# REALITY AND FANTASY IN CHILDREN'S VISION OF THE WORLD – FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EXPERIENCING THE WORLD OF MEDIA

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The article pays attention to the perspective of children who experience the world in compliance with their two systems of thinking: rational and magical. Several criteria used by children in order to distinguish reality from fantasy are presented. Some attempts are made to refer this knowledge to contacts of children with the specific reality – the media reality of television information. It turns out that children's difficulties related with appropriate reception of television information may result from some disability to classify such information in the specific type of the system – reality or fantasy. There is much need to carry out research that will focus on children's perspective of experiencing the world of media.

*Key words:* pre-school children, fantastical – magical thinking, thinking about fantasy, children's vision of the world.

### Introductory Remarks

In the article some attention is paid to children's perspective of experiencing the world including the world of media. Psychologists discuss two systems of children's thinking: rational and magical. Children of pre-school age are not able to distinguish any borders between the two systems, and the systems in question overlap. It is highlighted that children are capable of combining fantasy and reality in an elastic way. Moreover, borders between fantasy and reality are very delicate.

The issue of relations between realism and magic in the children's thinking has been discussed in the psychological context for a long time. None of the up-to-date theories explain problems related to the differentiation or confusion between reality and imagination in the child's development [3, p. 5]. It is necessary to carry out further research in this sphere taking into account those factors, including individual differences or context and specifics of the environment children live in. Therefore, there is now some need to pay attention to the fact that pre-school children spend approximately three hours daily in front of their television sets [6, p. 12]. Their contacts with this particular medium are of systematic, daily and multiaspect nature. Therefore, the media- related content is omnipresent in children's lives [1, p. 206]. It turns out that such content is not neutral to children's cognition and understanding of the surrounding world. Media broadcasts are skilfully prepared to generate recipients' interest, attract their attention and remain in their memory for a long time. The ongoing confrontation with media reality brings about the formation of a specific vision of the world in pre-school-children's minds. In this period of development children shape their personalities on the basis of their visualisation of the surrounding world. However, instead of experiencing reality in the real context, they more and more frequently watch it on the screen. Their lives are divided into two different worlds – the real one and the one created by the media. These two worlds are not equal. In spite of their almost parallel existence, the world of the media gains importance. It is more colourful, bright, and attracting children's attention, providing them with fun and some sense of self-fulfilment

with no efforts undertaken. In the real world everything is grey, sad and hardly attractive. Being brought up in the environment of the electronic media, children remain under significant influence of the media in question. The electronic media greatly affect contemporary ways of perceiving the world [7, p. 198].

**Coexistence of reality and fantasy in the world of children**

The vision of the world consists of representations that are related to sensorimotor, representational or notional nature. Representations always mean something, replace something or symbolise something. Ability to think about objects without any necessity to see them directly along with ability to undertake symbolic actions is the turning point of the development of children. The usage of symbols is connected with some abilities to imagine something and enjoy mental representations [5, p. 98]. The notional representation is related to the process that is called imagination. Imagination, however, is connected with such cognitive processes as perception and memory. The ability to perceive reality symbolically emerges when relations between an indicated element and an indicating one are discovered. Expressions of free combinations of what is real and what is made up may be observed in all the products of children's imagination, i.e. in stories, drawings and games. Children's conceptions may refer to either real pictures or products of their fantasies. Hence, children's imagination contains both realism and fairy-tale elements.

Pre-school children have different symbolic systems, which means that they can make their selection from numerous alternative forms of symbolisation and then perfect those that are related to the culture they live in. According to Piaget (1928), the symbolic representation is related to the development of intellectual processes and may be observed in many forms simultaneously – as it has already been mentioned above. At the pre-school age children do not only generate notions but also learn how to use them. Due to this, it is possible for children to play symbolically, represent the world in the form of a drawing or in a story.

As a result of the fact that children do not recognise fixed borders between rational and magical thinking and they are able to join fantasy and reality smoothly, they find it difficult to distinguish what is real from something that is not. While carrying out assessments of the systems in question, children take the following criteria into consideration:
– behavioural and sensory evidence (the possibility to touch a given object);
– public existence of a given object (other people have similar experiences with some objects that exist in reality); and
– harmonious existence of a given entity in reality and fantasy simultaneously (Wellman, Estes, 1986). Research carried out by M. Kielar-Turska indicates that the criteria given above are not sufficient for children to distinguish reality from fantasy. The author emphasises that children do not feel any need for the differentiation of what is real and what is not. The coexistence of fantasy and reality in one world is something natural for children. Something that is distant, unknown or treated by others as nonexistent is not real for them. Something that is not real may be anything that is characterised by extraordinary qualities, powers or skills [2, p. 328–333].

Problems related to the coexistence of fantasy and reality in the world of children is differently explained by researchers. The first attempts aiming at some explanations were undertaken by J. Piaget (1928) who identified reasons of the phenomenon in question in children's realism. According to Piaget, both animate beings and inanimate objects enjoy consciousness and may undertake meaningful actions. Following this author's interpretation, it is possible to state that children are realists, i.e. they are inclined towards the world of things and they tend to imitate everything that exists. Children's realism – from a Piaget's perspective – is the foundation of children's magic that is expressed in adopting a possibility to influence distant objects by means of magical gestures or words, e.g. spells.

A. Leslie (1987) believes that the phenomenon of coexistence of fantasy and reality in the world of children is related to the development of children's symbolic skills. Such ability is expressed in games involving pretending. While pretending, children distinguish a primary representation from a decoupled one that attributes extraordinary features to a given object for a while only. Symbolic games serve as those exercising imagination, and they undergo several stages of their development. Piaget (1962) distinguished two development stages of children's play: the first stage that lasts from the first to the fourth year of life and the second stage that lasts from the fourth to the seventh year of life. Symbolic play is always based on the understanding of relations between the indicating and the indicated. Firstly, children focus activities on themselves and sometimes on others. Then they can combine a few activities aimed at others in order to – eventually – use replacement objects while playing (e. g. feeding a doll with a stick) [3, p. 7]. Fun facilitates the development of different representations. Therefore, stimulation of the environment is highlighted to be of great importance referring to children's games and, simultaneously, representations. Adult experiences that are transferred to children and encourage children to imitate adults are very important here [3, p. 9].

Children also present their visions of the world by means of drawings. Drawings result from children's intellectual processing of the reality, and they involve the symbolic representation. Drawings are products that consist of determinants of different elements of the reality, including both real and fantastical ones. At some particular developmental stages of children's drawings children activate their sphere of representations while drawing.

**Children's perspective of experiencing television fantasy**

In the research on fantasy in children's vision of the world that has been carried out so far, it is possible to distinguish two aspects of the very issue, i.e. two categories: fantastical – magical thinking and thinking about fantasy. Such a division results from referring either to the content or to the process of reasoning. Considerations given in the latter group (i.e. thinking about fantasy) concern convictions that there is different fantastical content, including diversifying fantasy and reality with reference to the world of artistic representations (literature, film or television) and presenting 'social fantasies' (i.e. some attitudes towards different persons relating to some cultures, e.g. Santa Claus). Magical thinking is a way of thinking about the world that contradicts already existing knowledge about reality. Such reasoning is not supported by any knowledge. The research on magical thinking concentrates on the process related to the nature of the problem and concerns children's ways to present relations between mind and reality, behaviour and interactions between physical objects [4, p. 21–22].

The results of the latest research on children's attitudes towards magic and fantasy allow for stating that reaching complete perception of these two categories and moving on to different levels of 'reality' and 'fantasy' are subject to distinct developmental changes. Anna Kołodziejczyk (2003) undertook the attempt to refer this knowledge to a specific domain of children's contacts with fantasy, i. e. to their contacts with television. The research conducted by the author proves that children formulate their own criteria of fantasy that allow them to obtain some orientation in television information. While growing older children change their preferences as to favourite television programmes. They gradually lose interest in cartoons, thus getting more and more interested in more realistic programmes. With in age viewers acquire a higher level of competence to assess the fantastical nature of television information. However, the competent usage of the category of fantasy is possible only when children are able to spot the difference between the content and forms of television information according to the criteria of fantasy, i.e. when they are able to judge correctly whether particular television information is fantastical or real. In the light of the research carried out by Kołodziejczyk, only children who are four or five years old are able

to make such judgements. Moreover, advancing age brings some ability to use the category of fantasy selected by children. Children use the criteria of fantasy more and more consequently. When they get older, there is some decrease in the number of elements that belong neither to the world of fantasy nor to the world of reality. Such a situation results from young viewers' increasing television experiences (as it is also suggested by media theoreticians).

Small children find it difficult to perceive television information. They lack competences necessary to understand messages of some information properly, to understand the content and assess it correctly. Children cannot judge information critically and make its selective choice. Literature holds the opinion that the youngest viewers' difficulties, observed while having contacts with television, may involve the inability to classify information as a particular system – reality or fantasy (magic). The appropriate selection of information requires its correct interpretation. The interpretation of television information, undoubtedly, involves skilful differentiation between real and the fantastical. In order to understand and interpret particular information correctly, children should learn to differentiate the very information, should be able to see that television tells both about magic (thus being fantastical) and reality (thus being realistic) doing that in a different way. The acquisition of such competences allows for the appropriate understanding of television information.

The ability to analyse formal and context-related layers of information is particularly important for the development of a fantasy concept. According to Liebes and Katz (1990) and Davies (1997), personal experiences allow for the content analysis of information. However, experience that results from contacts with television enables viewers to analyse the formal layer of the information content. In psychological literature much emphasis is put on the significance of the formal layer of information because it is necessary to make adequate assessments. Distinguishing different formal features of information, it is possible make the first categorisation according to the criterion 'real – fantastical'. In the research carried out by A. Kołodziejczyk, children used their personal experiences and experiences resulting from their contacts with television while differentiating layers of television information [4, p. 106–107]. It was observed that while growing older the integration of knowledge that came from both sources of experience, i. e. from assessments of transformations of forms and the content of representations, was becoming.

**Assessment criteria of fantastical and real nature of the television media**

Changes in representations, i. e. in fact, dimensions of assessments of fantasy or reality of information, play a major role in global phenomena encompassing reality and fantasy. The research carried out in this area (Kołodziejczyk, 2003; Wright and Huston, 1994) allows for the statement that while assessing both reality and fantasy of information children applied common criteria. The assessment of fantasy or reality of information is carried out at least in two independent dimensions:
– the first of them includes the assessment of information in compliance with the criterion of truth and creation, i. e. determining whether presented situations, people and events are shown in their actual roles or if the information results from planning or creation;
– the second dimension of fantasy assessment of information concerns the similarity of presentation (of people and events) to viewers' everyday experiences in the real world.

It turns out that when children get older they pay more attention to the dimension of truth and creation while carrying out assessments, thus abandoning the dimension of probability. Older children have wider knowledge of television resources and they can – to a larger extent – use the criteria of truth and creation while assessing fantasy and reality. They can adequately assess material that is diversified in its content and forms by taking into account different aspects of fantasy and reality. Younger children – referring to their experiences and knowledge of reality – assume, in principle, that particular information is

generally not similar to and, therefore, does not match reality. Hence, older children are better at spotting true and false elements of information while performing its internal differentiation. Taking the above into consideration, it is possible to conclude that in order to assess television information correctly it is important that children develop their knowledge, which will facilitate their assessment of information in compliance with the criteria of truth and creation. The criterion of similarity is not sufficient to get oriented to television information. Television information is the product created by specialists, and it covers different subspheres (pictures, sounds, words, musics or colours). In order to assess television information it is not enough to apply a criterion and consider that if something is not similar to or far from personal experiences it must be fantastical. The level of knowledge of principles that govern the creation and construction of television information plays a major role in its assessment along with the development of competences to diversify information in the dimension of truth and reality. These basic pillars facilitate an appropriate orientation in television information. In the context of such considerations, it is possible to distinguish between several factors that influence changes within the formation of representation in case of fantasy. One of them refers to storing specific knowledge of structures and principles of the television media (e.g. learning about differences between a cartoon, a film and a documentary) and more general knowledge of principles and order of reality (i. e. knowledge that would facilitate the identification of elements of reality in an appropriate way). Other factors refer to the development of children's knowledge on the world of mind (development of children's theories of mind). A question may be asked: may the development of knowledge of fantasy help children separate reality from creation in television programmes [4, p. 110]? The above analyses lead to the conclusion that certain ability to assess television information in the dimension of truth – creation is needed for the correct interpretation of such information. The criterion turns out to be the most important for the orientation in the fantastical or realistic nature of television programmes. Therefore, it is especially important, cognitively, to distinguish between the knowledge of principles of television production and more extensive cultural experiences. The sense of belonging to a particular age group and all related social experiences along with the scope of possible cultural experiences (the theatre, the cinema, cable television or the Internet) that are determined by a place of residence (urban or rural areas) are very important determinants here. Their inclusion in research on reception and interpretation of television information (in the scope that is being discussed) may prove significant from the scientific perspective.

Research carried out in the above area should also include more and more complicated television genres (the combination of cartoons with a storyline and a documentary in one programme) in programmes for children. From a cognitive perspective, it would be interesting to learn more about children's attitudes towards this kind of programmes. It would be necessary to distinguish between a wide range of genres of television programmes and pay particular attention to the way the most important information is realised and its level of fantasy (such programmes will predominantly include all reality shows, television commercials and information programmes or the so-called 'intervention programmes').

## Summary

The article pays attention to the perspective of children who experience the world in compliance with their two systems of thinking: rational and magical. Several criteria used by children in order to distinguish reality from fantasy are presented. Some attempts are made to refer this knowledge to contacts of children with the specific reality – the media reality of television information. It turns out that children's difficulties related with appropriate reception of television information may result from some disability to classify such information in the specific type of the system – reality or fantasy. There is much need to carry out research that will focus on children's perspective of experiencing the world of media.

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## РЕАЛЬНІСТЬ І ФАНТАЗІЯ В ДИТЯЧОМУ БАЧЕННІ СВІТУ – З ПОГЛЯДУ НА СВІТ МАС-МЕДІА

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Стаття присвячена дітям, котрі пізнають світ на межі двох систем мислення: раціональної і магічної. Зроблено спробу показати кілька критеріїв, за якими дитина розрізняє ці два світи. Проаналізовано можливість зв'язку між вищезгаданими поняттями та світом мас-медіа – тобто світом телебачення. Виявляється, що наслідком поєднання дитячих труднощів та занурення у світ телебачення може бути неможливість відрізняти реальний світ від уявного. Потреба детального вивчення цього явища стає дедалі актуальнішою.

*Ключові слова:* діти дошкільного віку, фантастично-магічне мислення, роздуми щодо фантазії, дитяче бачення світу.