

CHILDREN'S FILMS

Aesthetics of Identification

Christian Stewen

As researchers in the field of children's media have shown, defining the characteristics of children's films is charged with wider problems. Producers, sponsors, distributors, critics, educationalists, researchers and not least audiences have differing criteria and expectations concerning children's films. This paper does not contribute to this ongoing debate on what children's film essentially is by offering a further definition based on clear-cut categories like age or cognitive progress of children as audience. Rather, in trying to establish a theory of children's films, this contribution takes a detailed look at different films associated with the term children's film and locates certain recurring aesthetic and rhetorical strategies. Thus, the analysis is not focused on which single film may or may not be considered a children's film, but on the question which modes of cinematic presentation – i.e. which narrative, audio-visual, and discursive strategies of producing and conveying meaning – are significant for children's films.

Most of the films which may be regarded as children's films are concerned with motives of shaping, naming, and visualizing, i.e. with processes of cognition, realization, and signification. Merging together these aspects, children's films can be characterized by their striking engagement with aesthetically based questions of identification. In the context of this paper, identification is understood not as a mode of film perception, in the process of which the viewer may 'identify' with a certain character on screen by adopting his or her perspective. Instead, what is relevant here is the basic meaning of the word identification, which points to the process by which something is recognized *as* something, *as* itself: the process by which identity is produced. If identity is defined – not in a psychological but in a philosophical, semiotic sense – as identicalness, consistence or congruence between signifier and signified, between word/image and 'its' object, then identification indicates the various processes by which this relation is

basically constituted. Viewed in this broader sense, identification can be used to describe general linguistic, rhetorical, and media-specific strategies of making reality readable, of ascribing meaning. These strategies may best be described as aesthetic structures, which are manifested in narrative as well as audio-visual formations. Words, moving pictures, and sounds are the constituent agents of these procedures of producing meaning. Apparently, they differ according to different media form: Identification being an equally important aesthetic motive of children's media in general, media forms like literature, music, and film deal with it in different ways. Picture books for example may establish an often twisted relation between picture and text, while the semiotic structures of films include spoken language, moving images, and sounds. The following analyses focus on children's films – nevertheless films often rely on semiotic systems like language which are not exclusive to films. Although intersections with other media forms are evident, especially the later observations of this paper will concentrate on the aesthetic structures which are characteristic for film.

Alice in Wonderland (USA 1951) and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (USA/UK 2005)

will serve as examples in the first paragraphs of the text, while *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* (USA 1977) becomes the object of analysis in the subsequent passages. These classic children's films may be regarded as representative of children's films in general because they centre on questions of identification in paradigmatic ways. As all of them are adaptations, they are dealing with converting narrative and stylistic modes of literature to films. Thus, – as the analysis will try to show – they are reflecting and multiplying the processes of signification. The paper aims to analyse children's films by subsequently focusing on identification as a narrative motive, as an aesthetic practice of producing meaning, and finally as a performative way of negotiating mediality. Questions will centre on how protagonists manage to identify themselves and others, how modes of signification become visible and unstable in these scenes, and how the media-specific ways of producing images and sounds are contributing to these procedures by means of performativity.

Cinematic Procedures of Identification

Children's films lend themselves to semiotic readings in extremely productive ways. For example, physical

appearances, names, clothes, and language of characters are always supposed to mean something, to signify gender, social background, family status, moral convictions and so on.¹ Establishing scenes, i.e. sequences or single shots at the beginnings of films or of narrative segments, are widespread and extremely elaborate in children's films. They introduce characters, their physical appearances, their names, affiliations, and relations to other characters. Analogously to these sequences, protagonists are often confronted with foreign environments and creatures. A closer look at Alice's first encounters with the caterpillar in *Alice in Wonderland* and Lucy meeting Tumnus, the faun, in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* may reveal the detailed aesthetic processes of identification, which mainly rely on acts of looking and naming.

1. *Confrontation*: The human protagonist is suddenly confronted with a strange situation, an unknown character or a foreign location, which has to be identified. This encounter is marked as a conflict between two different parties constituted as opposite. This binary is most often visualized by using shot/reverse shot dynamics.

2. *Questioning*: The two characters are then engaged in dynamics of mutual

questioning and answering. Here, questions are not so much signs for foreignness or ignorance – they rather work as challenges to the processes of identifying itself.

Alice constantly questions the reality around her and demands explanations of themselves from the various creatures she meets, who are also constantly demanding explanations of herself from her [...]. Readers, invited to view *Wonderland* from the viewpoint of Alice's inquisitive questioning of it, are primed to be in a mood that asks questions about the meaning of things and engenders explanations of them. (Nodelman 2008, 17)

In analogy to this, an interrogating gaze is established for the human protagonists as well as for the audience; a gaze which focuses in detail on the unknown body, object or landscape.

3. *Re-addressing*: Conversations and processes of identification are reciprocal. The question, "who are you?" is not only directed towards the unknown other, but is immediately returned to the asking self. Interestingly, in Lucy's encounter with Tumnus in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the identification of Lucy as a human being seems to be more important than to define what a Faun is. Thus, questions are

reversed and the formerly well-known is de-familiarized during the encounter with the other.

4. *Negotiation*: Identity is not fixed. Fantastical creatures and locations are unknown to the audience as well, so that signs and names cannot be *recognized* in the process of identifying but have to be *negotiated*. Identity is open for transformation and re-definition and may develop or change over the course of the film. Dressing-up and body transformation often caused by magic are common storytelling devices which point to this strategy.² For example, the caterpillar in *Alice in Wonderland* metamorphoses into a butterfly.

5. *Segmentation/Hybridity*: Identities are not limited to particular, clearly defined items. Creatures may combine different traits, which are not necessarily integrated as one particular identity. Tumnus, the Faun from *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, combines signs of a goat (e.g. legs) as well as signs of a human being (e.g. human torso). Thus, bodies are segmented and hybrid. The film also divides and re-assembles Tumnus's segmented body by mostly showing the legs of the goat and the human torso separately and rarely both together in one shot.

6. *Incongruity*: The processes of identification may end up in profound

misunderstandings. Rules and conventions of signification may be fundamentally disparate, so that incongruity between signifier and signified emerges. In *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* the misunderstanding of what and where "the city of War Drobe" and "the land of Spare Oom" actually are is not solved. Similarly, who Alice actually is and what it means to be someone or to "own" an identity is profoundly confused in Alice's encounter with the caterpillar:

Caterpillar: *Who are you?*

Alice: *I hardly know, Sir. I've changed so many times since this morning, you see?*

Caterpillar: *I do not see. Explain yourself.*

Alice: *I'm afraid I can't explain myself, Sir. Because I'm not myself, you know?*

Caterpillar: *I do not know.*

Alice: *I can't put it any more clearly, for it isn't clear to me.*

Caterpillar: *You, who are you?*

In this short dialogue, which is a slightly shortened adaptation from the original novel by Lewis Carroll,³ identity is not a fixed entity, which can be mapped by language or reason. Situations like these often result in non-sense and irony, which may be seen as characteristic forms of humour in children's films.⁴

As these rhetorical and cinematic devices indicate, the negotiation of identities is complex and extremely complicated. Identities seem to be unfixed and unfixable. By showing the mutual processes by which identity is attributed, claimed or assumed, the basic semiotic strategies of producing identity are shown as not entirely well-working. And by accentuating the processes of misunderstanding, the rules and strategies of producing identity become visible themselves. Following this, the scenes focussing on identification do not generally work to *naturalize* relations between signifier and signified but to *open up* the mechanisms of signification for reflection and re-negotiation. Rather than producing truth by recognizing 'natural' bonds between signifier and signified these children's films make an important contribution to the deconstruction of signs and their usages.

Identification as a Performative Act

The strategy coming into focus here is concerned with mechanisms of performative acts as originally described by John Langshaw Austin as

cases and senses [...] in which to *say* something is to *do* something; or in which *by* saying or *in* saying something we are doing something. (12)

The production of identities in children's films is not so much marked as an act of signification, of describing reality, of naming actual objects. Rather, it is shown to be a performative act by which the relation between signifier and signified is initially produced by the acts of speaking, of gesturing, of picturing etc. Searle argues that each act of speaking may be considered performative in so far as it establishes the relation between signifier and signified:

The unit of linguistic communication is not, as has generally been supposed, the symbol, word or sentence, or even the token of the symbol or word or sentence, but rather the production or issuance of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of the speech act. (16)

For example, in the mentioned scene from *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the habit of hand-shaking is not naturally a sign for welcoming someone. Rather, this meaning is constituted in the act of performing it. The theory of performativity leads to a constructivist theory of identity: Identities – in terms of gender, sexuality, social class, ethnicity, and so on – are not natural. They do not exist before language and are not based on the body. In fact, identities are socially and culturally constructed and determined by human culture.

Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (Butler 136)

In untying signifier and signified, word and object, the cinematic processes of identification in children's films illustrate that this relation is socially and culturally produced by the act of signification. The act of handshaking and the acts of naming individuals, objects, and locations in the above-mentioned examples constitute the things and their meanings, constitutes the characteristics of and differences between human and Faun and the necessities of defining and locating identities in comparison to others. Children's films in particular establish aesthetic and rhetorical devices to expose these performative procedures and to open them up for critical reflection and re-configuration.⁵

In order to stretch and deepen these theses, we have to focus on the role of media in these processes because the act of identification is

basically a process relying on medialization. At least one needs media – i.e. mediated images and words – in order to generate subjectivity and an understanding of oneself. Developing an idea of the self is only possible by, metaphorically speaking, viewing one's image in the mirror, by speaking or thinking about one's convictions, motivations, desires etc. In turn, identifying someone or something is the act of seeing something *as* something, of producing a bond between the actual object and the image, the word, the attributions which are expected or remembered. Media such as language, images, and films do not represent reality, they do not show what actually *is*. Rather, media set up equivalences between signifier and signified and thus actively shape and produce identities. Declaring a performative dimension to all media, Andrea Seier states that, when Butler describes gender identity as an effect of acts of conventionalized repetition by which the impression of presence on the basis of reproduction is generated, then there seems to be a structural analogy to film as medium.⁶

Children's films are fundamentally concerned with these performative dimensions of media. As described earlier, in children's films language is an aesthetic device which reaches its

limits in the course of the pivotal scenes of identification. It is crucial to add that the status or identity of words is often under question itself. As these meanings operate on the level of words as signs, the analysis so far applies to children's literature as well, and it is of course no coincidence that the mentioned films *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* are adaptations of popular children's books. But besides stating that identification is a crucial motive of children's media in general, it is important to point to the ways of negotiation which are specific to certain media. Performative acts are always basically linked to and dependent on their aesthetic and stylistic conditions. In this regard, film offers ways of de-signification different from literature. Children's films may add a further dimension to the aesthetic qualities of written language.

A detailed look at the introductory sequence of the film *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* can illustrate this point. The film begins by showing real toys in a nursery. After depicting a toy kangaroo, rabbit, piglet, and teddy bear, the camera focuses on a book sitting next to several dice with letters. As the book mysteriously opens, we see a drawn map of the Hundred Acre Wood. Some places are

indicated by words and names like "POOH BEARS HOWSE". Christopher Robin, Pooh, and their friends are sketched and begin to move within the drawn map. The camera captures each character at a time and the song introduces them by naming them and their characteristics and by musically pointing to their traits and habits.⁷ As the page of the book turns over, we see an animated picture of Pooh sitting in front of his house.

While he and the smoke of the fire are moving, the picture is still depicted as part of a book, which contains text below the picture and on the opposite page. The camera pans and zooms in on the illustration, soon making its borders and the surrounding text invisible. In this scene, several media and sign systems interact: The toy as an object, the book, the hand-drawn and moving picture, the written and spoken word, music and sound. Interestingly, the identities of Pooh and his friends – who and what they 'are' – constantly change in relation to the media conditions which generate and define them. Pooh 'is' a teddy bear (which itself is ambivalently identified as a combination of animal and human traits), a graphic representation, i.e. an animated illustration, and a word, whose sound mimics the sounds of blowing away

bees. In addition, the various names Pooh gets in the course of the film (Winnie-the-Pooh, Pooh Bear, (Mr.) Sanders) further problematize the idea of naming and identifying.

What is most interesting here is the variety of ways in which media devices are shown as variable and arbitrary signifiers, whose own 'identities' (what they 'are' and how they come to mean) are constantly negotiated. For example, words are not only visual and audible signifiers for imaginable objects (this is the way language is usually used). They are also depicted as generated and hand-made visual units. The name "Mr Sanders" on the shield above the door, for instance, is hand-written and some letters are inverted. In addition, written words become visible as objects themselves, which have a presence defined by a 'body' characterized by a certain shape, colour, size, and so on. Often, these items are independent from the semantic meanings of the word. In the opening scene for example, Winnie the Pooh hops over the letters of his own name.

In *Alice in Wonderland*, the materialisation of the word and the letter is linked to the act of speaking. As caterpillar speaks, the smoke coming out of his mouth forms certain letters, which move over to Alice and settle on her.

Here, the materialised letter is connected to the spoken word by means of analogous or similar sound; caterpillar's question "who are you?" manifests in the letters O – R – U. In these scenes, linguistic signs are questioned and divided into multiple dimensions: Letters and words are not only bearers of semantic meaning but also sonic and graphic entities. These levels of 'identity' constantly interfere with each other.

In a similar way, the identity of the cinematic image in the sense that it unquestionably represents reality or generates an unbroken natural narrative diegesis tends to be challenged *in* (respectively *by*) children's films. The cinematic devices and technologies are often established in order to point to the medial functions and identities of themselves. Strategies of narrativisation and illusionation are explicitly exposed as such.⁸ For example, children's films often feature an adult voice-over narrator at the beginning and the end of the film, a voice which is linked to the act of reading a book. In the opening scene of *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, we find intermedial references like photographic/cinematic representations of real objects and places, pictures of an old-fashioned book, an adult voice-over, written and spoken words, and hand-drawn illustrations. In the course of this sequence,

the cinematic image is marked as an effect of storytelling: The image is generated in the performative act of narration and is not the objective representation of a pre-existing reality. This is underlined by the fact that many children's films use animation techniques which accentuate the artificial character of the cinematic image (e.g. hand-drawn or digital animation, hand or string puppets, but also excessive masquerade, artificial mise-en-scene etc.). The cinematic image thus becomes visible as an artificial mediator, stressing the differences between signifier and signified (image and reality) and marking the cinematic image as an effect of the performative powers of storytelling, cinematic imagining, and animation. This process is enigmatically visualized by the caterpillar in *Alice in Wonderland*: As he tells the story of the crocodile, the smoke coming out of his mouth takes the form of a crocodile. Animation is reflexively shown to be a performative act, in which words become pictures and images become alive by the pure act of speaking.

Summary

Children's films may be described centering on the aesthetics of identification, which are crucial on different levels.

(1) Identification is a recurring narrative motive in children's films: Individuals in a foreign world often have to orient, relocate, and identify themselves and others. (2) Seen from a semiotic perspective, children's films are concerned with producing and questioning relations between verbal/visual/sonic signifier and signified. (3) On a technical-cinematic level, the status of the (photographic) image as a representation of reality and as precondition for a consistent illusionary space is put into question. Children's films tend to open up, expose, and renegotiate these practices of identification. Furthermore, identification is not an act of *describing realities* but rather a performative act of actively *producing* equivalences between signifier and signified. By focussing on identification, children's films thus always operate at the margins of signs, language, media, and meanings. This conclusion leads to wider considerations concerning children's media and their social, cultural, and political relevance. Following the detailed analyses above, children's films are not innocent and simply-structured media texts merely initiating or assisting children's socialisation processes. Rather, children's films are politically charged sites of cultural negotiation. The aesthetic and cultural strategies of the production of

identities are central issues with wider political impacts. Children's films realize and question the ways in which we construct identities according to differences regarding gender, social class, ethnicity, etc. and make it possible to understand these processes by means of performativity and by linking them to issues of media and medi-ality. Thus, children's films offer important impulses for reflection, insight, and social change.

*Christian Stewen (*1978) teaches Media Studies at the Ruhr-Universität of Bochum. His doctoral thesis was entitled The*



Cinematic Child: Kindheit in filmischen und medienpädagogischen Diskursen (Marburg 2011). His research interests lie in childhood studies, cinematic representations of childhood and youth, children's films, media culture and media literacy, film and animation theory.

NOTES

¹ From a linguistic perspective, Bertills analyses proper names of characters from *Winnie the Pooh* and the Moomin books, see Bertills.

² On clothes and their potential for signification and transformation of identities in folk tales, see Scott.

³ See Carroll 53ff.

⁴ Cross provides a detailed analysis of *Humor in Contemporary Junior Literature*. Apseloff/Anderson centre on *Nonsense Literature for Children*, whereas Lecerclé takes a close look at the *Alice* books with regards to theories of nonsense. In contrast to nonsense, irony, parody, and satire are often seen as “higher”, “more sophisticated [forms of] humor, which require more maturity” (11). Irony has been analysed especially in regards to picturebooks, see for example Nodelman 1988, 222–241.

⁵ Building on Butler’s theory of the performative construction of gender identities, Victoria Flanagan shows how cross-dressing in children’s literature and films works to destabilise the conventions of gender attributions and the category of identity itself.

⁶ i.e. “Wenn Butler die Geschlechtsidentität als Effekt von Akten stilisierter Wiederholungen bezeichnet, in denen der Eindruck von Gegenwärtigkeit auf der Basis der Reproduktion entsteht, erscheint eine strukturelle Analogie zum Medium Film nahe liegend” (Seier 68).

⁷ For example, Eeyore, the lethargic donkey, is musically characterised in the introducing scene of *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* by dark voice singers and deep sounds of wind instruments.

⁸ In Literary Studies, these strategies are often described as metafictional: “Metafiction is a stylistic device aimed at destroying the illusion of a ‘reality’ behind the text and instead emphasizing its fictionality. Metafictional elements in a text deliberately draw attention to its status as a literary construction and therefore raise questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Nikolajeva, Scott 220). Nikolajeva and Scott point to metafictional strategies in picturebooks, which work because of the interplay between text and pictures. Robyn McCallum explains the ways in which metafictional devices may question semiotic and cultural systems: “We use language and narrative to represent, mediate and comprehend reality, as well as to construct fictions. By ‘laying bare’ the artifice through which fictional texts mean, metafiction can also lay bare the conventions through which what we think of as ‘reality’ is represented and ascribed with meanings” (140).

WORKS CITED

Primary Sources

- Adamson, Andrew (Dir.). *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. USA/UK: Walt Disney Pictures/Walden Media 2005.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*. London: Bloomsbury, 2010.
- Geronimi, Clyde, Wilfred Jackson and Hamilton Luske (Dir.). *Alice in Wonderland*. USA: Walt Disney Productions 1951.
- Lounsbery, John and Wolfgang Reitherman (Dir.). *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*. USA: Walt Disney Productions 1977.

Secondary Sources

- Apseloff, Marilyn/Celia Anderson. *Nonsense Literature for Children: Aesop to Seuss*. Hamden, CT: Library Professional Publication, 1997.
- Austin, John Langshaw. *How To Do Things With Words*. London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Bertills, Yvonne. *Beyond Identification: Proper Names in Children's Literature*. Abo: Abo Akademi University Press, 2003.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London, New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Cross, Julie. *Humor in Contemporary Junior Literature*. London, New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Flanagan, Victoria. *Into the Closet: Cross-Dressing and the Gendered Body in Children's Literature and Film*. London, New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Lecerle, Jean-Jacques. *Philosophy of Nonsense: The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature*. London, New York: Routledge, 1994.
- McCallum, Robyn. "Very Advanced Texts: Metafiction and Experimental Work". *Understanding Children's Literature*. Peter Hunt (ed.). New York, Abington: Routledge, 1999. 138–150.
- Nikolajeva, Maria/Carole Scott. *How Picturebooks Work*. New York, London: Garland Publishing, 2001.
- Nodelman, Perry. *Words About Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books*. Athens, London: The University of Georgia Press, 1988.
- . *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.
- Scott, Carole. "Magical Dress: Clothing and Transformation in Folk Tales". *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 21/4 (1996): 151–157.
- Searle, John R. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.
- Seier, Andrea. *Remediatisierung: Die performative Konstitution von Gender und Medien*. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007.