

“So, what’s so funny about that?”

HUMOUR IN CHILDREN’S TV

Maya Götz/Maria Berg

In an IZI study 510 children aged between 7 and 13 from Canada, Uganda, Brazil, New Zealand and Germany drew and described television scenes which really made them laugh.

THE STUDY

“Please try to remember a situation when something you saw on TV really made you laugh” – 510 children aged between 7 and 13 from Canada, Uganda, Brazil, New Zealand and Germany¹ drew and described television scenes answering this question. Among them, for example, 12-year-old Mike from New Zealand, who really laughed about “a guy playing arrow roulette with his old basketball team. He stood too long and got an arrow in his left foot.” (cf. Ill. 1) But why is this scene funny?

Analysis has identified up to 41 typical elements of humour in children’s television (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004), from absurdity to irreverent behaviour (lacking proper respect for authorities) and visual surprise (sudden, unexpected visual/physical change). These can all be funny for children (cf. Prommer in this issue). In the end, it depends on the context, i.e. to what extent it is meaningful to children and offers them the opportunity to feel good. Through this perspective it is also possible to interpret the scenes the children drew and described for us. We were able to bring out particular paradigms that really make children laugh when watching television. Many

of the scenes mentioned come from animation programmes such as *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *Tom and Jerry* or *Family Guy*, but other comedy formats, such as *iCarly* or *The Big Bang Theory* are also named. In addition, various variants of *Candid Camera* and prank shows are mentioned. The scenes come from analogue/digital television, but a variety of videos also come from the Internet, mostly from the YouTube platform. Despite all the differences in genres, programmes and ways of access, some typical basic paradigms can be identified in these scenes. Some of the ones that are mentioned the most will be briefly introduced in the following.

What really makes you laugh ...

To go beyond something familiar aesthetically

“A guy [is] crashing into a big, red, inflated rubber ball”, says Chan, a 12-year-old from Canada, describing a scene which really made him laugh (cf. Ill. 2 and 3). The scene is from the game show *Wipeout*, in which one of the things the candidates have to do is successfully complete an obstacle course with totally oversized obstacles. The comic element is to be found more on the aesthetic level, in the sense of the Greek meaning of *aísthēsis* = perception. Familiar images and sounds



Ill. 1: Mike (12 years, New Zealand) laughed about a scene from *Grown Ups* in which 4 men play “arrow roulette”

are challenged. The scene goes beyond the boy’s knowledge of what obstacles are like. An aesthetic incongruity arises. His perceptual world thus far is teased, “tickled,” so to speak, which is funny in itself. This in combination with funny movements (hopping and balancing) as part of a documentary history (“it is genuine”), with a challenge and a certain degree of danger (of falling in a pool of water), stimulates the mirror neurons. The result: a tense following of the scene and elated excitement. An unexpected movement or plot development on top of this makes the viewers laugh out loud. Whether *SpongeBob*’s body changes form or *Tom and Jerry*’s various ways of chasing and “doing away” each other, they all “tickle” the viewer’s perception, and the coherent mood that is created as a result of story and musical setting makes them simply really funny. In terms of their amusement, the children themselves do not stumble over



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Ill. 2 and 3: Chan (12 years, Canada) laughed about a scene from *Wipeout* in which the candidates have to jump over oversized obstacles

the fact that the “doing away with one another” can be interpreted as highly violent and life-threatening content (cf. vom Orde in this issue). For them it is distinctly beyond reality (Aufenanger, 1996).

Slapstick and the minor misfortunes of others

It is mainly aesthetic humour that makes slapstick scenes funny. When in a Brazilian variety show a man “did not see a banana and slipped,” for 9-year-old Paulo that is just funny. It looks funny, it is a minor misfortune, and the boy was not expecting it – it produces a feeling of surprise. Same for 10-year-old Max from Germany who laughed heartily at a scene from the movie *Die Wilden Kerle* [*The Wild Soccer Bunch*] in which 2 friends, both in a hurry, collide with each other: “Raban runs as fast as he can to the soccer ground. But as he [runs] round the corner of the wall, Leon comes round the corner and crashes right into Raban.” The movie scene is set up through camera perspective and editing in such a way that the children watching the movie know that the 2 boys will bump into each other right on the corner. However, instead of just standing before each other in surprise, as would probably have happened in reality, the protagonists crash into one another and fall backwards onto their bottoms. The viewers fol-

low the development with tension, knowing what will happen on the basis of what they know about everyday life, but then a gag involving a “bigger than life” performance does actually surprise them. That is funny.

Play with expectations

Laughing at something on television is closely connected with the dramaturgical involvement of the viewer. Children become involved, put themselves into the situation, and then they are surprised – in this sense they are “tickled” on various levels. This is what happened to 11-year-old Peter from Canada who laughed at a candy commercial by the brand *Skittles*: “What happened was that the guy saw 2 little doors, so he went for the one straight ahead, he opened it and Skittles came out. So he went to the next one and a lion punched him.” The first opening of the door creates the frame of expectation, but instead of the desired candy, what appears in the second door is a lion who strikes the man. Children



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Ill. 4 and 5: Addie (12 years, Canada) draws her favourite funny scene from *Despicable Me 2*: Agnes misspeaks during a wedding speech

– like all viewers – put themselves into a situation and develop a presupposition on the basis of their visual experience. If this is breached (incongruity), the intellect is “tickled.”

Play on language and meaning

As in previous studies (e.g. Neuß, 2006), particularly

funny moments are often rooted in scenes in which there is a clever, child-appropriate wordplay. *SpongeBob* and *Patrick*, for example, are in a cave when Patrick replies to *SpongeBob*'s question: “*SpongeBob*, it’s too dark; I can’t hear you.” 12-year-old Anna from Germany found this nonsensical answer “hysterical.” When the movie character Agnes in *Despicable Me 2* misspeaks during her speech for the bridal couple and “instead of saying ‘I’d like to make a toast,’ she says ‘I’d like to make some toast,’” for 12-year-old Addie from Canada this is hilarious (cf. Ill. 4 and 5). The slip of the tongue gives rise to a meaning that does not suit the context (incongruity). Again, the intellect is “tickled.” Children are mostly very receptive to this kind of playing with meanings. This can only be funny, however, if the frames of reference are familiar, i.e. the common figure of speech is at least part of the passive vocabulary and the new meaning can be interpreted. The deviation from the familiar gives rise to a feeling of slight,

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surprising insight, and this is evoked by the emotional centres that release neuroplastic messenger substances in the brain (Hüther, 2009).

When tricks are played

Scenes in which tricks are played on people or people are fooled are often described as funny. 10-year-old Victoria from Brazil explains why she really laughed at the Brazilian show *Programa Silvio Santos*: “A girl dressed like a ghost is hiding behind a door at an elevator. A young woman enters the elevator and suddenly the lights go out and the elevator stops. The girl dressed like a ghost shouts, the young woman also shouts, then the lights turn on and the girl goes back behind the door.” The girl herself probably briefly flinched whilst watching television when this happened. She probably enjoyed the moment of fear and the adrenalin rush, and then, so to speak, transformed the energy into a hearty laugh. She was probably eagerly awaiting the reactions of, at the latest, the next person to appear in the programme, enjoying her own fright, her little emotional shudder, with relish.

When little heroes prevail

What works well for most children are stories in which little heroes win against bigger ones. When Tom the cat tries in different ways to gobble up Jerry the mouse, children have more sympathy with the little hero. If there is then a scene such as “When Tom was walking, Jerry saw Tom, Jerry hit Tom and Tom started sinking in the air” (Fatima, 10 years old, Uganda; cf. Ill. 6), then children laugh out loud. Here it is not the act of violence in the sense of destruction that is felt to be funny, rather the fact that a small character has won over a big one. Children often sympathise with the underdog and the physically smaller figure. They too are often inferior underdogs who often fall short of other’s expectations, who are powerless and physically smaller. If a little character can then assert him/

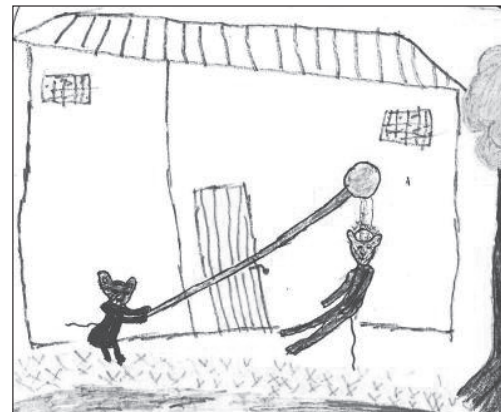
herself, and can do so in a surprising and outsized way (“bigger than life”), the aesthetic component and the unexpected plot development cause a pleasant feeling primarily on the level of identity. The scene “tickles” one’s self-esteem and confirms the healthy self-confidence of being able to do significantly more than might seem the case at first glance. These are scenes which, from a psychological point of view, enable an emotional compensation for debasements and vilifications that have been experienced, offering the child the possibility of staying in good mental health (Götz, 2014).

When justice is done

How the characters are positioned morally is important for many children if they are to feel a scene is really funny. A boy from Brazil remembers, for example, a scene from *The Road Runner Show* which really made him laugh. The coyote tries to fool the road runner, placing dynamite on a rock. “The coyote thought that the dynamite would not explode and came close to have a look. When he came close, it exploded and the rock fell on him.” (Danilo, 10 years old, Brazil) It is partly the aesthetic, it is partly what can be expected of the situation in the battle between Coyote and Road Runner, but it is also precisely the justice that the bad one does not win, and wanders into his own trap. This is presented not only on a slightly, but on an enormously exaggerated scale that is also beyond real occurrences. In this sense it is not about aggressive violence in the sense of destruction and serious damage, rather about “funny violence” (Aufenanger, 1996), which children from school age at the latest can identify clearly. Correspondingly, it is not delight in the pain of others that 12-year-old

feels when watching the scene from the film *Grown Ups*, in which 4 grown men play “arrow roulette” (cf. previous page). An arrow is fired into the air and everyone tries to get out of its way. As one of them boastfully celebrates that he has won, he gets “an arrow in his left foot.” To answer the question in the introduction as to why this scene is funny, it is surely a combination of the aesthetic joke (contortion of the face, loud screaming), the exceptionally absurd situation (grown men fire arrows into the air and wait), and the moment of surprise. In addition, the scene evokes *schadenfreude* because the arrow hits “the right man” and justice is done to a certain extent.

We can assume that there are similar contexts behind the *schadenfreude* that arises when people make a fool of themselves on a talent show. “There is someone up on stage singing on the *X Factor*. She is really bad at singing but she thinks that she is really good. And the crowd is booing her. The judges are hating it too.” (Amy, 12 years old, New Zealand) As is clearly verifiable in studies with talent show fans, children adopt a judging reception position when watching television. They feel superior to the candidates, in particular to those who are presented as freaks, and they judge them as if they themselves were the jurors. Children assume that reality is being documented here. They overlook the



Ill. 6: Fatima (10 years, Uganda) laughed out loud when Jerry hit Tom with a stick

fact, however, that the programmes are clearly directed and the candidates are staged as particular types. In addition, whereas an animation character suffers no pain, and actors acting in a funny commercial suffer no lasting consequences, taking part in a talent show can be permanently associated with humiliation and years of malice for the candidates (Götz, Bulla & Mendel, 2013). There is an urgent need for training in media ethics for those in positions of responsibility, and modules in media education for children and young people.

Country-specific tendencies and global trends

Overall, as in previous studies, it is evident that there are mainly similarities in what children from different countries find particularly funny. The differences actually lie in the programmes mentioned, and in this sense they are primarily dependent on the selection of programmes on offer. If *Tom and Jerry* is the series that is most frequently identified as funny in Uganda, this is mainly because in most households the child-appropriate programmes on offer are restricted to this and similar classics. If in Brazil the telenovela *Chiquititas* is mentioned more frequently, this is also because it is part of Brazilian television culture. The high number of scenes from YouTube or other video portals described by children from Canada and New Zealand as particularly funny is probably to be seen in the context of the high level of infrastructure and open-mindedness towards the issue of children and the Internet. What is new are so-called vine videos – very short video sequences that are published within social networks (Twitter or Facebook) and run on an infinite loop. Transnational trends are generated through, for example, globally marketed media brands. In the period of the study these included the minions from the films in the *Despicable Me* series. When children describe what

really made them laugh, it is firstly their funny appearance, “Little animals that look like a banana” (Bartolomeu, 11 years old, Brazil), and the funny sounds, “The minion is talking out of a speaker phone saying ‘bedoo bedoo bedoo’ like a fire truck. I don’t know why but it made me laugh.” (Claudia, 11 years old, New Zealand) It is also, though, the funny little moments in the plot, for the minions fulfil their needs impulsively and with relish. “They are fighting over a banana.” (Mia, 12 years old, New Zealand) Feelings like annoyance are converted suddenly and directly: “All the minions were singing except for the one lying on the ground. He was blowing a party thing and I guess one minion was annoyed so he punched the other minion in the face.” (Pam, 11 years old, Canada) The children know these impulses to act, but normally they can control them well. Watching comic characters who realise these directly “tickles” one’s own restrained impulses to act. If in the scenes this play with norms and zones of shame is then also converted into action with relish, this generates laughter: “One of them sits on his butt on the printer and then he prints out his butt.” (Jan, 9 years old, Germany) In this sense the minions embody various typical paradigms of what on television causes children to laugh out loud: little comic creatures who look and sound funny. They act in scenes reflecting what children know as impulse and desire but do not dare to fantasise about, let alone convert into action. These are taken up and exaggerated again with relish and surprise. An ideal representation of the child’s perspective, an appreciation of little heroes, who in their own way play a trick on the big and powerful ones, and of the justice in helping the big ones and the little ones to victory. This happens in a way that always pleasantly “tickles” one’s aesthetic sensitivity, plays with language and meaning, and positively surprises the imagination with “bigger than life” performances. ■

NOTE

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THE AUTHORS

Maya Götz, Dr. phil., is Head of the IZI and of the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL, Munich, Germany.



Maria Berg, M.A. *Communication Studies*, works at IZI, Munich, Germany, and is responsible, i.a., for the project “Guessing Games.”

