



Children of the world on British television: national and transnational representations

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Dossier thématique

Children of the world on British television: national and transnational representations

JONATHAN BIGNELL

Abstract

This article analyses comparative representations of childhood in British television programmes shortly after 1968, focusing on transnational broadcasting and international co-productions. Television played a relatively conservative role, limited to programmes associated with pedagogical, public service aims. However, programmes engaged with adults' insight into the importance of listening to children and attributing them with greater agency and voice, recognition of diversity in children's culture, and the need to communicate with both adults and children about social problems, not least of which were problems affecting children themselves. Comparative representations of British childhoods had already been made for British television, the most celebrated being the documentary series *7 Up* (1964-). It follows the life stories of the same seven-year old children from different social classes and geographical locations around the UK, for a new programme every seven years. In the 1971 edition the children were asked their views about politics, race and sex, implicitly critiquing British class privilege and opportunity, and expressing a desire for social change linked with experiences of childhood. However, transnational projects representing and comparing British childhoods with those in other nations rarely appeared on British television. The live broadcast *Children of the World* (1971), hosted by US actor and UNICEF representative Danny Kaye, representing children's lives in 45 countries, fitted a model for upbeat global simulcasts exemplified by *Our World* (1967), and was produced by an international consortium including the BBC in Britain, but it was not screened within Britain. Programmes made for children did investigate and compare childhoods in different countries, however. The 1971 BBC television series *If You Were Me*, an international co-production, showed boys and girls from different countries swapping lives with each other, foregrounding similarity and difference. The British

commercial ITV channel used a 1971 French film to launch an educational series for adults, *Children to Children* (1973), addressing childhood as experienced in various national contexts. Its short documentaries of widely differing styles were part of an outward-looking agenda preceding Britain's entry into the Common Market. With reference to these examples, the article assesses the significance of the internationalization and universalization associated with 1968, inasmuch as it underlay television representations of childhood.

Index terms

Keywords : childhood, television, Britain, 1968, documentary, international, transnational, education.

Géographique : Britain, international, European Economic Community (EEC), Common Market.

Chronologique : 20th century

Full text

- 1 One of the tensions affecting the politicization of childhood by adults in 1968 is the question of universality and thus comparability.¹ This chapter analyses comparative representations of childhood on British television in which the notion of a “universal” child was contested, either in locally and nationally distinctive forms or transnationally in representations from different nations. In the spirit of “1968”, universality as a discourse of empathy and global responsibility for children was being questioned by ideas about children’s agency, their local particularity, and the problems caused by their objectification as recipients of institutional policies. In the late 1960s and early 1970s children’s television, educational television and various kinds of drama and documentary for adults addressed contemporary childhood, since making programmes for children and exploring the different ways children lived were established aspects of Public Service Broadcasting.² Britain’s broadcasters were legally required to inform, educate and entertain the nation, so broadcasters took part in the education and socialization of children and made programmes about childhood that informed and engaged adults in debates about it. This article assesses the impact of a complex of ideas encapsulated by the term “1968”, in as much as they can be traced as a distinctive aspect of the childhoods constructed by British television broadcasters in a few specific examples of programmes made by the BBC and its commercial competitors. The focus here will be on “1968” ideas about children’s autonomy and independence, progressive education and the value of creative play, and internationalism and the comparative investigation of how children live. The insistent questioning of institutions and ideologies that characterizes “1968” had contradictory implications as far as television representation of childhood in different nations was concerned. Children’s lives were shown to be shaped by parents, state institutions and inherited traditions, as documented in selected examples of programmes comparing children’s lives within Britain and programmes that documented how childhood was lived elsewhere. In the few programmes about comparative childhoods, however, children sometimes expressed, or were used by adults as a means to express, creativity and energy that could lead towards social change.

Domestic versus international

comparison of childhoods

- 2 In Britain, the most celebrated example of a comparison programme featuring children around 1968 was the documentary series *7 Up!* (1964-), made by the commercial broadcaster Granada for the national ITV network. The premise was the Jesuit dictum that at seven years old the life course of an individual has been largely determined. It was made initially for the prime-time current affairs series *World in Action* (1963-98), as a study of class privilege and opportunity at a time when a Labour government influenced by the ideas of the New Left had just gained power, promising greater equality and opportunity in education, work and welfare.³ In *7 Plus Seven*, the 1971 edition of the *Up* series, the children were asked whether they had travelled, and what they thought about politics, race and gender, for example. The series was designed for viewing by adults, and followed the life stories of the same 14 children from different social classes and geographical locations around the UK. They included middle-class boys from Liverpool, a village boy from rural Yorkshire, three working-class girls and a boy from London's East End, two boys from a Barnardo's children's home and five children from private school. It was made in annual editions every seven years, and continues today. The format centres on interviews, in which an off-screen adult asks the children about social class, money, gender and their hopes and fears for their future. The programmes exposed the children's dramatically stratified expectations, based on their sex, social class and wealth, with an implicit critique of the entrenched inequality of British society. Cross-cutting between short sequences from the interviews conducted with the children works structurally to produce comparison between their answers to the same questions, for example about their feelings towards adults who go on strike. The children's words are also laid over sequences documenting moments in their everyday lives, in which the background settings offer viewers rich detail about the social strata the children negotiate and from where, it seems, their attitudes derive. The camera observes Paul in the kitchen of a Barnardo's children's home, follows Neil and Peter walking down suburban streets in their school uniforms, or finds Suzy in her wealthy parents' large garden, for example. The project's return to the same children every seven years assumes that the children's development is shaped by their classed histories, but the ongoing, cyclical returns play down the impact of particular moments in national and international history such as the political events of 1968.
- 3 The opportunity for an analysis of international differences in childhood was passed-over when the BBC collaborated with a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) broadcast in the same year as *7 Plus Seven*. American actor, singer and comedian Danny Kaye presented the hour-long *Children of the World* television programme representing children's lives in 45 countries on Thursday 17 June 1971.⁴ Kaye, star of the film *Hans Christian Andersen* (1952), had worked with UNICEF having met its Executive Director, Maurice Pate, by chance.⁵ Kaye had toured UNICEF's sites around the world and made a series of films and live telecasts beginning with *Assignment Children* (1954) in which he interacted with young children, doctors and other charity workers.⁶ *Assignment Children's* international success, translated into 18 languages and seen by 100 million viewers worldwide, however, was not repeated when *Children of the World* celebrated the 25th anniversary of UNICEF. Kaye presented the event at the General Assembly building of the UN in New York, with a live audience of 500 children. He was assisted by ten children whose main role was to interpret non-English contributors appearing on the venue's giant screen and relayed to television viewers. These contributors included children doing calisthenics to music from Iran, making

musical instruments in Bogota, Columbia, puppetry in Sidi Bou Saïd, Tunisia, athletics from Brazil, mural-painting in Tokyo, and circus skills demonstrated from a UNICEF-supported children's autonomous community in Orense, Spain. North American children were represented by children's opera from Atlanta, Georgia, and pupils performing at Canada's National Ballet School.

- 4 *Children of the World* expressed an internationalist UNICEF rhetoric that had already been superseded by 1971, though one that Kaye had brilliantly embodied over the previous 18 years. The press release for the programme quoted him explaining the basis of his relationship with UNICEF's international beneficiaries: "When I can communicate with a child without speech, but through a smile or a funny face, I become aware of love. We establish contact, and we're friends."⁷ The notion of transcendent common humanity, beyond barriers of language or culture, or by differences between children and adults, had underpinned UNICEF's original appeal to its institutional and individual donors.⁸ It had also been available as a discourse for international cultural events, via the concept of "the family of man".⁹ But by 1971, UNICEF had a much more localist attitude than Kaye's sentimental rhetoric suggested. Assessing UNICEF's work in 1972, for example, Dwight Ferguson of the U.S. Children's Bureau and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare noted UNICEF's inclusive, participatory policies and their egalitarianism, devolution of decisions to local level, and linkage of cultural with economic welfare.¹⁰
- 5 The concept of live media events linking diverse people and places was familiar from sporting events like the Olympics and from news coverage.¹¹ They enacted a form of televisual colonization in the name of universal values, like the global simulcast *Our World* in 1967, now known for its finale performance of "All You Need is Love" by The Beatles, a programme controlled from the UK but with 14 participating countries, broadcast live to up to 700 million viewers.¹² UNICEF's aims for transnationalism were expressed not only in its inclusion of child participants from countries around the globe, but also in the technological realization of *Children of the World*, which used 22 land stations and two satellites to link Kaye to the children who were featured. Three well-established Western television networks collaborated in its production; the BBC in Britain, ARD in West Germany and the public television broadcaster NET in the United States. BBC reporter Dewi Griffiths, for example, was on the beach in Rio de Janeiro to link up with the US studio for the segment about Brazil. However, despite the participation of the BBC, *Children of the World* was not shown on British television.
- 6 The context for the repudiation of *Children of the World* can be gauged by the tone of a report prepared in 1969 by Monica Sims, head of BBC's Children's Department from 1967-72, for the BBC's advisory board.¹³ In it she recommended that programmes should have greater relevance, realism and engagement with the audience. Sims lobbied both for greater resources, and also for the creation of programmes embodying the qualities identified in her report. For example, she oversaw the creation of *John Craven's Newsround* (1972-89), the first news bulletin for children, using the BBC's network of international reporters on adult news programmes. She commissioned the children's drama series *Grange Hill* (1978-2008), set in a state-funded Comprehensive school and exploring issues like racism, bullying and violence, and *Multi-Coloured Swap Shop* (1976-82), an early example of interactive television in which children phoned-in live to interview celebrity guests and to exchange unwanted toys. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, British broadcasters' conceptions of childhood valued children's self-reliance, autonomy and social action, influenced by the work of educational theorists like Frederich Froebel, Maria Montessori and Rudolph Steiner.¹⁴ Danny Kaye's vision of transnational childhood did not fit this context.

Pedagogy in the vanguard of progressive representation

- 7 Ideas associated with progressive education were becoming mainstream, and were incorporated into teacher education qualifications offered by British colleges that combined training in pedagogical skills with study of philosophy, psychology and social theory.¹⁵ The Newsom Report of 1963 advised the government to encourage the use of television as a teaching aid and to introduce media literacy teaching to equip children for the contemporary world.¹⁶ Newsom himself became a member of the Educational Advisory Council of the Independent Television Authority, the body responsible for commercial television in Britain. In 1967, the Plowden Report¹⁷ formally recommended approaches to teaching younger children that adopted the integrated day (in which curriculum subjects were mixed across disciplinary boundaries with autonomy for teachers to devise topic-based work), informal group-work, children's independent learning and recognition of the importance of play in school. These changes tended to support progressive forms of television programme-making that adopted Public Service Broadcasting aims to give children a voice and used less formal, more liberal approaches to educational programmes and children's entertainment.¹⁸ They also legitimated educational programmes for adults about how childhood was changing, and that compared versions of childhood within Britain and in other nations.
- 8 In 1971, the series *If You Were Me* began on the main BBC1 channel in Britain. It was scheduled at 5.15 pm, when most children were returning from school. The premise was summed up by the BBC's listings magazine, *Radio Times*: "You stay in my house I'll stay in your house. You sleep in my bed I'll sleep in your bed. You come to my school I'll come to your school ...".¹⁹ Thirteen-year-old boys and girls from different countries swapped lives, and were filmed at home and at school. The programme was a co-production, comprising films made for television by national channels in European Broadcasting Union (EBU) member countries. Those that chose to participate included the BBC in Britain, and broadcasters from Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, Tunisia, the USA, West Germany and Yugoslavia.²⁰ Its makers were interested in children's autonomy, as active in culture rather than being passive consumers. For example, the producer, Molly Cox, later made *Why Don't You Switch Off Your Television Set and Go and Do Something Less Boring Instead* (1973) which featured film segments authored by the children themselves, showcasing the children's hobbies and proficiency at sports and pastimes, like horse-riding, model making or amateur film-making. The director was Tim Byford, who made film segments for the children's magazine programme *Blue Peter* (1958-). The recorded film inserts for the live *Blue Peter* broadcasts featured children's activities and interests, or documented the presenters undertaking travel, physical challenges or the acquisition of skills. In the context of this emphasis on agency, broadening experience and developing talent, the different circumstances of childhood in other nations and cultures were another challenge that could be explored and overcome.
- 9 There were six *If You Were Me* films shown in 1971. In the first episode, James Currie from Melton Mowbray in Leicestershire swapped lives with Andrea Franchi from Assisi in Italy. In subsequent week's episodes, a girl from a Hampshire village exchanged with a Serbian girl from a village in Communist Yugoslavia. Then a boy from Yorkshire swapped with a Tunisian boy, then a boy from Aberdeen in Scotland exchanged with a boy from Holland. In the final two episodes of the series, a girl from a Suffolk village swapped with a Bavarian girl, then a girl from Bath exchanged with a girl

from Salt Lake City in the USA. The intention was to show the diversity of children's lives, and also the potential equivalences between them. Children from rural areas swapped lives with village children from another country. The ages of the children were similar in each case, so that their experience of the school systems of each country could also be compared.

10 However, in each programme a British child travelled abroad, swapping with the overseas child, so each foreign country could only be seen in relation to a known UK childhood that was the measure of comparison. *If You Were Me* was conceptually linked to the concept of Town Twinning, on which school exchange schemes and pen-friend relationships between children were often built. Twinning had been set up in 1947 after the Second World War to foster friendship and understanding between former enemies, and to encourage trade and tourism. It was a high-profile means to create European identity by acknowledging and repudiating national conflicts, featuring twinning between cities devastated by war like Coventry in the UK, Dresden in Germany and Stalingrad in the USSR, for example. Children's mobility and communication between countries was a concrete instance of this transnational idealism, but in *If You Were Me* it was anchored from the UK and controlled by BBC producers. The institutional structure underpinning the programme was the EBU, whose unstated ideology regarding childhood was influenced by West European concepts of public service, supporting programme-making for children and programmes for adults that encouraged pro-social values and developmental goals as well as entertainment.²¹ Thus, ideas about childhood were exchangeable across borders, and for adult audiences, representations of childhood could raise questions of national distinctiveness and comparison. But it was only in such contexts affected by this quasi-pedagogical, public service ideology that this approach to childhood prevailed.

11 The ITV commercial channel's short 1973 series *Children to Children* was also a comparison programme, placed in a different pedagogical context.²² The production company Inter-Nation Television Trust (INTT) acted as the umbrella organisation for these programmes, produced by British programme-makers who established relationships with national channels in both Western and Eastern Europe. The British team co-produced one-off, half-hour long films with foreign programme-makers, who shot film abroad and then dubbed it with English voice-over. Since 1970 INTT had made individual short films for adult audiences with broadcasters in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, Romania and Spain. *Children to Children* was made in the same way, but with the theme of childhood linking the films. They were Adult Education productions, aimed at adult audiences and scheduled at the end of the day's broadcasting or in daytime at weekends.²³

12 The ITV listings magazine *TV Times* described the first episode of 22 February, "The Voyages of Mlle. Lapié", by drawing attention to a new international context: "this first programme... should reflect how some children get along in an established member of the old E.E.C. – France. While France is one of Britain's closest neighbours, it is perhaps the one country in Western Europe that the British find the most difficult to understand."²⁴ The film had been made by Claude Oztenberger for the French ORTF channel's documentary series *Provinciales* (1969-77), and screened on Christmas Eve 1971.²⁵ It was then edited down to 30 minutes and an English voice-over added. Lapié taught in the one-room village school at Pouilly, and each year chose one town as the topic of an annual festival. The children studied the town from the perspectives of each curriculum subject, through geography, history, mathematics and poetry, for example. The town for 1971, Venice, was also to be the destination for a trip and the film explored the various literal and metaphorical "journeys" taken by the children with Lapié. The

unusual methods she used were versions of topic-based group work and experiential learning that were not unusual in Montessori education, for example, and were already infusing teaching in British state education.

- 13 *Children to Children* sought to help adult audiences internationalise via the topic of childhood and its representation on television, echoing what BBC had done for child viewers in *If You Were Me*. But the diversity of the films it comprised implicitly undercut its comparative project, despite being politically and aesthetically adventurous. The second episode, “Today is Tomorrow”, was from Mexico, and showed 24 hours in the lives of Mexican children. The *TV Times* highlighted its aesthetic qualities, and the relationship between a supposed childhood unconscious and the material conditions affecting children:

Beautiful photography combined with a penetrating script bring an uncanny reality to the inside minds of children. If the viewer becomes lulled into a sense of security by what seems pleasant on the face of things, this may be shattered into the reality of modern day living when the subconscious mind of a child is revealed.²⁶

- 14 The summary went on to note: “However, if these stresses are realised and understood, it is not destructive, for tomorrow could be made better than today.” The film was made by Miguel Alemán Velasco, a lawyer, politician and son of the former President Miguel Alemán Valdés. Velasco was a prominent member of the ruling socialist Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which followed Soviet principles to focus on economic autonomy, low inflation and infrastructural investment (including in education and children’s welfare) that led to the “Mexican Miracle” of sixfold growth in the country’s Gross Domestic Product between 1940 and 1970. The film adopts a politics of the unconscious and of childhood reminiscent of the versions of Freudianism adopted around 1968 by figures such as R. D. Laing, and links this to a political drive for social and political change.

- 15 Polish Television made the third episode, “Album”, in the form of a montage of turning pages from a photograph album representing childhood in Poland.²⁷ The director, the established documentary maker Maria Kwiatowska,²⁸ structured the film into three themes: My Family, My Friends and My Town. The film had no spoken commentary, but original background music instead. Kwiatowska’s work always focussed on everyday experience, and documented differences between men’s and women’s lives, between the country and the city, and evocations of place (especially Warsaw). Like other film-makers of the Polish School of Documentary, she sought opportunities to break away from observational style, and the adoption of the structural motif of a montage referencing a photograph album seems calculated to oppose the linear narrative expected of socialist realism. Indeed, the topic of contemporary childhood and the possibilities for a more poetic treatment of this subject took advantage of the greater freedom offered by television in comparison with the strictures (deriving from the USSR’s political influence over Polish culture) that affected her colleagues in Polish factual cinema and television. The focus on childhood enabled formal experimentation, and a degree of political resistance made possible because the programme appeared not to confront Polish domestic politics directly. After protests across the country in March 1968, Polish television’s news, current affairs and factual programming had come under tighter and more direct control by regulatory institutions.²⁹ “Album” can be read as a response to, and evasion of, the increased production of officially sanctioned and politicized factual content at this time.

- 16 Similar progressive aesthetic and political ideas informed the fourth episode, “In Your Hands”, made by Lee Polk in the USA. Polk was director of children’s television at

the ABC network (1972-6), and had previously been head of children's programmes for the publicly funded National Educational Television (NET) network (1970-2), the forerunner of the current non-commercial Public Broadcasting Service.³⁰ His film was very much engaged in the social and political issues affecting urban youth, and the role of the television medium in expression and representation. It focused on five students in a suburban New York progressive school, who were shown using recently available home video camera and recorder technology to make personal documentary features about black consciousness-raising, war and peace, drug use and immigration.

- 17 While Polk's film had an evidently political subject, the Bulgarian documentary filmmaker Nevena Tosheva's film, "The Most Beautiful Tale", adopted an apparently neutral, observational style. In this fifth episode of *Children to Children*, Tosheva gathered ten boys and girls aged between three and seven, who had never met before, and their parents. They were put together for the film and observed as they interact to develop relationships and exchange information about each other, responding to questions put by Tosheva's crew, all translated in voice-over.³¹ This experimental setting, reminiscent of a laboratory or a focus-group, parallels the techniques of the British *7 Up* series in putting people of different social strata together in order to relativise their experiences. Questions about how environment affected behaviour and personality were explored in a very different way by the Italian director Virgilio Sabel for "Giovanna, Robertino and Many Others", the sixth episode.³² Sabel was interested in the impact of modernity on Italian culture, and had previously made the documentary feature *In Italia si chiama amore* (1963) that re-enacted news stories about sex and relationships, and subsequently *Nude, calde e pure* (1965) that paralleled Sweden and Tahiti as places where sexuality was both uninhibited and natural. While his film for *Children to Children* did not focus on sexuality, its interest in children's freedom and constraint in city life connected with concerns over children's rights and autonomy.

Public service broadcasting as opportunity and constraint

- 18 The programmes discussed here can be read as legacies of "1968" inasmuch as they construct versions of childhood that implicitly claim it as something that is important to what society and culture may be. Childhood can be identified, investigated and evaluated by television, but it is not universal and television represents national (and local) difference in how childhoods can be lived and shown. Because there are differences between kinds of childhood lived both in familiar British contexts and in overseas ones, television representation implicitly recognizes some resistance in childhood to the project of satisfactorily documenting it. The programmes are not especially politically controversial or formally innovative, and in them television acts as a conservative medium, whose institutional form, national scale and industrial organisation made it prone to be ideologically mainstream. But on the other hand, British television offered some opportunities for transnational comparative representations, and institutional networks of collaboration with foreign programme-makers with interests in childhood. The powerful and accepted concept of Public Service Broadcasting required British channels to give viewers access to a diverse range of events, people, aesthetic forms and ideas that would inevitably be challenging and controversial sometimes. In the 1960s, the provision of television was limited; there

were two channels operated by BBC and one by the commercial ITV network. But programming hours and audience sizes had massively expanded, offering opportunities for experimentation and scope for provision of educational programmes aimed at both children and adults.

19 By 1968, British broadcasters had invested significantly in audience research so that they could more effectively compete with each other, demonstrate that they were fulfilling their legal remit to reach national audiences, and show, in the case of commercial channels, that they were targeting consumers with their programmes and advertising. But as Ien Ang has argued, the desire to gather increasingly detailed data about audiences testifies to an anxiety about how well the audience can really be understood.³³ No matter how accurate the sample sizes and feedback commentaries obtained by audience researchers, the audience will always be an abstraction that is imagined and constructed. Drawing on the original meaning of the term “broadcasting”, the scattering of seed over the soil, television programmes assume that viewers are like fertile land that can be made to bear a useful crop. The programme-maker, like a farmer, casts material rather indiscriminately, never knowing quite where or how it will land nor whether it will take root and grow. It is hard to demonstrate what the effects of television may have been; “broadcasting” implies indiscriminate seeding as well as fertility, and unpredictable results.

20 But inasmuch as broadcasting creates audiences, it also creates communicative relationships. Television teaches viewers how to be in its audience, and to assess kinds of otherness, belonging and community. The limitations of this for representations of British and international childhoods in the immediate post-1968 period discussed here were scheduling and audience address.³⁴ The representations of overseas childhoods were in adult educational programming or para-pedagogical forms of children’s television. These contexts determined when programmes were screened and who their target audience would be. They were shown either in the daily children’s television schedule or in the late evening or weekend mornings, thus marginalising them from mainstream evening programme blocks when large family audiences and adult audiences were watching television. The effect was to restrict their accessibility, though not as a conscious policy. Instead the apparent lack of concrete impact of “1968” and transnational radical movements on representations of childhood was a consequence of the assumed limitations of how attractive the topic would be to the audiences imagined by broadcasters. By screening programmes about overseas childhoods during children’s television hours, and in slots used for informal, non-curricular educational programmes for adults, such programmes were both given value as pedagogy and also devalued by their sobriety.

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About the author

Jonathan Bignell

University of Reading
Film, Theatre & Television - Minghella Studios - Shinfield Road
Reading RG6 6BT – UK
Email: j.bignell@reading.ac.uk
Tel.: +44 1189262135

Jonathan Bignell is Professor of Television and Film at the University of Reading. His books include *Writing and Cinema*, *Beckett on Screen*, *A European Television History* (edited with Andreas Fickers), *Big Brother: Reality TV in the Twenty-first Century* and *Postmodern Media Culture*. His articles about television include contributions to the journals *Critical Studies in Television*, the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, *Media History and Screen*. His recent work has been on science fiction TV of the 1960s, and the history of media for children including Doctor Who, children’s animation, toys and the Teletubbies. He is a founding member of the Graduate Centre for International Research in Children’s Literature, Culture, Media (CIRCL).

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