

Nele Steiling, *Concept of Childhood in Children's Television: Normalization coproduction of „Pan Tau“* (BA thesis, Charles University, Faculty of Humanities, 2022).

SUPERVISOR'S REVIEW

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It has been my pleasure to supervise Nele Steiling's bachelor's thesis. It represents an insightful analytic text, offering a fresh attempt to unravel the complex meanings, associated with children and childhood in the internationally acclaimed children's TV series *Pan Tau*, one of the best-known fruits of co-production between socialist Czechoslovak (Barrandov) and West German WDR (Westdeutscher Rundfunk) studios during the period of so-called Normalization.

Five chapters of the thesis are well ordered and create a logical whole. The grasp of theory and methodology is solid, and the student certainly deserves a commendation for navigating successfully between concepts from the fields of cultural history, media studies and historical anthropology, using a solid base of up-to-date academic texts. Her central research questions deal with one of the most debated contemporary problems, and that is subjectivity or agency, challenging the "idea of the powerful regime and the powerless Czechoslovak citizen." (10)

Regarding the theoretical base, the thesis builds on research by sociologist Helena Srubar, who managed to firmly establish the interpretation of *Pan Tau* as something, providing certain space for various, even contradictory meaningful articulations "of... relationship to the dominant ideology." (11) Srubar's text is nevertheless seen critically and the author challenges Srubar's tendency to sideline child characters and argues, that the focus of *Pan Tau* is not adult characters. The student was able to discern that *Pan Tau* communicates a wide array of meanings, defying the traditional view, that children are to be considered as basically "unfinished, irrational and lacking agency." (11)

Srubar's concepts are well supplemented by an interpretative approach to *Pan Tau* episodes, which are studied as a text, communicating certain meanings. This approach is grounded in the basic tenets of historical anthropology in the tradition of van Dülmen or Geertz, which provides a firm grounding for asking central research questions regarding children's agency and subjectivity, their relation to authority and the subversive use of the fantastical and the imagination.

Chapter 3 – *Pan Tau between Reform and Normalization* provides a detailed historical context of how the series was born in the context of the "Golden Sixties", slowly morphing into the "grey" Normalization. The author understood very well that the "dramaturgic group for children's and youth films" (18) represented a sort of niche, which could operate much more independently and had less trouble with the official ideological censorship. The analysis of the situation within the Czechoslovak context is supplemented with the analysis of equally intriguing development in West Germany, where a group of young artists had

been challenging the dominant concept of children's TV as a “completely non-committal idyll.” (21) The text builds a link between beliefs by Polák, Hofman and Münterfering, strongly supported by the post-1968 cultural development in the West, that it is necessary to employ a new concept of understanding children as “having the right to... their dreams and criticism of the adult way of life.” (23)

Nevertheless, the central piece of the thesis is represented by Chapter 4 – *An Analysis of Pan Tau and its Concepts of Childhood*. The student is the first author to argue that all 33 episodes of three seasons of *Pan Tau*, display a plot, clearly built around the conflict “between children and adults, or in other words, fantasy and reality.” (25) The author discovered that child agency is used as a central force behind portraying a conflict of consumerism and “utopic” socialism in the first season, which is “worked into the fabric of almost every story”. (26) The magic had been used mainly to disrupt the daily routine and consumerist rituals and to start an adventure, showing a possibility for a richer life. We never could see most of these episodes in Normalization Czechoslovakia. The last seven of them were banned during the post-1968 period because Jan Werich and Pavel Landovský, both in a certain way blacklisted during Normalization, performed some of the central characters.

This dichotomy of consumerism, materialism, and technocracy versus the fantastical world of magic and friendship, is typical also for the third season, which is perhaps best known in the Czech context through the motive of “man on the wing” as Pan Tau decides to spontaneously appear on the wing of a passenger plane in the altitude of 9 kilometres.

According to the author, there is a very strong set of meanings, hidden in the subtext, suggesting that Pan Tau resides in the “grey zone” between worlds of children and worlds of adults and wants to be a catalyst for the change for the better in the world of adults – using his magic. The character of Pan Tau, therefore, displays a permanent subversive potential, performed by “killing with kindness” kind of agency: “he himself is never part of the conflict and always helps everyone.” (31) Children are then his partners in the sense that deficiency of adults is always clearly displayed against the “children’s positive characteristics.” (32) This analytic argument is convincingly presented especially on pages 32–35, with a final deep interpretation on p. 36, arguing that *Pan Tau* series always justify and unconditionally support children’s actions and therefore puts them in the position of much more important actors than the adults. Following interpretations, setting this idea into the context of the Normalization ideology of “official” childhood (p. 37–39) are also very strong and convincing, and the same goes for the interpretations of the subversive agency of child characters towards authority, including the official one.

The whole interpretation is crowned by a text, dealing with imagination and fantastical elements, enabling the creators and characters of Pan Tau to “disguise their critiques of the state.” (43) Here *Pan Tau* fits into the usual 60s and Normalization pattern of specific characters from the fantasy world, crossing the boundary to the adult world and staying there being active and helping in its transformation (e. g. *Dívka na koštěti* or *Arabela*).

The author thus concludes, what is well grounded in numerous convincing interpretations: that *Pan Tau* represents a source, able to contribute to the construction of subversive “childhood in a transcultural context,” (53) where children display a specific agency and child characters are mostly constructed in contrast with negatively framed adult characters, which contributes to certain “eternal” or “romantic” ideal of childhood.

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My **final assessment** is unequivocal: the thesis represents an example of an academic text consistently well-thought-out and even able to bring new and solid interpretations to the table, which has been rather an exception within a genre of BA theses. **I recommend the thesis be graded “Excellent” (1).**

Given the overall quality of the text, I am firmly convinced that it deserves a nomination for some of the academic student prizes and that in this context it would represent our faculty very well.

Prague, September 3, 2022

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