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When adults have other things on their minds

How 3- to 11-year-olds understand *The Little Boy and the Beast*

In an IZI study, 50 German 3- to 11-year-olds were questioned about the award-winning quality programme *The Little Boy and the Beast*. The aim was to find out how they experience the animation, how they understand the story, and whether they see the film as suitable for children.

Highly praised by adult juries, the animated programme *The Little Boy and the Beast* (cf. experts' opinions in this issue) has already received numerous awards at national and international film festivals, including the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2010 in the category "Up to 6 Fiction", the German Robert Geisendörfer Prize 2010, the special prize for the best script at the German children's media festival Goldener Spatz in 2010, the Cristal award for the best TV production in Annecy and at "Cartoons on the Bay 2010".¹ The jury of the Robert Geisendörfer Prize explains its choice as follows, for example: "In just under 7 minutes the animated film tells, from a child's point of view, how parents are transformed by a breakup. The gentle irony, which can also be understood by children, ensures that the topic, sad though it may be, is packaged in a highly entertaining manner."² But do children really see it this way?

We investigated the following ques-

tions, among others, in a reception study³: how do children perceive and understand *The Little Boy and the Beast*? What stories do they reconstruct? Do they think the programme is suitable for children?

The study

In small groups, 50 3- to 11-year-olds watched *The Little Boy and the Beast* (ZDF, Germany) at kindergarten or after-school club in Germany. The viewing sessions were videotaped to gain an impression of how the children experience the programme. Immediately afterwards, the children drew their favourite scene from the film. They were then questioned in individual interviews.⁴ On the basis of the picture drawn, each interview focused on the individual child, to find out how he or she perceived and understood the film, the relationship between the characters, or individual scenes. Picture cards with the characters and key scenes of the film were used as backup, particularly with the younger children.

The drawings and the stories the children told to accompany the pictures were not intended to be instruments to "test" knowledge and understanding of the film's content, but were meant to give insight into how children translate the film for themselves. "In this translation, the important things are selected, the unimportant things forgotten, the unwanted transformed

into the wanted, and thus (re-)constructed as a remembered image in which what has been understood is simultaneously evaluated and reshaped" (Neuß, 1999, p. 81, translated from German source). In our analysis we reconstructed and summarized each child's individual story separately. For certain questions, such as the understanding of the character constellations, it made sense to quantify the results.

Character constellations and the "beastification"

When retelling the story, or when directly asked, it became evident that 43 of the 50 children in our study had understood the basic mother-son constellation of the protagonists, as established in the story. 35 of the 3- to 11-year-olds were able to reconstruct the father-son constellation. Some children are not able to reconstruct this. They think, for example, that the beast which drives up in the car is the boy's football coach, picking him up for practice, or a taxi driver, or one of the boy's friends. 2 of the respondents described the mother's new boyfriend as the boy's father.

More than 80 % of the children questioned understood that the mother and the beast were the same person. 8-year-old Lena, for example, says: "The mother was a troll, the child was just the child, and the father was a beast too."

Not all children can understand the possible reasons for the “beastification”. Almost a third of the 3- to 11-year-old respondents cannot imagine how or for what reason the mother and/or father have turned into beasts, e.g. 7-year-old Daria: “I don’t know. He didn’t explain why she’s like that.”

Not all children understand the symbolism of the “beastification”

Some children did not understand the “beastification” at all. The possible reason most often cited by children is fighting or trouble between the parents. In total, 14 children can imagine this explanation. Lena, 8 years, says, for example: “Maybe they had such a big argument that they suddenly turned into beasts, or something like that.” 8-year-old Sascha suggests: “Maybe she got angry with the dad and then she got so angry that she turned into a monster, and the dad did too.” In a few cases, separation or divorce are also directly mentioned here. 8-year-old Adim, in the interview, considers a breakup as a possible reason why the parents in the film are so angry at one another: “Maybe they’re divorced.” He adds: “My parents are divorced too.” 5-year-old Johann who has no experience of divorce says: “I think they didn’t like each other anymore.”

Some children also see something fantastic or magical as a possible reason for the “beastification”. According to Emilia, 7 years old, it could be “that she maybe ate something, or she has some kind of necklace and she’s a monster mum when she wears it.” As with the “beastification”, many children cannot understand or reconstruct how it was possible for the protagonist’s mother to turn back into a mother, since “that wasn’t said” (Sven, 9 years). Children who are able to conceive possible reasons for the “de-beastification” imagine various things: “Then she changed, because

the [monster] became nicer. That happened day by day” (Vincent, 6 years); “because she calmed down again” (Alina, 9 years); or “because she’s happy again” (Juliane, 6 years).

Some children see the protagonist as instrumental in the “de-beastification”, “because the boy always comforted her and that sort of thing” (Lara, 8 years). 8-year-old Sascha suggests: “Somehow she was healed, maybe because the boy spent so much time [with her].” Johann who is 5 years cannot decide whether the mother has been re-transformed “because the boy was nice to her” or “because she didn’t fight any more”. The children’s statements contain uncertainties such as this, or a lack of understanding of the issues or background involved. It would be wrong, however, to claim on this basis, using purely quantitative measures, that children have not understood the story.

With his comment “You can’t say that for certain”, Michael, 8 years, gives a fitting description of the perspective from which many of the children in our study see the film. In the scene where the 2 beasts growl at each other, a scene which in a sense symbolizes divorce, adults go back through the film and reconstruct everything in this light. They then take pleasure in the unusual and humorous way the story is presented.

Children proceed differently. For one thing, they do not think forwards and backwards. For another thing, the topic of “divorce” has not been directly mentioned, so they are able to fill the semantic links and “gaps” which have been left open (cf. Neuß, 2003) with their own (everyday) experiences and fantasies. The scene in which the fa-



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Ill. 1-3: For Sascha (8 years) the boy’s capacity of acting and the almost apathetic absence of the “beastified” mom (here while shopping), are central aspects of the programme

ther beast picks the boy up is thus read by some children as “[being] picked up for school” or “being driven to football practice”.

8-year-old Adim interprets it differently again. His parents live apart and he knows the situation:

Adim: “[...] The mum doesn’t want him to pick him up.”

Interviewer: “And why is he picking him up?”

Adim: “Because he’s staying with him for a day. [...] That’s one way you can do it.”

And 5-year-old Lotta also has a highly subjective explanation for the “de-beastification”, probably based on her previous experience of her mother’s depression: “You have to do every-



Screenshot from *The Little Boy and the Beast*
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Ill. 4 and 5: For Alina (9 years) the mother's retransformation and the regained presence in everyday life is important

thing by yourself until she turns into a mum again."

What story do children construct for themselves?

Understanding the film as intended

On the one hand there are children who reconstruct the film's story in the sense intended. For 8-year-old Sascha (with no experience of divorce), for example, the film is about parents who are divorced, and a mother who was so angry at the father that they both turned into beasts. His favourite scene was the one "where the boy loads up about 10 lollipops [on the supermarket conveyor belt] and the mum just looks on without doing anything". A central element for Sascha and his reconstruction of the story is the boy's capacity to act; he shows maturity, and manages to derive some pleasure from a negative situation (cf. ill. 1-3). Sascha also symbolizes this in his drawing. Behind the boy, who is physically very small, stands a large beast, indifferently allowing him to do things which are normally not allowed.

"It was as if she wasn't there at all"

9-year-old Alina (with experience of divorce) can reconstruct the story with all the details and connections. The "lollipop scene" is very significant for her too (cf. ill. 4, 5),

however she means the one in which "he's not allowed to have any lollipops because the mum is normal again". It is important for her that the mother is a "proper" mother again, who sets boundaries and is not "as if she wasn't there at all". She also emphasizes this at the end of her retelling: "And that when the dad came the mother hugged the child when he left. The mother didn't do that before." 5-year-old Lena, whose parents had separated shortly before the study, understands that the mum and dad are beasts, but cannot imagine any reason for this. The most important thing for her is that the mother changes back again. Her drawing of the dog symbolizes the fact that the boy can play with a pet again when his mum is no longer a beast. There are also cases,

things". It also showed that adults are sometimes different and "have other things to think about, not the same things as when they're normal". Key scenes which he drew in his picture are, for him, "when the boy took all the lollies and when the beast nearly walked into the stack of cans". These impressions humorously reflect his experience that adults sometimes "have other things on their minds".

Adults "have other things on their minds"

Janina (9 years, no experience of divorce) states that the boy only perceives the mother as a beast "because she shouts" and sometimes does things he does not like. In her picture she drew the shopping scene, in which "the boy is embarrassed by his mother beast" (cf. ill. 6, 7). This reflects what she herself has experienced in everyday life, "when you just have little moments where you don't like Mum". In 6-year-old Vincent's story, mother and father have



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Ill. 6 and 7: Representation of one's own experiences: Janina (9 years) draws moments when she does not like her parents

become beasts “because there are always such bad things, anger and fighting”. He is familiar with situations like this from home, when parents sometimes “act like monsters. [...] For me it’s my father [...] when he runs out of patience. Then he sometimes says such [awful] things that we sometimes both have to cry.” He then adds: “Then my mum does something to calm him down again, but sometimes they argue too.” The scene he liked best was the one “where they walk together right at the end”. He included this scene in his picture as a symbol that there is hope for him and Mum despite his aggressive father (cf. ill. 8, 9).

Every child constructs his or her own story

The individual cases show that every child constructs his or her own story, picking up central elements of the film on the basis of his or her own experiences. For an adult, many of the children’s stories seem at first glance to be wrong in places or only based on obvious aspects. If we look at them in detail, we find reconstructions that show the openness with which children receive the story, an openness which the film allows. It also becomes clear that they find good ways to describe the fact that adults can sometimes be like beasts too, “when they

had other things to think about” (Lars, 7 years).

Children’s evaluations of the film

When asked how they liked the film, the children in our study mainly gave positive evaluations of the film. This is also confirmed by the recordings of the viewing sessions. Here we see, almost without exception, children who are following the film very attentively, seeming virtually spellbound. Even a group (with older boys) which initially makes jokes about the film and is somewhat more restless ends up watching it with great interest and engaging with the story.

“All children should see the film”

What is important for the children – this is evident both during and after viewing, and in the drawings and comments – is humorous scenes which relieve tension, and the film’s happy ending. Some children find the film “really funny in some places” (Sascha, 8 years). And older children in particular are amused by e.g. the way “this monster always chased everything away and was so funny” (Valentin, 11 years). In a few cases they laugh while watching: when the beast

“nearly knocked over that stack of cans”, when “the boy could buy himself lots of lollies” (Wesley, 9 years), or when “[the mother] pushed him out of the bed” (Amanda, 7 years).

Younger children tend to use the humorous scenes as a release from tension. They smile, relax their tensed bodies, or change the position they are sitting in. Absolutely crucial for their positive evaluation of the film is the happy ending. 6-year-old Jacqueline, for example, thinks it is “so nice that the mum is a mum again, and that the mum can play again”.

Scenes giving emotional relief are important for children

There are only a few children who are not quite sure whether the short film really is suitable for “all children”. 4-year-old Sina considers, when evaluating the film: “But maybe some children are scared of the film, [...] of the beast, of the mother, because she is such a beast. And of the father.” In this comment, however, Sina is referring to herself. The 4-year-old has – as the kindergarten teacher confirms – little experience of television and is very tense in some places, e.g. when the beast appears, when it “shouts at” the checkout operator, or when the beasts growl at each other. The



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Ill. 8 and 9: Representation of hope: It is very important for Vincent (6 years) that the harmony between mother and son is restored

story's happy ending is particularly important for her, "when the mum has really become the mum again". She not only stresses this several times in the interview, but admits at the end, secure in the knowledge that everything turns out well: "I was also a bit scared of the beast mum, I mean the mum when she was still a beast."

Along with funny and exciting moments, observation of the viewing sessions also shows sequences of great emotional involvement. With some children, one can detect from their faces and their whole body language that they are feeling empathy, e.g. when the mother sits sadly over the photo album in the evening, is comforted by her son, and eventually even climbs into his bed. One girl whose mother has suffered from depression, according to the kindergarten teachers, can no longer hold back the tears in this scene, but then smiles again when the boy falls out of bed.

Children can interpret emotional states correctly

Many children empathize, and can generally understand the protagonists' feelings well. When asked in the interview – e.g. about the specific scene in which the beast sits in front of the torn-up photos, sad and crying, and is stroked and comforted by her son –, many children correctly identify the beast's emotional state. Some offer this interpretation, for example: "[The beast] is in a bad mood because it's been remembering the good times when it wasn't a monster yet." (Sven, 10 years) Or: "The mother cried then because she must be sorry about what happened to her and the father." (Luisa, 8 years)

Overall, nearly all of the 3- to 11-year-old respondents think that other children should also watch the film, e.g. "because they should also know how parents can act, i.e. how they can behave. Parents can sometimes behave very well, and some-

times not so well." (Lara, 8 years) And 9-year-old Wesley would also recommend the film because of its (in his view) very specific and valuable message: "I think you can learn from it that your parents are good the way they are and that you don't necessarily need a beast."

Conclusion

Children see and understand the film differently to adults, but they can also get a lot out of it. They perceive certain symbols and emotions, but they also make different associations based on their developmental state and their experiences.

The part in which the story becomes completely clear for adults, is the scene where the male beast's car drives up and the 2 beasts growl at each other. If this symbol for divorce cannot be "decoded" by the viewer (yet), he/she will interpret the story differently. This does not mean the story is badly made or unsuitable for children, instead the story becomes more open and deeper.

Areas of openness are a strength of the film

It becomes clear that presenting a serious topic with a tendency to reduction, i.e. the tendency not to show and explain everything in detail, can also be attractive for children – provided that there are humorous moments to relieve the tension, and a happy ending. Areas of openness are a strength of the film, and one which becomes evident from the children's perspective. Thus there are children who reconstruct their own story entirely. For 4-year-old Renda, for example, the film is about a happy family with a grandpa (the male beast), a grandma (the female beast), a mother (the "de-beastified" woman), a father (the checkout operator) and a child.

At no point during the programme the topic of "divorce" is made explicit, but symbols for it are presented that

can also mean other things. Adults are sometimes cuddly, sometimes they are beasts. There are also children, however, who think of the film very positively as a kind of "intellectual enrichment", "because it just kind of made sense to me" (Michael, 8 years). ■

NOTES

¹ ZDF press release from 26 October 2010; retrieved from http://www.pressrelations.de/new/standard/result_main.cfm?pfach=1&n_firmanr_=100209&sektor=pm&detail=1&r=429777&sid=&aktion=jour_pm&quelle=0 [25.2.13]

² retrieved from http://www.ekd.de/presse/pm192_2010_geisendoerfer-preis.html [25.2.13] (translated from German source)

³ In line with the core idea of "Watching television through children's eyes" and working from a concept of action-oriented reception research, which understands children's dealings with media offerings as the expression of their symbolic processing of real-life experience and their strivings to construct meaning and to develop their own viewpoint (cf. Bachmair, 1984; Götz, 2005).

⁴ All interviews were recorded and transcribed word for word for the analysis. The kindergarten teachers were also asked for contextual information on each child. In total, 8 of the children interviewed had experience of divorce or conflict (e.g. a mother suffering from depression, or a father who had spent a long period in prison).

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