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Gaps for fantasy in children's films - Television and the aesthetic of reception

Gaps for fantasy are created not only in books but also in art as well as the television film. They are produced in the gaps that stimulate activity on the part of the recipients/viewers. These gaps can be created deliberately, for instance, by means of metaphors, symbols, direct mode-of-address, a feeling of togetherness, or abilities conducive to fantasy.

Can television stimulate children's fantasy? This question is customarily answered with the opposing argument: books are predestined to trigger off pictorial fantasies in children. As I will demonstrate in the following article, films also have this capability - and yet the stimulation factors involved are different to written language on its own. First of all, I will introduce gap theory from the field of literary studies, a significant element of reception aesthetics. Whether children's films also leave "gaps" for fantasy will subsequently be illustrated by several examples.

1. Who looks at the images? - Constructivist conceptions of perception

The basic premise for the following exposition is a constructivist conception of communication and perception, detached from conceptions describing perception as imaging and communication as the transportation of data from A to B. In addition, the philosophy of images had a significant impact on the reception of films, as it was presumed that all human beings receive the same images that are then stored in the brain. This conceptualisation produced simple, technically oriented models of information transfer. The customary idea that our sense organs are a window onto the world, through which we receive reality in the form of information, is not doubted only by scientists oriented towards constructivism: biologists, brain researchers and psychologists mostly agree nowadays that the human brain is by no means a stimulus-response system exposed to the environment but that perception is always governed by existing previous experiences. It is thus crucial who is looking at the images. This is well illustrated by an easily remembered pictorial example from the brain researcher/scientist Gerhard Roth. By showing students a picture, Roth attempted to activate fixed elements in their visual memory. The viewers of the picture were instructed to combine its initially unconnected black-and-white contours to form a stable, meaningful complete picture. This probably caused most viewers considerable difficulty, no matter how hard they tried. After a considerable period of time spent considering the picture in the knowledge that it is a cow, the perception was stabilized and it became impossible to see anything apart from a cow. Roth thus indicates the special significance of prior knowledge and experience for perception.

"The memory is consequently our most important sense organ." (Roth 1994, p. 242). Hence environmental events do not themselves determine their impact on the brain; the decisive factor is the human being who decides their effects and meanings. Thus the human being, his or her quality of experience and appropriation of reality constitute the focus of analysis - and research.

2. Gap theory in media sciences

Characteristically, the most important prior considerations concerning the links between narrative levels and reception scope are much older than the re-establishment of reception research in Germany. The latter was developed by the Polish philosopher Roman Ingarden in 1930; however, his book "The Literary Work of Art" was not noted until it was translated in 1968. As a pupil of Edmund Husserl, Ingarden was oriented towards phenomenology; he conceives the literary text as possessing a multi-layered structure, whose individual layers stick together in a harmonious relationship. Due to the selectivity of the nature of the epic he maintained that the literary work of art is organized schematically: "It is not possible to determine unequivocally and exhaustively the infinite diversity of the certainties of the individual objects portrayed in the oeuvre by means of a finite number of words or sentences; a number of certainties will always be missing" (Ingarden 1975, p. 45). Proceeding on the basis of this observation, Ingarden coins the term spots of indeterminacy. "I call the page or the place of the portrayed subject - which on account of the text fails to reveal precisely how the object in question is determined - a 'spot of indeterminacy' (Ingarden 1975, p. 44). It is the readers' task to ascertain relevant places of uncertainty and subsequently to decide which should be filled and which left. The reader does after all have to undertake the reconstruction of the text by concretising, in a suitable fashion, the relevant spots of indeterminacy to be filled. Ingarden takes great credit for relating the uncertainty of literary texts to the recipients, which proved to be of consequential value for issues concerning the aesthetic of reception. The most significant development of his concept stems from Wolfgang Iser, who corroborated Ingarden's phenomenological approach in terms of communication theory and language psychology. Iser defines the uncertainty of literary texts as no longer only a characteristic of these texts themselves but as, expressly, a "condition for effect" (Iser 1975a, p. 228 ff.). For him it is not the work itself that is significant; "the meanings of literary texts are not generated until the reading process takes place, they are the product of an interaction between the text and the reader and not dimensions hidden in the text that can only be unearthed by means of interpretation." (Iser 1975a, S. 229) According to Iser, "the constitution of the meaning of the text becomes an unmistakable activity of the reader" (Iser 1972, p. 7), to whom the text affords "scope for updating opportunities" (Iser 1975a, p. 230). This scope makes itself manifest in so-called gaps, which he terms the "most important switch element between the text and the reader" The gaps comprise the appeal structure of the texts, according to Iser. Filling the gaps, however, is not left to the whims of the recipients but must be accomplished in accordance with the "instructions" of the text (Iser 1976, p. 7). These instructions assume the form of the concretisation being "guided but not completely controlled by the structures of the text" (Iser 1976, p. 45). Iser thus discards a simple stimulus-response model of literary communication and postulates instead an interactive model. In order to clarify the constantly given but not completely determining instruction character of the texts, their "appeal structure", Iser draws on the concept of the implicit reader, already plotted out in Umberto Eco's oeuvre (Eco 1987, p. 64).

As in the case of television reception research, Iser's gap concept was accused of radical subjectivism by supporters of structuralistic hermeneutics. A structuralism-oriented view conceives of literary texts (and films) as autonomous, self-contained constructions with a recorded meaning. It is the recipients' task to find out this meaning and discuss it. This work-immanent approach ignores contradictory interpretations, ambiguities and influences on the recipients. Hans Georg Gadamer demands that the work of art should be set "in the clarity and openness of its actual meaning" (Gadamer 1975, p. 113). Arthur C. Danto also envisages an interpretation of works of art that "submits to the exigencies of truth and falsehood (Danto 1996, p.56). In the view of this classical aesthetic, works of art are regarded as objective, timeless and autonomous without any consideration of the recipients' role. It also seems to be problematic that a structuralism-oriented perspective assumes normative parameters, for the "correct" meanings of texts can only be elaborated by experts. Complex interpretations by recipients are bound to conflict with the "specified meaning" because they and their amateurish understanding of the text do not and cannot do it justice.

Theoretical and practical approaches in the reception research of the early eighties became more significant due to the interpretation of the "text" as a semantically open work of art and the postulation of the recipient generating a meaning. Pioneering literary studies witnessed the beginning of a trend towards a radical-constructivist reception theory, led by Siegfried J. Schmidt as its most prominent representative. The aim of this orientation, also termed empirical literary studies, is to investigate recipients' text comprehension.

The so-called aesthetic of reception, mainly influenced by Jauss, Iser and Kemp, adopts - as mentioned previously - an intermediary position between radical-constructivist and structuralist approaches. It

emphasizes the view that works of art are basically aimed at observers, that they do not assume their meanings until the subjective process of reception takes place. Via the inclusion of gaps, the text calls upon the recipient to bridge the omitted links in meaning with ideas and fantasies. The observer "is inclined, not only as a result of the environment commonly shared by him- or herself and the work but also due to inner prerequisites - he or she has as an observer a specific present and past." (Kemp 1986, p. 203) Works of art have their own scope for interpretation, permitting the observer a subjective approach to unknown reality, as they provide space for projection, empathy, identification as well as delimitation. Gaps are therefore invitations for the recipients to participate, to occupy fantasies with their own subjective interpretations, their own experience and fantasies. Let us look at the painting "Woman at the Window" by Caspar David Friedrich (Fig. 2). Where are the gaps or spots of indeterminacy in this painting? Probably the clearest empty space is created by the view from the rear. We do not know what the expression on the woman's face is. Is she smiling at a neighbour or is she watching her husband sailing out to sea, full of longing, perhaps even crying? When we look at this painting, the view from the rear directly provokes us to create our own thoughts and a meaningful extension to the scene.

In both literary studies and in the fields of media science and media pedagogy research the film-recipient relationship has been reassessed and the role of the active recipient re-emphasized (cf. Milos 1994). Whereas previously the content of the film had usually been the centre of observational interest in media science research, now attention was focused more on the recipients. The subject of research was, in particular, how television is integrated in everyday life; for example, which use motives play a role in selection and reception and which needs are consequently satisfied (cf. Merten 1991, p. 62 ff.). Besides the theoretical turning point, this paradigm shift away from research into media effects to research into media uses meant it was necessary to conceive new research methods suitable for the subject under investigation (media appropriation). Media pedagogy also underwent a change from quantitative to qualitative methods, for whether children occupy the gaps with fantasies, which fantasies they create and how these are "directed" by the film production can only be ascertained by descriptions of the gaps and the fantasies expressed.

3. Gaps in children's films

Concerning gap theory, the following questions were of interest:

- Where can gaps in the structure of children's films be found?
- Where are recipients targeted with the appeal to "get involved"?
- How does self-involvement (fantasy) come about in television?

As expected, gaps can be traced and described in all elements of (children's) films (language, music, sounds, dramaturgy, editing, history, etc.). As films represent a dynamic construction of simultaneous information items, the gaps within them cannot always be classified analytically but are particularly made manifest by the simultaneity and combination of sounds, images, language and actions.

Gaps are created by imaginary time and imaginary space

The words "Once upon a time..." introduce many a fairy tale. This introduction makes it clear that the story about to be read came to pass a long time ago. The question as to when the story occurred remains unanswered. Children's television and children's films also feature such introductory reception references assigning the story to an imaginary time and/or imaginary space. We hear, for example, in the intro to *Biene Maja* (Maya the Bee): "In an unknown land, not so long ago, a bee was very well-known" and in *Teletubbies*: "Behind the hills - unknown to anybody - is Teletubby Land." Such introductory phrases are reception instructions inviting us to set out for another time-and-space reality. What this reality is really like or when this story really takes place is left to our imagination. Such phrases also serve the purpose of attuning listeners or viewers to the fact the stories they are about to watch or hear cannot be classified in the reference system of our profane everyday experience. That these stories are still relevant is expressed by the fairy-tale's final ritualized phrase "and they lived happily ever after."

Gaps are created by metaphors or language images

The following lyrics are sung at the beginning of the Feuerstein Junior (Flintstone Junior) programme Abenteuer mit Pebbles und Bamm Bamm (Adventures with Pebbles and Bamm Bamm): "Just imagine us sitting around on a cloud and then flying around on a pink Dino. It's easy, it's kid's stuff. I'll tell you why. This is Pebbles' and Bamm Bamm's world. We fly, we fly on the wings of our imagination. Pebbles and Bamm Bamm will show you how to do it. This is how Pebbles and Bamm Bamm do it. We fly, we fly, our dreams are bright and colourful, they soon become true. Everything's possible with Pebbles and Bamm Bamm." Following this introduction, we see a pink Dinosaur, on which two children are flying through the air; transformed, they immerse into a colourful cartoon world. Can we tell immediately what it is like to fly on the "wings of our fantasy"? An approach based on logic is not possible, only associative understanding is useful in this case. Perhaps we think of the following associations: fantasy inspires us, gives us wings; flying to our fantasy, drifting from one thought to the next; disregarding reality or giving free rein to our imagination. It is in this associative comprehension mode that the gaps are found. Every one of us may understand something different by "wings of fantasy", but the spontaneous associations, if compared, would not be arbitrary. Metaphors like these act as bridges between images and concepts, spanning the gap between pictorial and conceptual thinking. They connect highly unconventional material with immaterial circumstances, or psychological with concrete things (astute judgement, absolutely clear conscience etc.). Everyday matters are combined with uncommon phenomena, the metaphors representing a form of poetry. These language images seek our interpretation. Metaphors are language constructions comprising similarities, implying "what something is like": What is the lawn like? What is a velvety pullover like? Children also construct such similarities because the "real concepts" are not yet available; moreover, they are closer to magical thinking than adults are.

Gaps are created by the use of pictorial symbols

Film is symbolic material in two ways. On the one hand, it compresses complex stories (e.g. entire biographies) by showing a selection of relevant events. On the other, in order to help the viewers decipher this compression, film uses pictorial symbols that produce "whole stories" in themselves as well as references to other stories (intertextuality). A prime characteristic of symbols is their ambiguity, their equivocalness. A red traffic light is a culturally unequivocal sign with a clear meaning (Stop!), but symbols demand interpretation. We intend to illustrate the exigent nature of pictorial symbols with two pictures from the film The Lion King. Before Simba is expelled from his prospective kingdom by his evil uncle's ruse, he sits with his father on a rock (Fig. 3).

Mufasa tells his son: "Look at it, Simba. That is our kingdom, everything touched by light. The reign of a king rises and sets like the sun. One day, Simba, the sun of my reign will also set - and rise with you as the new king." The metaphor used in these phrases (sun of my reign) is supported by corresponding pictorial symbolism. Striking features in this freeze frame are the proportions between father and son as well as the view from the rear. But what is, apparently, more important is the interpretation of the tension arising from the combination of picture and text. It is still certain that the sun is floating in the sky behind Mufasa's field of vision, but at the same time we have a premonition that his reign will soon come to an end, the sun being about to set. The path of the sun is used here to indicate the mythical interpretation of circular sovereignty (not linearity). Fig. 4 seems even more symbolically "charged". Simba, who has fled abroad and who does not recall and does not even want to remember his original identity (his duty as heir to the throne and ruler), is confronted with his reflection in the waters of a lake. What ensues is a dialogue between him and his reflection, the latter assuming the voice of his father: "Simba, you have forgotten me." Simba replies: "No, I couldn't do that." The reflection continues: "You have forgotten who you are and therefore me, too. Listen to your heart, Simba. You have another destiny. You must occupy your place in the eternal circle. Do not forget who you are. You are my son, the true king. You must remember." The reflection is used here as a symbol of unreserved honesty and imminent awareness.

Jacques Lacan, for example, in his acclaimed article "The mirror stage as the sculptor of the ego-function", also emphasized the concept of the mirror as a mode of behaving to oneself by the subject. The reflection, in another sense, can be termed a symbolic mirror of the inner world that has not been affected by the outside world. Of course, children do not know anything about Lacan, but they are very sensitive to archetypical, constantly recurring symbols and themes in development stories. The pictorial

symbols thus elucidate children's thematic perspectives, which in turn integrate them into the story by a process of identification. Some examples of these thematic perspectives are justice and morals, living alone and separation, death and dying, social relationships, one's own sexuality, being young and growing up.

Gaps are formed by creating "a feeling of togetherness" and actively addressing the recipient

Examining the following introductory text on the Pokémon series, one is immediately struck by two interesting aspects: "Each of us would like to become a master, everyone wants to prove what they are capable of; everyone dreams of being the very first to climb to the top. Every attempt brings you a little bit closer; what you achieve is your opportunity the next time round. This world in which we live is still completely new for us; we haven't yet explored this new world. Come with us and go for it - do your very best, all the time." A compelling feature is how the young viewers are involved in the Pokémon world in terms of language. The kids are actively called upon to play their part and to set out with the film characters for the "completely new world". The film characters have no edge on the kids in terms of experience - the like of which children usually encounter in their everyday lives; they are adventurers with the same rights, with no reason to be concerned, for everything can be learned. The active appeals to take part in the action of the film, the creation of "a feeling of togetherness" pave the way for strong para-social interaction (Horten/Wohl 1956, p. 215 ff.). Questions that remain unanswered are how kids in their thoughts participate individually, the roles into which they project their fantasies and the actions through which they show their courage.

Gaps are created by abilities that open up fantasy

Of course, it is the TV heroes' abilities that invite the kids to join in with their fantasies. Let's listen to the introductory song in the Bibi Blocksberg programmes: "There's Bibi! She's flying on a broom! Hello, Bibi! Hello, Bibi! Hello, everyone! Nice you're here! I'll conjure up something fantastic, okay? Hey presto. Bibi Blocksberg, the little witch, can do many things you dream of, she'll always help you because she's your best friend. Bibi Blocksberg, you little witch, come and show us what you can do. We like your tricks, the magic you do, the way you laugh and dance! Come to us, Bibi Blocksberg, and be our friend, Bibi Blocksberg. We are curious, Bibi Blocksberg, what you're going to do today." Apparently, not only children know when somebody rides a bike or throws a ball. But what happens when somebody does magic tricks or witchcraft is far more open. The appeal and openness of many children's films stem, in particular, from the heroes' abilities and what they do with them: witchcraft, flying, becoming invisible, magic, changing form or disappearing from the scene are all actions that emphasize the fictional nature of the film but which also invite the kids to integrate these magical actions into their own world of experience. 8-year-old Saskia, for example, drew a picture after a fantasy trip (Fig. 5), which, in retrospect, turned out to be a media trace (Neuss 1999c, p. 62 ff.) related to Bibi Blocksberg (Fig. 6)

The following is a summary of the interview with Saskia about her drawing: "I'm in the jungle with my Mum. We stand there looking at all the things around us. There are loads of animals: a snake with many colours, a monkey, a spider, a bird, a butterfly, a peacock and a parrot. And of course many other things, but we can see them. And of course there are trees and grass, and so on. But there are no people and nothing at all bad or evil. If I can, I would like to stroke a hare or feed a parrot, for example. Yeah, I'd love to go into the jungle sometime." Saskia's statements clearly reveal that she does not simply reproduce the programme and its contents but finds inspiration here for her own fantasies and wishes (cf. Götz et al. in this volume).

Gaps are created by the choice of perspective

As previously seen in the case of Caspar David Friedrich's painting, gaps can be created by the perspective of the scene. In films, gaps are also created by the editing. To understand parallel editing, i. e. to recognize jumps in time and space, children must have acquired a certain amount of televisual literacy. The generation of such gaps therefore does not comply with children's development-specific perception qualities.

Gaps are created by abstraction

Who has never stretched out on their back and gazed up at the clouds, watching them assume the most incredible figures and shapes? Pre-school kids probably had a similar experience when they were shown an experimental film featuring only white circles moving at different speeds on a black background (Fig. 7). The circles sometimes overlap to create very different forms, initially with no meaning. The children project into the film fantasies of an "overturned tractor, a snowman, a can, a rocket, balls and a fight". They use these pictures as opportunities for generating fantasies and their own interpretations of the meaning. Clearly, this experimental film has no chance of topping the kids' ratings. Its only intention is to show that the trend towards reduction - i.e. not presenting and explaining everything in detail - also has an appeal. In addition, this film can manage without any editing, thus leaving scope for inner verbalisations.

Naturally, not only images but also the sounds can be abstract and stimulate fantasy.

In Jim Knopf, for example, there is a scene in which Lukas and Jim want to go to Dragon Town. On the way they have to pass through a long, dark tunnel, in the middle of which "the Mouth of Death" is located. During the journey the viewer sees only the two full beams of Emma the locomotive (Fig. 8) and hears highly mysterious noises (howling, whistling of the wind, groaning, voices etc.) In this scene particularly, the abstract audio-visual information can induce dynamic fantasies in the children - partly frightening fantasies, too (Neuss 1999b, p. 205 ff.).

Media Characters and heroes too can somehow be abstract and open for interpretation. Wickie, for example, in *Wickie und die starken Männer* (Fig. 9) (*Wickie and the strong men*) is sometimes interpreted by the kids to be a boy and sometimes a girl. In the film the way this character is seen results in completely new perspectives and relationship constellations. Wickie therefore tends to be androgynous with regard to its gender-specific characteristics. Personally, of course, I have always considered Wickie to be a boy.

4. Children's fantasy in everyday life

As we have seen, television can stimulate children's fantasy in many different ways. Naturally, this is not only revealed by analysis of the contents but also by close observation of children during daily life (Neuss 1999a, p. 11 ff.). They don the role of their favourite heroes, draw on their television experiences to work on a whole variety of personal themes and make use of the language, including other television symbols, for communication and contact with other children. When adults, in particular, notice that children relate to television contents in their games, fantasies, associations, the child's activity is usually deprecatorily regarded as "copying". If adults (parents and teachers) are unable to interpret television-related expressions of fantasy as the kids' own fantasy achievement, this is a situation that is less ascribable to the kids themselves than to adults' ingrained interpretation pattern that "television harms fantasy". This article has clearly shown that this is by no means the case.

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NOTES

Roth, Gerhard (1994). Das Gehirn und seine Wirklichkeit: Kognitive Neurobiologie und ihre philosophischen Konsequenzen. Frankfurt a. M., p. 240 f.

Cf. Steinmetz, Horst (1974). Rezeption und Interpretation. Versuch einer Abgrenzung. In Labrousse, Gerd (Ed.): Beiträge zur Methodendiskussion. Amsterdam, pp. 37-83, here p. 39.

Cf. Ingarden 1960, pp. 261-303; 1968, pp. 49-63, 312-345, 413-439; 1975.

Iser 1975a, p. 248. cf. Warning (1975, p. 31): "Die ästhetische Erfahrung verdankt sich nicht mehr einer von den metaphysischen Qualitäten ausgelösten Ursprungsemotion, sondern den Leerstellen, die es dem Leser erlauben, die Fremderfahrung der Texte an die eigene Erfahrungsgeschichte anzuschließen." (Translation: Aesthetic experience is no longer due to an original emotion triggered by metaphysical qualities, but due to gaps permitting the reader to associate the alien experience of the texts with his or her own biographical experience."

Der implizite Leser ist im literarischen Kommunikationsmodell nicht - wie der Name nahe legt -

auf der Seite des Lesers angesiedelt, sondern auf der des Textes, und er ist dadurch definiert, dass er die Lesetätigkeiten vollzieht, die der Text ausdrücklich fordert. (Translation: In the literary communication model the implicit reader is not - as the term would suggest - located on the side of the reader, but on that of the text: he or she is defined as completing the reading activities expressly required by the text.)

Bachmair macht daraus später die "individuelle Bedeutungskonstitution" (Translation: Bachmair later turns this into the "individual constitution of meaning" (1996, pp. 13 ff. and 96 ff.).

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Cf. Kemp, Wolfgang (1986). *Kunstwerk und Betrachter: Der rezeptionsästhetische Ansatz*. In Belting, Hans u.a. (Eds.): *Kunstgeschichte. Eine Einführung*. Berlin, pp. 203-221.

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