Children’s media experience
Understanding their view on fiction and production

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Many advocate early media education. But how can we understand “film literacy” for primary school children? This small-scale exploratory study aims at generating initial insights on how children understand films.

The study involved 34 pupils from grade 3 (age 8/9) from Canton Ticino (Switzerland), who attended a 1-day workshop on stop-motion animation in February 2018. A survey was distributed before the session; additional data was collected in a group discussion at the end. The main findings were then discussed in a focus group with 3 children of the same age who did not attend the session. The study focused on two film literacy elements:

1. **Distinguishing facts from fiction.** Most children films are fiction: how do princesses, superheroes, talking animals, and action sequences relate to the real world?
2. **Understanding the production process of media messages.** What is behind the scenes? How are films created? What technologies and jobs are involved?

How often do you watch movies? With whom do you do it?

Children in this study are intensive video consumers. For most of them, *film-watching* is a daily and highly socialised activity, and mainly involves *animation films*.

**TRUE OR FALSE?**

The last movie you saw: what was true, what was fake?

Half of the participants think that everything they see on screen is fake, independent from the technique (real-actor films vs. animation).

None of the children who saw animation films indicate that “everything is real”, while this happens for fiction films like *Star Wars: A New Hope* or Bud Spencer’s movies.

The main argument to support their claim about true/false is direct correspondence with own experience (“They were humans” vs. “I have never seen talking rabbits”).

Most children focus on the mis-en-scene: characters, situations, actions. Only 3 children mention the film story or message.

Distinguishing true and false is challenging. Children mostly focus on what they see (not the story or the message) and refer only to their direct experience for comparison.

Shaun the sheep: how do you think this film was created?

Most children mention “the computer”, but cannot say how this happens in practice. The computer is presented as a sort of magic wand to create video.

Less than half of the participants can indicate real jobs connected with the movie industry or with animation-making. Most name actors/actress and director; only 1/3 name technical jobs, including cameraman, photographer/director of photography and light crew.

The making of a film is a kind of “digital magic” for children. They know it is complex, but have only a rather rough idea of how it happens and of who makes it.