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Quality is a matter of perspective

Thoughts on how to define quality in children's television

There is more than one type of "quality" in children's television. Many programmes fulfil only a few criteria of quality, and yet they are successful. Quality, therefore, does not just depend on the production style of a programme, but also on its usefulness for the children.

What do we understand by quality, when we are neither taking aim at mass culture from the ivory tower of bourgeois culture, nor observing it secretly from a safe distance with a telescope? The communications scholar Stephan Russ-Mohl once said that "attempting to define quality in journalism is like nailing jelly to a wall". This comment ought to make it clear how hard it is to define quality in the field of journalism and the media. In the meantime, the general consensus has become that quality in different contexts is also subject to different demands. This means that we cannot compare a serious daily newspaper with a tabloid, or a news programme on a public sector channel with a news programme on a music channel. Certainly, similar standards apply to all of these, but quality is not measured by these alone. For quality is not some quasi-objective property of media products, but is instead dependent on various parameters. It is not just determined by the bourgeois criteria of aesthetics and art. Quality can also be defined by function. This means that the news programme of neces-

sity possesses a kind of quality different from a series like *SpongeBob SquarePants*. It is also clear that the producers of television programmes may have different criteria of quality from their consumers.

Quality from a consumer's viewpoint

We can, therefore, also consider quality from the perspective of the media consumer, and in this case the quality of, for example, a television programme depends on whether it fulfils its viewers' expectations. Viewed in this way, a crime thriller has quality when its promise to excite its viewers is fulfilled. If it does not succeed in this, then its well-meaning viewers will feel that it is boring and, as a result, bad – in other words, lacking quality. Moreover, the quality of a crime thriller cannot be compared with that of a daily soap or a talk show. A children's news programme must be measured according to different criteria from *High school musical* or *SpongeBob SquarePants*. While in the meantime general criteria of quality for journalistic programmes such as variety, relevance, acceptance, professionalism, and – in the case of news broadcasts – topicality have become commonly accepted, such criteria are very much harder to determine for fictional films and television features or shows. What, for example, determines the quality of *Bob the builder*? This question is not

easy to answer. Is it the delineation of the character? Its integration into the ensemble? Its character traits? Its behaviour in the situations it encounters? From the viewpoint of "acceptance", one might ask which target audience the character is important for. Does it, for instance, fulfil the expectations that 3- to 5-year-olds have of a television character? What value does *Bob the builder* possess for girls, and what value for boys? The list of questions could be extended.

These examples show that it is not a simple matter to determine quality. It depends on several factors. The demand for quality in children's television is, therefore, far too general. We have to ask: Which kind of quality is meant here? Is it the practical value which children's television programmes are supposed to have for children of different age groups? Is their quality to be found in polished technical execution, or is it a matter of aesthetic innovation? Finally, there is the further possibility that the quality of a programme reveals itself in its practical value which derives from the everyday contexts in which it is used. Does quality ultimately have something to do with success, which can be measured by ratings, or is that completely irrelevant? As a rule, the quality of a programme is a product of several factors, which may be located on any one of the different levels of the concept of quality mentioned above. It therefore consists both of aesthetic, dramaturgical, and technical aspects as well as of the

contexts in which the programme is utilised by its target audience. In an ideal case a programme would demonstrate quality on every level, but this tends to be the exception. Instead it might possess some good qualities – for example, succeed dramatically and technically – but not others – for example, not appeal to the viewers. (This example also works the other way round – a programme may be dramatically and technically inept, but a success with its audience.)

Let us examine the problem with the aid of a few examples. For instance, there are a number of factual information programmes for children which follow different formats in order to give their young audience a closer understanding of important features of the natural and material world. One essential difference, for example, is that they are aimed at different child audiences – some for younger children, others for older ones. The differences in the target group result in a different way of addressing the audience. In turn this means that the “explanatory items” assume a somewhat different format. It also means that the presenters must find the “appropriate tone”. Moreover, they must be liked by the appropriate target group and “go down well” with them. If the children like the character or presenter, a major part of the battle has already been won, because then the technical, journalistic qualities of the “explanatory items”, for example, become almost secondary matters. But only *almost* secondary; for here too it is a matter of exercising journalistic care and selecting a treatment of the topics that children can understand. For all that, however, a feature item which does not meet these criteria hardly diminishes the children’s reception experience at all. For them it is more important that the topics in question can teach them something, that is, that they must be new and interesting. A boy interested in aircraft will consider a feature about the new Airbus interesting – or, in other words, accord it

quality – even if it is unsuccessful on a technical level. In this respect older children are somewhat more selective because from the age of about 9 they not only have a more developed sense of genre, but also expectations about the journalistic and technical qualities of items. Consequently, if I want to help children understand a subject that until now has not interested them, it is necessary to gain their attention with the help of dramatic treatment and presentation, and employ a presenter the children like. Otherwise there is a danger that the programme will not get through to the children. In the field of fiction, matters are not really any more complicated; they are just more complex. Here what applies for adults also applies for children: a good screenplay can be ruined by a poor director; a director, however good, cannot make anything out of an outstanding screenplay if the characters are acted inappropriately – in other words, if there has been an error

of casting. The production of fictional films and television programmes is teamwork, and each member of the team can contribute to an increase or diminution of the quality of the product. However, quality cannot be determined by means of these production values alone. The success of soaps and series like *Power Rangers*, *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and so on, or of films, depends on whether the narrative treatment is dramatically and aesthetically appealing to children, and also on whether, in the programmes with human actors, those used are accepted by them. Of more central importance, however, is the question of whether they tackle themes relevant to the children’s development. This alone achieves considerable empathy, and at the same time the series and films acquire such a high degree of quality on a functional level that they can be regarded as beneficial to development. The same also applies to action films, which one presumes are aimed rather at an audience of youths and young adults. This requires, however, that characters with whom children or young people can identify constitute a central component of the plot. The effect is even better when the child characters prove to be heroes who gain in strength over the course of the story. This formula is as equally applicable to classic action films like *Terminator 2 – Judgement day* or fantasy films such as the *Lord of the rings* trilogy as to modern children’s action films such as the *Harry Potter* series – even if, in the case of *The lord of the rings*, the casting and dramatic treatment of the child character (Frodo, a hobbit) still follows the “little kid” model. One of the reasons why Japanese *anime* series appeal to children is because the characters very much conform to this same “little kid” stereotype, even if predominantly only in terms of their external appearance. Cartoon series represent a special case. Here too, certainly, the characters must appeal to the children, but a more decisive factor is whether the story and the

actions of the characters appeal to children's sense of humour.

Quality through relatedness to everyday life

In addition to these elements, which are to be found in films or television programmes and in their relationship to the audience, quality may also consist of features which are not directly related to the media product itself. Let us take as an example the German preschool programme *Our little sandman*, which has a market share of around 40%. The Sandman is popular not only because he tells the children suitable bedtime stories for their age group, but because the programme, with its 6.50 p.m. broadcast slot, fits almost perfectly into a family's evening and bedtime rituals. Thus, a programme may also give parents an opportunity to leave their children sitting alone in front of the TV set. This, in its turn, helps to reduce the parents' burden and is an important reason why they switch on this programme for their children. In this case, a crucial determinant of quality is a need on the part of the parents, coupled with the opportunity of embedding the programme in the ritual schedule of everyday family life.

The quality of a programme may also arise out of the dynamics which characterise children's communication. For example, the quality of a series which is technically mediocre and demonstrates flaws of dramatic construction may consist in its ability to provoke discussion and play among children – presumably, precisely because it is only mediocre in terms of production, narrative, and structure. Conversely, successful characters inspire the children to take on their roles during play. This sets in motion a specific group dynamic because in group play only one child can take on the role of the television character. Those who succeed in this have achieved something in the group and are both admired and envied for it. At

the same time, children can negotiate their identity and self-image with the help of characters from television – ranging from *Bob the builder* to *Popeye* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* – by talking about popular television characters and discussing them. This works particularly well when two diametrically opposed heroes, such as Nagisa and Honoka in the *Pretty cure* series, master challenges and solve problems together. It is precisely this ability to contribute to children's development in media literacy and social skills which forms an essential component of the quality of popular films and television programmes. In this case its practical value for the process of socialisation takes precedence, which may also mean that the aesthetic quality of the series in question is of secondary importance. However, it is above all the aesthetic and dramatic qualities which contribute to the formation of media literacy, since it is through them that children acquire awareness of types of staging and structure, typical plot schemata, narrative structures, configurations of characters, and generic traits. This awareness, in turn, influences the expectations with which children confront films and television programmes.

More than one type of "quality"

These examples demonstrate that "quality" – as a single, unified property of films and television programmes, and by extension also of children's films and programmes –

does not exist. Quality does not just depend on the the production style of a programme, but also on its usefulness and value for the children. This naturally means that quality is also bound up with value judgements. However, in this respect it is a question of one's standpoint and perspective. Quality means different things to the producer of a children's programme than to the network editor, than to the presenter, than to teachers, than to parents, than to (their) children – and to the latter again quality means different things according to their age and gender. If quality does not admit of an absolute definition, then should the concept be abandoned completely? By no means; because, like many other concepts, it does not acquire meaning until it is used in social discourse. For this reason, media criticism that contests the quality of films and television programmes is important because it impacts on public discussion of quality criteria. In turn, as a rule all the groups of people mentioned above participate in this discussion (with the exception of the children, but they have their advocates in each of the other groups). All of these together, in collaboration with the media researchers who reflect this process, negotiate publicly and in dialogue with one another what is to be understood by "quality" of (not just) children's films and television at a given historical point in time and in a given social situation. ■

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