

# Children's identity issues in a Viking animation

## VICKY THE VIKING FROM THE CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE

Andrea Holler

**Vicky the Viking represents children: they are little people surrounded by adults. Proving themselves like Vicky by being smart encourages children. The world of the Vikings allows them to indulge in fantasies of being wild and unruly.**

Vicky the Viking (see Ill. 1) has been a favourite character among children for years. Children derive something from their favourite characters that they can take beyond the reception situation into their everyday lives. They reflect on these characters, integrate them into their daydreams or games, and thereby also into their identity construction and how they deal with their

experiences. In this sense, media are a symbolic material used by children to cope with daily life and negotiate their identity. Qualitative individual case studies on girls' and boys' favourite characters show that children use

Vicky the Viking to deal with issues that guide their actions, e.g. to develop their own self-image, or they see themselves reflected in their favourite character, which reinforces their own self-image (Götz & Lemish, 2012).

A study with primary school children investigated what it is about the *Vicky and the Viking* stories that makes them so fundamentally significant, and a classic, for children.

### BOOKS, FILMS, AND TV SERIES

*Vicke Viking* (original 1963) is the first volume of a 7-part children's book series which won its author, Runer Jonsson, the German Children's Literature Award in 1965. The stories are about Vicke, a diminutive Viking boy from the Viking village of Flake. Together with his father, Halvar, and the crew of his ship, Vicke sets off on a series of adventures. Throughout his adventures, he proves again and again that brain is more important than muscles. He repeatedly helps the Vikings out of difficult situations with his clever and unconventional ideas.

As a cartoon series, *Vicky the Viking* became a classic of children's culture. Based on the books, *Vicky the Viking* was produced in 78 episodes in 1974 as the first anime series on German television. The director of the series, which was produced in Japan

and co-produced by ZDF, ORF, and the animation studio Zuiyo Enterprise Company, was – as for *Maya the Bee* and *Pinocchio* – Hiroshi Saito. In 2011, 7 episodes were among the 10 most successful TV programmes for 3- to 13-year-olds in Germany (market share 45.2-47.6 %; Feierabend & Klingler, 2012).

The massive success of this first serial adaptation for television also led, decades later, to subsequent adaptations as a film. With 4,891,161 viewers, the live-action film *Wickie und die starken Männer* (*Vicky the Viking*) was the most popular German film in 2009<sup>1</sup>. In 2011 the film was, as a free-TV broadcast, the most successful individual programme for children. Over one million 3- to 13-year-olds watched the live-action film *Vicky the Viking*; the market share was 56.9 % (Feierabend & Klingler, 2012). On the back of this success, the sequel *Wickie auf großer Fahrt* (*Vicky the Viking and the Treasure of the Gods*) was released as a live-action film in German cinemas on 29 September 2011; it became one of the most successful 3D productions of 2011.<sup>2</sup>

In 2014, on the 40th birthday of the cartoon series, the German public broadcaster ZDF brought *Vicky the Viking* back to the screen, transforming it – as had already been done for the new version of *Maya the Bee* (see also Götz in this issue) – into a 3D animated cartoon series called *Vic the Viking* (first broadcast on 18 April 2014). The new CGI version is an international co-production by Studio 100 Anima-

tion, ASE Studios, ZDF, and the French broadcaster TF1.<sup>3</sup> Up to now, it sold to 96 territories.

### VICKY THE VIKING FROM THE CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE

In the qualitative IZI study *Classics of Children's Television from the Children's Perspective* we asked, in total, 429 children in Germany about traditional classic TV characters. The primary school children were asked to choose from among the classics *Maya the Bee*, *Vicky the Viking*, *Pumuckl*, and *Pippi Longstocking* (see Haager in this issue) a character who was particularly significant for them and who they had liked watching as preschoolers or in year 1 or year 2 of primary school. In the process of this, the children were seen as actors in the construction of their own biographical identities. Retrospective drawings and descriptions, stimulated by open questions, show what is particularly appealing and subjectively significant from the children's perspective. In total, 99 children (81 of which were boys) aged 8-11 from Germany (Bavaria and North Rhine Westphalia) decided on *Vicky the Viking*.

The answers and pictures give no indication that the children are referring to the stories in the original book. Some children are clearly referring to the 2009 live-action film; others describe scenes that only appear in the animated 3D adaptation *Vic the Viking*, or they mention episodes of the 1974 anime series. Most of them refer to typical elements in the *Vicky the Viking* stories that can be found in all adaptations.

#### Brains instead of muscles

When children describe what it is that is special about Vicky, they mainly recall "his great ideas" (Laila, 9 years old). They admire Vicky's particular skills, astuteness and inventive creativity, the

fact "that he thinks up things and they are really great, and that he comes up with ideas at all" (Coline, 8 years old). Many of them would also therefore like to be like him, for "then I can think like Vicky" (Alexander, 9 years old). Vicky always finds ways out of the most dangerous and hopeless situations with his clever ideas, thereby helping others out of trouble. Many children refer to his willingness to help and think it is great that he is always there for others: "Vicky always helped people if they needed help" (Lucie, 10 years old). In addition to the principle of helping with astute ideas and doing good, children also emphasise another of Vicky's

#### Vicky as a representative of childhood

What children also like about Vicky is that he is the only child who is allowed to travel with the Vikings, the adults. "I thought it was great that Vicky was allowed on his father's ship" (Brahim, 9 years old). From the children's perspective, a key aspect is that Vicky is a "little one" who is competently involved in the world of adults, repeatedly protecting them from danger and competing with people he is actually no match for (yet).

In 8-year-old Harid's favourite story, for instance, the little Viking boy even



Ill. 2: What Abraham (9) and Riad (10) find particularly appealing: Vicky solves problems differently to his father: by using his brain.

behavioural traits that is worthy of imitation: "That he thinks about things and doesn't just use violence straight away, like his dad" (Jan, 9 years old). From the children's perspective, Vicky is therefore a "role model" (Yakup, 10 years old), and, above all, younger children can, in their opinion, "pick up" a lot from it (Coline, 9 years old), such as "how you deal with other children and use your wits instead of your fists" (Svenja, 10 years old). Children use *Vicky the Viking* as a guide and a source of ideas on how to behave responsibly. With ethical justification, Vicky uses his own resources, employing what is inherent in both him and other children: brains instead of muscle power.

outwits the terrible Sven. Furthermore, for Marco (9 years old), the best moment was "when Vicky proved that he too could be a strong Viking". In their descriptions of their favourite stories, Vicky is the one who takes action, and the one who, in the end, is even superior to the older Vikings. Vicky therefore represents not only the position of children – small, but being clever in the world of the grown-ups – but also provides symbolic material for an essential need in children: to be valued and recognised. This encourages children; 10-year-old Lukas, for example, was very impressed by the fact that Vicky "always believed he would one day become a Viking".

## Being wild in a world full of adventures

For many children, the Viking setting holds great fascination. They think it is great that Vicky is a Viking, and they are impressed by the Viking ship, which is a key element echoed in many of the pictures drawn by the children. Riad (10 years old) once imagined himself being a Viking boy and taking part in Viking life: "I had a helmet on, and I fought on a ship". Children are inspired by historical subjects such as Vikings or knights as part of making sense of the world. These are worlds which hold a certain fascination because "you" can be wild there. "Vikings are cool" (Georg, 8 years old), and Viking stories also offer children – above all, boys – "action and adventure" (Samed, 9 years old). "I quite like adventures, and Vicky is almost always having adventures or finding treasures; that's why I really like it." Children enjoy the exciting, adventurous, and action-oriented stories of *Vicky the Viking*, for they offer them a further kind of experience: "that the Vikings were always beating up robbers, knights and other Vikings" (Mehdi, 10 years old). The children enjoy the humorous fights and squabbles which represent what children – above all, boys – are otherwise not entitled to think: that it is acceptable to sometimes be wild and to fight.

## Boy or girl? – Ambiguity creates gaps for fantasy and adds value

When children describe Vicky, some of them apparently perceive the boy character as a girl; they do not explicitly say as such, rather they use the corresponding articles or personal pronouns, for example, 9-year-old Abiram: "What is great about Vicky is that she is a Viking and is clever". The exceptions to this are the comments by two boys who quite consciously perceived Vicky as a girl character and, in retrospect, describe this, too, as something particularly great about Vicky: "I like

the fact that I am always wondering whether she is a girl or a boy" (Reid, 11 years old); "that she was a boy, and I thought she was a girl" (Lars, 9 years old). For children in this study, as well as for other children, Vicky's gender is – despite the apparently unequivocal media text – not always clear. In 2009 the IZI asked a representative sample of girls and boys aged between 3 and 12 in Germany whether they thought Vicky was a girl or a boy (Götz, 2013). The result: a little more than a third of the children surveyed saw Vicky as a boy. The number of children who see Vicky as a boy increases as the children's age increases, and girls are more likely than boys to see Vicky as a girl. Vicky has androgynous traits. He not only has long hair and wears chain armour that looks like a skirt or dress, but he also has a name that could just as well derive from "Victoria" as from the term "Viking". Neither does Vicky's behaviour correspond to the familiar stereotypes of boy characters, for he solves problems using brains instead of muscles. According to Götz (2013), this means that "some of the contours of socially dominant images of boy characters [...] are ruptured, and ambiguities are allowed to persist". This openness to interpretation creates gaps for children to fill with their individual interpretations and a gap for fantasy (Neuss, 2003). This represents another particular quality of *Vicky the Viking*.

## CONCLUSION

With his children's books Runer Jonsen created characters and stories which, even after 50 years, have lost none of their individuality or ability to entertain, are well known in their various adaptations, and are watched and enjoyed by many children. From the children's perspective, Vicky represents an ideal figure who always knows what to do and is interesting in his specific role within the plot. Vicky is small – smaller than the others. He

is self-confident, able to take action, friendly, and willing to help. Above all, though, he always has clever ideas and suggestions for solving problems, and he can always get the adults out of trouble. The ambiguities deriving from Vicky's androgyny open up gaps for fantasy. Children see in Vicky the skills they want to acquire themselves, shared social values, approval, exciting adventures, and the freedom they desire. This combination facilitates sympathy and empathy – a distinct and particular quality that makes *Vicky the Viking* significant for children today, and a classic: "They were nice stories, and they make people happy" (Raban, 10 years old). ■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> German Federal Film Board (FFA) film hit list 2009, national: <http://www.ffa.de/download.php?f=0a5c30bb9fe4764910acba18e98803ec&target=0>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ffa.de/ffa-legt-kinoergebnis-2011-vor-1296-mio-tickets-und-9581-mio-euro-umsatz-der-deutsche-film-sorgt-fuer-besucherzuwachs.html>

<sup>3</sup> ZDF press portfolio, 2014. Ein neuer Look zum 40.: »Wickie und die starken Männer« in 3D-Optik. <https://presseportal.zdf.de/pm/ein-neuer-look-zum-40-wickie-und-die-starken-maenner-in-3d-optik/>

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