



# FIVE-YEAR-OLDS' FASCINATION FOR TELEVISION

## A comparative study

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Is there a difference between children's reception of a programme from a public service channel and a programme from a commercial channel? This article is based on a comparative, qualitative study of a public service and a commercial programme with 20 5-year-old children. The empirical approach highlighted children's understanding of, identification and fascination with the two television programmes. Furthermore, the study also dealt with the parents' perspectives as well as potential discrepancies between the parental perspectives and the child's perspectives. The children were particularly fascinated by sequences containing affective components such as conflicts and aggression. Sixteen children out of 20 chose the programme from the commercial channel. The parents intuitively showed insight into what their child chose and why. However, when comparing the parents' choice with the children's, we found that the children appeared to create their own alternative television culture – a possible 'counter-culture' – as opposed to an adult media culture. This type of research may facilitate a more multifaceted image of the child audience.

### Introduction

Much of the public debate has focused on worries about television and its effects on viewers. A central concern has been that of possible negative effects. This attitude has to a large extent determined the research agenda regarding children and television. Such a perspective can, at best, obscure how complex this field of research is, and prevent us from exploring in greater depth what children themselves have to say about their relationship with television (Buckingham, 1993). Another prominent perspective is children's media use and preferences. Further theoretical perspectives have

focused upon experience and understanding of television. Such a tradition moves beyond the question of use, and has focused on the meaning that is created between the text and the viewer. The prolific American television series *Sesame Street* contributed to this shift in focus. Such a perspective brings about increased interest in qualitative media research in general and reception studies in particular. Some of these studies are conducted within the framework of 'cultural studies'. In cultural studies the focus is on the varied 'readings' individuals construct from the content and how they make sense of it. Tannis M. MacBeth (1996) also focuses on the relationship between the child and the media as a dynamic relationship, in which the child is active in making sense of what they watch. David Buckingham, who has been eminent in the research of children's use and understanding of television (Buckingham, 1993, 1996), also stresses this point of view. Within the Nordic countries, the following qualitative studies have highlighted the child's own perspective: *Sesame for Norwegian Children*<sup>1</sup> (Åm, 1991), *TV-Viewing in a Socializing Perspective* (Tingstad, 1994), *Making Sense of TV-Narratives: Children's Reading of a Fairy Tale* (Rydin, 1996), *TV – The Electronic Family Member* (Løngreen and Holm Sørensen, 1996) and *Sesame to the Television Text* (Seip Tønnessen, 1999).

My central concern in this respect is not the effects of television, but the ways in which children read and make sense of it. Researchers have had a tendency to focus on meaning, while they have neglected the central question of 'pleasure' (Buckingham, 1993). Attempts to study the role of television in children's affective development have generally been quite inadequate, states Dorr (1982).

Buckingham maintains that very little attention is paid to the diverse ways in which children make sense of what they watch. He further states that there has been comparatively little research into the emotional dimensions of children's relationship with television (Buckingham, 1993). My study focuses on children's reception seen both from a cognitive and an affective point of view: What reflections and emotions do these programmes evoke? It is a comparative study focusing on children's fascination for two programmes within the same genre; programmes that are archetypal of two television channels with different purposes: one being a public service channel, and the other a commercial channel.

### *Theoretical concepts*

*The theory of schemata* is applied as one of the main concepts to explain the dynamic relationship between the child and television and how the child meets television with assumptions and expectations that will form understanding and fascination. According to cognitive theory within the context of television (Berry and Asamen, 1993; Højjer, 1992), people create meaning using schemata – a set of expectations created through earlier experiences – both in a general sense and specifically through television. These schemata

are formed partly through interaction with the text, and partly through earlier experiences and structures that are evoked while watching. Schemata theory underlines our active construction of reality. The young viewers in their role as 'active constructors', are a fundamental dimension underlying the design in this study.

*Fascination* is another central concept. It is applied to characterize how children experience the television programmes. The concept is borrowed from Fausing (1977, 1993). Fausing, among others, describes fascination as 'meeting aesthetic experiences' and fascination in relation to play as 'the lustful panic'.<sup>2</sup> Fascination includes elements of excitement, delight and titillation, and at the same time a certain degree of hesitance, but nevertheless enjoyment. It includes attraction as well as gleeful terror. The concept therefore includes an ambivalence: A sentiment or attitude that involves enthusiasm, attraction and/or a tense, sceptical attitude as well as a certain reluctance towards impressions.

Buckingham speaks about 'the ambiguous pleasure' (Buckingham, 1993: 139) in order to describe such an ambivalence. Cognitive and affective elements are often considered to be separate elements in the reception process (Dorr, 1982). Buckingham (1993, 1996) uses the concepts of both 'pleasure' and 'unpleasure' in relation to the children's television experiences. These concepts include both pleasure and terrifying experiences, and may result in considerable ambivalence. Both pleasure and terrifying experiences are dimensions that are included in the concept of fascination, as is the case in this study.

*Identification* is also relevant in order to illustrate the affective elements of the television experience. Identification describes a relationship which is established between the viewer and a media figure. Rydin (1996) describes identification as the viewer's emotional involvement with a character or a situation. It is a form of emotional involvement in which the viewer is attracted to a character or a situation that reinforces the viewer's emotional reactions. This partly implies that the viewer identifies with a mass media character, or that the viewer wishes that he or she were this person. Often there is a combination of the two (von Feilitzen et al., 1989).

### *Key questions*

1. Is there a difference between children's fascination for a commercial and a public service programme?
2. What are the characteristics of a text that children are highly attracted to, and how does this compare to the text that children are *not* attracted to?
3. Confronted with both a public service programme and a commercial television programme, which would the children choose?
4. What is the relationship between fascination, understanding and the children's preferences?

5. To what extent is there a correspondence between children's and parents' evaluation of the programmes?

### The text

The empirical basis in the study was a children's television programme from the commercial television channel, TV3, and another from the Norwegian public service channel, NRK. Test panels from both NRK and TV3 chose three programmes within the same genre from their own channel. It was from these programmes that the final programme selection for NRK and TV3 would be made. The test panels ensured that the two programmes were typical of the children's programmes shown on these two channels. There were numerous reasons behind the final selection decisions which were made (the programmes being *Spot and his Grandparents Go to the Carnival* and *Beethoven*). The test panel from NRK had the following reasons for choosing *Spot*:

The programme was the one which was most relevant for the target group, because it referred to children's everyday life. Both the dramaturgical scheme and the story constituted a programme that is close to children's everyday life. It gives an opportunity for identification and recognition, showing the children how to solve conflicts in their real life.<sup>3</sup>

TV3's test panel stated these reasons for choosing *Beethoven*:

The programme is suitable both for the youngest children and the older ones, up to 12 years. It is aimed at a broad target group, but it also appeals to the youngest children. It is not too advanced for them. The two other programmes that were discussed were too intense and rather frightening for preschool children. *Beethoven* is typical for TV3's target group, and is neutral as to male/female sex in the sense that it appeals both to boys and girls. *Beethoven* is based on a film which is well-known to Norwegian children.<sup>4</sup>

Both programmes were produced for established children's television schedules. They were approximately similar in length, were both animated films, and both had dogs as their main characters. These are well known characters to many children in Norway through films and books. In this way possible differences in fascination may be attributed to differences in experience and not to differences in genre, length or main characters.

### The television programmes

The plot of NRK's *Spot and his Grandparents Go to the Carnival* goes as follows. When Spot arrives at Grandma and Grandpa's house on carnival day, they have a special surprise waiting for him: in the shed is a real fire engine, the one that Grandpa used to work with when he was a chief fireman. Spot and all of his friends are going to ride on it with Grandma and Grandpa in the carnival parade.

Before they get that far, however, there are some important rescues to be made. Grandma's cat gets stuck in a tree. She was frightened by the monkey blowing the trumpet. And the brass band's float breaks down. Fortunately, Spot comes up with an idea and everyone reaches the carnival parade in time. The carnival parade was the highlight of a perfect day, the best day Grandma and Grandpa could have planned. Grandma got a prize because she had made the best cake for the carnival festival. Grandma gave Spot the prize because he had saved the day.<sup>5</sup>

*Beethoven* (TV3) consists of two different episodes: *Dear George* and *The Pound* which the children watch uninterrupted. In the first episode, *Dear George*, Beethoven is doing several tricks. George, his master, had given him a ball when he was a puppy so he should not feel lonely. Every time he goes to sleep, he has to have the ball with him. But he has lost it in a bin. Beethoven cannot sleep alone. He wants to sleep with George, his 'boss'. George tries to go to sleep, but Beethoven wakes him up several times, making George very angry. Beethoven tries several tricks to get indoors to George and he runs away from the dog yard all the time. All the obstacles that George puts up to keep Beethoven in the yard are of no use. Beethoven always finds ways of getting into George's house. At last, George is trying to fall asleep, but he is not able to do this before he lies down beside Beethoven. In the end, Beethoven and George sleep happily together.

In the second episode, *The Pound*, the dog Sparkey is caught by the dog warden and put into the pound. Sparkey's friends are looking for him and finally they find him in the pound. They try to set him free. One of the dogs gnaws at the chain on the door, while a hamster creeps through the letterbox and opens the door using the door handle. All the dogs pass the dog warden and find their way out of the prison. When the dogs are free, they are happily gnawing bones outside on the lawn.<sup>6</sup>

## Method

There were 20 5-year-old children, 10 boys and 10 girls, participating in this study. They represented ordinary television-viewing children in Norway. Norwegian preschool children have a relative homogeneous viewing pattern (Hake, 1998). The 5-year-olds were selected because they are well-established television viewers, and basically have a more homogeneous background than older children, who gain experience of a wider variety of social arenas. Neither of the programmes had been on the air previously, and so had not been watched by any of the children participating in the study. The key questions were attempted to be operationalized through three different methodological approaches:

1. Qualitative interviews,
2. Video observation,

3. Questionnaire to the parents concerning their evaluation of the programmes. In addition, three parents were interviewed individually.

### *The qualitative interview*

The qualitative interview was conducted in a relatively open-ended, semi-structured way. The introduction was 'Tell me about what you just watched. What was it all about?' This reflects a non-directive technique where the children may reconstruct what they experienced as being personally most relevant. In this way we might uncover the children's 'immediate fascination' – what they immediately present as the first theme in their free reconstruction of the story. 'A guided reconstruction' (Rydin, 1996) that leads the children through the story from one sequence to another followed 'the free reconstruction.' At the end the children were asked the following question:

'Now we are going to pretend that it is your birthday. Then we pretend that I give you a birthday present. I want to give you either a *Beethoven* videocassette or a *Spot* videocassette – a *Spot* videocassette or a *Beethoven* videocassette. Which one do you prefer?'

It was an important point to link this question to a concrete, well-known situation such as a birthday present. In this way it was easier for 5-year-old children to identify with a situation than if they were confronted with an abstract choice.

### *Video observation*

Video observation gives us data on an experiential level and highlights the children's body language, facial expressions and mimicry. The aim of this methodological strategy is to go beyond verbal expressions, to reveal 'the unspoken dimension' (Hake, 1997). To interpret children's fascination for a programme only on the basis of qualitative interviews would be to underestimate the complicated process of reception. When children are asked to reconstruct a story, we ask them to remember, understand and make inferences – a cognitive process. Children do not only retell a story, they reconstruct on the basis of what they experience as most significant. The affective dimensions of the viewing experience are much more difficult to articulate. Therefore video observation will include areas of experience not necessarily explored through interviews. The younger the participants are, the more important it becomes to use other methods in addition to qualitative interviews, since younger participants do not have the vocabulary with which they can express their experiences in an adequate and comprehensive manner.

The videotapes last for approximately 50 minutes and give a full view of the children's body language and facial expressions while they are watching. The tapes reflect a rather varied picture of the children's reactions. Some children show little variation in facial expressions and body language

and are very concentrated in the viewing situation. Others give a more varied impression. They smile, frown, lie down or leave the screen for a while. To try to interpret certain facial expressions as an indication of fascination (or absence of such) involves a significant amount of subjective interpretation. The researcher has to be very sensitive in order to grasp very small nuances.

### *Reliability and validity*

In the complete report (Hake, 1999) I have discussed several questions concerning reliability and validity. In this article I focus on two of them.

Reflective analysis and interpretation of the results are elements that may strengthen the reliability of the study (Heap, 1988). In this study, such reflective work is achieved through discussing the analysis and interpretations with a co-researcher. This is particularly pertinent with the video observations in which the subjective factor may be strong. The two researchers' respective categorization and interpretation of the results correspond to a large extent. This may be an indication of inter-rater reliability.

In this study I find it especially important to reflect upon my identity as a researcher working in NRK. Have my analysis and interpretation of results been influenced by this position and has this caused a possible selective interpretation of the results? I have tried to counteract this by continually reflecting upon 'surprising' results and adopt a critical outlook on analysis – to counteract the possibility of biased interpretations. As Kvale says: 'To validate is . . . in general to play the devil's advocate towards his or her own findings' (Kvale, 1996: 242).

*Data triangulation:* It strengthens the validity of the results to apply different approaches when considering the same questions. For instance, data from qualitative interviews may be compared with other sets of data, in this case video observations. Observational data may supplement and adjust interpretations from interviews, or vice versa. Observational data may reinforce or weaken information derived from interviews and may give additional information that is not easily obtained through another method.

### *Analysis*

The interviews were analysed as a whole, but also on the basis of the following categories: focus, understanding, narrative style and identification.

*Focus:* What do the children experience as the most important themes in the story? This is reflected by which of the themes or sequences they spontaneously retell and most frequently mention in their retelling.

*Understanding:* To what extent did the children understand the main points in the story expressed in their retelling or guided reconstruction?

Understanding is recorded when the children described the main points and are able to express the relationship between cause and effect.

The three main points in *Spot* are:

1. The cat was frightened and got stuck in the tree because the monkey played the trumpet.
2. Spot saved the day because he used the fire engine to bring his friends to the carnival in time.
3. Grandma got a prize because she had baked the best cake at the carnival day and Grandma gave Spot the prize because he had saved the day.

*Beethoven* has two main points in each episode.

In episode 1: *Dear George*:

1. When Beethoven goes to sleep, he needs the ball which George gave to him when he was a puppy. Beethoven loses the ball in the bin. Therefore, he cannot sleep because he feels lonely without the ball.
2. George is unable to fall asleep until he lies down beside Beethoven.

In episode 2: *The Pound*:

1. How Sparkey disappeared because he was caught by the dog warden.
2. The process of how the dogs rescued Sparkey with the help of his friends.

**Narrative style:** To what extent do the children retell the story as a whole or parts of the story coherently – as opposed to describing them only by means of key words?

**Identification:** Which elements – themes, persons or acts – seem to arouse special involvement and emotional identification? This is highlighted by looking at the interviews as a whole: by focused themes and by the children's reasoning about preferences.

**Preference:** The children's ultimate programme preference was analysed based on the answers to the final question in the interview about which programme they preferred.

**Video observations – level of fascination:** The children's reactions, classified on the basis of a general impression of the videotapes, were categorized according to level of fascination:



- High level of fascination: the children are absorbed and concentrated, commenting, showing pleasure and are open to impressions. Alternatively, the children seem to be closed to the impressions and are tense and sceptical.
- Intermediate level of fascination: the children concentrate and are involved, but show uneasiness and become gradually bored as time elapses.
- Low level of fascination: the children are attentive but not involved. They show some motor activity, are sceptical and drop out now and then.

*Questionnaire – the parents' perspective:* The parents were asked to choose between *Spot* or *Beethoven* on behalf of their own child and state which programme they thought their child would choose. They were also asked to reflect upon these answers. Furthermore, they were asked to evaluate the two programmes in relation to three target groups; 3–4 years, 5–6 years and 6 years and older.

## Main findings

This section presents the main findings regarding how the two programmes spoke to the viewers.

### *Focus*

In the reconstruction of both programmes, a clear majority of the children focus explicitly on themes such as problem-solving, coping, succeeding and working hard to be competent. In both programmes, the child identifies with the Spot character as the hero; he succeeds. Spot finds solutions before the adults manage to do so, and he receives praise. Beethoven wins and gets his way. This implies a certain opposition to authority. The conflict between the dog and authority is underlined very clearly with strong visual and auditory effects. Beethoven copes and solves problems with the help of good friends. This is a story about solidarity, friendship and helpfulness in a difficult situation. Both in the children's spontaneous retelling (the free reconstruction – by which they convey their 'very first fascination'), and also in the guided reconstruction, the theme coping is very predominant. Also when the children give the reason for their preference, themes such as helping, coping and succeeding are predominant. Coping and problem-solving are important developmental tasks for 5-year-olds. They identify with Spot and Beethoven and adopt their perspectives. The image of a hero who is coping mirrors the challenges which a child encounters in their everyday life. The frame of reference – their schemata – that they have in mind when reading the programme links up to central themes in the programmes.

Another of the children's central focuses is of themes that deal with the affective components, such as aggression and events related to conflicts. These dimensions are very distinct in the episodes of *Beethoven* – the programme from the commercial channel. When retelling, the children use words such as 'angry', 'naughty', 'mad' to characterize his image. These elements are clearly presented not only in the story itself, and in the dialogue, but also in the visual and auditory effects. This is expressed through shrieks and howling and resignation from the adults because of Beethoven's tricks.

### *Understanding*

**Spot:** Fifteen of the 20 children understand the points about the cat being frightened because the monkey played the trumpet. Nearly all, 19 out of 20, understand the point about Spot saving the day by helping his friends. Only few – three children – understand the point about why Spot got the award. The first and the second points are presented in a very concrete manner, and the connection between cause and effect is clearly visualized. This is probably the main reason why so many children understand these points. But it may also be explained by identification. Elements that fascinate children and with which children identify, also facilitate understanding or motivation for understanding (von Feilitzen et al., 1989).

**Beethoven:** About half of the children understand the point about the ball (12) and the point about 'sleeping together' (13). Nearly all the children (18) understand how the dog was caught and the majority (16) describe how his friends rescued him. It seems that where the points are very concrete, this is much easier for children to understand and express. For example, notions of 'a sleeping problem' may be experienced by the children as very subtle and abstract. This may be the reason why fewer children are able to explain this point.

### *Narrative style*

The children's capacity to retell the stories coherently show great variation. Some children only answer with key words, others reconstruct the story in a very lively manner with lots of details. It does not seem that the programmes themselves facilitate a different narrative style. Half of the children (11) reconstruct both *Spot* and *Beethoven* coherently. In both cases, it seems that it is the children's general capacity for memory and fluent expression which forms the basis of their narrative style. Each child either retells the story using key words or gives a coherent presentation of the story.

### *Identification*

The situations and characters with whom the children identify are revealed by looking at the children's focus, understanding and the manner in which

they express their programme preference. An overall perspective of the interviews about *Spot* reveals that the children focus upon coping. Spot 'saves the day' and he also gets a prize, being acknowledged by the adults for solving a problem. In the way the children reconstruct the story about Spot, they focus upon Spot being the hero. Concepts like 'prize', 'she won', 'they managed it' reflect that the children identify with both Spot and Grandma.

The children also identify with the relationship between the main characters: the grandparents and Spot. However, there are relatively few that explicitly focus on these scenes.

The children identify with Beethoven being naughty, rebelling against authority and confronting angry adults. Beethoven is testing boundaries, just as the 5-year-old does in his or her everyday life. The children are excited and fascinated by this and the tension that follows. Here are elements of identification – the children recognize and identify with such situations.

In contrast to this, *Spot* presents a storyline of harmony. There are idyllic relations free from conflict, and there are no exciting situations. To a large extent the plot is predictable. In the *Beethoven* programme, the children experience exciting conflicts, which reach beyond a harmonic viewing experience.

### *Preference – which programme do they choose?*

Sixteen children prefer *Beethoven* when they are asked which videocassette they would prefer. Among these there are as many girls as boys. Nearly all the children (18) give a prompt and clear answer to the question. Two children answer 'don't know' at first. But when the question is repeated, both express a distinct preference and make a clear choice. One of these says 'both of them' and thereby expresses a certain ambivalence. Another child expresses her ambivalent attitude in another way. She first chooses *Spot* and this is also her final choice. But while reflecting she hesitates a little and says 'maybe the dogs' referring to *Beethoven*. 'Both were nice', she says. There are elements in *Beethoven* which fascinate her, but after a total evaluation she nevertheless goes for *Spot*.

### *Children's fascination – a summary of qualitative data*

What is the relationship between fascination, understanding and the children's preferences? The videotapes show a pattern of fascination in two different ways: either the children show a relaxed body language, receptive to what they are being presented on the screen, and seemingly enjoying the experience, or they are fascinated but closed and tense. Auditory and visual stimuli seem to be experienced as intrusive.

The children's reactions, classified on the basis of a general impression of the videotapes, are categorized according to three different levels of fascination, high, intermediate or low, as listed earlier.

There is no absolute correspondence between what the children under-

stand, the level of fascination and their programme preference. However, for some children, there is correspondence between what they understand, their level of fascination and their programme preference. For others there is no correspondence between the level of fascination, how much they understand or express what they understand, and what they choose. When we compare data from the interviews and the video observations, we find many different patterns concerning how the children experienced the two programmes in relation to their choice.

To illustrate this, two cases representing different modes of reception are presented, varying from a 'logical' mode of reception where there is a correspondence between level of fascination and preference, to a mode of reception where there is an incoherence between level of fascination and preference.

*David:* David is highly fascinated by *Beethoven*. He is concentrating deeply while he watches, and is eagerly looking forward to what is going to happen. He hides behind hands and knees and may seem a little anxious. The programme seems to challenge him. He understands all the plots. His fascination with *Spot* is on an intermediate level, and he seems to be in another mood when watching *Beethoven*. When he watches *Spot*, he seems engaged and secure. He is open and relaxed, but gradually seems to become bored. He understands two out of three main points in *Spot*. David prefers *Beethoven*. Here we find a logical pattern: this child is mostly fascinated by *Beethoven* and prefers this even if (or maybe that is just why) this programme elicits excitement, which is very close to provoking anxiety. When he watches *Spot*, he is tense in a different way, and, as noted, his fascination is on an intermediate level.

*Maria:* Maria is highly fascinated by *Spot*. She is open, relaxed and concentrating while she watches, and seems to enjoy herself. She understands all the main points in this story. While she watches *Beethoven*, she is fascinated at a lower level. She moves from being an intense viewer to lacking concentration while watching. She drops out, and seems to be uncomfortable with the situation. She understands two out of the four points. Maria prefers *Beethoven*. In this case there is little correspondence between the level of fascination and what she prefers. Maria understands *Spot* most thoroughly and is highly fascinated by this programme. Nevertheless she chooses *Beethoven*. It seems as if she experiences some sort of excitement when she does not feel comfortable, and is attracted to this. The pleasure which she experiences while watching *Spot* does not seem to be sufficient for her to choose this programme over *Beethoven*. There are elements in *Beethoven* that are stronger determinants than a secure and understandable viewing experience.

### *The parents' perspective*

The parents were asked to choose between *Spot* or *Beethoven*, and on behalf of their own child, state which programme they thought their child would choose. They were also asked to reflect upon these answers. Furthermore, they were asked to evaluate the two programmes in relation to the three target groups: 3–4 years, 5–6 years, and 6 years and older. In addition, the individual interviews with three parents gave a general, but more detailed picture of the aims and content of children's television programmes from the parents' point of view.

The majority of the parents think that *Beethoven* is far more appealing to their child than *Spot*. When we look at the correspondence between what the parents choose as their favourite programme and what their child chooses, there are eight pairs of parent/child for whom the parents' and the child's choices do not correspond. In all these cases the lack of correspondence is one-sided: all these eight parents choose *Spot*, while their child choose *Beethoven*.

This study indicates that in a number of cases the parents give priority to other dimensions, and emphasize other criteria when they express their opinion about 'good' television programmes for children. This finding contrasts the findings concerning the children's fascination. The parents choose differently on behalf of their children, and the parental choices contrast with the children's own choices.

It is especially striking that when the parents describe *Spot*, they emphasize that this is a story about 'good values' and 'high moral values'; television programmes for children should, according to the parents, have a positive normative function. In addition, the programme ought to be secure and not threatening. The children stress other criteria: the gloomy and sinister elements, and the visually and auditory complexity engage the children. This is more important for them than idyllic harmony. It seems to challenge the children to receive impressions that are not just simple to understand and comfortable.

## **Discussion**

The children's reactions to the *Beethoven* programme do not only reflect immediate pleasure. Rather, they also reflect what Buckingham (1996) includes in his 'pleasure-concept': Excitement and horror, in addition to delight.

Many people – including children – actively choose to watch or read things that they know will upset or frighten them, and the sadness or fear is often inseparable from the pleasure. (Buckingham, 1996: 3)

This is in accord with Fausing's (1977) concept of fascination – i.e. an attraction that includes joy as well as scepticism, and may even include strong dislike.

The majority of the children prefer *Beethoven*, even if it implies some sort of ambivalent attitudes and negative emotions. The children's choice, and the way in which they expressed why they preferred this programme, are very clear. This was to me a rather surprising finding, which may have implications for our knowledge about the relation between children's fascination and their ultimate choice. Despite aggressive emotions that are presented strongly and very distinctly, such as in the *Beethoven* programme, there may be a positive experience to be gained from the acting out of aggression. It might even be a form of cathartic experience and, despite the conflicts, the programme has a happy end. Stories such as this are in contrast to those in which the content and form is harmonious, cautious and full of trust, and in which the children are not exposed to rather dubious and exciting experiences like those encountered in *Beethoven*.

Bruno Bettelheim (1979), who has especially worked with children's relation to fairy tales, states the following:

If a story is going to succeed in sustaining children's attention it has to be amusing and call upon curiosity. But to enrich life it has to engage their fantasy, help them to develop their reasoning and straighten out their emotions, it has to respond to their fears and expectations, acknowledge their difficulties and at the same time suggest solutions to problems they may have. It must, in short, at the same time, include all aspects of the child's personality. (Bettelheim, 1979: 11)

The children's perspective on these two programmes shows that the *Beethoven* programme responds to other parts of their emotional register than *Spot*; the parts associated with engaging and stirring. *Beethoven* deals with emotions, primarily aggression, that evoke a more intense response and fascination than *Spot*. Experiencing strong excitement and horror may relate to their own fear. It provides an opportunity to feel scared, to experience emotional arousal and to experience intense emotions. Perhaps such experiences are missing in our modern, very structured everyday life even for young children.

### *'Counter-culture'*

A Danish pilot study presents the concept of 'counter-culture': the children are expected to comply with attitudes and values in the family, but in practice they act beyond the norms that their parents find acceptable. The children's media use is expressed through the knowledge of cartoons and commercials that the parents reject. Tufte and Christensen state as follows:

In the restricted surroundings the commercial media culture will function as some sort of counter culture. (Tufte and Christensen, 1998: 61)

Furthermore, Tufte and Christensen maintain that there is some sort of dynamics between children's culture, the adult culture and the media culture in the family. The children's media culture may function either as some sort of counter-culture to an adult culture, or as a parallel culture to an adult

culture. One may also take this aspect of counter-culture further: Is children's own culture, i.e. their play, in itself a sort of counter-culture compared to the adult world?

Five-year-old children are still at the stage where parents can regulate what they want their children to watch and, if possible, which impressions they want them to be protected from. In this study the children are separated from the parents' spheres while watching these programmes. In a situation such as this, the children have the opportunity to express their own views more freely. The children seem to stress criteria of fascination other than those of their parents, and in this way they are creating their own alternative media culture – a counter-culture. This is in contrast to an adult media culture which the adults implicitly or explicitly try to impart. Is it possible that there is a silent and implicit dissemination of attitudes from parents to children of an 'acceptable' media culture, which dictates what the child 'ought to' choose to watch? Is the child socialized into certain ways of thinking about media? 'There are always certain ideologies behind the way we behave towards children', says Haldar (1996: 177).

The parents want their children to be protected from frightening experiences, aggressive emotions, aggressive fantasies and unpredictable excitement. At the same time, they are well aware that speed, excitement and devious elements fascinate the children. In contrast, the 'careful and nice' story elements and form elements are those which the children do not find very engaging. It is primarily heightened emotions, the excitement and horror that elicit intense fascination. This study indicates that children are highly fascinated by strong excitement and horror, even though they seem to experience a certain ambivalence. They seem willing to 'take risks' and not simply protect themselves from unpleasant experiences. The question which needs to be posed is whether the children should be confronted with elements of aggression and conflict, or alternatively whether they should experience only nice stories and good-natured fantasies. To be confronted with unpredictable excitement is part of life and of childhood. Perhaps children have a greater capacity to handle risks and suspense than adults often think, and adults primarily want to protect the young viewers.

The concept of counter-culture may also be connected with discussions about constructions of childhood. Television programmes for young children are changing, a change that not only tells us about our television programmes – but also about our representations of children. How does the media organize a child's world? How do the media messages change? How do children change? To understand the modern child is much about understanding how the child relates to his or her media landscape. How do they read television and which images of children do television producers present? (Frønes, 1998).

The old familiar sentimental notion of children as innocent and vulnerable (Buckingham, 1998) is a notion that corresponds with many of the

parents' view of children in this study: The parents want to protect their children from action and aggressive content presented on television. They want their children to be a protected audience. Harmony and happiness should dominate.

Childhood is constructed as separate (conceptually and physically) from the adult world (James and Prout, 1990). The texts which adults produce for children represent an adult construction of childhood. Buckingham (1998: 47) maintains that 'within public service children have traditionally been a protected audience and critics are increasingly asking whether the market will be able to provide for their needs in a multi-channel commercial future'. He further states that 'there is now an acute tension between how we construct children and how children construct themselves – between what children want to be and what we adults want them to be' (Buckingham, 1998: 50). Perhaps this study can contribute to a broader understanding of how children construct themselves, how they read media messages and the notions that adults have of children's reception processes.

## Conclusion

The findings in this study aim to be of wider value than experiences from case studies. They cannot be generalized to other programmes, but they can form the basis for understanding how children may experience other programmes (Højjer, 1986). We can consider these findings in an analytical manner and as such they can constitute a tool for further understanding of children's readings of television. However, the data in this study must be interpreted with caution, and we cannot draw substantial conclusions outside this context.

This study has focused upon two different television programmes, one from a commercial channel and one from a public broadcasting channel. If we look back about 10 years, the differences between programmes from these two channels were quite clear. Programmes which were aired on a commercial channel would not have been accepted on a public service channel. Today the boundaries are more blurred. There are examples of programmes which could have been broadcast by either channel. There has been increasing similarity between programmes in terms of style, e.g. use of animation techniques, and not least pace. On the other hand, there are still examples of programmes that are aired on commercial channels that would not be accepted by a public service channel. A current example is *Pokemon*, an animated Japanese programme series that was rejected by NRK because of 'a large-scale commercialisation and a rather low-quality story line'.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, findings in this study may indicate that there may still be rather considerable differences between the two television channels in the way they look at children's television programmes. This may partly be explained by the different purposes of a commercial and a public service



television channel. However, it may also be explained by the possibility that TV3 seems to offer programmes with more action and excitement. This might imply a different attitude towards the target group concerning what sort of content is appropriate for young children. This attitude may, implicitly or explicitly, be in contrast to that of NRK. It may also imply that a commercial channel like TV3 has a slightly different image of the young audience as compared to NRK. Perhaps a public service channel still maintains more of a protectionist notion of childhood than a commercial channel does, even if we keep in mind the different purposes of the two channels. It may also imply another attitude towards where to set the limits for unacceptable horror and excitement. In this study, NRK represents an attitude that focuses on security and harmony, while TV3 to a larger extent presents dramatic and conflict-focused content.

It may be relevant to ask, to what extent ought children to be protected from such experiences or should they have the freedom to experience a world that includes insecurity and excitement? Perhaps it is a challenge to cope with experiences that are on the edge of what can be tolerated, and to alternate between excitement and release of suspense, experiencing 'a happy ending'.

In the case of those parents who stress that their children should receive secure and harmonious television experiences, which they think are represented by NRK, this implies that their children obtain experiences that the parents know that they can cope with and tolerate. Therefore the parents may consider the NRK programmes as 'secure experiences'. The programmes from TV3, consisting of elements that are more unpredictable, complicated and intense, may be more demanding from the parents' point of view. This may be the case because the parents may feel that these programmes might imply the need for parental control. In these circumstances, the parents have to form their own opinions of the programmes and choose on behalf of their children.

### *Enlightenment or entertainment?*

A normative perspective is not included nor was this an aim of this study. Even if it focuses on children's perspectives and reception, adults still ought to discuss which programmes they want for their children. It is of utmost importance to listen to children's voices, but this does not imply that they alone should decide what to watch. In a policy debate and a decision-making process, this form of research may enable children's voices to be heard. The parents may be threatened by the fact that their children are fascinated by and focus on other elements than they themselves do. These differences may also be intertwined with the fact that children and parents have different views about the function of television. Several parents in this study stress that television ought to bring important messages to the child and to have an educational and normative function. This also implies that they want their

children to understand these messages. The children are possibly looking at television as a medium for entertainment, where fascination and engagement are important, and where messages are subordinate.

Knowledge about children and their everyday life is often knowledge about children as adults perceive them. This type of research, where there is a cross-reference between the children's and the parents' perspectives, may constitute a tool for understanding and analysing the concept 'a good television programme for children'. The concept is incomplete if we only look at it from the adult's perspective. It does not only deal with preventing negative elements, but also combines analysis of the children's patterns of engagement with the adults' views of what forms 'a good television story'.

A research design like this might have the potential to enable us to study more deeply how children experience certain programmes and which elements are fascinating, especially focusing on the more emotional aspects of the reception process.

Childhood and children's social relationships and culture are worthy of study in their own right, and not just in respect to their social construction by adults. This means that children are and must be seen as actively involved in the construction and determination of their own social lives. (James and Prout, 1990: 8)

This study may contribute to giving children a more distinct voice and thereby further a more multifaceted image of the child audience. This may imply a challenge towards rethinking some of the possible stereotypes that influence policy-making in producing children's television.

## Notes

1. The English titles of Åm (1991), Tingstad (1994) and Løngreen and Holm Sørensen, (1996) are the author's own translations.
2. This and the previous phrase from Fausing are the author's translations of the original Danish.
3. Marit Løvdaal et al., NRK (1998; personal communication).
4. Ellen Christensen, TV3 (1998; personal communication).
5. King Rollo Films (1997) *Spot and his Grandparents Go to the Carnival*, synopsis.
6. TV3 (1996) *Beethoven*, synopsis.
7. Elin Raustøl, NRK (2000; personal communication).

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