

# Genji

The Dutch KRO Youth production *Genji* is a fiction programme targeted towards 6- to 9-year-old children. The film itself, “a martial arts story, standing up against bullying and embracing marginalized children ...” (producer Jan-Willem Bult), points towards ways of active engagement in order to overcome situations of mistreatment.

The main character of the story, Bo, an 8-year-old girl of Asian origin, is bullied by older and awkwardly clumsy-looking Vincent. Bo befriends Lot, a blind girl a couple of years older than her, who is equally picked upon by Vincent. Bo is driven by the idea to find a way of keeping Vincent from bullying her friend. By reading several books featuring the fantastical heroine Genji, she is inspired to take up Aikido lessons of self-defence, and in a final encounter is able to defeat Vincent.

One key aspect of *Genji* deals with the marginality of its 3 main characters: Bo is marginal due to her ethnic background and Lot because she is physically challenged. The audience also gets a glimpse of how Vincent’s apparently overwhelming invulnerability and superiority start to crumble when short scenes reveal that he is afraid of the dark and that he who mistreats and bullies is a victim of violence himself. The characters are embedded in the surreal and dream-like sequences typical of the martial-arts genre. Rather than providing a ready-made solution to the problem of bullying, the story remains in the symbolic inter-space of the fairytale, ending in a dream-like sequence that echoes notions of David and Goliath.

*Genji* was one of the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2008 finalists in the 7–11 fiction category and won the special prize “in the name of the UNESCO”.

## International experts’ opinions

*Genji* was discussed controversially by several panels at the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2008. Experts generally considered the film to be aesthetically highly appealing, although some criticised the atmosphere of the film for being too gloomy and dark.

“This piece was in dark tones all the way. When something good was happening they weren’t cheering, they weren’t happy.” (female expert, Europe)  
The final sequence of the film, in which Bo challenges the bully Vincent, was subject of many discussions. Several experts felt uncomfortable with the message that violence was used as a means to repay violence. Also, a frequently mentioned criticism was that the character of the bully did not go through any kind of personal development but remained rather one-dimensional. In contrast, a number of experts argued that the topic of bullying is central to the lives of many children, highlighted the importance of the notions of personal engagement and empowerment, and pointed out that the fighting scene should not be taken literally but understood on a symbolic level and as a genre-typical aspect of the martial arts movie.

“If somebody fights all the time you need to learn how to fight also. I don’t think that’s a solution. It’s just the problem of the ending. Because if you do the same thing somebody else is doing, then what’s wrong with it in the first place? But if you teach them peace in a different way, it probably would have been better.” (female expert, Africa)

“Why is this boy a bully? After we had watched the programme we had some really sad feeling, because he didn’t change.” (female expert, Asia)

“It’s about bullying, and everything I read about it is: you can’t run away, you have to be strong. And it’s symbolic, because it’s the genre. Plus, they decided to do Aikido which is very defensive. It stands for the idea of being strong and to stand up to the problem.” (male expert, Europe)



Ill. 1: Main character Bo



Ill. 2: Vincent, an older boy from the neighbourhood



Ill. 3: Vincent bullies Bo once again

### Children's opinions



Ill. 4: Bo is inspired by fantasy-figure Genji



Ill. 5: Bo takes up Aikido lessons to protect her friend Lot



Ill. 6: In a genre-typical dream-sequence Bo takes on Genji's super-powers



Ill. 7: Bo finally overcomes her fear and stands up to Vincent



Ill. 8: Bo challenges Vincent and prevails

Boys and girls aged 9 to 13 from various marginal regions of Colombia formed the Youth Jury for the screenings of Television de Calidad Conference 2008. Among their vote on selected programmes of the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2008, they awarded the programme *Genji* first place. The film had sparked off a lot of controversy and discussion. Jury members were then given the opportunity to discuss *Genji* with its producer Jan-Willem Bult.

The overall consensus was that “this is the type of film that children should be watching” (Sofia). The children were interested in the different characters and their underlying motivations; in particular, they were able to relate to the main character Bo and her situation:

“I am familiar with seeing people being mistreated. Where I am from, the big kids bully the little ones. However, I would have liked to see Bo not only engage Vincent physically, but also speak with him and engage him on an intellectual level.” (Maria Camila)

#### *How to deal with a bully ...*

The jury also felt strongly about the character of the bully Vincent and agreed that violence cannot be a way of dealing with a bully:

“Vincent ... values violence, cruelty and doing harm to others. In my opinion it should not be this way. I did not like the way Vincent sought out and picked on Bo.” (Luisa)

“Bo did not take advantage of the situation and used violence to repay violence” (Keila)

This point was taken up and confirmed by Bult:

“There is no solution if you use violence to repay violence. Another subtle thing we did in the movie was to ensure that Bo took up classes of self-defence, Aikido, and not a fighting sport. The message here is that a person has the right to defend himself. A person does not have to put up with abuse.”

#### *Empowerment*

A number of jury members would have liked the scene to go beyond Bo's mere use of physical force to confront Vincent and wished for a happier ending in which Vincent gained insight into why his behaviour was wrong:

“I would have liked to see Vincent's character face some kind of difficulty and have Bo approach him and try and befriend him.” (Cristian)

The suitability of the film for younger children was also questioned:

“We do not feel that this film would be appropriate for a child of 6 years of age since many children copy what they see. When watching *Genji*, I was reminded of the movie *The Three Ninjas*.” (Sebastian)

In response, Jan-Willem Bult pointed towards the main message of the film and its aim to empower marginalized children:

“We want to empower children who have been mistreated and give them hope and not to encourage them to start fighting.”

The central notion of empowerment was clearly valued by the children when talking about the message *Genji* was supposed to convey. Several children pointed towards how they appreciated the way Bo actively took charge of the situation and stood up for herself as well as for her blind friend Lot:

“There are children who are bullied because they cannot defend themselves, or their parents do not believe them. In this case Bo doesn't talk to her parents: she tries to defend herself and defend her friend Lot.” (Luisa)