

“Children Love to be Hilariously Silly and Dead-Serious Alike”

Interview with Margret Albers

Margret Albers has been managing director of the Children’s Media Foundation GOLDENER SPATZ and director of the German Children’s Media Film Festival of the same name from 1996 to 2016. She developed the festival from a film and television only festival to a media festival where children are engaged at several levels. In addition, she is the board spokeswoman of the Association for the Promotion of German Children’s Film. Together with Thomas Hailer and Greg Childs, she is responsible for the direction of studies at the Academy for Children’s Media. She is also project director for the initiatives Outstanding Films for Children, and Television from Thuringia¹. Albers was recently nominated president of the European Children’s Film Association.

You have been the managing director of the German Children’s Media Festival “Goldener Spatz” from 1996 to 2016. How did you come up with the idea to introduce the Spixel-Award for television productions of children into the festival in 2005?

From the mid-90s on, we had an increasing amount of submissions from projects and institutions which enable or support children to produce films. Some of these films were of remarkable quality. Since the festival’s competition is aimed at professionals, we started to present a selection of films in a side-programme called “Up- and Coming Talents” in 1999. Facing an increase of productions made by children that have been aired either on Public Access or Regional TV, on the long term this non-competitive slot turned out to be unsatisfactory.

¹“Children Love to be Hilariously Silly and Dead-Serious Alike”. Interview with Margret Albers in Ilana Eleá and Lothar Mikos (Eds.) *Young & Creative. Digital Technologies Empowering Children in Everyday Life*. Gothenburg: Nordicom

Therefore we teamed up with the Thuringian Media Authority, which runs the “Public Access Children’s Channel PiXEL” in Gera and started with this competition for TV productions made by children.

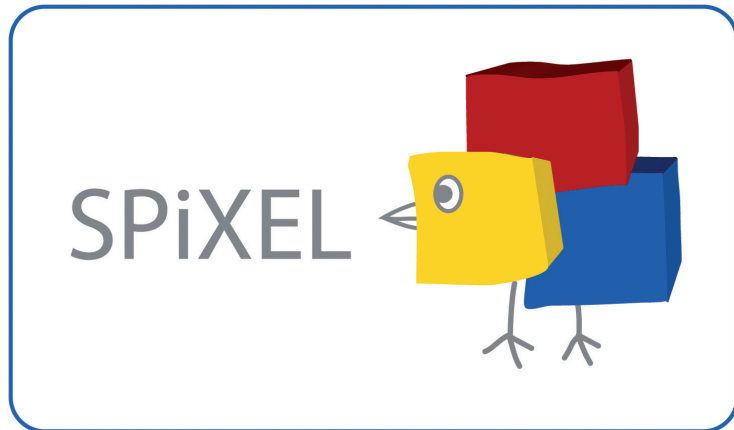


Image 1. SPiXEL- Logo

Source: Deutsche Kindermedienstiftung
GOLDENER SPATZ

What is the main idea behind the Spixel Award and which age groups do you address?

There are different awards that have their focus on the media-educational process, which leads to an audio-visual product. In the case of the Spixel the focus lies on the production itself. To submit a film it has to be aired on TV or (since 2016) been made available on the internet. The aim is to support and award high quality and experimental TV productions made by children, age 8 to 14.

What kind of challenges did you have to manage with the Spixel Award in the beginning?

We had to make it known at the right places, but that actually happened quite fast because the approach of the competition is quite unique. In the first year, the age group was “up to 12 years”. This turned out to be difficult. One of the main criteria of the award is that the films have to express the children’s viewpoint. Especially in case of productions made by young children, the viewpoint of the educators became very evident. Therefore we changed the age range into 8 – 14, which actually works quite well.

Why do you differentiate between animation productions, feature film productions, and information or documentary productions?

To display the variety of TV productions made by children. Most of the TV formats made by children can be differentiated in these categories, as animation, feature film and information/documentary.

How would you describe the creative process behind the productions?

As different as the productions are, [so are] the creative processes behind them: Sometimes friends join in their spare time together to be creative. In some cases, children who have never met before take part in a media summer camp, develop an idea, and make a film. “Making a film or magazine” could also be part of a project week at school. There are also children who do every step of filmmaking on their own, but that is rather an exception, like Midas Kempke’s 7-minute stop motion “Harry Potter and the Lego-Philosopher’s Stone – Part III”, which won the animation Spixel in 2013.

The Toolbox available for children to display their creativity has grown larger and more technical. Most of them have at least access to small high resolution cameras or smartphones and you don’t have to pay a fortune for editing-software anymore. Nonetheless, the production of a TV programme, either as a magazine or short film, is a craft. While developing and finally producing a programme, children figure out that it is more difficult than it seems on first sight. Skilful media educators who are not eager to realise their own visions are crucial at this point – they give advice and support and don’t intend to lead throughout the process.

Usually children develop basic skills quickly and react to production restrictions (e.g. huge explosions) with new, more manageable ideas. Being part of a film or TV project is for the participants being part of a creative process and in most cases a positive teamwork experience.

The Spixel competition has now been running for 12 years. Can you summarize some tendencies in the production of the participating children regarding style, topics, professional role models for the children, passion for television or....?



Image 2. Happy Award Winners & Jury 2016. Source: Deutsche Kindermedienstiftung GOLDENER SPATZ

The popularity of crime/detective stories is unbroken since we started with the Spixel Award. Also, picking up topics that are relevant while growing up, like friendship and first love. In recent years, we had an increasing number of productions dealing with mobbing in its analogue and digital variations.

Throughout all categories, children display a strong sense of justice and [show] that they care about the environment and the fate of other people. In magazine formats, grown-up interview partners often have a hard time to deal with the frankness of the interviewing children. Regularly the difference of what grown-ups say and what they do is unmasked. In this context, the young TV makers also like to provoke. In the street-interview format “What makes you ask these stupid questions?” (2010) passers-by in Hamburg are asked questions like “Who is lazier – we schoolkids or unemployed people?” The answers

are revealing. Also, in terms of style children display a sometimes very quirky sense of humour, like in the stop motion production “Who let the plopp out” (2014): Rapper “Bottle” (actually a beer bottle) is abducted by two Ninja-Pine-Cones.

Over the years there have been a lot of parodies of popular TV-formats, especially casting shows, which makes obvious how well known and liked TV-formats are.

Could you please summarize your experiences with the award in term of children’s creativity?

The use of audiovisual means to display their creativity becomes more and more natural for children. They are quick adaptors of formats and like to play with them. They love to be hilariously silly and dead-serious alike. Unfortunately neither media nor education acknowledge, value or support this immense creative potential as they should.

Note

1. <http://www.kids-regio.org/speakers/albers-margret/>