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Fantasies of fighting and fighters

The fascination of *Dragon Ball Z* in between strong inner pictures and a heightened readiness to resort to aggression

One of the current trends in children's culture is *Dragon Ball Z*. Boys are fascinated by the characters, by their strength and invulnerability. They integrate the series into their fantasies in order to feel more secure or to be able to control themselves better, but also for reasons of self-defence.

Broadcast since August 2001 on the private channel RTL 2, a series has been making its triumphal procession through German children's culture which is anything but quality television for children: *Dragon Ball Z*. In long-drawn-out scenes brutal attacks between ludicrous heroes are presented, with a minimum of any other action. There is no lack of hacked-off body parts, pain, and death resulting from the fights. As in other countries, the programmes are an absolute hit in terms of ratings in Germany as well - especially with boys. [1]

What is it that fascinates children and pre-teens about this series with so little dramatic art, which is cheap in its production aesthetics and full of violence? With which fantasies is the fascination associated? Do any connections emerge between the violent contents, fantasies and behaviour?

In qualitative interviews the Internationales Zentralinstitut für das Jugend- und Bildungsfernsehen (IZI) questioned 70 regular viewers of *Dragon Ball Z* between the ages of 6 and 15 (58 boys, 12 girls). [2] The starting point is qualitative, everyday-oriented reception research which sees children as actively meaning-forming viewers. Gender-specifically the emphasis is on boys and on the importance they attach to the series; but the individual cases of girls that were examined reveal interesting facets of media appropriation. Here are some excerpts from the results, emphasising the fantasies connected with the fascination for *Dragon Ball Z*.

The basic story line of *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z*

First of all a brief introduction to the story line of the series: it begins with the arrival of the principal character, the boy Goku, who is sent from his home planet, Vegeta, to the Earth to conquer it and sell it to the highest bidder. Because of a head injury, however, he forgets what his real job is, takes a turn for the better and from then on saves the Earth from numerous alien invaders. Special importance attaches to the seven Dragon Balls, which, once they are brought together, can fulfil a wish. Whereas the heroes in *Dragon Ball* are still children, *Dragon Ball Z* takes place at a later point in time. Goku is married and the father of two children, Goten and Gohan, who play a prominent part in *Dragon Ball Z*. In the course of the series Goku dies, but, provided with a halo, continues to play an important role in the story. Both formats are quite clearly fighting-oriented. But while *Dragon Ball* centres on the adventurous search for the seven magic balls, *Dragon Ball Z*, which is not officially billed as children's television, is almost exclusively concerned with aggressive conflict.

What children see and like in *Dragon Ball Z*: fighting and fighters

In all the responses of the 70 *Dragon Ball Z* fans the fighting and the fighters are clearly dominant. That is what they like about the series, what they talk about, what they copy in their games and what they dream about. Here it is not a matter of showing one's prejudices by demonising or harmonising, but of taking the boys and girls seriously in their points of view and coming to grips with the fascination of fighting and fighters. But this is not possible without a relation to the children's everyday life and culture.

***Dragon Ball Z* is in**

Dragon Ball Z is in at the moment in the peer group 9-year-old Amelie says. "All the children in my class watch the series, so I'd like to be able to join in the discussion." Regularly watching the programme is therefore not necessarily the result of any deep interest in the series. Trends keep cropping up in the peer group that are frequently determined by the principal medium of television. *Dragon Ball Z*, like *Pokémon* and *Digimon*, is also a trend in children's culture. From the point of view of the children these trends have a high communicative value: children use the material of the media so that they can carry on short conversations in a larger circle (e.g. the class). Games or swapping things with friends help the children to join up in groups and keep others out - or in intimate conversations with best friends *Dragon Ball Z* becomes symbolic material for discussing values and experiences. Apart from these subjective and positive aspects, at the same time trends always entail pressure "to know what's what" and to possess the appropriate licensing or merchandising articles. Also, in the case of a programme like *Dragon Ball Z*, we have to ask whether some of the children are themselves overtaxed by this trend.

Being able to stand violence

Dragon Ball Z, with its large content of violence, is a challenge - not only for academics and educationalists, but also for children and pre-teens. On several occasions they describe how frightened they are during very brutal scenes. One of the most frequent answers to the question of whether they would like to improve anything in the series is: "less violence" or "if only they wouldn't always fight".

"For me it's not too violent, but for the young children it's certainly too violent. [...]" (Cem, 13 years old)

"If I made telly programmes I would have said that it is not suitable for children under 13, because it's really quite brutal sometimes. [...]" (Mirjana, 12 years old)

Dragon Ball Z fans realise how violent the series is - and it is precisely this that makes up part of the appeal. For they are no longer "little" or almost no longer under 13 and can stand the violent images. Even if they are frightened by the brutality or reject it for others as well (third-person effect), they are rather proud that this no longer bothers them. To be able to stand *Dragon Ball Z* and to report this on the next day is part of how they present themselves. With their enthusiasm for the series the boys and girls confront their peer group - but also adults and interviewers - with a self-image as tough boys and girls. But for all these subjectively sensible aspects there is also a risk that some of the frightening images "get stuck" (Klemm) and cannot be processed without difficulty.

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Fighters as a chance to project their own experiences and fears

For the children usually one character comes to the fore: Goku, the strong and good hero, who is witty and also good-looking. Jonas (12 years old), for example, is especially fond of Goku: "[...] Goku, because he makes super attacks; because he has often saved the world and because he eats so much. [...]" For others - or in combination with Goku - it is Vegeta, the cool one with a lot of muscles, who is the favourite character.

"[...] He's really cool. He doesn't put up with any nonsense. He can never admit that others are stronger than he is. He wants to learn from his mistakes. He doesn't like it if someone helps him or is sorry for him. That's what I like about him." (Erkan, 13 years old)

The characters seem to reflect, albeit on a very symbolised level, (partial) experiences and behaviour patterns. Here Erkan picks out only quite definite aspects and interprets them in keeping with his own concerns (also see Götz et al. in this issue). Through his interpretation of Vegeta Erkan finds points of guidance, for example refusing to help and not letting anyone take advantage of him. This guidance may not be especially welcome for educationalists, but from the boys' individual point of view it is not difficult to understand. Not only, but in particular, for the younger ones, Gohan is the hero, because he "[...] saved the world even when he was a child" (Marek, 8 years old). Here force, energy and potential are the central factors which make a character attractive from the boys' perspective: "Gohan and Trunks - because they are the two smallest and later become the strongest of all." (Björn, 13 years old) The obvious interpretation is that here boys project their experiences, desires and hopes using the cliché of strength. Some of the girls interviewed also name the central male characters of the series as their favourites, but combine them with the female ones (mostly ChiChi and Videl). Others only give special emphasis to the female fighters.

Bujana (11 years old), for example, is fascinated by C18: "She has such a cool haircut and she is brutal. She does what she wants, she refuses to take orders from anyone. She is a good fighter - for a woman, or, a girl. [...]" Asked whether she often thinks of *Dragon Ball Z*, she replies, "I've sometimes wished I could be like her [...]" On the one hand, these girls look for strong characters who can get their own way, which also means that they prove themselves as fighters. On the other hand, Bujana's qualifying remark "for a woman" indicates that here existing role assignments are expanded but not really exceeded.

Fantasies of strength and self-assertion

Forty-one of the children and pre-teens interviewed reported they thought about the plot, the characters and the fights long after seeing the programme, most frequently in bed (before falling asleep), before and after transmission time, at school or, for example, also when playing *Dragon Ball Z* games.

Manga drawings as an opportunity for perfect drawings that stress action

The drawings are an articulation of the fantasies. Mario, for example, reports that he thinks of *Dragon Ball* "almost all the time" at school and at home, especially when he is painting (see Fig. 1). He has unquestionably attained perfection in it, (even though he paints schematically and copies a picture). In their drawings the boys pay great attention to muscles, hairstyle and resoluteness - signs of self-assertion in the *Dragon Ball Z* logic. A second typical factor, although clearly only expressed in a few pictures, is the lines of movement, similar to those in manga. Action, movement and strength here seem to be central factors for the drawers. The chance to make use of anime or manga pictures or to be able to copy them from the internet offer boys not only an opportunity to make relatively perfect drawings, even if their abilities to express themselves by drawing are not yet otherwise so far developed. At the same time, the stereotype pictures - with an appropriate and aggressive gesture, fighting scenes and strong physique - become part of the inner pictures of such characteristics as self-assertion, virility and being a man.



Fig. 1: Mario's picture

Daydream fantasies: the story line of the series and the dream of being invincible



Fig. 2

Some of the daydreams the *Dragon Ball Z* fans talk about are partially concerned with the story line of the series. Sven (13 years old) relates that he always thinks before the programme is broadcast about how it might go on. Kerim (13 years old) says, "Sometimes I'm only worried whether they will succeed, for example, in defeating the bad guys." Most of the daydreams related deal with the subjects of strength, rapidity and invulnerability, as in the case of Tarek (12 years old), who says, "Sometime I also think I am just as fast and strong" (see Fig. 2).

Role games: fighting rituals and movement

Several boys say how they imagine in role play that they are the characters, replay parts of the story and try to make similar movements. It seems that the school playground is a particularly favourite location for this.

"We make our hair stand up with water and then fight for fun, without hitting each other properly. We only touch each other and then fly away as if we had really hit the other boy." (Bülent, 10 years old)

Certain aspects of the programme, e.g. the hairstyles, are copied and the main content of the fights is ritualised in play. Moving, touching one another and pretending are here the main features of the game. At the same time the role games are built into the group dynamics. Positions are allocated (good, bad, winners, losers etc.), individual boys are integrated, but some are excluded or stigmatised. Nevertheless, what at first sight looks like aggression is ritualised acts from the view point of the boys. Here movement plays a central part. Of course, the possibility can certainly not be ruled out that they unintentionally injure one another through the unaccustomed movements of kicking and hitting.

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Night dreams: fantasies of stature and fears

The question as to whether they have ever dreamt of *Dragon Ball Z* is answered in the negative by many children or they say they cannot remember doing so. Some, however, do report having had night dreams, which, despite the necessary caution required because of the small number of them and the methodological problems of freely reported night dreams, do provide further insight into their fantasies. The night dreams reported deal, on the one hand, with the story of the instalment seen before going to sleep. Kilian (8 years old) replies that he almost always dreams about the series. His dreams focus on the characters and he goes through scenes of the story in his dreams, but also anticipates the plot. Angelo (8 years old) dreams how the bad characters are changed into good ones, thus reversing the story line of the series in the latest instalment. On the other hand, there are dreams in which boys imagine themselves in the position of Goku or Gohan, who are successful in their fights, bringing the earth together and thus saving it from imminent danger. The boys do not always have the super powers of their heroes, but they do have their strong will and friendship for other boys.

"I have also dreamt about how I am standing there fighting. I just came along and fought against the bad guy Cell and defeated him." (Carsten, 11 years old)

"I've quite often had the dream in which me and my friend are the heroes and we are fighting bad guys with the forces of the characters [...]." (Bülent, 10 years old)

Others talk about the dream in which they take part in a competition against the good characters in the series and can beat them "hands down". As far as can be gathered from the few examples, they are

dreams of strength, fitness to fight and invulnerability, forms of fantasies of stature. Only two of the girls report having had night dreams; one is a story in which a blue character and a green one threaten the Earth, although they do not carry out their threat. In the second account of a dream Elena reports about a dream in which she is saved by one of the television heroes:

"A dream, I once dreamt something with Trunks, that he saved me from wolves. That was in the jungle. An older man came along who wanted to take me with him. Then I woke up." (Elena, 9 years old)

Elena dreams a classic gender role situation in which she is rescued from danger. Interestingly this threat also comes from a man. Even if this is not the place to develop an interpretation of this dream, it would appear that Elena is at least starting to use the series and its characters to deal with her own fears.

Fantasies of fighting and fighters between self-control and a heightened readiness to resort to violence

For those who watch the series regularly *Dragon Ball Z* becomes part of their fantasies. It is extremely difficult to examine the extent to which this is expressed in real-life behaviour. Not only are changes in behaviour in everyday life difficult to observe and interpret; an unidirectional link to television cannot be reliably established, as the connections are far too complex. Nor can we give a reply to this matter in this study. Nevertheless, we asked the children and pre-teens whether they could learn something from *Dragon Ball Z* and whether they had noticed any changes in themselves since they had been watching the series. Though this does not allow any conclusions to be drawn with regard to actual behaviour, at least it can enable us to obtain further indications of the importance of the series from the standpoint of the recipients.

The question of whether anything could be learnt from *Dragon Ball Z* was answered in the negative by just under half of the children interviewed. For the others fighting and martial arts are clearly of prime importance (28%). Murat (9 years old) replies: "Fighting. You can learn how to use your fists [...]". Here fighting can come up in the context of attacking, but also of self-defence. Thus Miro (15 years old) answers: "(You can learn) to defend yourself, self-confidence is important", or Judy (14 years old) as well: "Yes, I have learnt how to defend myself and to take better care of myself." The aspect of fighting gives them a feeling of having gained in strength.

When asked about changes that had been noticed, about half of the respondents mention changes in everyday life, such as, for example, an increase in television consumption or that their pocket money is no longer sufficient. But there are some who notice a heightened readiness in themselves to resort to violence.

Ten-year-old Bülent relates: "Yes, I feel stronger somehow. When someone hits me, for example at school, then I really scream and hit back hard, like in Dragon Ball. Before I never defended myself."

In Bülent strength and a feeling of being fit to fight go hand in hand with a potential willingness to be better able to "hit back" more effectively. Now when he has the feeling he is being attacked he knows how to defend himself. He resorts to an inner picture, an episode (Klemm in this issue): when you are attacked then scream as loud as you can and hit back.

In this case *Dragon Ball Z* contributes to an inner willingness to act aggressively. There is no simple connection of effects between a violent series and aggressive behaviour. The connection is more complex - but it does exist. In our sample there is only the idea of being able to fight in some of the children (28%). A far smaller number (6%) have made the concrete observation that in real life they really do hit back. It cannot be directly concluded from this what this means for their behaviour in their actual everyday life. Nevertheless, it is certainly significant subjectively. It is known from research into boys (cf. Winter / Neubauer 1998) that boys (in Germany) feel threatened (by other boys). With the inner pictures which they gain from *Dragon Ball Z* they feel better prepared for these threats. In this case their strength is based on the willingness to resort to violence, and the means of solving the conflict is physical fighting. What they fail to realise is that, on the other hand, their heightened willingness to resort to violence turns them into a potential threat to others. A cycle of aggression is the result, which

is certainly problematic from an educational point of view.

Placing the appropriation of the series exclusively into this connection does not, however, take the complexity into account, since the inner pictures which children form with *Dragon Ball Z* may have quite a different meaning. For example, 10-year-old Torben says:

"Dragon Ball is like a cushion - when I fall it doesn't hurt, because I imagine I'm a fighter."

Torben has the feeling that the image of the fighter from Dragon Ball helps him to keep pain under control. Julia has the feeling that you could learn to be tougher from Dragon Ball Z.

"You can learn that you get a bit tougher and don't start to cry at every little thing." (Julia, 9 years old)

These inner pictures of strength encourage self-control, without directly endangering others or setting off a cycle of aggression. From an educational viewpoint these are certainly positive inner pictures which help individuals to deal firmly with themselves and with their feelings.

It again emerges that the connection between television and what children make of it is very complex. Even from a series like *Dragon Ball Z* the children and pre-teens make something positive for themselves.

That is not tantamount to a carte blanche for producers. For as has been shown, a series like *Dragon Ball Z* encourages a willingness to resort to violence, not as a simple stimulus-response connection, but perhaps rather via something like inner images, which are formed by, among other things, the media. That children can also draw positive aspects for their development from a programme containing violence (cf. Jones) does not mean that we necessarily need more of these programmes. For, although not dealt with in greater detail in this connection, boys do not seek violence first and foremost - that is only the form in which it is offered in *Dragon Ball Z*. They look for pictures that help them to find their identity. There will also be other forms for what these children and pre-teens are seeking, forms which symbolically make use of strength and toughness, forms which, however, break through the exclusiveness of violence.

One of the great challenges facing producers of children's television programmes.

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NOTES

[1] In the first half of 2002 the series was watched on average by 570,000 3- to 13-year-olds every evening, three-quarters of whom were boys. According to information provided by CTM, which has reserved all rights to names and copyrights of the series, licensing trade and merchandising accounted for a retail turnover throughout Germany of about €110m solely from the subject of *Dragon Ball Z* in the period from 1st July 2001 to 30th June 2002.

[2] Distributed and carried out throughout Germany, face-to-face interviews with open questions and opportunities to talk (n=70). It was undertaken a second time to allow the children and pre-teens to express themselves once again on the development of their enthusiasm (n=32). The two waves of the survey took place in April/May 2002, the climax of the popularity of *Dragon Ball Z*, and in June/July, when the ratings were levelling off. The interviews focused on social integration (including the parents' attitude) and other television interests, the interactive function of the programme, i.e. entertainment and games, individual perspectives and assigning meaning (what is most important from the point of view of the children and pre-teens?), questions on understanding, characters, fantasies opened up by *Dragon Ball Z*, learning aspects and changes the respondents had noticed in themselves, the children's assessment of the violence in the programme, ideas about Japan. The altogether 102 interviews from the two waves were evaluated following the grounded theory (Glaser, Strauss etc., 1992), computer assisted using winMax. In addition, case studies were reconstructed by a group of several educationalists and media scientists. The interviews of the recipients were supplemented by media analyses, press analyses and market analyses as background information.

[3] Winter, Reinhard; Neubauer, Gunter (1998). *Kompetent, authentisch und normal? Aufklärungsrelevante Gesundheitsprobleme, Sexualaufklärung und Beratung von Jugend. Eine qualitative Studie im Auftrag der BZgA*. Koeln: Bundeszentrale fuer gesundheitliche Aufklärung. 386 pp.

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