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Quality from a boys' perspective

How boys perceive boy characters in prize-winning programmes

Are boys a lost cause for quality TV programmes? Or is it possible to reach boys with innovative characters and boy-related topics? Drawing on reception research conducted in boys' workshops in Germany the authors show what 9- to 13-year-old boys like (and dislike) about high-quality television.

Boys between the ages of 9 and 13 are a lost cause as far as quality television is concerned. The reasons for this are certainly varied. Could it have something to do with the heroes boys are presented with in quality programmes? There is a whole range of shared conceptions about what it is that keeps boys – as far as characters are concerned – from becoming interested in certain series or programmes. They expect, for example, that their heroes must not be depicted as too soft, that tears are out of the question, that their modes of relating to the world and others should be more instrumental and adaptive than expressive and integrative, that their intelligence should be technical rather than emotional, and so on. In the light of such stereotyping it appears to be especially difficult to devise characters which both appeal to boys and at the same time accord with the emancipatory objectives of a quality television programme.

However, in this study of the ways in which boys perceive heroic characters in quality television it is shown that the character traits which boys find attractive or unattractive are not those nor-

mally supposed. In their judgements they are much more likely to refer to a multitude of qualitative aspects which transcend conventional notions of young boys' character reception.

The study

We conducted 11 "boys' workshops" with groups of two or three 9- to 13-year-old boys in Southern Germany (24 boys in total). These were organised into "boys' expert panels" with a common viewing agenda and discussions moderated according to specific guidelines which were recorded. The subject matter consisted in each case of two episodes from series with cartoon characters (*Sponge-Bob SquarePants*, *The Simpsons*, *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, *Disney's Kim Possible*) and two "quality" programmes with live actors. The programmes chosen by the IZI were: *Stark! Kevin – hear me out* (Germany), *Boys will be boys* (Norway), *Girls* (The Netherlands), and *Secret thoughts* (The Netherlands). The criteria of selection were, in the case of the series, their popularity with this age group, and, in the case of the programmes with live actors, an award at the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL festival and competition (winner or second place between 2002-2006) which had been presented partly on account of a treatment of boy/gender-related topics regarded as innovative. An assessment questionnaire was intended to help the boys formulate their impressions for themselves after viewing. It asked first of all "What is good? What is

bad?" and about the subject of the programme. Drawing on aspects of our "variables model" (Winter/Neubauer, 2001), but expanded to include more individual points of view, it also asked for a characterisation of the main protagonist(s), for a "school grade" to be given, and for a final overall assessment in a single sentence. In the discussion which followed, the boys could further justify their evaluations. In addition to that discussions were conducted with 131 9- to 13-year-olds. The following is a presentation of the results relating to the characters in quality television (for the cartoon characters, cf. Winter/Neubauer, 2008).

Stark! Kevin – hear me out

Of the programmes with live actors, Kevin was given the best rating and most sympathetic reception by the boys. Above all, this is clearly due to its subject matter which is presented in such a manner that it scarcely permits any other reaction than sympathy:

"Kevin talked about his life, because he always stutters when he speaks. Then he goes on a stuttering course where he's supposed to break the habit, then at the end he almost succeeds, and if he succeeds completely he'll get a motorbike from his parents."

The plot is nearly always related by the boys according to this simple scheme. For the most part, the necessary efforts and difficulties along the way – and the fact that in the programme itself the stuttering has not yet been completely vanquished – are passed over. For the boys, it is

as good as vanquished, as good as achieved. Less important in the boys' plot summaries are concomitant circumstances such as the peer mockery which Kevin describes or the other things he does (play football, drive go-carts). In the foreground of their perceptions is Kevin's problem; the boys develop empathy *with*, but more especially sympathy *for* him.

What the boys admire in the character of Kevin is that he can speak so openly about his stuttering; they describe his way of coping as strong and respect the fact that he even allows himself to be filmed as well. Some of them, however, would not wish to be shown in such an embarrassing situation themselves; it might well be astonishing for viewers to see how a boy got over his stuttering, but they are afraid that he is exposing himself to even more ridicule. One idea is that the whole process should only be shown on condition that it succeeds: "... if I made it in the end, then I'd let it be shown, otherwise no, they'd only make fun of me even more."

In this context, mention should also be made of the observation that Kevin only fights against the stuttering, not against those who mock him. Behind this lies these boys' wish not (just) to see their hero reduced to the role of a victim, but also to see him actively opposing the mockery with

something: to see him take action. Inasmuch as Kevin only fights against something "inside himself" (the stuttering), he represents the type of the reclusive, individualised hero. Boys, by contrast, appear to be far more interested in the social hero who fights against something outside his own person and for something connected with society – the "hero in his own world". A situation that is both embarrassing and tense for Kevin presents itself on the last day of his course. Fortunately, however, he is already on the path to success, and moreover he is not alone.

"Then he's given a task where he has to go up and talk to strange girls, ask them for their telephone numbers; if he stutters, it's very embarrassing for him, so he has to use the method, but that works really well. He doesn't feel so alone either, there's other stutterers there, he's already made friends."

This indicates that the boys do not wish to see too much of the problem. It has to be presented in such a way that the problem must be overcome or is already under control. It is important, therefore, not only that Kevin fights, but that he is actually successful. The boys expressed only a few direct criticisms, for example of the background music.

"Sometimes I found it too annoyingly doom-laden, the music. For example: he goes to the stuttering class – and you get this sad music. But this is actually something nice! [...] You could clearly see that he was enjoying it – but no: sad music!"

This criticism is emblematic of the potentially disempowering representation of the hero: his strength and proactive energy appear to be forbidden and must at all costs be undermined (in this case, by the music).

In the boys' eyes, the hero figure Kevin is invested with positive characteristics; he has their sympathy and to that extent is adequate as a hero – but what is "done" with this hero in the course of the programme is of limited interest to the boys, or none at all. The activities of the character shown

here, such as football, go-cart driving and motorcycling, are very good access points for boys, but these topics are not "sustained". The problem of stuttering is placed in the foreground, not the ways in which Kevin overcomes it or whatever other things he does. The problem is also intensified by the fact, for example, that Kevin cries (which is not the problem) and is then alone with his frustration (which *is!*). This contradicts the boys' expectations of a solution, as well as the traditional heroic formula of "event and resolution". Where does the hero go, what situations does he encounter? And how does the hero get out again? Three overarching themes of the programme are registered by the boys in particular: morality ("You see how you ought to behave"), empathy ("You can feel yourself what it's like for someone like that"), and information ("You learn something about the cause of stuttering and that there are courses where you can overcome it"). In this way *Stark! Kevin – hear me out* is perceived predominantly as an educational, morally worthwhile, sensible programme, suitable for religious education or ethics class. Pleasurable and enjoyable aspects, fun and joy are certainly provided in the shape of the leisure activities shown, but they are either too weakly sustained or deprived of value and play no part in the boys' perceptions.

Girls

In their summaries of the plot of *Girls* the boys mainly confine themselves to a simple enumeration of the programme's main themes. "It's about three boys of colour and about girls, sex, adolescence, what boys think about girls and what they have to look like." All three boys are equally regarded as main characters in the programme, for the most part without any special preference.

What a number of the boys like most about *Girls* – apart from its subject matter – is the witty, cool way the boy characters behave. The – unin-

tentional? – stumble of one boy while dancing and posing and the purchase of condoms in a pharmacy are regarded as the funniest scenes. The fact that the main characters are not playing a role but are authentic and tell the truth wins approval. "... that it really happens, they are honest and talk about everything without being ashamed." However, concerning the coolness in regard to sexual topics, it seems that the limits of comprehensibility have already, in part, been exceeded: "They act as if nothing can hurt them". Here the boys are registering the fact that the heroic form of coping has turned into a masquerading posture, into "acting as if...". This is not registered as action – the heroes do nothing; they only act as if they do. Around half the other boys think the programme is at least "a bit exaggerated" and the main actor "too cool". By means of assessments such as "exaggerated" they also distance themselves from the theme of sexual activity, without rejecting it entirely. It is much rather the case that a certain ambivalence which hints at the juvenile themes of latency and deferred sexuality can be detected:

"It's good that they think about all that – it's not too early to think about it, but you don't have to think about it all the time [...] anyway they're much older than we are."

The directness of the main actors' language, in parts coarse and eroticised, is received in different ways – which seems to be less a question of age than of individual development. Reactions to this take two forms: first, "We talk like that, but it doesn't belong on television", and second, "With us it's different, but it belongs on television all the same". A third possible form – "We talk like that, and you can show that sort of thing on TV" – was not encountered in our study.

The noticeably contradictory nature of the three characters is criticised several times, which surely also reflects the boys' own individual ambivalence. "On the one hand they come

out with so much romantic nonsense, on the other hand with expressions like 'fat arse', 'big tits' and so on." This clearly reveals a difficulty in the programme for boys. On the one hand they value the openness and directness – or at least, do not significantly undervalue it. On the other hand, the programme lays bare something intimate which the boys would prefer not to see exposed to public view, because for them it is loaded with shame: their own posing pretences, their own "acting as if", which is not (as yet) coping-oriented action, not "real" action.

In the more negative assessments of the programme it is striking that weighty arguments are brought in, for example regarding the insufficient level of action, the communicative excess, and the proximity to everyday life, which is of no use for an idealisation of one's ego in heroic terms. "They blabbered on the whole time without a single pause for breath, and there wasn't enough happening"; "you don't need to show that on television, instead I can go to my friend and discuss it there." Positive emphasis is placed on the background music whose atmosphere seems to suit the programme's subject matter very well; on this point a "connection" by way of youth culture can easily be made. It appears that the treatment of erotic topics in *Girls* is too advanced for the 9- to 13-year-old age group. Boys watch it with a certain openness (and with more interest than, for example, in the case of *Secret thoughts*), because here something is offered them on an aesthetic/youth cultural level. However, the programme does not appeal to boys so much on account of its actual subject matter (eroticism and sexuality). Additionally, in the eyes of many boys the peer communication depicted in the programme tends to be unrealistic; most boys do not communicate in this way. The characters' quips or innuendoes might be fascinating in themselves, but to present them in such a reflexive way and over such a long

time span as in this programme comes across as unbelievable.

Boys will be boys

In the case of the plot summaries of *Boys will be boys* one is struck by the variety of individual points of view. Certainly, most boys state that it is about "four boys" or "a boys' gang", but in addition to this they foreground different themes and life situations, without being equally gripped by all (or some) of them. For most of the boys the conflict between one boy and his teacher is at the forefront:

"It's about four boys – one of them was quite cheeky – then the next year they got this substitute teacher, and the teacher, he's quite a strict teacher, he told him off so much, he was quite disappointed with this strict teacher, he didn't like him and so he made a bet with him that he could

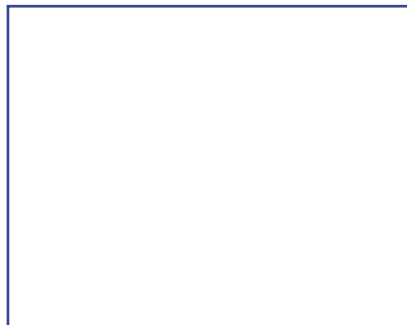
carry all the school satchels, and he lost so he was upset about it.”

Here, interest is also aroused by the fact that the boy tries to compete against his teacher in unequal combat. This occurs, among other things, in the form of the bet described above, which in turn occupies a central position for some boys without their appearing to take any great interest in the conflict that triggers it or the story leading up to it. For them it is, for example, a matter of “how much you can actually achieve”. Their attention is focused on failure and how you can get over it: “... he lost the bet, he was too weak, he over-estimated himself and his strength.” Others, in turn, concentrate on the internal relationships of the gang; in their case it is a matter of the interplay between closeness and distance, between conflicts and putting up with one another – “of quarrelling between boys”. One boy focuses on the single parent scenario above all else. Here it becomes clear that *Boys will be boys* introduces and opens up a multitude of topics, leaving its young viewers to choose which to concentrate on.

Besides the lost bet, one short scene from the opening credits is repeatedly cited as a sequence charged with suspense. As a kind of test of courage, the four boys shoot arrows vertically into the air – it is a question of who stands there longest facing the danger of being hit by an arrow: “You think, now one of them is going to get it in the head.” Compared to other programmes, however, this suspense is often put into perspective. “... [the programme] is a bit earnest, these aren’t the sort of subjects that appeal to me so much, I mean school, separation and so on, things happen right enough, but not so much that it gets really exciting for me.” Certain cool or witty remarks, for example during the first encounter with the teacher, are appreciated, but many boys would like more of this and less serious and solemn material. It is revealing that several boys characterise the programme as “a bit of this and

that” – which above all has something to offer, but in the last analysis ends up dangling somewhere in midair.

The appeal of *Boys will be boys* is damaged by its stagnant plot and the way it “gets bogged down” in the difficulties. The end of the programme is also consistent with this: it ends depressingly, with a defeat lacking any potential positive outcome – a heroic twist of the plot is (at least in this episode) nowhere in sight. But boys want to see heroic contents and seem to have little interest in an unadorned reflection of their own everyday lives – “fidelity to nature” seems instead to bore them. The most exciting scene of the episode is the opening sequence; this is certainly highly dramatic and makes an impact on the boys too, but it has no obvious connection with the later plot. Boys perceive this almost as a form of misleading packaging: exciting things are promised, but what follows is simply everyday life.



Secret thoughts

The subject matter of *Secret thoughts* is quickly described by the boys, for example as follows: “A boy was in hospital and had himself examined, his head is connected to a computer, and he spent the whole time looking at a woman’s low-cut neckline and believed someone could read his thoughts on a computer.” Doubtless in order to indicate that the boy is doing something indecent, the word “tits” appears very often in the descriptions; “low-cut neckline” or the idea that the boy “gets excited” in the hospital appear less frequently. For the boys it is

obviously less a question of the erotic content of the situation, but rather of the transgression of the rules (at least on a mental level) and the danger that this will be discovered, with humiliating consequences.

They also view this as a kind of test situation, in which they do not at all identify with the person being put to the test but, on the contrary, distance themselves from him. One can hear everything he thinks – for example, over and over again, that he thinks the woman can read his thoughts, which only seem to revolve around one topic. The boys find this somewhat too limited:

“That’s unrealistic though, in real life they explain to you what they’re doing in hospital, only if someone doesn’t have anything to do with such things, with technical things, could they believe that, but actually it’s a joke.”

The speed and frequency of the thoughts also appear unrealistic. “His thoughts are going all over the place; I wouldn’t have had so many.” The main actor is also pitied for the fact that he is not permitted to demonstrate any activity other than thinking and succumbs to stress. “He just has to lie there, he can’t say anything” – in other words, the exact opposite of an action character, an achieving hero. The plot of the programme is regarded as unrealistic and tedious because in its numerous variations it always deals with the same theme. Despite the brevity of the programme, therefore, its monotony and monothematism are criticised. Criticisms are also made of the fact that too much remains open-ended or is not mentioned at all, for example, whether the woman is a doctor. Above all, though, the boys are preoccupied with the question of why the boy is in hospital in the first place. Does he perhaps have a serious illness?

“They should have told you why he was in hospital, why his brain impulses were being measured, because he said they all felt sorry for him, those who were now

sitting in the maths class. I don't know if he has an illness, that's just a peg to hang the other story on."

This is a good observation. The story is not narrated consistently; the frame story exists only in order to place a certain topic within in and elaborate it – apart from this it is of no interest. In addition, the hero only fights inwardly, with himself and with his thoughts – which in relation to the situation are totally excessive. He lies stark naked on the floor and is only liberated from his precarious situation by outside influences (the examination is over, his father picks him up again) – in other words, without action on his own part. In the final analysis, no suspense or dynamism can be built up in this way.

A further deficiency is to be found in the generational relationships. For boys it makes a considerable difference whether they regard same-age or slightly older girls (or boys) with an erotic glance or adults. For many boys the conflict between morality and sexuality here acquires an importance that overshadows the entertainment value: in real-life situations that is not done with adults. What is being negotiated in the programme, however, is not an engagement with the topic of morality, but rather a pseudo-conflict which, for boys, is insufficiently intellectually challenging ("Can machines represent thoughts?"). Possibly the problem here is also that, when realistic topics and conflicts are being presented using realistic characters, then the presentation should also be realistic. The same scene using a cartoon character (one could imagine Bart Simpson or SpongeBob in the role), exaggerated and liberally dosed with nonsense, would work very well. In this way action could also be introduced (for example the thoughts could be depicted, the woman could act) – but with a real-life character as hero this does not work. And so the theme of morality raises its head, dominates in the form of an inner conflict with-

out any action and without a realistic explanation, and vanishes again into the mists of vagueness.

Conclusions

With the material obtained in the boys' workshops it is possible to show what boys like about quality characters. By examining what the boys criticise or leave to one side we can at the same time find the key to the (further) development of characters which might appeal to them.

- Over the programme as a whole, Kevin acts too little in *Stark!* The construction of the character emphasises distanced empathy, not an inner identification with his achievement. Kevin therefore invites too much sympathy, which is equivalent to a disempowerment of the hero. Positive aspects here are the friendships, which are depicted as reliable, and "masculine" activities – which, however, are unfortunately presented as unconnected contrasting experiences and are deprived of their power by banal music. The action sequence (talking to strange girls) is successful: Kevin is given a concrete task; he takes on the challenge and succeeds in it.
- In the case of *Boys will be boys* the network of relationships presented is too differentiated: there are too many themes in play at the same time. During the programme, and at the end, there is too much stagnation: the characters remain trapped in their old, still unresolved situation. At the same time there is no way out, no vision emerges. In the intergenerational encounters (the bet with the authoritarian teacher) there is no "but actually he's won" effect, rather an educational/moral resolution from an adult perspective: "Don't overestimate yourself, know your limits".
- In *Girls*, too, talking occupies the foreground, rather than the actual accomplishment of developmental tasks in the context of adoles-

cence. The monothematic reduction to and emphasis on sexual/erotic relationships with girls, tied to excessive language, makes it easy for many boys to dissociate themselves and reject the contents – even though they themselves are in the same situation. In the action sequences the boy characters do not really confront any actual challenges (e. g. erotic approaches). By contrast, connections with youth culture and fun elements, or the choice of music, are seen as appealing.

- The boy in *Secret thoughts* is not a hero but rather a victim. For the age group it addresses, the programme fails to "hit the mark" since adult perspectives (voyeurism) and child perspectives are mixed impermissibly. No plot is unfolded here since the boy's inner monologue leads nowhere. The programme operates outside any context – no "world" makes its appearance in which the hero moves, there is no explanation of any sort for the reason for the medical examination, and finally there is as good as nothing at all on which the boys can "hook" their own experiences. ■

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