

# “I’m running very fast but they can still catch me”

## WHEN TELEVISION BECOMES A TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE

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**In an IZI study, 510 children from 5 countries drew pictures in answer to the question “Have you ever had bad dreams from television?”**

Sensei Wu and the 4 Ninja apprentices look on, transfixed, as the Great Devourer comes to life and rises to his full terrifying height. His eyes glow red, his long fangs glitter, and he hisses threateningly. The Ninja warriors flee immediately, but the Great Devourer is hot on their heels, roaring and flicking its tongue. It devours everything that gets in its way and grows bigger, stronger and faster with every bite.

This or a similar sequence from the animated series *LEGO Ninjago: Masters of Spinjitzu* could have been seen by 8-year-old Aidan from Canada before the “Great Devourer” appeared to him in a dream: “The Great Devourer is go-

ing to eat me.” A creature which he fears will eat him, like the protagonists in the series, for which the recommended minimum age in Germany is 6. This is exactly what he drew in his picture (cf. Ill. 1 and 2). His fear of this dragon-like creature, probably also felt while watching the programme, has turned his dream into a nightmare.

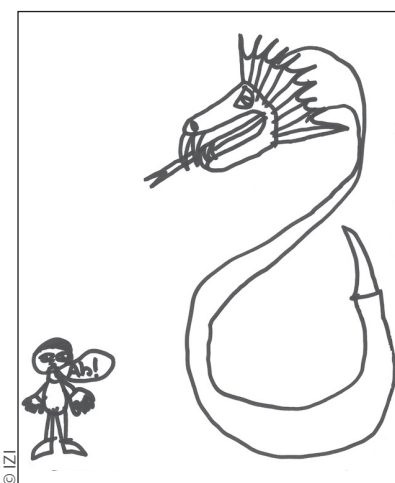
### NIGHTMARES FROM TV

Nightmares are defined as dream experiences full of fear and dread, where the dream content is remembered in great detail (Pietrowsky, 2011). As well as fear, nightmares can be associated with disgust, anger, and other negative emotions (Schredl, 1999).

Around 5% of adults suffer from the repeated occurrence of nightmares

(Pietrowsky, 2011). Nightmares are particularly frequent among children, however. Nearly every second child between the ages of 6 and 10 has nightmares at least occasionally (ibid.). Dream events are the continuation of what we experience while awake. Thus fears we have actually felt are reflected in our dreams (Domhoff, 1996). All our previous experiences, thoughts and feelings can find their way into our dreams. This includes what we have seen on television.

A survey of over 3,000 children comes to the conclusion that, for three quarters of children, what they have seen on TV, in videos or in films is reflected in their dreams. Media content influences the events in dreams considerably more than the things experienced during the day (Stephan et al., 2012). If children witness events on television which far exceed their ability to process them, this can become a traumatic experience (e.g. Reddemann & Dehner-Rau, 2008). They then experience feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, horror, and intense fear. Nightmares may be an attempt to cope with this emotional state of emergency.



Ill. 1 and 2: 8-year-old Aidan from Canada draws a dragon-like creature (right) from *The LEGO Ninjago* series (left) which caused him nightmares

### THE STUDY

510 children from Germany, Canada, New Zealand, Uganda and Brazil,<sup>1</sup> aged between 7 and 13, drew a picture in answer to the question “Have you ever had bad dreams from television?,” then described the content of the

picture and their dream. These descriptions were analysed to establish what the dream content was, where the nightmare came from, whether the children played an active part in the dream, or whether they replayed the media content without being involved themselves. The next step was to identify media traces, and analyse them comparatively across the 5 countries. The aim was to work out what elements of the nightmares came from the media.

### *Children do get nightmares from television ...*

8 out of 10 children were able to identify a nightmare that had clearly come from television. Girls report TV-related nightmares somewhat more often than boys. The frequency of the nightmares declines with age. If we compare the 5 countries, children from Germany are least likely to have bad dreams from television. Children from Uganda are most likely to do so.

### *... especially from adult programmes*

Three quarters of the films and TV programmes that gave children nightmares are, according to their statements, "for adults." This proportion was highest in Brazil, with 9 out of 10 children saying this. In each country, however, there were also a few children who had had nightmares after watching children's TV programmes.

### *Children talk about the bad dreams they get from TV*

6 out of 10 children told someone about their TV-related nightmare and do not deal with their overwhelming television experience and the horrible dream images on their own. Most often they tell their mother or a friend. The comparison between the 5 countries shows that children from New Zealand are least likely to share their nightmares with anyone. The children who took part in the study in Brazil are most likely to talk about their bad dreams.

## THE CHILDREN'S NIGHTMARES

The children's descriptions and pictures enable us to identify typical recurring patterns in which children's imaginations are shaken by TV experiences, and then reflected in their nightmares.

### *What humans or creatures can do to each other*

Children most often have nightmares about TV scenes in which they witness how a character's life is threatened, or he or she is seriously injured or even killed. What is crucial here is the (for them) new awareness about what acts humans, animals or creatures are capable of, and what they can do to each other. Children learn what cruelty is, and what previously unimaginable kinds of injury or killing are possible.

Children tell of dreams in which hands and feet are sawn off, a girl is nearly burnt to death, or a murderer cuts off people's faces. They also recount dreams where a stepmother cooks her stepdaughter and feeds her to her siblings, or a man eats eyes so he can see and ears so he can hear.

Physical acts of violence often actually take place in the dream and are replayed by the children. Older children in particular experienced these in their nightmares exactly as they had seen them on television, or in a similar form: "An Alien bites off one half of a man's head and the man reaches behind his head and pulls out a bit of his brain. Then he dies." (Amy, New Zealand, age 12) A comparison between the countries shows that such violent dream content occurred most frequently in Brazil, and least often in Germany.

Younger children in particular dream of the physical threat intended by a character, without the act of violence actually occurring in their nightmare. Here the outcome usually remains uncertain. 8-year-old Carol from Uganda awoke crying from her nightmare about the film *Wrong Turn*: "It was

about men who were eating people (...)

The nightmare I had was that we were going in a car with my aunt and an ugly man wanted to eat us, I cried loud." In her dream she experienced – personally, as it were – the threat of humans being killed, dismembered and then eaten by human-like creatures. Most of the dream descriptions in which the children defended themselves against their attackers, e.g. by killing the attacker with a sword blow, relate to the theme of physical threat.

Fighting or war scenes also become traumatic experiences for some children, if these scenes show them, to a previously unknown extent, how brutally humans or other creatures can treat each other.

### *How horrible humans and creatures can be*

Even just the traits and physical appearance of TV characters can constitute traumatic TV experiences for children. For Young (age 12) from Uganda, watching the Beast from *X-Men: First Class*, it was the combination of an abnormal exterior and superior power that gave him a nightmare: "It was a man with fingers as his feet, his body was full of hair, he was fast in running and he was powerful." It is not just previously unknown acts of violence or threats which cause nightmares, but the mere existence of certain people or creatures, and the realisation of what they can be like. The distinguishing feature of such beings is often that they are unnatural, in terms of their abilities, character traits, actions or physical appearance, and show a certain degree of demonisation, e.g. gigantic spiders, dinosaurs, Sharktopus (half shark, half octopus) or classic horror characters such as Freddy Krueger or Chucky. Children are particularly overwhelmed by beings whose motives are incomprehensible, and who are so evil and cruel that this surpasses the power of their imagination.

Some TV characters became a nightmare for children because they

underwent a transformation or were possessed by something. Here the nightmare may be caused both by the possibility of being transformed or possessed, and by the associated changes in appearance and character. Zombies, e.g. from the series *The Walking Dead*, are a particularly frequent source of children's nightmares.

Comparing the countries, it was striking how often children in Uganda had nightmares about animals, especially snakes. Snakes are a realistic threat to humans in Uganda, which is perhaps why this topic often comes up there in both fictional and non-fictional TV programmes. Some children, for example, mention programmes produced in Africa, containing drastic and dramatic depictions of how snakes (or snake-like creatures) attack or eat protagonists.

#### *Situations the children could end up in*

Television also shows children the threatening situations they could get into. Situations in which they are defenceless, helpless and alone can be extremely vivid and overwhelming: "This evil man took this girl from a Halloween party and he put her on a train and he locked her in a wooden box and there was a dead person in there but nobody knows that she's there and it's midnight." In her nightmare, a 12-year-old girl relived virtually the exact scenario experienced by a protagonist from the TV series *Pretty Little Liars*, with the attendant desperation and the physical inability to act. She thus became aware of a danger which she had perhaps never thought about before this TV experience, a danger which has played no part in her life thus far – and probably never will. Children's imaginative capacity is so far exceeded, and the threatening, cruel new possibilities are so overwhelming, that they cannot reconcile this with their previous knowledge about the world. This leads to nightmares.

Often children dream about being chased by TV characters. For example, 12-year-old Clara from Uganda: "There

were 3 snakes. They were biting me, I run and run;" or 12-year-old Khan from Canada: "A giant robot monster with a Gatling gun was chasing me trying to cut me in half and kill me!" As with dreams of being chased, children's desperation and feeling of being overwhelmed become clear in situations of threat such as being kidnapped or imprisoned. Janine (age 12) tells of an evil witch who wants to take her away, and Jenny (age 10, Germany), after seeing a film about a girl's disappearance, *The Lovely Bones*, dreams that she is lured into a house by her neighbour: "We went in, and when I was inside the man wanted to kill me."

Disasters and accidents are also situations children often first encounter on television. José (age 9) from Brazil, for example, had a nightmare because he had seen on television how "a car hits a lamp post with some people inside and they all die." 12-year-old Madison from New Zealand learnt about an earthquake and the possible threat of a tsunami in the news. She draws her nightmare, in which this natural disaster destroys her family, and com-

ments: "My whole family is dead and I almost drowned."

### THE THEMES OF CHILDREN'S NIGHTMARES

If fear becomes predominant when watching television, children feel overwhelmed and powerless. The more intense their emotional reaction while watching television, and the less able they are to distance themselves from it, the more likely it is that what they have seen will be worked on in their dreams. Certain recurring themes can be identified on the basis of the children's descriptions of nightmares (cf. Ill. 3). Scenes from the programme viewed beforehand are replayed or relived in dreams, either in exactly the same form or with modifications. Some children state explicitly that they watched the things they had seen on television happening again in their dream ("I saw how/that ..."). Two thirds of the children used this type of dream to process what they had seen; this increased with age. In other cases the

Theme	Description
Physical violence	Injury or killing by a character; act of violence actually happens and is the most important aspect
Physical threat	Threat or attack by another character; act of violence does not take place, outcome uncertain
Appearance of creatures	A character appears whose looks or traits make him threatening, no direct intention to threaten
Being chased	Being chased by a character, fleeing/running away is the most important aspect, outcome uncertain
Paranormal phenomena	Supernatural, mystical or inexplicable events
Accidents & disasters	Involvement in accident (e.g. car accident) or disaster scenario (e.g. natural disaster)
Desperation & hopelessness	Helplessness, defencelessness, powerlessness, being alone; spatial aspect and physical limitations are the most important aspects
Transformation & possession	Transformation or being possessed; act in itself or change in appearance or traits is frightening
Being kidnapped/taken away	Being kidnapped, imprisoned, taken away or caught by a character
Fighting and war	Fighting between characters in film/TV programme; getting emotionally involved in outcome (i.e. who will win)

Ill. 3: Themes of children's nightmares

children are involved in the action of the dream themselves. Here they may go through similar situations to the protagonists in the films/programmes they have seen, find themselves in exactly the same role as a character, or interact with other characters from the film or TV programme. In some cases it was not (only) the children themselves who played a part in the dream: their families were involved in the events of the dream, and were in danger.

In all 5 countries, children frequently experience physical violence in their nightmares. Here they tend to replay what they have seen on television, and are less likely to be personally involved in the events of the dream. For example, 12-year-old Lilli from Germany describes her TV-related bad dream as if she were an external observer: "It was about a monster that tore apart a man with its claws."

Dreams in which children are in danger are most often those involving a physical threat. They then see themselves as being threatened by another character in their dream. Here no actual act of violence takes place, and the outcome is often open and remains uncertain. 12-year-old Esperanza from Canada, for example, states that "Chucky was trying to kill me and I was screaming and crying."

Another theme that often shapes children's dreams, most frequently in Germany and Canada, is seeing individual characters appear. Humans, beings or creatures from television can be so frightening and overwhelming that they appear in nightmares. They usually do so without an explicit intention to threaten, and in 9 out of 10 cases the child is not personally involved.

### NIGHTMARES FROM CHILDREN'S TV

The majority of films and programmes that inspire nightmares are not age-appropriate. There are also children, however, who report having bad dreams from children's programmes and children's films. Many children had nightmares from family/adventure fantasy films, such as the *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings* series. For example Mia (age 11, New Zealand) dreamed of being chased by the man-eating spiders from *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*: "They were after me because I had asked for directions out of the forest and they just said that I wouldn't get out because I would die first." (cf. Ill. 4) 11-year-old Damian dreams and draws a picture showing how the Mad Hatter from the movie *Alice in Wonderland* is decapitated.

Even TV content produced for younger children can be overwhelming for children. For 8-year-old Lina from Germany, for example, a protagonist from the film *Coraline* (recommended minimum age in Germany: 6) turned into a nightmare: "In my dream the woman had button eyes, and was always sewing dolls that looked like children. (...) The woman pretended to be nice because she wants to sew button eyes on the child, and she likes eating the child's soul." In the case of 8-year-old Aidan from Canada, his fear of the over-powerful "Great Devourer" from the animated series *LEGO Ninjago: Masters of Spinjitzu* (recommended minimum age in Germany: 6) is also particularly

obvious (cf. Ill. 1 and 2). Presumably the powerlessness he feels when facing the creature in his nightmare is similar to what he felt in relation to his frightening TV experience; this became a traumatic experience which he tried to process in his nightmare.

### WHEN TV EXPERIENCES BECOME NIGHTMARES

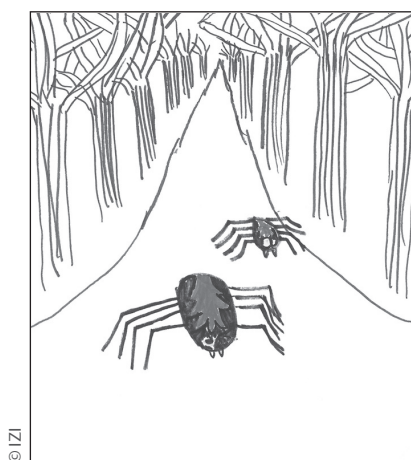
Television mainly causes nightmares when programme content exceeds children's previous imaginative capacity, in an uncontrollable, overwhelming way. Their previously unquestioned assumptions are shattered. They experience something that they have trouble integrating into their view of the world. Here it scarcely matters, especially for younger children, how realistic these events really are. They react with emotions such as fear, helplessness and horror. It is therefore possible to speak of traumatic TV experiences, which children cannot deal with. Their processing abilities are exceeded. The things they have experienced remain present, as if in temporary storage, and trigger nightmares, perhaps as a means of being processed.

### WHAT MAKES A NIGHTMARE?

Analysis of the children's descriptions showed that fear and its more extreme forms, horror and terror, were the feelings most often associated with nightmares. The fears actually experienced by the children while watching television are reflected in their dreams. The experience of fear while watching television differs considerably between individuals and age groups. The children's pictures and descriptions in all 5 countries reveal typical fear-inducing elements on television which also trigger nightmares.

#### Representation of physical violence

Many children, well into their school years, can barely tolerate images of vio-



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Ill. 4: 11-year-old Mia from New Zealand dreamed of being chased by the man-eating spiders from *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*



lent acts and physical injuries. Blood, torment and pain, seeing someone being eaten, shot or tortured, fights and images of dead bodies are impressions that shock children even in very short sequences. Scenes that show people actually being injured are particularly likely to upset children. If children witness how brutally humans or other creatures can treat each other, this usually leads to nightmares.

### *Unimaginably cruel beings*

Children are afraid of characters that represent danger in the context of the film: beings with incomprehensible motives, supernatural abilities, evil intentions, or a threatening physical appearance. Seeing such beings appear is frightening at the time of viewing, and the images often remain in children's heads for a long time, because they are perceived as unpredictable and therefore worrying. Creatures which are so evil and cruel that they exceed the power of the imagination overwhelm young viewers, and can then reappear in their nightmares.

### *Threatening and unsettling situations*

Scenes where characters are exposed to a threat, and where they are defenceless, helpless and alone, can be very overwhelming for children. Such scenes are then relived in nightmares. These include: threats to a protagonist's life, chase scenes, scenes of fighting, or the fact that someone is trapped in a precarious situation, e.g. imprisoned. Children get caught up in these scenes in quite a different way to adults, who have more TV experience. Even a disquieting tone makes them expect bad things (cf. Götz in this issue). Certain settings, such as secluded places or darkness, can exacerbate their fear. If the dramatic structure is then used to create suspense, this is often almost unbearable for children, and generates considerable emotional tension. If children become intensely involved in such scenes, and discover previously unimagined threaten-

ing situations which they could get into, this can lead to nightmares. The emotional involvement is even more intense if profound fears such as "being alone" or "being abandoned" are evoked.

### *Realistic threats*

While younger children are more likely to develop fears in response to fictional content, as they grow older they are increasingly prone to fears about dangers related to reality. With increasing age, and the ability to distinguish more clearly between reality and fiction, children become aware of actually existing threats. The fear of situations such as accidents or natural disasters increases, and may be expressed in nightmares.

## CONCLUSION

Nearly all the respondents had experienced fear and nightmares from television, and were able to describe and draw these in great detail. Most children had seen content which was not age-appropriate and which had overwhelmed them. Nightmares can potentially draw attention to important issues in life, and thus perform a positive function. Among children, they can reveal social fears, such as the fear of doing something embarrassing in front of others, or fear of failure at school. Here the content of dreams has an individual meaning for children's lives. However, most TV content which turns into nightmares for children has no useful purpose in terms of helping them to cope with life. These are extremely unrealistic events, far removed from their lives, which are shocking and overwhelming. The children are overwhelmed and powerless, feel – perhaps for the first time – horror and terror, and do not know how to categorise what they have seen, or what it might have to do with their lives. The protective mechanisms that create distance break down, the children are overcome by their emotions, and the viewing situ-

ation becomes a traumatic TV experience, leading to nightmares. This makes it clear how important it is to protect children from such overwhelming situations. Children should not (have to) see any TV content that makes them feel defenceless and unable to act. A clear distinction must be made between pleasurable excitement (cf. article on thrill of Unterstell & Müller in this issue), which children can cope with and enjoy, and traumatising TV experiences which exceed the power of their imagination. These can only be processed with great difficulty, and may lead to long-lasting and stressful fear responses.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Our sincere thanks to the national research teams who organized the study: Dr. Ruth Zanker and Judith Duncan (New Zealand), Florence Namasinga (Uganda), Ana Lucia Lima (Brazil), Kristen McGregor (Canada).

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