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Tackling the themes of children

Achieving quality by picking up children's developmental tasks

Quality is generated in the head of the viewer, through the interaction of programme and recipient. Seen from a pedagogical perspective it is essential to pick up the children's developmental themes and to find appropriate forms of narration for them. Here quality means to relate the abilities and themes of the children to the corresponding genre.

Imagine you see a delicious-looking doughnut lying on a bakery shelf, perfectly formed and sugar-coated. You buy it and sink your teeth into it with relish. But you are utterly disappointed because the doughnut has apparently been lying there for several days already; it tastes dreadful, the filling is different from what you had expected, and on top of that it is all greasy. It is the same thing with the quality of TV shows. A programme might have been outstandingly well produced on a technical level, it might even promise an interesting story; but whether you really like the programme as well, whether it accords with your expectations, moods, fantasies, or wishes – this you do not know until you have seen it. But how is it at all possible for anyone to say what quality is? The following text begins by investigating theoretically the fundamental question of where the actual meaning of a programme originates and how, on the basis of this, one can judge its quality. Concrete suggestions for the

latter are given in section two. The article concludes by offering some thoughts on the differentiation of qualitative criteria in children's television which are intended to serve for future discussion.

1. Quality: product of the producer or the viewer?

My thesis is that the question of quality in children's television cannot be answered in isolation from the question of "meaning". The fundamental question, in fact, is where the meaning of the programme actually originates. "Meaning" refers to the content and the significance of that content. On this question there appear to be two positions in media studies which tend in markedly opposed directions. Although it may sound somewhat theoretical at first, one can make a rough distinction between a perspective oriented around structuralism, and one oriented around post-structuralism. A structuralist-oriented perspective understands programmes as autonomous, closed structures with a prescribed meaning. While a structuralist-oriented approach simply attempts to establish the meaning of a programme by means of the programme itself, constructivist-oriented reception research locates the meaning of programmes first and foremost in the viewers themselves. Here the motto is: meanings first arise when a programme is viewed, in the viewer's

head. Meanings of TV shows are not generated until they are seen. They are the product of an interaction between programme and viewer. Now, since cultural, historical, individual, and social influences are different at different periods, a work of art (or programme) will always generate different meanings as well. In media studies and media education research this has led to a new understanding of the programme-recipient relationship, and to a recognition of the role of the active recipient. While in media studies research, for the most part, the content of the programme had constituted the focus of observation, viewers now attracted more attention. In particular, research was conducted, for example, into the way television is integrated into everyday life, what utilitarian ends play a role in choice and reception, and what needs are satisfied in this way.¹

2. Interests surrounding the "quality" of children's TV

Fundamental to the assessment of quality in children's programmes is the question discussed above: where, then, does the meaning actually originate? Is it inscribed in the programme, does it lie exclusively within the viewers' own powers, or are both in some way true? The post-structuralist view emphasises that the audience itself decides what quality is.² What people select from the manifold choices on offer is that which comes

closest to their requirements and, in consequence, which for these viewers possesses high quality in terms of needs satisfaction. The ratings become the “barometer of quality”. This argument is viewed critically by those who situate quality firmly in the product and wish to decide the question of quality by reference to normative standards. Those who adopt this position see the deregulation of the public service broadcasting system as a dumbing-down of contents and programme structures. Against these, those who regard the ratings as indices of quality affirm the free enterprise principle of the consumer market. The interests of radio and media politics therefore enter into the discussion on quality (and not just of children’s programmes). While public service broadcasters emphasise the “quality of the product”, private providers argue – of necessity – for “quality measured by ratings”. Those who still have the courage to make programmes for children, despite these unpredictable factors, deserve our admiration.

3. Criteria for quality in children’s programmes

Even if there may not be a secret recipe for a good children’s programme; however, in popular children’s programmes similar structures of form and content may always be observed. In my opinion, with the help of two research fields it is possible to identify relatively precisely what makes for good children’s programmes (restricting myself here to fictional contents).

3.1 Good children’s programmes tell stories which relate to themes of child development

Such themes take a different form in each case according to age and the child in question. They are either developmentally determined, that is to

say, influenced by the developmental tasks³ of a particular age group, or determined by everyday life and experience, that is to say, influenced by the child’s concrete social circumstances and previous individual experience. In media education research these developmental themes are also referred to as “behaviour-guiding themes”⁴ or “thematic bias”⁵. These themes have been identified in the course of reception research and illustrate which topics cause children to “deploy” children’s programmes as aids to managing their own development:



- *Being small and growing big:* In the case of children, identification is often established through the perspective of small characters. Horst Petri has used the term “Gulliver experience” to describe the perspective from the viewpoint of a child’s smallness.⁶ For children the world is divided into large and small, into dwarves and giants, into the powerful and the powerless. From this arises the wish to overcome one’s smallness and grow big quickly.
- *Justice and morality:* Children grow into a culture in which they must also engage with its prevailing ideas of values and norms. In their development they also repeatedly engage with questions of morality, rules, and justice. These questions are presented in many action cartoons in a boldly

simplistic manner by means of a “good and evil” schema, and then differentiated by means of everyday stories close to the children’s own experience.

- *Being alone or separation:* Being abandoned, or becoming abandoned, are themes with which children engage in the most varied forms. Sabine Jörg, too, describes abandonment anxiety as a child’s first major feeling, their first great fear. “Infantile abandonment anxieties are like a debt which many people spend their lives repaying.

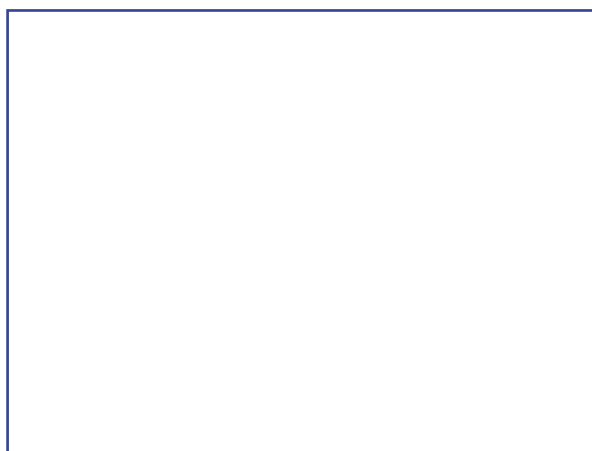
Excessive need for security, depression, and dependence result from the lack of anxiety-free opportunities for self-unfolding.”⁷ External events, such as parental strife or separation, are equally capable of leading to anxieties and feelings of powerlessness. The egocentric perspective of children also leads them to believe that they are the trigger or cause of the conflict. Media and fairy tale plots, such as *The lion king* or *Hansel and Gretel*, also

confront children with these questions. They are frequently accompanied by a feeling of impotence, of being consigned to a situation without protection, or of having no influence. How fortunate, then, that children’s media offer numerous encouraging solutions for this feeling!

- *Gender:* Questions about one’s own gender and the expectations, behaviour patterns, and outward appearance associated with it already constitute topics of discussion at preschool age and, according to Rolf Oerter, already start to form at the age of 5 to 6 years.⁸ According to Dieter Schnack and Rainer Neutzling, boys have more difficulty than girls with the process of seeking out and constructing their own gender role identities.⁹ Because boys have no real

or “genuine” models, they also use models provided by the media to engage with this issue. Without communicative reflection with the child, however, this engagement can lead to the manifestation of stereotyped gender roles.

- *Death and dying*: Children are not only confronted with death and dying on television: religion and fairy tales also treat this question, each in their specific way. However, for the most part it is less the consciousness of one’s own mortality, but much more the sense of bewilderment and the search for explanations, with which children are preoccupied. In their everyday lives, too, children are confronted with themes of this nature spontaneously and unexpectedly. Children see a dead bird that has fallen out of its nest, a hedgehog that has been run over, or a dead insect and ask for reasons or explanations.



- *Social anxieties*: Preschool-age children experience the tension of gradually separating themselves from their parents, building their own identities, and with it also increasingly abandoning their symbiotic closeness to them. Each step towards autonomy at the same time represents a distancing from the parents. For children, finding one’s own level means, on the one hand, having the courage or daring to do things and, on the other, not losing

one’s trust in love and feelings of security. This delicate balancing act is often undertaken in the company of media characters such as Pippi Longstocking, or Ronia the Robber’s Daughter, who support children in their strivings towards autonomy. “Defiance”, too, may be connected with fears of loss or withdrawal of love.

- *Relationships*: With increasing independence and expansion of their field of experience, preschool children also establish contacts and relationships with other children and adults. In this process children discover that they are not liked and recognised because of a family relationship, but because they are accepted for their personality and “the way they are”. In the everyday lives of children this can be seen in the search for friendships, common interests, or membership of a group (“forming a gang”). But the subject of intra-familial relationships is also handled with the help of the media, and for preschool children these are especially important when the customary family configuration changes. This might occur because of the birth of a sibling, which in most cases leads to a spatial and emotional “reorganisation” of the family.

Particularly important are those programmes which enable adults, looking back on their own life story, to recognise these developmental themes in their own children. This is especially successful when the symbolism used in the story can be equally well understood by the children as by the adults.

3.2 Good children’s programmes tell stories whose structure resembles that of fairy tales

The fairy tale researcher Max Lüthi has deduced the following structural characteristics of the traditional European fairy tale¹⁰, which can also be found in abundance in the fictional material of present-day children’s programmes:

- *One-dimensionality*: No distinction is made between the real world and the fictional world. In the world of fairy tales there are fantastic characters and miraculous creatures such as witches, speaking animals, fairies, and so on, who rescue or bewitch others thanks to their extraordinary powers. The supernatural is, as it were, accepted as reality and not distinguished from it.
- *Superficiality of detail*: The traditional fairy tale is not tied to any fixed time or place. The formula “once upon a time” does not specify when and where the story takes place, and the location “in a faraway land” is vague and indeterminate. And just as time and space have no meaning, so too the laws of nature and human logic are suspended (for example in the motive of the “hundred years’

sleep"). A specific reality, internal to the fairy tale, prevails. As such, the fairy tale offers children symbolic, open-ended narrative contents which they can further develop with the aid of their own imagination.

- *Use of formulae*: By these are meant introductory formulae ("Once upon a time..."), verses ("Abracadabra, three black cats..."), and concluding formulae ("And they lived happily ever after."). An example from television is: "Tomorrow is another day, I'll be back before you can say..." These formulae lead one into another reality, and their recipients can be certain that they will also be led out again. Ritualised narrative formulae of this kind serve as aids to reception. Ritual and routine afford the recipient safety and familiarity.
- *Polarisation*: In fairy tales persons, characters, appearance, and situations are presented as extreme opposites. There are extremes of perfect beauty and total ugliness, of rich and poor, of hard-working and lazy, of good and evil.
- *"Stern weighting"*: This concept is taken from seafaring, "stern" meaning "the rear". Lüthi uses this term to refer to the fairy tale's sympathy for those standing right at the back, those who are the very last: the small, the stupid, the poor, the lazy, the useless, and the weak. Many of these characters are so appealing for the children as identification figures because situations in which they feel small or weak are all too familiar for them.

4. Differentiation of qualitative criteria

Children's television today offers a highly differentiated product. There are numerous factual programmes, entertainment or edutainment magazines, daily soaps, action cartoons, news programmes, animal documentaries, and fictional feature pro-

grammes. In view of this generic diversification, the question of "quality" in children's television cannot be answered with a global generalisation, unless one has very general characteristics in mind, such as "appropriate language for its age group" and the like. But even such a criterion must be examined critically because when we speak of children's television, we are talking about a group of viewers whose ages range between approximately 2 and 12 years. During this time span the most diverse stages of children's cognitive, emotional, and social development occur, which are summarised in the form of developmental periods. Consideration of these would be just as necessary as consideration of the various genres. In other words, if one were to divide childhood into four phases, one would therefore have to ask which criteria, for example, an animal programme for children of primary school age should fulfil, in contrast to a similar programme for preschool children. In the process one might arrive at the conclusion that several genres are not yet, or no longer, relevant for particular age groups. One must therefore bring two things into relationship with one another: the children's development – their perceptual abilities and the topics which guide their behaviour – must be related to the appropriate genre of children's television. This gives rise to consequences for technical production, dramatic structure, and language, the consideration of which would result in a children's programme production appropriate for its target group. In order to test whether such productions also "go down well" in the children's reception and perception, there will also be a future need for the kind of research that is taking place at the IZI. ■

NOTES

- 1 The utility approach has also been described as the "uses and gratifications approach". Cf. Merten, Klaus (1991). *Allmacht oder Ohnmacht der Medien – Erklärungsmuster der Medienwirkungsforschung*. Funkkolleg Medien und Kommunikation. Studieneinheit 22. Tübingen, p. 47 and 62 ff.
- 2 Cf. Baacke, Dieter; Kevin, Wayne et al. (1997). *Kinder und ästhetische Erfahrung*. In: Gottberg, Joachim von; Mikos, Lothar; Wiedemann, Dieter (eds.). *Kinder an die Fernbedienung. Konzepte und Kontroversen zum Kinderprogramm und Kinderfernsehen*. Berlin: Vistas, pp. 3-31.
- 3 Oerter, Rolf (1998). *Kultur, Ökologie und Entwicklung*. In: Oerter, Rolf; Montada, Leo (eds.). *Entwicklungspsychologie*. Weinheim: Beltz, pp. 84-128.
- 4 Cf. Bachmair, Ben (1984). *Symbolische Verarbeitung von Fernseherlebnissen in assoziativen Freiräumen (Part 1)*. Kassel: Gesamthochschule, (Parts 1 and 2); Neuss, Norbert (1999). *Symbolische Verarbeitung von Fernseherlebnissen in Kinderzeichnungen*. München: KoPad.
- 5 Cf. Charlton, Michael; Neumann(-Braun), Klaus (1989). *Strukturanalytische Rezeptionsforschung. Theorie, Methode und Anwendungsbeispiele*. In: Baacke, Dieter; Kübler, Hans-Dieter (eds.). *Qualitative Medienforschung. Konzepte und Erprobungen*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, pp. 177-193 (here p. 179)
- 6 Petri, Horst (1989). *Erziehungsgewalt*. Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, p. 66.
- 7 Jörg, Sabine (1994). *Entwicklungspsychologische Voraussetzungen der Medienrezeption bei Kindern*. In: *Deutsches Jugendinstitut (ed.): Medienerziehung im Kindergarten – Teil 1. Pädagogische Grundlagen*. Opladen: Leske & Budrich, pp. 188-217 (here p. 190)
- 8 Oerter (1998), p. 124
- 9 Schnack, Dieter; Neutzling, Rainer (1992). *Kleine Helden in Not. Jungen auf der Suche nach Männlichkeit*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt. Cf. also Hoffmann, Bernd (1997). *Fehlt Jungen- und Männerforschung?* In: *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, vol. 43, no. 6, pp. 915-928.
- 10 Lüthi, Max (1974). *Das europäische Volksmärchen. Form und Wesen*. München: Francke; first published Bern: Scherz, 1947. Cf. also Lüthi, Max (1976). *Das Volksmärchen als Dichtung. Ästhetik und Anthropologie*. Köln: Diederichs.

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