

“Creativity through deviation”

A CONVERSATION WITH BENJAMIN MANNNS*

What does creativity mean for you?

Manns: For me, creativity also means taking a detour, in other words, sometimes thinking about something from another angle altogether. One of the things I learned from my academic study was the “creative principle of deviation”. And there is a very striking, though not very beautiful, example of this: What is our idea of a restaurant? Probably this: we have a cosy atmosphere; we have time; we have nice cutlery; we are served at our table; we are shown to our table, it smells good. And if we turn this completely on its head for a moment – we make it garish; we have to queue for our food; it is served in a carton; we have to eat it with our hands (laughs) – then we’re in a McDonald’s restaurant. And that’s the most successful restaurant chain there is. So it doesn’t always have to come something beautiful out of it, but you have to just think differently, take a look at things from another angle and ask, “What can we turn that into?”

Tom und das Erdbeermarmeladebrot mit Honig (Tom and the Bread with Strawberry Jam and Honey) is a complete deviation from what we otherwise understand to be preschool television. What is the idea behind Tom?

Manns: Tom is a character by Andreas Hykade. He is an animation specialist who usually makes cult short films for adults. And the unusual thing about the series is the main character, Tom, who is not even a child anymore: he is grown up, barely has any hair on his head, wears some kind of dress, and is only ever thinking of bread with strawberry jam and honey, which is something very unusual as an approach. And the character goes through the same adventure 52 times (Ill. 1).

What was the creative challenge?

Manns: The idea was originally to make an interactive film for the Internet, a game in which you could lead Tom through different situations. He comes to the mill, wants to get some flour, wants to ride on the pig, wants to help the miller. And the user can always help him do these things. “What happens next?” and: “How do I get to the bread with strawberry jam and honey in the end?” The challenge was to consider

how this concept could be implemented for a linear form on television where I would no longer have this opportunity to make decisions, and to still involve the viewer. And then we had the idea of telling the story over and over and over again so that children would be able to see exactly:

At what point does the story branch off? At what point am I being misled? At what point do I believe I already know the story? And what happens differently then?

How did Tom and the Bread with Strawberry Jam and Honey come about?

Manns: Well, this “Tom cosmos” was in Andreas Hykade’s head for decades. The first character he thought up was the “Erdbeermaus” (“Strawberry Mouse”), when he was always telling his little sister about a kind of parallel world where this “Strawberry Mouse” was the guard. And it’s his way of going through life by making sketches of the people he meets, or who are in some way important to him, caricaturing them and developing them as characters. And then at some point he met his producer Thomas Meyer-Hermann. And so the Tom character already existed, and many, many years later he had a moment of illumination:

children played in the garden and ate strawberry jam on bread. And they even put honey on their bread with strawberry jam. And that is how this story came about. It was just one of many stories. There was also “Tom in Town”, “Tom in Prison”, and all sorts of stories in this “Tom cycle”. Then the idea developed further through the interactive film in such a way that it focussed on “Tom and the Bread with Strawberry Jam and Honey”.

What is “Tom mathematics”?

Manns: The mathematics ensues from the task of producing a slice of bread with strawberry jam and honey on it. These are the parts we also took from the interactive game: I need flour to bake the bread; I need strawberries to make the jam; I need bees and flowers to make the honey. And this gave us a particular mathematics for each individual story, too (Ill. 2). Then we noticed that if the viewer is to understand that it is always the same story that is being told, we have to place at least 2 episodes back to back, i.e. one after the other, so that it starts off in exactly the same way as it did in the first episode. Overall, though, Tom is a very mathe-

matical project. Every episode is exactly 7,500 frames long. And it is structured around a fixed “Tom rhythm”. The “Tom loop” lasts exactly 8 frames, so his musical theme spans these 8 frames, too. We have a rhythm in each episode. And each character has its own music. We can turn all the characters into an orchestra, and we can put them together however we like, because they follow the same “Tom rhythm”.

How long was the production phase?

Manns: The development and production of the series took over 10 years. In the end, it was fortunate that we had so little money, that the production periods were so incredibly protracted. At first we did 4 episodes. Then we did 9 more episodes so that we could make a mini-series. Then at some point we did another 13 episodes and then another 26. So, we were always able to look at our process and ask: Where are we? Which stories have we already told? Which stories do we need in order to develop our characters further, to add to them? What can we do to interweave the episodes with one another? The periods of time we had were just unbelievably important and valuable

for us. We did not have the pressure of having to make 26 or 52 episodes and only having two and a half months to complete these whole books. These of course all happen in parallel, so there is no sequence.

Is Tom a success?

Manns: The feedback from the children is overwhelming. They identify with the character; they go with it; they love Tom and his goal. The adults get a bit irritated, but we expected that. When you make something new, something different, people will always have their reservations. But the longer it is on television, the more people get used to the new programme and the new style. That’s something we also really value about the project. ■

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