Agency in Children's Gothic
A Matter of Life and Death

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The twenty-first century has seen an increase in Gothic fiction for children. The child in contemporary Gothic is portrayed as a capable agent, successful in their attempt to defeat the threats emanating from the Gothic netherworld. This portrayal is in keeping with the general tendency to date to emphasise child agency and competence as positive traits in the representation of childhood subjectivity. However, recent Nordic Gothic fiction – particularly from Sweden, Denmark and Norway – challenges this discourse on child agency and competence. The aim of this article is to show how images of child agency and competence are problematised in contemporary Gothic fiction for children published in the Scandinavian countries. Gothic fiction for children utilises a generic ambivalence of the Gothic in its portrayal of child subjectivity, which resonates with tensions in the contemporary understanding of childhood. In this genre, agency is not foremost a positive trait but rather a compulsory feature. To act in accordance with continuously changing circumstances is shown to demand specific kinds of competencies: adaptability and flexibility. But depictions of the competent child are frequently haunted by its counterpart – the incompetent child – which problematises the very notion of child competence as understood within a contemporary context. Gothic ambivalence therefore throws a light on darker discourses of child agency and competence in the Nordic countries today.

The twenty-first century has seen an increase in the publication of Gothic literature for children and young people. It is a multifaceted form of fiction with many subgenres, such as ghost stories and zombie fiction. But, as pointed out in *The Gothic in Children's Literature. Haunting the Borders*, »Fear or the pretense of fear has become a dominant mode of enjoyment in literature for young people« (Jackson et al. 2008, p. 1). Previous research has enhanced our awareness of what this dominant mode has to say about the child and about various societal discourses constituting childhood. In short, according to Anna Jackson, the Gothic makes up »a contested space, with horror and epic elements within a carnivalesque space of playfulness and experimentation; a space where allegorical and displaced versions of cultural debates and concerns can be played out« (2017, p. 1). Gothic fiction stages an intrusion of the past, in the shape of hidden secrets and the supernatural, into a common order of things (Hogle 2002, p. 2). Still, it remains engaged with its contemporary context and responds to various changes (Botting 1996, p. 3). This engagement applies to children's Gothic fiction as well, which constitutes a rich source of knowledge about our view of childhood, particularly within a Nordic context.[1] Drawing on French philosopher Michel Foucault's ideas of discursive battle and subjectification, I show how post-millennial Swedish, Danish and

1 Although there are several studies focusing on Nordic Gothic works, such as the recent anthology *Nordic Gothic* (2020), children's literature remains mostly unexplored – particularly post-millennial works. My dissertation, *Hemsökt barndom. Bilder av barnet i gotisk barnlitteratur* (2022) [Haunted Childhood. Images of the Child in Gothic Children's Literature] includes a brief survey of children's Gothic fiction in Sweden from the 1970s onward (pp. 36–61). In 2023, Mattias Fyhr's *Svensk skräcklitteratur* [Swedish Horror Literature] was published; it is a survey of horror fiction in Sweden, including works addressed to children and young people.

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Norwegian Gothic fiction engage with hegemonic ideas of childhood in twenty-first century Scandinavia.

Children in historic Gothic fiction are perceived as ›becomings‹, predestined to grow up into either the Gothic hero/heroine or the Gothic villain (Georgieva 2013, p. 13), while the child in contemporary children's Gothic is primarily a ›being‹. This child sometimes steps into the role of the victimised Gothic heroine of classical writing, mimicking her shiftless action or lack of action altogether (Butler/O'Donovan 2009, p. 129). More often the child tends to mimic the activity of the Gothic hero without falling prey to the destructive force of the Gothic netherworld, as is often the misfortune of the hero in classical Gothic writing (Day 1985, p. 18). The child displays resilience and cunning and thus manages to keep horrors at bay (Jackson et al. 2008, p. 7). Both of these developments are rooted in a much broader cultural shift in the discourse of childhood, where the child of the late twentieth century and onward is conceived of as a competent agent. However, in Scandinavian Gothic fiction for children, the discourse on child agency and competence is not simply reproduced and reaffirmed but rather elaborated on with an ambivalent outcome. This article asks how the images of the child, as represented in Gothic children's fiction, resonate with notions of agency and competence in contemporary society. How are established ideas challenged and thus renegotiated and with what result?

The Gothic, childhood and (child) subjectivity

Gothic fiction for children comments on a variety of social, political and cultural subjects, all important in our understanding of childhood. It reflects the societal imaginary alongside a distortion of it and, in doing so, elaborates on societal discourse. In a lecture series at the Collège de France, Foucault addressed the way Gothic writing tied in with societal change as feudalism was challenged in the late 18th century:

> The gothic novel is both science fiction and politics fiction: politics fiction in the sense that these novels essentially focus on the abuse of power, and science fiction in the sense that their function is to reactivate, at the level of the imaginary, a whole knowledge about feudalism, a whole knowledge about the gothic – a knowledge that has, basically, a golden age. (Foucault 2003 p. 212)

Foucault emphasises Gothic writing as part of a critique of society, and his way of acknowledging literature as partaking in discursive change is of importance here. As famously stated by Foucault in another context, discourse is actions that systematically form the very object of which they speak (2002, p. 54). This applies to childhood as well, as explained by sociologist Michael Wyness: »we do not simply read about childhood or talk about childhood or even theorise about childhood, *we bring childhood into being* [my emphasis]« (2006, p. 18). The actions in question – the speech acts – include verbal as well as written utterances put forward in a variety of forms, including children's literature. Peter Hunt describes the relationship between children's literature and childhood as symbiotic in nature, where »books give an image of childhood different from actuality, but the book is then imitated in real life« (2008, p. 52). Although I disagree with the cause-and-effect description, I concur with his overall statement. Children's literature forms, expands and elaborates on our understanding of childhood. Naturally, all children's literature is part of the discourse of childhood. However, Gothic writing differs from other types of fiction in its use of aesthetic means. William Patrick

Day suggests that Gothic writers use reality as a takeoff to create a state of metaphysical uncertainty, showing reality in a misrepresented form – much like a distorting mirror (1985, p. 60). This wry version of reality works through several techniques, not least parody and satire, which confront us with hegemonic ideas twisted into extreme forms. Whenever Gothic fiction for children emphasises agency and competence as normative traits in representing childhood, it remains, as I intend to demonstrate, haunted by a potentially destructive outcome.

A major shift in the discourse of childhood in the twentieth century was the move away from treating children as becomings rather than beings (see for example James et al. 2018); children are now regarded as subjects rather than subjects-to-be. When conceptualising subjectivity, Foucault's ideas of the process of subjectification are of importance. This process consists of a variety of technologies, and two are of particular interest here: technologies of power and technologies of the self. The former »determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject« (Foucault 2000, p. 225). The latter, on the other hand, permit individuals to effect operations on themselves, their bodies, thoughts and ways of being to transform themselves »in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality« (ibid.). Technologies of the self are not to be understood as independent from technologies of power (ibid.). Rather, they coexist in the process of subjectification that functions as, in the words of Derek Hook, »[the] interchange between structural apparatuses of influence and a micro-politics of self« (2007, p. 216). This dynamic is particularly evident in relation to children who are subjected to adult oppression and yet are increasingly acknowledged to possess a certain amount of capacity for self-governance. However, the process of subjectification is also highly influenced by societal structures in high modernity.

Gothic childhood and high modernity

The Gothic texts I work with were all published in the twenty-first century and are predominantly addressed to middle-grade readers. They are three Swedish short stories by Dan Höjer, with illustrations by Hans Arnold, published between 2002 and 2008; the Danish series *Zombie City* (2013–2014) by Benni Bødker and the Norwegian novel *Dukken* (2010) [The Doll] by Ingunn Aamodt. What unifies these texts is an emphasis on child agency in the portrayal of the protagonists. Allison James and Adrian L. James have defined agency as the capacity of individuals to act independently, and therefore agency »underscores children and young people's capacities to make choices about the things they do and to express their own ideas« (2008, p. 9). According to Nina Christensen, there are various ways to engage with the concept of agency in literature, and one of them – »the degree of agency granted to fictional child characters« (2021, p. 11) – is of particular interest here.

The texts chosen for this study are all from post-millennial Scandinavia. This period is sometimes referred to as late modernity or, following the argument of sociologist Anthony Giddens, high modernity. Reflexivity and change outline a trajectory of existence within high modernity which forces us as individuals to renegotiate our circumstances on a regular basis. Each of us »not only ›has‹ but lives a biography reflexively organized in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life« (Giddens 2012, p. 14). The impact of this is effectively summarised by social psychologist Shoshana Zuboff:

> Everything must be reviewed, renegotiated, and reconstructed on the terms that make sense to us: family, religion, sex, gender, morality, marriage, community, love, nature, social connections, political participation, career, food … (2019, p. 36).

As suggested here, a continuous reviewal and renegotiation are present on all levels of life. Philosopher Zygmunt Bauman argues that this stream of options reduces individuals to consumers and actions to shopping, not predominantly on a material level, even if this is important too, but rather as individual choices we are forced to make in every situation: »There is no end to the shopping list. Yet, however long the list, the way to opt out of shopping is not on it« (2019, p. 74). This unprecedented freedom, then, comes with a downside; the compulsion to choose where the choice *not to* choose seems at odds with high modernity, as a »repudiation of a controlling orientation to the future in favour of an attitude which lets events come as they will« or, in short, a »refusal of modernity« (Giddens 2012, p. 110).

Giddens, Zuboff and Bauman do not specifically addresses child subjectivity in this context. Karen M. Smith, on the other hand, argues that childhood in the twenty-first century tends to mimic features of adult life. The rise of the »competent child actor« and the significance placed on traits such as responsibility and self-reliance resonate with neo-liberal concepts of choice and competition (Smith 2014, p. 187). Sociologist David Oswell names the twentieth century and onwards as »the age of children's agency« (2013, p. 3). This is not just a paraphrase of Ellen Key's famous prediction,[2] but also a further development of the previously mentioned move from becoming to being: Children are no longer simply beings; »they are more significantly doings. They are actors, authors, authorities, and agents« (ibid.). When Oswell defines agency, he proposes a less individualistic definition and aims to move away from it as centred around »self-present consciousness or reflexive subjectivity« (ibid., p. 7). Rather, he suggests that agency is »distributed across human and non-human arrangements and infrastructures« (ibid.). However, to partake in networks is itself complicated in high modernity because arrangements and infrastructures are in constant flux. Interaction with various parts of networks demands a fair amount of adaptability, where agency also becomes a question of competence. According to Smith, each individual (child and adult alike) is »free to choose, but at the same time personally responsible for the consequences of his or her choices« (2014, p. 188).

Smith's argument bridges the gap between adult and child subjectivity in high modernity, and yet, while the image of the »competent child actor« is established or even normative, as suggested elsewhere (Kampmann 2004), it remains debated. Hugh Cunningham, in his survey of the history of childhood spanning the sixteenth to the twenty-first century, acknowledges a shift in the discourse of children's rights in the late twenty-first century that has had a significant impact. Previous rights had been centred around the right to a protected childhood but with the publication of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) in 1989, this was combined with children's right »to be heard in any decision that may affect his or her life« (Cunningham 2021, p. 156). Participation in the structuring of their own life has emerged as equally important, acknowledging the child's capacity for self-governance. Therefore,

2 In her famous publication *Barnets århundrade* (1900) [*The Century of the Child*], Ellen Key argued that the equality gradually granted women in the nineteenth century should be extended to children. The century to come would therefore be the century of the child.

competence tends to be regarded as a questioning of adult authority and a subversion of hierarchies. Apart from the general impact of the UNCRC, it supports what authorities on child-rearing such as Benjamin Spock and, in the Scandinavian countries, Anna Wahlgren and later Jesper Juul have written about child competence.[3] Cunningham describes this development as a gradual weakening of adult authority, resulting in child-rearing becoming »a matter of negotiation between parent and child« (2021, p. 165). In children's Gothic it also becomes a negotiation with the demands from the Gothic netherworld as it intrudes into the order of things, and it highlights the significance of agency in combination with competence.

The rise of the *in*competent child in Ingunn Aamodt's *Dukken* (2010)

Ingunn Aamodt's novel *Dukken* is part of the series *Marg & Bein*.[4] In it, the protagonist Eva, a young girl, receives a gift from her great-grandmother: a doll named Isabell Viktoria. The great-grandmother explains to Eva that she should treat the doll well and she will be rewarded, which turns out to be literally true. The doll is a supernatural object, and every action inflicted on it rebounds to its owner, thus making it a source of pleasure as well as pain, depending on the decisions and actions of its owner (and others with access to the doll). Dolls are a common Gothic motif, often portrayed as inherently evil or uncanny, situated between subject and object.[5] However, what is essential in Aamodt's novel is the complete neutrality of the doll's power. The one who is granted power is Eva herself, but the outcome of her actions serves as a criterion for competence. Eva, upset about what she considers a useless gift, throws the doll in the garbage bin (Aamodt 2014 p. 14) but later retrieves it and, in the process, falls into the bin herself (ibid., pp. 15–16). A chain of cause and effect is established and from that point on, the reader knows what to expect – but Eva does not. She continues to treat the doll badly and is repaid accordingly: She hits the doll in the stomach and is hit herself; she throws the doll into a basin and nearly drowns in the bathtub; she scratches the doll's face with a needle and cuts her own face on a nail; she breaks the doll's arm and then breaks her own; she stabs out one of the doll's eyes and accidentally stabs herself in the eye with a pair of scissors (ibid., pp. 21, 23, 30–31, 38, 45–46, 49, 69, 71). The increasingly violent chain of events continues without Eva putting two and two together.

In a discussion of Aamodt's novel, Ann Sylvi Larsen (2015) refers to Noël Carroll and a variety of narrative patterns he considers distinctive for horror fiction. One of them, highlighted by Larsen, is discovery/confirmation/confrontation (see Carroll 2004,

3 Benjamin Spock's famous child-rearing manual *The Common Sense Book of Child Care* was first published in 1946 but has been frequently republished and updated. Gradually, emphasis on physical health has shifted to ideas of child development, where the child's own needs were to be met and their competence to be nurtured and refined to create socially aware human beings. Anna Wahlgren published *Barnaboken* (1984) [*For the Love of Children* 2009], and Jesper Juul his influential study *Ditt kompetenta barn* (1995) [*Your Competent Child* 2001]. Just as Spock's advice for child-rearing has been influential within a Scandinavian context, Wahlgren's and Juul's works have been widely read outside Scandinavia.

4 Translated literally, the name of the series would be Marrow & Bone, and it alludes to a bodily sensation when scared stiff: to shiver to the bone. Aamodt has published a sequel to the novel, *Dukkens rette ejer* (2017) [The Doll's Rightful Owner], but this book is beyond the scope of the present article.

5 This is a central aspect of the uncanny as outlined by Sigmund Freud in his essay »Das Unheimliche« (1919). Freud, drawing on the writing of E. Jentsch, describes the doll as an example of the automaton, which blurs the boundary between subject and object and, in turn, provokes a sensation of the uncanny (Freud 1976, pp. 624–625).

p. 116). The discovery of the supernatural leads to a confirmation of its existence and finally to a confrontation between forces. Eva, on the other hand, remains stuck in the discovery phase (Larsen 2015, pp. 35, 121), and when she finally moves on to the next step and confirms her insight with the help of her great-grandmother, it turns out to be too late. Turning to the doll with the aim of pampering it, Eva finds out that her younger sister has torn its head off (Aamodt 2014, p. 85). Larsen suggests that Aamodt's novel follows in the older tradition of exemplary literature and provides a moral example like the ones found in cautionary tales such as Heinrich Hoffmann's iconic *Struwwelpeter* (1845) (Larsen 2015, pp. 116, 125–126). In a sense this is correct, since Eva, as pointed out by Larsen, comes across as a very unpleasant character (ibid., pp. 117, 123, 126). Yet these character traits have little to do with the harm that befalls her. Eva remains as unpleasant as before, even once she realises the way the doll works, so the possibility of a better future has little to do with a change of character and depends entirely on her capacity to (finally) make use of the doll's power to her advantage.

As previously pointed out, trademarks of subjectivity in high modernity are reflexivity, flexibility and adaptability. Therefore, the question of agency – to act independently – means being able to manoeuvre within a field of possible actions. According to Jan Kampmann, in an anthology with the illuminating title *Beyond the Competent Child. Exploring Contemporary Childhoods in the Nordic Welfare Societies* (2004), a new kind of childhood norm has emerged within the discourse of socialisation and education since the late twentieth century:

> [t]he child and the pupil are expected to be responsible for their own learning and individualization to such an extent that this makes up an essential element in the basis of what is increasingly regarded as *expectable*, as *desirable* and as *achievable*, or in the short form: what can be considered as *normal* in relation to the individual child's development and daily performance. (2004, p. 145)

Technologies of the self are emphasised as part of the subjectification process, whereas the capacity to decode expectations and act in accordance with them rests with the child. Examples of the exact opposite permeate Aamodt's *Dukken,* because its protagonist continuously fails to make the right choice: Instead of pleasure, she constantly causes herself pain due to her failure. Eva is a representation of the incompetent child, a distorted and dark counterpart to the twenty-first century childhood norm. Eva is indeed an example but not a predominantly moral one, as suggested by Larsen. Instead, the novel is a cautionary tale with the message: If you fail to combine agency with the necessary competence, the consequences can be severe.

Authority and what ›might‹ (not) be in the stories of Dan Höjer (2002–2008)

Child agency has frequently been discussed in studies of age-based power relations in children's literature. Maria Nikolajeva coined the term ›aetonormativity‹ to denote the power hierarchy in children's literature which is governed by adult normativity. She discusses the carnivalesque qualities in children's and young adult fiction through which normative power relations are (often temporarily) challenged and the child enjoys the freedom of autonomy in the absence of adult suppression (Nikolajeva 2009). However, as pointed out by Clémentine Beauvais, the child is not necessarily powerless

at the outset. Beauvais makes a distinction between ›authority‹ and ›might‹, which allows for a division of power between the adult and the child. To be an adult is to possess authority; to be a child is to be mighty, to possess a longer future in which to act: »What one loses in might, one gains in authority. To be mighty is to have more time left, to be authoritative is to have more time past.« (Beauvais 2015, pp. 18–19) This model of power distribution resonates with the main argument in Nick Lee's study *Childhood and Society. Growing Up in an Age of Uncertainty* (2001). Drawing on the writing of Giles Deleuze, Lee claims that human development and progression consists of accumulated experience that forms an assemblage, and he states that »the bigger the assemblage, the slower it can change or be changed« (2001, p. 137). Therefore, growing up inevitably means slowing down:

> Slowing down or growing up has a cost. It sets limits to the pace of personal and social change. But it also has a benefit. The more extensive one's network, the more elements included in one's assemblage, the more powerfully agentic one can be (ibid.).

In a context where change is normality and flux is pervasive, Lee's description switches age norms and creates, in the words of Jacob Wentzer, »an epistemology where the child serves as norm for the adult instead of the other way around« (2004, p. 319). Once again, technologies of the self are stressed, and yet the child in children's Gothic frequently fails to live up to this. In Aamodt's *Dukken* it is evident that agency without competence is destructive, but this is taken even further in the short stories by Dan Höjer, to which I now turn.

In Höjer's short stories, child protagonists continuously perish or find themselves swallowed up by the phantasmagoric netherworld of the Gothic. In »Den skrattande sjön« (2005) [The Laughing Lake], the protagonist Torben is confronted with a sinister being in a lake and draws upon knowledge passed on to him by asking what the being's wishes are, convinced that this move will save it, and himself as well. In the end, the being dismisses Torben's belief and sucks the soul out of him (Höjer 2005, pp. 87, 90). Adult authority, passed on through knowledge and experience, turns out to be false. What Torben has learned is incorrect and his failure to realise this condemns him to a soulless existence. Adult authority proves to be an unreliable foundation, and the failure of the adult world, alongside the child's incapacity to see through it, is a lethal combination.

In the short story »Tiden bara rinner iväg ...« (2008) [Time Flies ...] we see a similar pattern. The protagonist is confronted with a threat and fails to respond adequately to it. A watchmaker who is either a supernatural being or simply a mad old man (with little difference for the outcome) declares that he needs a human brain to complete a time machine. The protagonist Christoffer laughs and treats the situation as a hoax, suggesting he is the object of ridicule – subjected to a »candid camera« (Höjer 2008, p. 95). He is unable to understand the danger he finds himself in, and in the end is drugged; the last thing he perceives before losing consciousness is the sound of a circular saw (ibid.). Whether the knowledge passed on to the child affirms the possibility of the supernatural or not, the end result remains the same. Authority is a burden, and slowing down proves a threat to the child's might which, according to Beauvais, is their future.

A final short story by Höjer intensifies the theme of the inadequate and therefore dangerous impact of adult authority by specifically challenging the child-adult

relationship. The story is called »Telefonterror« (2002) [Telephone Terror], and the representative of the Gothic netherworld is a teacher who seems sweet and kind but in reality nurtures a hatred for love between children (Höjer 2002, p. 87). Affection between two children makes them targets, and in the climactic end, they are forced down into a vault. When the heavy stone above them closes, they huddle together in the darkness side by side with two skeletons doing the same, suggesting the inevitable outcome (ibid., p. 91). Further amplifying the untrustworthiness of adults is one of the accompanying illustrations by artist Hans Arnold that depicts the teacher as half human, half other, with cat-like features, fangs and horns; the blackboard in the background that ›she‹ points to shows the mathematical formula: »2 × 2 = 5« (ibid., p. 89). Adult authority is delegitimised, and it is suggested that to rely on it means to squander your future – what might be turns out not to be. The power relations described by Beauvais are undermined and the process of slowing down, as outlined by Lee, leaves children vulnerable. What is needed instead is a ›speeding up‹ – a continuous re-evaluation of circumstances that must never be allowed to settle. When Eva, in Aamodt's *Dukken*, is destroyed by the doll's powers, and when Höjer's protagonists are unable to question adult authority, the archaic past of traditional Gothic is concentrated. Much like high modernity itself, children's Gothic fiction transforms recent time to immediate past, and every decision made has a very short expiry date.

The auspicious apocalyse in Benni Bødker's Zombie City series (2013–2014)

Danish writer Benni Bødker's series *Zombie City* (2013–2014) consists of four parts, of which the first two will be discussed here. The series revolves around Chris, a young boy trying to survive in a post-apocalyptic setting where all adults have been transformed into zombies and the children are left behind. It is a dystopian version of the carnivalesque, and the series makes use of a common narrative pattern from zombie fiction, established by George A. Romero's movie *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Briefly outlined, this pattern consists of one or more human beings trying to survive and to fend off flesh-eating zombies as well as malevolent humans. In the end, the survivors either live out their days in some safe haven, or they are scattered and left without hope in a dying world (Proffitt/Templin 2013, p. 36). Bødker's series utilises this structure almost to the letter, albeit with significant differences, and in doing so comments further on questions of child agency and competence.

The immediate removal of adult supervision enhances the space for subjectivity in *Zombie City*. Technologies of power appear to be completely replaced by technologies of the self, yet to survive and prosper, specific actions are necessary to adequately meet the new demands of the post-apocalyptic setting. The zombie apocalypse stages an extreme version of what Isaiah Berlin once termed negative freedom, that is the absence of regulation (2002). However, in the post-apocalyptic context, regulation is replaced by competition and a mock version of survival of the fittest. Yet for Chris in *Zombie City*, the apocalypse is auspicious. Before the outbreak he resided on the city dump with other abandoned street children. Their everyday routine consisted of waiting for the trucks to unload their garbage and searching for food – mouldy bread and rotten fruit – among the waste (Bødker 2013b, p. 20). Chris's precarious existence improves after the outbreak of the zombie plague because his spatial limitations are gone. He can explore the city and, in the first part of the series, *De dødes by* (2013) [The City of the Dead], he finds

himself scavenging an abandoned shopping mall.[6] He finds an abundance of preserves: »Han er næsten ved at blive kvalt. Så hurtigt spiser han. [...] Kæberne går næsten af led, når han skal tygge.« [He almost gets sick. That's how fast he eats. [...] His jaw is nearly dislocated from chewing.] (Bødker 2013a, p. 15).[7] Episodes of this kind, where survivors gorge on food and the act of eating is featured as a necessity bereft of any aesthetic pleasure, are common in contemporary zombie fiction. However, in Chris's case, it is actually an improvement.

A recurring scene in zombie fiction portrays survivors who have »some fun smashing storefront windows, looting shopping malls, or other acts of vandalism« (Proffitt/Templin 2013, p. 36). The looting part is particularly significant because, in a sense, zombie fiction is about consumption, whether of goods, supplies or even human flesh. Chris is a consumer too, but a very conscious one. Instead of looting, he picks and chooses like a connoisseur. Fancy merchandise such as videogames and expensive clocks is discarded in favour of an old-fashioned compass (Bødker 2013a, p. 12). The importance of being particular is emphasised in another episode when Chris approaches a place previously inhabited by the rich. It used to be a gated community with guards by the gate shooting to kill trespassers (ibid. 2013b, p. 23). After the outbreak, the guards are long gone and children run amok, looting and playing with jewellery and clothing. In the middle of this childhood cornucopia, Chris is alarmed by a sudden cry from a girl. She has been attacked by a zombie, and when Chris discovers her, she holds a golden necklace in one hand while the other one has been bitten off (ibid., p. 28). The image is almost a hyperbolic example of destructive consumption, where jewellery lacks value in the post-apocalyptic world. The greed displayed by the girl robs her of her hand and, following the rules of the zombie myth, transforms her into another specimen of the living dead. Once more, the child in Gothic fiction fails to adapt, and once again the outcome proves fatal. Chris suggests that he has been trained for the apocalypse because of his past life on the city dump: »For os gjorde en katastrofe ingen forskel« [For us, a catastrophe made no difference] (ibid., p. 26). The previous, precarious conditions give Chris and the other street children the advantage of learning to deal with their perilous existence in a world without security, where every choice means life or death or, worse, un-death.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that children's Gothic literature published in Scandinavia reaffirms the significance and impact of children's agency and competence, consistent with concepts of subjectivity in high modernity. Yet through a distortion of these notions, Aamodt's novel, Höjer's short stories and Bødker's series highlight a potentially problematic dark side. While the protagonists are granted agency, the significance of agency is challenged when action is compulsory. Furthermore, the action is unsatisfactory in itself if it does not respond to the demands raised, making the process of subjectification as portrayed in Gothic writing a highly difficult task to master. As pointed out by Smith, agency enhances individual responsibility which, as I have shown, is frequently displayed in Gothic writing for the young through images of death and

6 The episode alludes to George A. Romero's second zombie film, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), which mostly takes place inside a shopping center. The film has been interpreted as a unsubtle critique of consumerism.

7 All translations from the series *Zombie City* are by the author.

mutilation. The intrusion of the past into the present, typically a part of the Gothic, is enhanced as the distance between the present and the past is significantly shortened. The immediate actions taken in the here and now become the very past that haunts the protagonists.

While technologies of the self are central in the subjectification process as represented in the Gothic, resonating with child subjectivity in high modernity, child protagonists find themselves subordinated due to a variety of demands. Knowledge passed on needs to be continuously re-evaluated, and experiences provide lessons to be immediately learned. Failure to acknowledge and adapt is shown to be the pathway to destruction. Thus, the emancipatory potential of portrayals of child agency in children's literature, as pointed out in previous research, does not pass unchallenged. Gothic fiction undermines the notion of stability by showing that experience and knowledge are futile unless continuously updated. To be a child, in the Gothic as well as in high modernity, is paradoxically to be a being that is in a constant process of becoming.

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