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“I think it’s very good, because...”

Children’s perspectives on quality in film and television

For the most part it is adults who engage with the issue of quality in children’s television, but in this study it is different: here it is children who discuss the quality of programmes.

The concept of quality in children’s television

The concept of “quality” surfaces repeatedly in public discussion in relation to children’s television. Quality cannot, however, be objectified, founded as it is on various networks of social communication whose assessment of quality is mediated historically, socially, and culturally. Various arguments, interests, and claims occupy a central position here. Different aspects of the quality discussion are reflected in various disciplines¹ and contexts. Yet in all of this discussion about quality an omission is apparent: although children are the topic of discussion, the perspectives of children themselves are rarely included in it. This is the point of departure for the research project of the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI), “Children’s Perspectives on Quality”, which accords the perceptions of children a central position. This means not only involving young people, with their particular viewing habits, preferred subject matter, and everyday environments, but also taking them seriously. Sporadic

studies of this topic already exist.² The aim of the study is to deduce the qualitative criteria which children demand that their programmes should fulfil. The starting point for this is the children’s juries at film and television festivals. Their qualitative criteria are reflected in their discussions on what they consider to be quality, prize-worthy programmes.

Method

Data was collected mainly from the children’s jury of the German “Goldener Spatz”³ Festival of Children’s Film and Television in Gera and Erfurt. The data collected⁴ – recordings of the children’s jury sessions – were evaluated by means of qualitative content analysis.⁵ The children’s qualitative criteria extracted in this way were cross-checked and further developed at other festivals, e.g. the “Schlingel” the “PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONALE” and the “Lucas”.

The children’s qualitative criteria

The children rely on specific criteria which, for them, determine quality. Six main categories, which represent yardsticks of assessment for the children, may be abstracted from the jury sessions: *subject matter, dramatic structure, people, emotions, style, and recommendations.*

For the children, subject matter is the key criterion of evaluation

The criterion the children place first when describing a quality programme, and which they discuss in most detail, is *subject matter*. The story, in the case of fiction, or the main topic, in the case of non-fiction, must be appealing. Assessment of the subject matter is at first undertaken independently of whether the children enjoyed its treatment or the programme as a whole. In their assessment of the subject matter the children stress the fact that it must be interesting and offer them something new or special/different. “*The subject was interesting – how you get a jumbo jet over a river and through the town to a museum!*” (boy on an episode of the series *To be continued – the documentary*).

They also demand certain moral standards from the subject matter – for example, that something can be learned, or that there are no representations of violence. Serious subjects, with which the children also engage (for example illness, death), should also be subsumed under this category. However, this is not always without its problems. The children do not reject such contents on principle, but they like to discover positive elements in the treatment of the subject (for example something funny, something to relieve the tension, or a happy ending). “*I think it’s very, very good and very brave of them to tackle even subjects like this. Otherwise they’d always treat only funny, fluffy, pretty subjects, and I*

think it's very daring of them that they also take up topics like this" (boy on an episode of the factual information programme *Willi wants to know it all* dealing with the topic of death).

A further important point in their qualitative assessment of subject matter is that the children acknowledge verisimilitude. Verisimilitude relates on the one hand to the total content, but also to quite concrete sequences of material within a programme. Arguments for the assessment of this quality draw principally on the children's own store of experience. If they can relate the content to this, they accord it quality. In the children's eyes this means: problems are revealed openly, and the action is of such a nature that they can put themselves in the characters' position. *"I thought it was great, this film, because it also had the rights of children in it, because most adults don't consider at all that we children also have something to say"* (girl on the feature film *Family XXL*).

However, the children also accord qualitative value in terms of content to fantasy topics and stories, as long as they can still find points of contact between these and their own experiential context and everyday world. *"That fantasy stuff was good, though of course the star doesn't exist. But it's believable..."* (girl on the animation feature *Laura's star*).

Dramatic structure: children are disturbed by plot inconsistencies

In the category of assessment relating to dramatic structure, the children

use as their yardstick the criterion of comprehensibility. By this they understand a seamless style of narration which has a clear "thread" they can follow. *"There was always a thread there. That stuff about the king, that was clearly the end"* (boy on the animation feature *Pettersson and Fin-dus*). But expectations and presumptions that the children have about the future course of a programme which are not subsequently fulfilled, or missing explanations and leaps (mental leaps, excessive toing and froing) within the dramatic structure lead to inconsistencies which prevent the content from being easily understood. The same applies when plot strands are not narrated through to the end (with much remaining unexplained and left too open).

A second important criterion of assessment for the children is whether the title of the programme also indicates what it promises in terms of content. For the children, the name of the programme is very important. It affords them an initial orientation as to what might possibly be coming their way. The young recipients repeatedly look for a connection between what they are seeing and the title. If they are unable to bring the title into any relationship with the content, the children report that they have problems following the content and react with boredom.

*"I didn't think it was so good – somehow the name didn't fit at all, I thought. It was called *Felix and the wild animals*, Felix wins their trust, Felix something or other – OK, in the opening credits, he takes them in his arms. But then there was nothing more about Felix. I don't yet know whether that's the same with every series"* (boy on an episode of the factual information programme *Felix and the wild animals*).

As a third important criterion of evaluation, the children mention the characters, their roles, and their coherence. It is important for the children that characters and their roles should be introduced unambiguously. This

means a clear characterisation of the role and its significance in the course of the programme.

Children look for authentic people

The children assess the persons who act in the programmes. As already described under the heading of "dramatic structure", the people performing (actors, characters, presenters) help them find their bearings and navigate the content. The most important point for the children is that the people should be credible for them.

Actors

For children, good actors are even more important than the roles they embody. The essential criterion of assessment here is the actors' performance and their credibility. For the children, this means whether the role was well acted. What is important here is a performance which seems real, which indicates whether the actor has taken some risks for the role and whether the role to be interpreted was a difficult one. *"The actors were very, very good. The way the girl was always clambering about – well, I wouldn't have done it!"* (girl on the feature film *Summer of the wolves*).

A further demand which children make on actors in their assessments is that they must be well suited to their roles. This also applies to the cast as a whole, which must be harmoniously balanced. *"I thought the actors were good, too. They acted well, and were well suited to their parts!"* (girl on the feature film *The flying classroom*). Attractive-looking and well-known actors are just as much to the children's taste as child actors and animals.

Characters

An important factor for the children in their assessment of characters is the way the characters have been conceived (in relation both to individual characters and to their relationships with one another). This implies comprehensible, but at the same time

many-faceted character types with diverse characteristics. *"I thought it was interesting that here were two different types of people, who actually don't have anything to do with one another [...] but who have somehow met in the middle"* (girl on an episode of the series *Rollercoaster*).

Children make statements to the effect that they like interesting characters. Characters are "interesting" in the children's assessment particularly when they are distinguished by a special characteristic. This can be a particular quality of character or ability, but also a visual distinguishing feature. Children like characters who are funny/jolly and, above all, likeable (and not least those with little foibles). *"The character of Elea particularly appealed to me, because it was a completely new type. Here was a girl with a genuine handicap, and yet she did her own thing and made friends. I thought that was really great"* (girl on the feature film *Bibi Blocksberg and the secret of the blue owls*).

At the same time the children place value on whether they can easily imagine themselves in the character's role. *"I also thought that you could put yourself in this girl's shoes really easily: the parents who get on your nerves; a friend like that, a boy you've never seen before, who pays you a visit; and her friend, who'd lived things up a bit by prattling on so much that it got on her nerves"* (girl on an episode of the series *My life and I*). By contrast, stereotypical characters which are too easy to see through are rejected by the children in their assessments. *"Those were all stereotypes: in other words the baddie, the goodies, and at the end everything's all right again"* (boy on the feature film *Bibi Blocksberg*).

Where animated characters are concerned, two other factors are foregrounded: on the one hand, cute appearance, and on the other, appropriate voices.

Presenters

Regardless of whether a programme is entertainment or factual information, children assess the presenters according to how well they perform their task. Key factors are: that they must be credible, courageous, active, spontaneous, human, and many-sided, but also very well prepared. *"I thought it was also cool that, even if the presenter was afraid, he went and did it all the same"* (girl on an episode of the magazine programme *RELÄXX*).

According to the children's assessment criteria, presenters should not behave in an unnatural and over-excited manner and must always find the right register of speech. *"Sometimes she made a few jokes. But sometimes she seemed somehow also a bit flustered, very briefly..."* (boy on an episode of the factual information programme *Berit at random*).

Emotions: above all, it must be exciting and fun

A further essential category of assessment for the children is that they feel the programmes address their emotions. This applies not only to the *subject matter*, but also to the *dramatic structure* – for example, the way individual scenes are produced. Here, fun and excitement take pride of place. Contents which the children perceive as funny usually elicit little concrete response about why particular things make them laugh. *"I thought Bread's commentary was very funny! Incredibly ironic and sarcastic"* (girl on the entertainment programme *Rock the bread*).

By contrast, exciting material is described precisely by the children. In the sphere of emotions, excitement is a key assessment criterion for them. For children, a programme is exciting if its contents, although presented clearly and in-

telligibly, still leave sufficient scope for the unpredictable. This applies particularly to the beginning and ending. The children feel that contents are exciting, and judge them as such, if the narration is rich in variety and there are surprising twists to the plot. *"That plot twist was good – you really believed the mother had split up with her stupid boyfriend, and now she comes home and then she's dead"* (boy on the feature film *Who will ever kiss an iguana?*).

A continuous increase of tension is important for the children. *"I thought it was good that the programme took so long to find its bearings, because then it became more and more exciting. It really heightened the tension"* (girl on the feature film *The curse of the black swan*).

But it is far more important for them that a certain underlying tension is maintained throughout the entire programme. The cause of a loss of tension is identified by the children as tedium, which arises from too many repetitions, explanations, and superfluous features. *"I thought it went fairly quickly, but I still found it too long. All those rhyming words the whole time – that got boring sometimes. They could have shortened that"* (boy on an episode of *The programme with the mouse*).

For the children, excitement is predominantly connected with positive emotions. However, children also demand other kinds of emotional



content. For example, in the opinion of the children there should also be room for sorrowful, sentimental, and touching material. This means that a programme which knows how to create a mixture of different, even contradictory emotions has a powerful emotional effect on children. *"It's a good mixture, I think. It had love, it had suspense, it simply had everything a film should have..."* (girl on an episode of the series *The peppercorns*).

Style: cinematic aspects

The technical aspects of film production are utilised by the children as a criterion of quality, but do not assume a foreground position for them. Even in the case of animation films, the content comes first rather than its mode of realisation, even if the latter is more frequently discussed where this genre



is concerned. In the case of all creative elements, harmony with the content is important for the children.

Where "animation" is referred to as an assessment criterion, the most important point for the children is that the animation should be consistent with itself. This means that the drawings (etc.) should be in harmony with each other (for example as regards maintenance of proportions). *"I thought the characters were absolutely horrible, with their gigantic mouths and these enormous, great heads and those lips"* (boy on an episode of the interactive game show *Nelly Net(t)*). Colourful and cheerful designs are a

priority for the children.

Children enjoy the *musical* element above all because it introduces some relaxation into the subject matter. However, in their opinion it is always necessary to gauge the correct amount, in order to preserve harmony with the content. *"Perhaps they should have put a bit of music in there, because while they're making up their minds it gets really boring for the viewer"* (girl on an episode of the quiz game *Q-Boat – the quiz*).

Where "sets", "scenery", and "props" are concerned, appropriateness to content is again important for the children. Elaborate sets receive acknowledgement and praise from the children. By contrast, scenery which is too sparse and lacking in colour is disliked. In the case of the feature film genre, the children take particular notice of locations. *"The house looked bleak and dreary and so did what was outside it; all that wasn't so nice, I thought. Not much colour, everything was so dark"* (girl on the feature film *Science Fiction*).

Make-up features in the children's discussions only when it really attracts notice as something conspicuous. This naturally applies mainly to the field of fiction. In such a context make-up is good in the children's view if it is appropriate for the character and the story (suitability) and does not look fake or artificial. *"... didn't like it at all, his nose. You could easily see that it was artificial"* (boy on the feature film *The Sams*).

As with all the other creative elements, the costumes must also be appropriate for the content. *"I thought it was a bit odd – Sevenstone was always totally modern and well-dressed, and yet in this junk shop she doesn't really sell very much because everything's old rubbish; yet she's dressed to the nines! The two don't quite go together"* (girl on an episode of the series

Sevenstone). Particularly conspicuous costumes go down well, as long as they are fitting for the content.

The children make recommendations about the suitability of a programme

Children evaluate programmes according to their suitability for other viewers. For this, their own age group provides the benchmark, although the children try to free themselves from personal preferences and view what they have seen from the perspectives of others (for example siblings, friends, parents). The children engage eagerly with the question of which age groups the items viewed might be appropriate for. Suitability and harmlessness for their own age group and younger children are criteria of quality for them. *"For younger children, I don't know how much they can take, but too scary? I have a sort of boyfriend, and he found the – he's in the 4th grade now – well, he found it too creepy"* (girl on the animation feature *The little polar bear*).

This also means that, even when they themselves do not feel a particular item addresses their age group, there is no contradiction between this and assessing the item as successful, since it might be very good for smaller children. *"I would really only recommend the film for very small children, because it wasn't really my cup of tea. I sat there asking myself, 'When is it going to end?' And I really thought to myself, 'Now, that's something for smaller children'"* (girl on an episode of the picture book stories from *Our little sandman*).

Also positively rated are items which have something to offer children of all age groups or the whole family. *"Somehow I think this is a cartoon film which even adults will somehow find cute, somehow there's also something there for grown-ups"* (girl on an episode of the animation series *The little king*).

Items which, in the children's opinion, are only suitable for older groups,

An example is a short animation film from *The programme with the mouse*, about which they could only say: "I've never seen anything like that!" – and award the henpecked husband a "Goldener Spatz" prize. ■

for example because they are too exciting, violent, or scary, are rejected. "I think, because this is a children's film festival [he emphasises 'children'] and not an adult one – and for 9-year-olds, there's almost nothing but blood in it. The girl with the jacket is dead and then..." (boy on the short feature film *The red jacket*).

Conclusion

In their evaluations of the quality of programmes, children are remarkably competent critics. They argue with close reference to the medium and place their own perceptions/concerns in the foreground. When assessing the quality of programmes, children begin by addressing the subject matter: they demand a comprehensible dramatic structure and authentic characters. They want emotions which, above all, will give them goose pimples or make them laugh. Style is considered as a category of evaluation by the children, in order to assess such aspects of cinematic technique as animation, music, sets, costumes, and make-up. However, children also judge programmes according to their suitability for other viewers and make recommendations. For the children, in all their assessments, content takes precedence over form. Nevertheless, the thematic treatments which children demand must not only be interesting, comprehensible for their age group, harmless, exciting, emotive, and credible, but must also not tolerate any technical weaknesses. And there are also programmes by which the girls and boys are so captivated that they find it difficult to express their enthusiasm in words.

NOTES

1 With regard to this, 3 discourses have crystallised in current discussion on this subject area which seem to be of relevance:

(1) Professionalism of production, from planning to end product. Quality, as determined by professionalism, comprises the optimum realisation of the programme (calculation/execution; cf. Geissendörfer/Leschinsky, 2002) and its aesthetic implementation, in which aspects of cinematic technique (sets, music, etc.) form the central elements (cf. Faulstich, 2003).

(2) Developmental psychology approaches. Here, quality is linked to the fulfilment and gratification of developmental psychological needs (cf. Piaget, 1973; Singer/Singer, 2001; Kohlberg, 1995), that is to say, to children's programmes appropriate for their age group, in which nothing is permitted on the content level or formal level which either overtaxes or patronises them (cf. Charlton et al., 2003).

(3) Children's life environments as mirror for the assessment of quality. Quality is closely connected with children's developmental tasks, their gender, and their individual and specific living conditions (cf. Paus-Haase, 1997). Quality programmes, therefore, are formats which inform the children about contents situated close to their own life environment (cf. Bachmair, 1998) and which, according to the findings of recent reception research, promote media literacy (cf. Groeben/Hurrelmann, 2002).

(4) Statutory youth media protection. The regulations on youth media protection are designed to protect against possibly damaging or dangerous media contents. They are reflected particularly in the prescriptions on programmes which are inappropriate or damage development, where punitive measures range from restrictions on broadcasting times to prohibition (cf. Hartstein/Ring/Kreile/Dörr, 2003).

2 One of the few exceptions is provided by a Dutch study in which 4 groups were examined who assessed programmes from 4 different genres. Alongside the groups of programme makers, critics, and parents, Peter Nikken expanded his field of enquiry to include a group of children. Nikken adduced criteria of quality such as: comprehensibility, aesthetic quality, commitment, entertainment, harmlessness, credibility, and presence of role models (cf. Nikken, 1999).

3 The festival, which is aimed at both the general public and professionals, is the largest of its kind in Germany and affords an overview of German or co-produced children's films and television programmes with the aim of rewarding and supporting productions of high quality. A special feature of the festival is the large children's jury drawn from across the whole country, which every two years awards prizes for its favourites in the fields of children's film and children's television.

4 The data collected comprise all sessions of the children's jury, consisting of 32 children between the ages of 9 and 13 from 16 German federal states, of which audio recordings were made in order to be able to capture the children's spontaneous statements. The study group used was homogeneous as to age and heterogeneous as to gender and, although obviously artificially assembled, was not assembled specifically for this research. The same applies to the children's juries quoted as supplementary data. Here too the children ranged between 9 and 13 years of age.

5 In accordance with the qualitative content analysis method, all the jury sessions were analysed. A system of categorisation arises directly from the material. By means of the obvious coding, criteria which are relevant for children must then be derived. Parts of the materials analysed are subjected to quantification.

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