

Article from Titel-Magazin, 21.12.2004

Original German (entitled "Der Quotenfuzzi") at: <http://www.titel-forum.de/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=3122&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0>

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The Ratings Freak

By Peter W. Jansen

He was slapping himself on the back, whether with his right hand on the left shoulder or his left hand on the right is not recorded. He was maltreating his shoulder, already heavily bowed with the weight of Sisyphian labour, because, as he said, he had two pieces of good news to announce. The first: that for another fifteen years he would be groaning under the yoke into which he had harnessed himself, but which he had not wanted to relinquish when an underpaid honourable job was available to him. The second piece of good news that the Director of Programmes at ARD announced, was that they had succeeded in coming top in the ratings war. But already Sisyphus was having to weep bitter tears, because, as he said he well knew, the whole beautiful success story was about to go down the drain, as the channel Das Erste, now finally for once living up to its name, was going to sacrifice itself to high culture in the next few days. Not only in prime time, right after "Daily News", but at Christmastime too. With the new "Heimat" series, already celebrated throughout Europe as a unique worldwide masterpiece, six times 88 minutes plus 30 seconds long.

That anyway was what we were told about the Advent celebration in the Bayerische Hof Hotel, and it was offered with neither an official confirmation nor an official denial -: not surprising among people who don't keep any rules themselves, but who bank on other people keeping rules. For example, on the so-called journalistic duty of attention to accuracy, which can be taken to excess, so that it lets criticism be subject to approval by those criticised. In that way almost everything is liable to get suppressed.

ARD was venturing to fulfil its commission properly, a commission concerned with such unpalatable stuff as culture, sadly not with delicious things for the sake of the ratings. What was left for a Sisyphus and Ratings Freak, other than for once to tell the unvarnished truth?

It was reported – note: without official confirmation, but also without denial – that our hero took the opportunity of the half private, half publicly organised party, before maybe two hundred hand-picked guests, to rail against a prime production that at the same time was being heavily promoted by Das Erste. So what!

Is it really "so what"? Should he relieve his little tantrum, that he sold them during his heroic battle against "Heimat 3 – a chronicle of endings and beginnings?" Supposing an employee, an executive even, of General Motors were to say the new Opel model was rubbish; supposing an employee, an executive even, of RTL were to pull his firm's new soap opera through the mud – either of them would immediately get fired. Yet not so a Sisyphus, who is to be accorded fifteen more years, secured by contract, to make his own bad taste into the arbiter of taste for a television channel - to call it then Das Erste ("the First") is only possible only under pain of torture. May Apollo's lightning strike him in his dearest enterprise: His viewing figures.