupil is someone who is free, i.e. capable of making autonomous decisions, someone who is not determined by the laws of nature or by instincts and urges. They are someone capable of adopting a conscious and free attitude towards what they discover in and around themselves. Adults – parents and educators – should

step in to guide them towards making wise choices that foster their all-round development. It is adults who, by their behaviour, their attitude to others and by their whole life, should invite the children they educate to activate all spheres of human life and thus to realise themselves as a human person.

#### CHALLENGES FOR MEDIA ORGANISATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF HUMAN EDUCATION

Given the indisputable value of the human person, it is important to remember that everything that surrounds them should serve their growth. In today's world, the media is increasingly one of the most powerful factors influencing people. Paradoxically, this pressure is placed under the guise of slogans of freedom, tolerance, openness and complete liberty in every sphere of life. Herbert Marcuse – a scholar of contemporary culture – draws the following conclusions in this context: “In the overdeveloped countries, an increasing proportion of the population is becoming, as it were, one powerful, hypnotised audience – held captive not by a totalitarian regime, but by the liberties of the citizens” (Marcuse, 1991, p. 300). An important role in promoting self-will, preaching slogans of stress-free upbringing and maximum autonomy is played by the modern media.

Instead, all culture, including the most popular culture, should take into account the value of the human being as a person in the content it conveys. The Internet and television have great power of influence and should therefore, like other scientific and technological creations, pose problems whose ultimate target will be both the individual and humanity as a whole. Progress and all the achievements of civilisation should make human life “more human” and “more worthy of man” (Chrobak, 1999, p. 70). In order to create culture, the person must be seen as an integral and special value.

The media – especially the Internet and television – are therefore obliged to shape free people, since freedom “is the deep nature of man and the foundation that joins all experience and all subjectivity” (Chudy, 1998, p. 71). The media will affirm the value of freedom when they move towards shaping people who are both free and responsible.

Guided by respect for freedom, media organisations should help young people to make free choices. Finally, they should support the individual in understanding their own abilities, capabilities and needs. Such support should be discreet and tactful, leaving the audience the freedom of choice, so that they do not feel enslaved and oppressed, so that they are aware that they “can but don't

have to". Man's freedom springing from his "inner self" demands that he use it prudently. This, in turn, will be accomplished neither through oppression nor through self-will, but through rational education – and this is the challenge for those responsible for media messages.

The problems that afflict modern man can only be handled by a person who is free in the truth. It therefore belongs to media organisations to submit to the truth, which is not concerned about profits, whims, interests and circumstances. Indeed, respect for a person's right to the truth stems from the human attributes of sapience and freedom. It is important to provide adequate, sufficient and optimal information in the media. It should be orderly, understandable for all audiences, free of flattery and misrepresentation of reality, and should emphasise important events. A media message is a dialogue between the broadcaster and the audience, and a lie obliterates its meaning.

In carrying out their tasks, media producers are obliged to use language in such a way that it becomes "an instrument that brings man closer to the truth" (Chudy, 2003, p. 507). Creators should therefore move in the direction of presenting an objective picture of reality, and thus reject any deformation of it – overflowing with scandal, sensationalism, or violation of good manners.

While respecting personalistic requirements, the media should also take into account "that special 'duality' together with complete equality, in the matter of human dignity" (John Paul II, 1981, p. 37). This is because the body represents a great value and a gift that people can bestow on each other in love. Television should therefore promote an attitude of mastery over one's body and its proper usage. This involves portraying the sexual sphere in accordance with the values of sexual purity, modesty and moderation (Galarowicz, 1992).

It is important that the human body portrayed in the media is always accorded respect, whether it belongs to a child, a man, a woman, an elderly person, or a deceased person. Caution and sensitivity are needed, especially when reporting on death, as in this context the dignity of the human body is quite often violated in the media today. The problem of the presentation of violence deserves special attention. When facing the personalistic tasks assigned to them, broadcasters must not allow aggression to be over-represented on screen. It is well known that the practical consequence of this over-representation is sometimes the spread of violence in interpersonal relations (Nowakowski, 2002).

The basis of the equality of all human beings is dignity, whereby "a human being is always a value in and of itself, which derives from the singularity and uniqueness of each person" (Chrobak, 1999, p. 72), hence it should be particularly respected in social media. It is therefore important for the broadcaster to take

into account a number of factors, such as the social diversity of the audience, different levels of tolerance to the presence of vulgarisms, gender differences and the age of the audience. If it produces a programme containing “strong” language, it must warn its audience or schedule the broadcast outside prime time (Szafraniec, 1997). Furthermore, while respecting the value of dignity, the broadcaster must not allow the instrumentalisation of the audience. Respect for every human being should be encouraged, including on television and the Internet (especially social media), because – as the Stoics noted already in the third century BC – *homo homini res sacra*, i.e. “every man is sacred to another man” (Chudy, 1997, p. 12).

Culture as such is created by each and every one of us; popular culture, on the other hand, is essentially the responsibility of media organisations, website originators and administrators, as well as content creators. The onus is on them to ensure a message that respects the value of freedom, truth, the body and, above all, the dignity of the person. With regard to children and youth – in the context of adequate preparation for using the media – parents, teachers and educators play an important role. The way in which they guide them, sensitise them to what is valuable and what is unworthy of a human being, will determine the attitude of children and youth towards various media messages.

#### CONCLUSION

Today’s cultural threats – in connection with the education of the younger generations – largely concern the area of social media. Cartoons and films shown on TV and online, numerous web portals enslave young people, stunt the development of consciousness and conscience, impose certain attitudes and mores as well as preferred intellectual or emotional reactions (Marcuse, 1991). Children and youth increasingly function in axiological chaos, additionally fed by a false identity coming from the media, advertising, and indoctrination. This in turn calls for renewed reflection on the essence of human education and on the great responsibility that rests first on parents, then on schools and on society as a whole.

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SUMMARY

Nowadays, we are increasingly confronted with numerous attempts to eliminate an education that takes into account all dimensions of human life, that shows the way to personal maturity, that helps to overcome the existential imperfections of man. Consequently, in the socio-cultural reality surrounding us, traditional values such as goodness, truth and beauty are being neglected, and the dignity of the human person and their freedom is being disregarded. This situation is not facilitated by media organisations and their increasingly “progressive” offers aimed at children and youth. From an early age, young audiences are introduced to a world of aggression, evil, aesthetics of darkness and corruption, a world dominated by the cult of ease, pleasure and prosperity. Deprived of proper guideposts, role models and authorities in the sphere of education, they often uncritically accept what is offered to them.

In the face of these contemporary cultural threats, today there is a particular need to restore the proper sense of education understood as perfecting the human being, actualising the fullness of their humanity, discovering what is important in them, a journey towards goodness, truth and beauty. Only a process of education understood in this way, aiming at the full development of the human being, has a chance of protecting them from a mutilated humanity.

**Keywords:** education; media; culture; child.

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O PRZYWRÓCENIE WŁAŚCIWEGO SENSU WYCHOWANIA  
W OBLICZU WSPÓŁCZESNYCH ZAGROŻEŃ KULTUROWYCH  
– NA PRZYKŁADZIE MEDIÓW

STRESZCZENIE

Współcześnie coraz częściej spotykamy się z licznymi próbami wyeliminowania wychowania uwzględniającego wszystkie wymiary życia ludzkiego, wskazującego drogę do osiągnięcia osobowej dojrzałości, stanowiącego pomoc w pokonywaniu jego egzystencjalnej i bytowej niedoskonałości. A co za tym idzie – w otaczającej nas rzeczywistości społeczno-kulturowej pomija się tradycyjne wartości, takie jak dobro, prawda i piękno, lekceważy godność osoby ludzkiej, jej wolność. Sytuacji tej nie ułatwiają dysponenci medialni oraz ich coraz bardziej „postępowa” oferta adresowana do dzieci i młodzieży. Młodzi odbiorcy od wczesnych lat wprowadzani są w świat agresji, zła, estetyki ciemności i zepsucia, w którym panuje kult łatwości, przyjemności i dobrobytu. Pozbawieni właściwych drogowskazów, wzorców i autorytetów w sferze wychowania nierzadko bezkrytycznie przyjmują to, co jest im oferowane.

W obliczu tych współczesnych zagrożeń kulturowych, istnieje dziś szczególna potrzeba przywrócenia właściwego sensu wychowania rozumianego jako doskonalenie człowieka, aktualizowanie pełni jego człowieczeństwa, odkrywanie tego, co w nim ważne, wędrówka ku dobru, prawdzie i pięknu. Tylko tak rozumiany proces wychowania, zmierzający do pełnego rozwoju człowieka, ma szansę ochronić go przed okaleczonym człowieczeństwem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wychowanie; media; kultura; dziecko.