

TELEVISION

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How much fantasy does the future need?

Fantasy is the power to create new things from existing things. This is an ability future generations will urgently need. Public broadcasting corporations must take the responsibility for our children seriously and support their imagination with quality.

Fantasy is the product and the power of imagination, briefly our specifically human ability to imagine. At first sight fantasy appears to be the opposite of reality. A lively imagination is not always the object of our admiration; our prime suspicion is that it is a retreat serving as a place to flee reality and its demands. On the basis of this perspective, what the future really needs is in fact less fantasy and an increased sense of reality. Plato (427 - 347 BC) would probably have agreed unhesitatingly! He was fundamentally sceptical about the fantasy and the image. In his eyes the acquisition of knowledge was solely possible as a result of conceptual thinking, while fantasy, images and myths were primarily illusions and allurements. His pupil Aristotle, however, (384 - 322 BC) had a decidedly laxer attitude towards these "inner pictures"; in his view they were mainly an element of order. Every age has had its own special relationship to fantasy: Leonardo da Vinci emphasized the visionary powers of fantasy, Kant underscored fantasy's enlightening role in the debate on the World and the Self. During the Age of Romanticism fantasy became the creative principle of the whole universe. For Adorno and Bloch fantasies are the drawing boards for designing futuristic utopias (cf. Ransch-Trill 1996).

Today - at the outset of the 21st century - we are familiar with the power and the significance of fantasy. It enables us to produce new things from those already in existence. It is not the counter pole, but the extension of reality. Only by means of fantasy can we conceive and conceptualize the future. Thus the future requires fantasy as a constitutive part. When referring to the future, we should not focus only on ourselves but also on those due to create and design the future. It is no longer modern to allude to "children as our future". It is more modern to see children as our "here and now" - a highly important notion, for children are our present. But this does not relieve us of the responsibility of additionally thinking of their future. We must give children our support in the "here and now" in order to make it easier for them to fashion their future. And if fantasy means an increase in knowledge, if it is the power for adapting traditions to modern standards with an aim to creating new things, then we should foster children's fantasy.

There is no doubt that imagination plays a special role in children's lives. Children grow into this world, they have to come to terms with what already exists and to find their way. In make-believe games and stories they develop an understanding of themselves and the world. They also devise wishes and a possible future; they digest the experiences of their daily lives (cf. Piaget 1980, for example). It is precisely this daily life that has become extraordinarily complicated for children. Trends, characterized with catchwords such as individualization and fragmentation, do not bypass children. Family forms have multiplied, the decrease in the number of children has made brothers and sisters more of a rarity, and the fewer children we have, the more intensively our hopes focus on individual children. We try to

support them as early as possible, as purposefully as possible. We fulfil their wishes and liberties that we ourselves would like to have had. Nowadays children are accordingly offered a wide variety of options, in a market featuring all kinds of initiatives, commodities and institutions. Last but not least, commercial suppliers on the media market have long since discovered the kids as an interesting target group: They are after all - to use James McNeal's catchy expression - a "Three Kids' Market": a market of the present, a market of the future and a multipliers' market (McNeal 1987, p. 5 f.).

But what does this mean for the kids? A comparison of their situation with that of other generations reveals above all a host of chances and opportunities: children have more liberties, receive encouragement at an early age and support for their individuality. On the other hand, the vast range of offers targeting them does mean enormous pressure for the kids; these liberties cause them decision-making stress. A diary full of entries for afternoon events is no rarity among primary school kids. This is joined by the high level of consumer pressure exerted particularly by private television broadcasters. The kids constantly have to emulate the latest trends if they do not want to be considered as outsiders by their peers. Evidently, our society subjects children to extremely high standards; we should bear in mind what this means for children whose parents have less time and money or a lower sense of commitment to invest in their advancement. In this case - and in others, too - children frequently have to fend for themselves and their socialization process, with the media also playing an important role. Consequently, we have to ask ourselves very urgently what our task is as a public service broadcaster. Our goal must be to make children fit for the "here and now", equally with a view to their future. We can only surmise what this future will actually look like, however. We know that today's generation of primary school kids will be confronted with fundamental problems - problems we have started to think about but for which we have not yet found any lasting solutions. The whole can be summed up in a few catchphrases: globalisation, the shortage of energy resources, the destruction of the environment. The rapid development of technological facilities implies new chances and opportunities, but at the same time new borders and difficulties. We are now aware of the strong presence of the media in children's everyday lives, which will by no means wane in the years to come. We want to make the kids fit for a future we can at best only discern. What we can give them in particular is the ability and the skills needed to cope with future exigencies. And this will mean above all: creating new things from already existing things - a basic principle of fantasy.

The relationship of the mass media to fantasies does initially seem to be problematic. Excessive demands, resulting from portrayals of violence and presentations rich in provocative stimuli, intensify the pressure on children and will presumably become just as much a part of the fantasy as advertising and consumer wishes. Spontaneously the media - particularly television - seem to have hardly anything positive on offer for kids' fantasies. Equally spontaneously we are confident that fairy tales and well-narrated stories are beneficial for the kids, especially for their fantasy. "Children need fairy tales", as Bruno Bettelheim put it, extending this later by "Children need television", providing that television offers something similar for the fantasy as in bible stories, myths and folktales (Bettelheim 1988). It is therefore not necessarily a question of the medium; it is a question of quality.

It is our social obligation to support children, not because they are a market-relevant target group or customers with money in their pockets but because we bear responsibility for them that we should take very seriously - a duty for whose fulfilment we will require a sense of commitment and a lot of imagination in the future.

NOTES

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