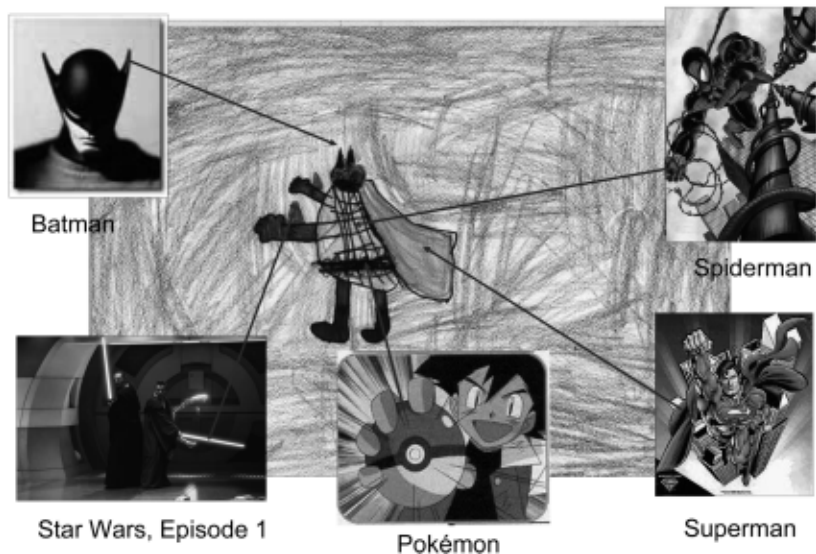*Maya Götz/Dafna Lemish*

Media and the make-believe worlds of boys and girls

A multinational study

This multinational study showed that children integrate media stories into their daydreams. But there is a gender-specific difference: Whereas boys follow the story lines and carry them further, girls take parts out of the original medium and leave out the male hero.

Omer pictures himself as superhero, who can climb like Spiderman, fly like Superman, and has a laser sword as in *Star Wars* …

The media enter children's imagination and especially television has an impact on the children's imagination: TV programmes leave obvious "media traces" in the children's minds. We could show this in a multinational study with 197 children between the ages of 8 and 10 years from South Korea, Israel, the USA and Germany (Götz, Lemish, Aidman, Moon, 2005).

The children went on a dream journey to their "big daydream". According to the introduction of the imaginary trip, accompanied by music and text, their daydream is about something they have had imagined over and over again, mostly during the day, perhaps sometimes even at night. After this, they painted a picture of what they imagined, wrote a few words about it and then explained in intensive individual interviews what their fantasies were about and if there was any connection to the media. By reconstructing individual cases, the children's daydream narrations were then put together to "stories" and the media traces were analysed.

The results show obvious gender-specific tendencies. It stands out that girls' drawings seem to emphasise harmony, and less media traces are observed than in the boys' drawings. Accordingly, in 56 % of the girls' make-believe stories and in approx. 74 % of the boys' big daydreams significant media traces can be detected. Quite often, the boys' images and stories abound with unambiguous clues to current media arrangements. However, there is not only a quantitative difference. A closer analysis of a given trace compared with the original medium demonstrates a fundamental structural difference.

How boys integrate the media into their imagination

Take it in, assimilate it and carry the media story further

Boys – in all 4 countries – often dream themselves into the position of their heroes and experience a story similar to the one in the original medium.

Ricky (USA) or Sandro (Germany) imagine themselves as Pokémon trainers – just as Ash in the original medium, Jun'sik (South Korea) dreamed of a land and of an adventure just like the computer game *Kingdom of the Wind,* Jack (USA) is the best millionaire from the TV programme *Who Wants To Be A Million-*

Guy'hyong's "world of dinosaurs"

aire?, Martin (USA) is Peter Pan and saves Neverland just as in the film *Hook,* and Ruben (Germany) is the captain of a spaceship as in *Armageddon* and saves the world.

However, this does not mean that boys do not deal creatively with the medium. For instance, they often combine several formats, like Jed (USA), who fuses two Manga series: *Tenchi Muyo* and *Dragon Ball Z*, or Omer (Israel), who imagines having Spiderman's, Superman's and Batman's etc. powers. Boys take from the medium what makes them feel successful and powerful in their imagination. At the same time they omit a lot and for example redefine actions when they are getting too violent.

Gui'hyong (South Korea) drew his big daydream "World of Dinosaurs", which is explicitly based on *Jurassic Park*. But there is, for example, a safe observation post from where dinosaurs can be observed without being threatened by them. The dinosaurs are neither killed by humans nor by other dinosaurs, in his world they just die "on their own" and only then they are eaten by others. Gui'hyong picks up only those moments of the original medium appealing to him and then redefines them as controllable and far less cruel.

Overall, as it is typical for boys, he sticks closely to the interpretations of the original medium, however, and his imagination shows considerable media traces.

Among those boys who develop their imaginations from a relationship-oriented life, from bearing responsibility or just from fun times in a group, we often found only marginal media traces or none at all. Thus, Angelo (Germany) flies with his Pegasus to a secret and private land of animals, where all perfectly get along with each other. Matthias (Germany) imagines an island on which he lives together with his family. He and his wife would take a boat to go shopping and whenever they return they would be greeted by the jabbering parrot and their daughter, who loves to shoot marbles on the beach. Matthias stated that he had neither heard nor read about it anywhere nor had he seen it on TV.

To develop these kinds of fantasies television hardly offers boys the necessary symbolic material. In most cases, stories about fights, conflicts and competition dominate the boy-oriented formats.

How girls integrate the media into their daydream

Leave something out, take something in and dissociate from it
Compared to boys, girls far less often integrate characters and media stories into their imagination. If we listen closely though, the girls' fantasies show significant connections with the media. Quite often, they imagine a fairy-

tale setting or a magical world. Karen (USA), for example, describes her make-believe world in which she turns into a mermaid:

"… I jumped into the sea. Under a big rock, there was a starfish who told me about the magical box. I found a box that would change me into a person or a mermaid. The box could sense when you are out of the water and want to have legs or when you are in the water and want to have a fishtail. In my fantasy, I get stung and chased by a shark, but I go through an anchor and the shark gets stuck in it, so I am saved. I love water and being a mermaid makes me feel like I am a fish in the water."

Karen herself refers to the Disney film *The Little Mermaid* as the source of her imagination. However, neither does she involve the father nor the prince nor the wedding.

Especially one scene is important for her: the one that introduces Arielle into the film: the struggle with the shark. She just leaves out the rest of the plot.

Karen's imagination diverges not only in this matter from the fairytale and the Disney version: not only is the helper character a starfish this time, there is also a magical box which transforms her according to her requirements.

That way, Karen simply avoided all the difficulties Arielle had to go through to be able to go ashore and

Karen is picturing herself as a mermaid with a magical box

to meet her prince. A clever idea, which lets her be what she is interested in: a self-dependent, adventurous mermaid, who does not have to lose her voice. Karen picks up from the medium what is useful for her desire to be powerful and self-determined. However, in many media stories girl and women characters appear only marginalised or in serving roles. That is why it is typical for a lot of girls' fantasies for example to simply kick the male protagonist out.

Katrin (Germany) imagines a gingerbread land, just like in one episode of *Bumpety Boo*; however, the boy Ken, his dog, the magical car Bumpety Boo or the evil wizard do not appear in her imagination.

Milena (Germany) imagines a fairyland with only women living there: a butterfly, a bird, herself as a little fairy and a female Easter Bunny. Through a magical oak they can access another world where men live. But the access does not work the other way around. The original medium is *Faeries*, an animated children's film about a brother and a sister who reach a fairyland through a magical oak where they have to prove themselves. In her imagination Milena picks up the magical oak and the fairyland. The male characters, however, like the brother or the male elf, are dispelled.

In a number of cases girls pick up traditional female characters from the media, but reinterpret them or think about them in a completely new way. Chloe (USA) for example imagines Rapunzel, who behaves not at all like she does in the fairy tale. Chloe's Rapunzel is a real tomboy who does not want to be rescued by a boy. Instead she cuts her hair off, refuses to do the dishes and slides down the banister.

In their imagination girls – just like boys – want to experience themselves as powerful and competent. In the light of what the media offers, where girls and women are still marginalised in various series and films and/or represented stereotypically, girls often have no other choice but simply to omit male heroes and to invent their own characters instead.

That way they come up with new, almost feminist characters like the female Easter Bunny, but at the same time they pick up certain media char-

Milena's magical fairy world only with female characters

acters over and over again, e. g. the fairy or the princess. These are typical symbolic representations offered to girls to make them feel strong and assertive.

On the one hand, this is more wholesome than telling the story of the prince who saves the female protagonist from distress over and over again. On the other hand, these representations restrict girls in certain ways as most fairies and princesses are characterised by certain physical attributes (e. g. overly slim figure) and a certain colour (pink).

Eventually, their capacity to act is based either on their inherited position (princess) or on magical powers (fairy, little witch), and not on their own achievements and actions.

Conclusion

Many features are reinterpreted, but some remain

Girls and boys only pick up moments from the media in which they can imagine themselves as powerful and strong. In this regard, the children's creativity is extensive and should not be underestimated. But despite all their creativity and competence in the dealing with the media, traces of the media content prevail.

Action settings dominate many of the boys' make-believe worlds, and the dominant mode of their capacity to act is fighting.

Girls often play this out in fantasised outside appearances or in symbolic worlds of princesses and magical characters – aspects that call for optimisation in current TV programmes. ■

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