

The 1960s in Scandinavia

A Time of Change and its Impact on Concepts of Children's Media¹

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This article, based on extensive source material from Denmark, Sweden and Norway, is about the changing norms for children's media, childhood and art in Scandinavia in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The analysis demonstrates how changes within welfare state institutions converged with the youth rebellion's wider criticism of children's low status in traditional power hierarchies, and contributed to new definitions of the role of media in children's lives. After establishing a wider historical contextualisation, the article moves on to show how the criticism of existing norms in the realm of children's literature in the mid-1960s grew into a critique of the prevailing ideologies and existing narratives in all children's media (including film, theatre and television) at the end of the decade. A key figure in the redefinition of norms for children's media was the Swede, Gunilla Ambjörnsson. Her 1968 book, *Trash Culture for Children*, led to discussions about the role of media in children's lives all over Scandinavia. Her core belief in the innate social and political interests of children had a great impact on the ways in which the possibilities for an explicit political agenda in children's media were conceptualised in Scandinavia at large.

The literature we provide for children in Sweden today encourages escapism and does nothing to contribute to a child's understanding of the world.

(Ambjörnsson 1967a, p. 129)²

Many people believe that ›children's culture‹ represents an area of interest that is positive, free of conflict and a topic on which people can work together irrespective of their political views. They could not be more wrong.

(*Barn og kultur* 1969, p. 24)

In the summer of 1967, Gunilla Ambjörnsson, a literature scholar, TV producer, author and critic, travelled to Czechoslovakia and had an eye-opening experience. She was, at that time, a Swedish university student writing her master's thesis on children's literature, and the media produced for children in Czechoslovakia surprised her greatly. She was struck by what she saw as the great richness and high quality of everything from books and plays to films and television programmes. She was also amazed by the way in which children seemed to be addressed as being of equal importance to adults (Ambjörnsson 1968a, preface). After returning to Sweden, she wrote a book entitled *Skräpkultur åt barnen* [*Trash Culture for Children*], in which she argued that Swedish chil-

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² Unless otherwise specified, all translations are by the author.

dren would benefit from a change in attitudes regarding children's media. She proposed bringing an end to the long-standing tradition of providing children with media products that were, in her view, either »commercial trash« or »so-called high quality« – the latter of which she perceived as moralistic and escapist. Ambjörnsson's provocative attitude regarding the established norms for children's media expressed the challenges that the existing view of children's media faced at the end of the 1960s. At this same point in time, the Scandinavian public experienced an upheaval that would define a radical and sometimes provocative children's culture in the decade that followed.

The central point in Ambjörnsson's argument for revisiting the standards of children's media was that children deserved to be treated as competent and aware individuals. She argued that the well-meaning, protective and moralistic tendencies, which she thought were apparent in many of the books, films and television programmes that were generally considered to be high quality, made them boring. She proposed that children were suspicious of happy endings because they were well aware that the real world was not like that (see also Hemme 1968; Sjöstrand 1970). She argued that seemingly appropriate media, for instance books that were promoted in the 1950s as children's classics, were dull, unattractive alternatives to the media products of »commercial trash culture« (Ambjörnsson 1968a, preface). Therefore »commercial trash« (paperbacks, comics, magazines, Swedish slapstick comedies and Westerns) were preferred by many Swedish children because they found these products »more realistic despite the fantasy they represent[ed]« (Ibid.). According to Ambjörnsson, it was this lack of respect for children's interests and needs in so-called high-culture products that drew children towards »trash.«

The effects of *Trash Culture for Children* rippled throughout Scandinavia. Articles for and against changing the topics and standards of children's media, as advocated by Ambjörnsson, were published in Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian newspapers, and her book was debated on television and radio programmes. With the publication of her book, challenges to the definition of appropriate children's literature in the mid-1960s became part of an overall redefining of the criteria for acceptable media products for children. Accordingly, debates that started in the realm of children's literature led to the period's development of a new concept of ›children's culture‹ and discussions about children's theatre, film and television. The focus of this article is the interplay between the broader sociocultural changes of Scandinavian societies in the 1960s and the shift in norms for children's literature, and how these became the combined context that informed the main arguments of Ambjörnsson's revolutionary book.³

1. Challenge and change

The challenge of established norms played a prominent role in the sociocultural context for debates about children and children's media in the 1960s in Scandinavia. Many scholars have noted the significant impact of the ›1968 youth rebellion‹ and the counterculture ideals of the ›long 1960s‹ on pedagogical and educational values at the time (Andersen 2007; Kåreland 2009; Korsvold 2008; Nørgaard 2008; Rydin 2000). The criticism of existing cultural and social values, in particular the way in which these were transmitted to younger generations, was common to the many different manifestations

³ The impact of Ambjörnsson's book on conceptualisations of children's media, in general, is the focus of Chapters 4 and 5 in Jensen 2017.

of ›1968‹ – from the hard-core political variants of neo-Marxism to the countercultural lifestyle of the hippies (Jensen 2013). With this criticism, new conceptualisations of ›culture‹ and *bildung*⁴ followed (Lindgren 2003, p. 23).

However, in a comparative study of Norwegian and Swedish early childcare, the Norwegian historian Tora Korsvold has shown how the New Left's criticism of the welfare state converged with changes that were taking place inside state institutions (Korsvold 2008). This entailed a shift from a mainly psychological definition of children's needs to a greater emphasis on a sociological one. The shift in the dominance of professional knowledge inside the welfare state combined with the criticism of the educational system from the outside is of particular interest here as together they posed a challenge for two of the professions that had dominated the debates about children and media in the 1950s: teachers and psychologists. Changing definitions of appropriate media for children in the 1960s and early 1970s must therefore be seen as related to not only ›1968‹ but also a broader reformation of the Scandinavian welfare state model.

The 1960s were a period of challenge and change: challenges to accepted cultural, social and political hierarchies, changes in ways of living and thinking. In Scandinavia, as in the West in general, the years around 1968 have become associated with the ›youth rebellion‹ and the visibility of alternative lifestyles. The debates about children's media in the late 1960s and early 1970s were influenced by the rebellion and the emergence of the New Left. Ambjörnsson's decision to visit Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1967 can be seen in light of the fact that this was a socialist country, perceived as an alternative to the capitalist, bourgeois West. The ways the many different groups of the youth rebellion, from hippies to the militant factions of the New Left, questioned the existing values and hierarchies of power in Scandinavian societies, influenced debates about children's media. The criticism of existing cultural and social values and the ways in which they were reproduced made all means of ›socialisation,‹ from families and formal education systems to children's books, the target of analysis and criticism.

Debates about children's media were also linked to more general social changes. Increased availability of childcare institutions for preschool children and a greater involvement of women in the labour market led to significant changes in family ideals in the Scandinavian countries (Andresen et al. 2011; Korsvold 2008). Living conditions changed as a result of the educational reforms of the 1950s and 1960s as well as simultaneous economic growth. The emergence of the television as a common household appliance also brought the outside world closer and gave everyday life a visually powerful international dimension.

The fight for gender equality that arose in the wake of the youth rebellion, and which had a significant impact on the Scandinavian welfare state systems, provides an important context for the change in values in children's media. Changing views of family patterns, parenthood, and the value of women's work in the economy transformed views of children's roles in the family and their needs in terms of enculturation (Andersen 2007; Lindgren 2003; Nørgaard 2008). Children's needs and their best interests were redefined, both inside the framework of the welfare state as well as outside of it. An analysis of how children's media was conceptualised in the period and the relationships between family,

4 *Bildung* here is the Scandinavian variant of the German term, and denotes the processes of cultivation that make a person knowledgeable of their own being as well as the traditions that have shaped

them and the world surrounding them. *Bildung* can occur outside the educational system; for instance, through the consumption of media products.

child, state and the market must therefore be understood in light of these new ways of viewing family life and the position of children.

The responsibilities of the state regarding equality for women, and subsequently the responsibility of parents for their children, became important issues in Scandinavian welfare policy in the late 1960s (Andersen 2007; Korsvold 2008). The principle of universalism that had been applied to education and healthcare before the 1950s was vastly expanded in the 1960s and 1970s and led to the rapid expansion of public social services, which were financed through taxation and economic growth. This created new opportunities for women to engage in paid work outside of the home; local county employees in the expanding care and service sectors were often women (Christiansen et al. 2006). Thus, both official policies regarding families and the lives of individual families were changed by the expansion of the dual breadwinner model, which meant that an increasing number of Scandinavian families abandoned the family structure that had dominated the 1950s (Christensen 2006, p. 343). More women working or wanting to work outside of the home questioned the status of children as one confined to the private space of the family (Andersen 2007; Korsvold 2008). By insisting on ›making the private political,‹ second-wave feminists expanded public family policy to include what had formerly been seen as private matters of gendered labour divisions and responsibilities within the family. Scandinavian feminists, such as the Norwegian sociologist Harriet Holtner, argued that family life was a political construction and thus something that, if it were to be changed, demanded political solutions (Haavet 2006). In relation to children this meant that childcare was no longer something that could automatically be seen as a private responsibility. The expansion of day care institutions, particularly in Denmark and Sweden and to a lesser extent Norway, in the late 1960s and early 1970s was a result of this de-privatisation (Andersen 2007; Korsvold 2008; Thuen 2008).

While the involvement of the state in the private sphere of the family was seen as a solution to gender inequality, in other respects the state was seen as failing to battle social inequality (Lindgren 2003; Nørgaard 2008). Dissatisfaction with the political establishment was a common theme in the Scandinavian youth revolt. The rebels were critical of the flaws of the welfare state's redistribution system and especially what was seen as an overall acceptance of capitalism. The emergence of a new urban, industrial society in Scandinavia in the 1950s, and the wealth and growing consumerism it led to, were key points of contention in the social movements of 1968. The oppression that both neo-Marxists and other, less overtly political, counterculture groups argued against was seen as connected to modern industrial capitalism and the centralist, »growth-oriented« state (Lindgren 2006). Inspired by different variants of Marxism, the youth revolt in Scandinavia attacked not only the capitalist state and commercial sphere but also what were seen as the failures of the welfare state: the inequalities it could not redress, the groups it did not include (Jørgensen 2008).

The anti-authoritarian trends in the youth revolt were part of a broader destabilisation of traditional hierarchies, including the consensus on cultural policy and educational standards that had marked the 1950s. Forces from the left as well as the right that stood outside the traditional political system articulated criticism against the political establishment at large, but a revision of cultural norms and values also took place from inside the established political system (Nørgaard 2008). In Denmark, for instance, a conservative minister of justice put forward a bill that repealed the law against pornography in 1969. Another example of the changes to general authoritarian patterns from this period was the switch from the use of the formal third-person pronoun to the more infor-

mal second-person singular one in everyday language, the press and schools, which coincided with a decline in the use of titles (Adelswärd et al. 2009; Weinreich 2006). These general trends were without any specific political affiliation. It was, however, in the new left-wing milieus that the rights of groups outside, or at the bottom of, the traditional hierarchies of power, such as unskilled workers, women and children, were brought to the forefront of the political battle to create a new political, economic, social and cultural organisation of society. This emphasis on the low status of children in traditional power hierarchies, and criticism of it, became particularly important in the discussion of children's media in the 1960s.

2. Changing norms for children's literature in the mid-1960s

Many of the ideas central to the public debate about children's media that followed the publication of Ambjörnsson's *Trash Culture for Children* had their roots in discussions about children's literature in the mid-1960s. In Sweden, the leading participants from the debate about comics in the 1950s were challenged in 1965 and 1968, respectively; both in public debates and institutionally within the Svenska serieakademin [Swedish Academy of Comics] and Seriefrämjandet [Swedish Association for the Promotion of Comics]. In Denmark and Norway, the sense of a break with established norms was not as distinct, but joint Nordic conferences on children's literature bred a mutual desire for change. The definition of appropriate children's literature was questioned from many angles and entailed a criticism of the experts and institutions that had previously defined it.

One key example of the changing attitudes towards children's literature in Sweden in the early 1960s was the publication in 1963 of *Tankar om barnlitteraturen* [*Thoughts on Children's Literature*] by Lennart Hellsing, a children's book author and critic. Many of the issues that were introduced in this book, particularly the way children were conceptualised in relation to literature, were rearticulated later in the period and represented a sea change in children's literature in Sweden and also in Denmark (Anon 1965; Hansen et al. 1965; Winge 1973) and Norway (Breen 1995).

Hellsing was a celebrated Swede often compared to Astrid Lindgren and Tove Jansson (Bäckström 1966; Sundkvist 2006). However, despite his favourable position inside the canon of children's literature, he argued for a change in the norms for children's literature in the early 1960s. His books were understood to represent the genre of nonsense literature. It is therefore interesting that the change he argued for entailed the use of topics and motifs from children's everyday life, which reflected the lives and challenges of contemporary Swedish children; this turn does, however, illustrate the drastic changes and challenges to established views of children's literature from this period. The successful dissemination of Hellsing's ideas as the 1960s progressed can be linked to the possibilities he had of transgressing the border between the establishment and the criticism from outside of it. On the one hand, he had a position of high status as both a respected and established children's book author and critic in all of Scandinavia; something which gave weight to his arguments inside the establishment of children's literature despite their provocative nature. On the other hand, his arguments against established norms and the fact that he touched on some of the core threads in the later, more politicised criticism of the Scandinavian establishment's view of children's media consumption, made way for a positive reception of him outside the establishment.

Thoughts on Children's Literature, and in particular its call for a better reflection on children's everyday lives, can be seen as a break from the works of Eva von Zweigbergk

and Greta Bolin. These two librarians were well established in the field of children's literature in Scandinavia due to their co-authored book *Barn och böcker* [*Children and Books*], which had been a standard reference text in the field in Sweden, Denmark and Norway since its first publication in 1945. One of Hellsing's main points was that children's books had to be relevant and interesting to their readers. This meant that instead of judging children's literature according to some »timeless« aesthetical norms, as he claimed Zweigbergk and Bolin did, children's literature should be judged on the basis of its usefulness at the time in which it was read:

Books exist for the sake of humans and not the other way around, something that they [Zweigbergk and Bolin] do not understand. The fact that books are a source of happiness and can support the development of the personality is to them of subordinate significance. Books become an end and not what they should be, a *means*. They claim, boldly put, Wohlgast's old thesis that Art is something divine that is above the human in both its social and individual character. (Hellsing 1963, p. 71)

Hellsing felt that the literature Zweigbergk and Bolin deemed appropriate for children was not literature that served the interests of children, but rather reflected the interest of a timeless aesthetic norm. He considered this Romantic view of art to be undemocratic, because its standards for quality were created from norms that did not take readers into account. He proposed that the existing top-down view of children's literature, in which children were seen as in need of edification, should be replaced by an approach to children's literature that saw the child reader as »already [being] a human with legitimate current needs [...] and not only in the future« (Ibid., pp. 20–21). To Hellsing, children's own accounts of what they gained from reading were a focal point when defining appropriate children's literature. His proposed revisions to the definition of appropriate children's literature therefore emphasised how children's interests should be understood and taken into account in the judgement of ›their‹ literature. As opposed to Zweigbergk's and Bolin's perspective, the focus should, according to Hellsing, not be on making children read ›classics‹ in order to familiarise them with established aesthetic and cultural values in service to their future adult selves. Instead children's reading should be of interest to them here and now. He believed that children already had preferences, and these should be met in the literature they read. This was a very different view of children's knowledge about their own needs than that of the 1950s. It departed from the idea that children's leisure-time reading should mainly support educational efforts directed towards preparing them for their lives as adults.

The interest Hellsing showed in children's own judgements of their literature did not, nevertheless, lead him to dismiss children's literature as a means of enculturation in general. The kind of knowledge that Hellsing argued should be provided to children through literature was, however, defined using a new set of criteria. He believed that children's literature should focus on children's experiences. This demand for literature to provide useful knowledge to its readers made him insist that authors of children's books should focus on achieving an insight into the lives of children in contemporary society. He insisted that children's books should no longer be based on a psychological understanding or educational ideals as was the norm in the 1950s. The US American children's book theorist of the 1930s, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, was Hellsing's role model in this respect.

Hellsing's view of children's needs and wants was not the only difference to the discussions that dominated the debate about comics in the 1950s. His view of art was also unlike the elitist's exclusive conception of art, which had dominated the decades following the Second World War. He believed that art, and in particular reviewing art, was something that everybody should engage in, not only small groups of professionals. According to Hellsing, the usefulness of art in everyday life was an important criterion for reviewing it. The consequence of this view was the democratisation of all forms of art – although his continued insistence on the importance of aesthetic qualities still seemed to pull in the direction of exclusive norms, not accessible to the layperson. The argument for a more democratic definition and use of art, and literature in particular, nevertheless points in the direction of the utilitarian feminist and working class literature of the late 1960s and 1970s, in which literature was seen as a means to enlighten and unify suppressed social groups (Mai 2004). Hellsing's argument for this change regarding children's literature was also connected to a nascent international trend, which called for children's literature to be a means of children's social empowerment, and was also picked up elsewhere in Scandinavia (Ambjörnsson 1967a; Hansen et al. 1965, p. 147; Hellsing 1963, pp. 25–27. See also Breen 1995). From an international perspective, it is interesting to notice how Hellsing's view of the child as a subject is almost 15 years ahead of Colin Ward's *The Child in the City* (1978), which is generally accepted as representing the paradigm shift in this regard (Thomson 2013, p. 219). The much earlier introduction of this idea in Scandinavia might suggest a broader convergence of counterculture ideals and interests among advocates for a change in view towards children in Sweden than in Britain.

The idea of literature as a form of child empowerment grew stronger within the field of children's literature in the mid-1960s and was central to the redefinition of appropriate children's media in the late 1960s. Other types of criticism of the children's literature that had dominated the 1950s, however, also contributed to the challenges to the existing norms.

3. Criticism of the establishment's institutional power from the political left and right

The criticism Hellsing directed against Zweigbergk and Bolin was part of a wider Scandinavian critique of the established norms for children's literature and the power of the professional groups who defined it. The establishment that was targeted at the beginning of the 1960s consisted of many of the people who had been engaged in the debates about comics in the 1950s, such as Lorentz Larson, Christian Winther, Jo Tenfjord, Rikka Deinboll, Eva Nordland and Eva von Zweigbergk. In the 1960s they continued to engage in discussions about children's literature in various national and international institutions, and had considerable power over the funding, publication and distribution of children's literature. The relatively small number of children's books published in Scandinavia meant that the milieus in which funding for and selection of libraries' book purchases took place were powerful because a (high-culture) children's book was much more likely to be profitable if it was selected for library purchase. Prize committees, book selection boards and national committees for children's literature thus held great power over the children's literature book market because their approval of a book was an important way for authors and publishers to gain publicity and increase sales. The work that the members of these committees had been doing in the 1950s had not attracted

criticism; quite the contrary, their work was seen as a safeguard against inappropriate literature and other media. In the mid-1960s this changed, not only because of shifting conceptualisations of ›art‹ and ›children‹ but also because of a change in attitudes towards state control. The latter was particularly the case in Denmark in the mid-1960s.

In the mid-1960s, Ellen Buttenschøn headed a group of authors and critics who made a forceful attack on what they saw as increasing state control of the children's book market in Denmark. Buttenschøn was a librarian as well as a children's book author and a reviewer at the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. The main target of her and her group's critique was the national committee for children's books, Børnebogsudvalget [The Children's Book Committee]. Their criticism began with a disagreement regarding the choice of the winner of a national book contest in 1963 and continued in the following years. For the group led by Buttenschøn, national book prizes and state-funded committees equalled state control of the literature market. They found the power of these national initiatives particularly intolerable and dangerously close to censorship because authors who did not fit the literary criteria of the committees, in their view, had a minimal chance of getting their work published (Nygaard 1966; Buttenschøn 1966, pp. 26–27; Hansen et al. 1965, pp. 151–156; Nørgaard Jepsen 1966; Svendsen 1966; Svendsen/Rud 1966, pp. 178–180). This criticism was clearly associated with the centre-right ideology of *Jyllands-Posten*. By the 1960s, the newspaper had become a central voice for common fears in Danish right-wing circles about growing state control of the arts through increased state funding of artists and art institutions. The increased politicisation of artistic value meant that, although Buttenschøn and the other authors and critics who supported her did not, in fact, have very different ideals regarding children's literature from those of the members of the national committee, political convictions began to play a role in the debates about whether the state had the right to participate in the definition of appropriate children's literature.

The criticism of the growing institutionalisation of children's literature was not exclusive to Denmark at this time (for Norway, see Gundersen 1969). In Sweden, Hans Peterson, a children's book author, also spoke out about what he saw as a »guerrilla war« against authors of children's books, led by what he claimed to be a »junta [...] [of] professional opinion makers« (Peterson 1965. See also Hellsing 1965; Stjärne-Nilsson 1965; Strömstedt 1965). Peterson's criticism of the establishment was not rooted in differences in political convictions and pedagogical or aesthetic norms. Rather it derived from differences in opinion about who had the right to define what appropriate children's literature should be and if this could be decided upon at all. Peterson argued that such definitions worked against authors' creativity. Mainly, it was his profession as an author of children's books that made him reject the pedagogical, educational and political norms that others considered appropriate for children's books. Thus, even though he reacted against the normative system in which the work of Zweigbergk and Bolin played a central role, he shared their overall aesthetic norms. The demand for a more diverse and realistic children's literature, as made by Hellsing and others, was therefore also an unacceptable alternative to Peterson.

Buttenschøn's critique of increasing state control was similar to Peterson's, although it did not have the same overt political bias. Hellsing, on the other hand, represented a line of criticism that did not object to the institutionalisation of children's literature per se, but rather to the existing norms of these institutions. Despite the very different ideals these two types of critique sought to promote, they both contributed to a destabilisation of the consensus of opinions from the 1950s about children's books in a Scan-

dinavian context. What further added to this destabilisation was when Hellsing's objections to the content of children's classics were picked up by the New Left.

Hellsing's criticism of Zweigbergk and Bolin became part of a wider trend in the mid-1960s. Swedish children's book authors and intellectuals called into question the ideological bias of all literature and all literary norms (Ambjörnsson 1966; Antonsson 1967; Hellsing 1966; Kellberg 1966; Widerberg 1965; 1966). They accused what they termed »the regime« of Zweigbergk and Bolin and other well-established children's literature authorities of exercising great normative power in the formulation of appropriate children's literature (Ambjörnsson 1966; Widerberg 1965). Their criticism was rooted in a socialist mind-set, a common interest in the utility of art, and a desire for new social structures that would not suppress the interests of children. Ambjörnsson belonged to this group, together with people such as the journalist and author Siv Widerberg, the author Sven Wernström, the cultural critic Åke Wahlgren and the critic Magareta Strömstedt. They all contributed to the relocation of debates about norms for appropriate children's literature from a slightly secluded forum of people directly involved in the production and distribution of children's literature to a wider arena of audiences interested in topics associated with literature, culture and society in general.

Ambjörnsson, Wahlgren and Wernström broadened the audience for children's literature criticism by publishing articles in established journals that traditionally focused on adult literature and culture such as *Fönstret* and *Bonniers Litterära Magasin* (Ambjörnsson 1967 a; 1967 c; Wahlgren 1966; Wernström 1966, pp. 20–22). Strömstedt's many articles published in the influential Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* can also be considered a part of this trend. The point of criticism that unified these scholars was a shared inspiration from ›Critical Theory.‹ This made them opponents of the dominant view in the 1950s of children's literature as something non-ideological, which only followed so-called ›objective‹ pedagogical and literary standards. They argued that rather than being free of moral, political or any other kind of bias, the existing view of art, including children's literature, as something independent of the surrounding society, was indeed political because of its tacit acceptance of existing systems of power. In Ambjörnsson's *Trash Culture for Children* this criticism of the norms within children's literature was developed and rearranged into an argument about all media products for children.

Widerberg, Ambjörnsson, Wernström, and Strömstedt had all written children's books, and their engagement in the debate about the definition of appropriate literature for children was linked to their work as authors. They defined appropriate children's literature as that which furthered children's understanding of their own lives and society. The demand for utility and a clear connection to the current society meant that children's literature deemed as appropriate would mainly have to be written by authors who took an interest in society and children's lives from a contemporary perspective, as these authors did. This definition of appropriate children's literature and its function in children's lives was very different to that which had dominated the 1950s and entailed an entirely different role for the author. The author of a children's book, according to these new standards, was no longer a Romantic genius whose work was independent of time and space. Instead, this type of children's book was written by an author who engaged in current society and wrote stories that related to it. By insisting on this, the new view of appropriate children's literature created an innovative, outspoken social and political role for authors. Many of the individuals who participated in the debates about children's media in the late 1960s and early 1970s were themselves media producers. This can be seen as linked to the change they had called for: they saw everything as political, including their own work.

4. NORDEN and the nature of children's literature

A trans-Nordic arena for discussions about children's literature was established at the same time as critique of the established norms for children's literature emerged in Denmark and Sweden. During the mid-1960s, the Nordic grass-roots movement for inter-Nordic relations, Foreningen NORDEN, held a series of conferences in three Scandinavian countries. Even if this was a Nordic rather than a Scandinavian organisation, Danish, Swedish and Norwegian delegates played a pivotal role, and NORDEN's initiatives further highlighted the Scandinavian commonalities in the area of children's media. NORDEN's first congress on children's literature was held in Oslo in 1964 and the second in Stockholm in 1966. A summer school also took place in Uddevalla, Sweden, in 1965. These trans-Nordic events held a central position in the public debate about children's literature because they provided a shared space for many of the professionals who produced, reviewed and distributed children's literature, including teachers, librarians, publishers, critics and authors. The NORDEN events can be considered one of many initiatives that grew from, and contributed to, an increasing focus on children's literature in the mid-1960s. These included the foundation of the research institute and documentation/information centre, the Swedish Institute for Children's Books in 1965, and the acceptance of the first doctorates in children's literature in Sweden (Göte Klingberg) in 1964 and Norway (Sonja Hagemann) in 1967. NORDEN's congresses and summer school prepared the ground for later discussions on children's culture by forming a well-defined space from which new ideas about children's literature emerged and were disseminated. Two issues that were raised at the NORDEN events in 1965 and 1966 are of particular importance to the discussions concerning children's media at the end of the decade: the issue of »realism« versus »protective« ideals in children's literature and the difference between literature for children and literature for adults.

At the summer school in 1965, Sonja Hagemann, a Norwegian children's literature scholar and influential children's book reviewer, gave a presentation in which she argued that realism had been absent from Scandinavian children's literature for the previous three decades (Noreen 1965; Stjärne-Nilsson 1965). Hagemann suggested that the escapist nature of Scandinavian children's literature resulted from a desire of adults to protect children from reality. According to accounts of the conference, Hagemann's presentation led to a lively discussion on protective attitudes in children's literature because many participants thought that a more realistic children's literature would expose children to topics they could not understand and would scare them. The demand for realism and the counterargument about the need to protect children were repeated continuously in debates about children's media in the years that followed. Hagemann was part of the Norwegian establishment of children's literature. Her views on realism, however, were perceived as a challenge to the existing norms for literary criticism in the Nordic context. Thus, like in the case of Hellsing's critique of Zweigbergk and Bolin, Hagemann's challenge to the established views on appropriate children's literature that had prevailed in the 1950s and early 1960s also came from within the establishment.

The status of literature for children versus that for adults was another important theme at the NORDEN summer school and conference in 1965 and 1966, respectively. This topic was linked to a growing interest in children's books as an academic subject, whereby the discussion of children's literature shifted from it being a pedagogical tool to being (something closer to) art.

The Scandinavian and international success of three Swedish children's literature authors, Lennart Hellsing, Astrid Lindgren and Tove Jansson in the 1950s and 1960s, chal-

lenged the low status of children's books within the hierarchy of art. The recognition of these authors' high-quality aesthetic performance and choice of themes, questioned the default characterisation of children's books as pedagogical tools and their authors as lower ranking than authors of adult literature. Simultaneously, it questioned the status of pedagogy and child psychology over ›literary quality‹ regarding children's literature, and who had the right to define what was appropriate children's literature – professionals whose speciality was children or professionals whose specialities were art and aesthetic norms. Yet the consequences of viewing children's literature as art, rather than as a pedagogical tool, were also uncertain, as the definitions of ›art‹ and ›high culture‹ were also being contested in this period.

The many challenges facing existing norms for children's literature in the mid-1960s, from both within and outside of the established arenas, destabilised the definition of appropriate literature that had dominated the 1950s. This was most visible in Sweden, where both the literary establishment and the existing norms for children's literature were under attack. In Norway and Denmark various groups did, however, also call for changes in the institutions that dominated the criteria for the selection of appropriate literature; for example, when Hagemann, in Norway, asked for more realism or Butten-schøn's group, in Denmark, questioned the state's interference in the market for children's books. The strengthened trans-Scandinavian environment also created a platform from which the existing definitions of appropriate children's literature could be challenged. Ultimately it paved the way for a revolution in debates about the role of media in children's lives at the end of the 1960s.

5. *Trash Culture for Children*

The debates during the mid-1960s about the definitions of appropriate children's literature shaped the basic ideas presented in Ambjörnsson's *Trash Culture for Children*. As a student, she had participated in the 1966 NORDEN conference and actively debated with others about children's literature – and television – in various Swedish newspapers and journals (see e.g. Ambjörnsson 1966; 1967 b; 1967 c; 1968 b; 1968 c; 1968 d). Ambjörnsson had reviewed children's books at a newspaper in Gothenburg and published a children's book in 1967. In 1968, she synthesised the previous years' main criticism of children's literature into a general thesis about the flaws and failures of Swedish children's media products. Her book *Trash Culture for Children* provoked discussions on children's media consumption all over Scandinavia.

Trash Culture for Children was published in Sweden in March 1968 as part of a series called Tribuneserien. This was a series of paperbacks that aimed to be a »political and cultural forum for debate« and published by one of the large Swedish publishing houses, Bonnier. Being part of this series clearly highlighted the book's New Left outlook: previously published books in the series dealt with cultural and social topics such as ›black power,‹ socialism, imperialism, gender equality and cultural/artistic hierarchies from a left-wing perspective. With *Trash Culture for Children*, Ambjörnsson also challenged the established hierarchies of power related to media, art and age; consequently, the book can be characterised as part of the broader sphere of the 1968 youth revolt.

From the outset Ambjörnsson made her main point clear: in her eyes, Sweden had no available appropriate media products for children. Children's media were either »commercial, trash products« or boring, moralistic and conservative (Ambjörnsson 1968, preface). The media that Ambjörnsson labelled ›commercial trash‹ were products

such as *Donald Duck*, the *Phantom* and *Batman* comics and *The Flintstones* cartoon TV-series, the Swedish teen magazine *Bildjournalen*, Westerns and Swedish slapstick comedies. Ambjörnsson's objections to these products were in some ways very similar to earlier concerns expressed about comics in the 1950s. As in the 1950s, she linked what she saw as media of low quality to US American capitalist consumer culture. Likewise, she also found these media products inappropriate because of their simplicity and appeal to the lowest common denominator. Yet while those in the previous decade had criticised commercial media products because they did not live up to the high standards of what was considered to be appropriate children's media, it was the fundamental principles of capitalism, also in their Swedish form, that was the problem for Ambjörnsson. For her, the unwillingness of Sweden to regulate advertisements was a mistake because it meant that children were exposed to advertisements for ›trash‹ products that they could not resist. The vulnerability of children to commercial powers had also been perceived by the participants in the 1950s debates. Ambjörnsson, however, also believed that adults could not resist commercial powers, and thus her view of children's inability to resist ›trash‹ did not have a basis in the developmental psychology view of the differences between children and adults noted in the 1950s, but rather it was rooted in her general distaste for capitalist society.

Though much of Ambjörnsson's argument about commercial products was similar to the debates of the 1950s, her opinion of the so-called high-culture products could not have been more different. In her book and articles, Ambjörnsson made clear that she did not consider the existing products defined as high quality to be appropriate alternatives to ›trash‹ products (Ambjörnsson 1966; 1967 a; 1967 b; 1968 a). Her dismissal of what were considered to be high-quality products was the new and provocative element in her book. Though people before her, such as Hellsing and Widerberg, had criticised the dominant view of high culture for children in relation to children's books, Ambjörnsson repeated and generalised this to apply to all kinds of children's media. Using provocative language, she stated that not only the so-called classics of children's literature but also all kinds of children's films, plays and television programmes were »preserving existing social norms« and were »boring sanctuaries for conservative norms and were »protective« (Ambjörnsson 1968 a, p. 7). Along the same lines as had been argued by left-wing critics of children's literature earlier in the decade, she said that the claimed »objectivism« and declared aim to »protect« children in the realm of children's media was tacitly supporting existing hierarchies of power (Ibid.).

In Ambjörnsson's view, there was no such thing as neutral or apolitical content. By arguing thus, she took one of the most common refrains of the 1968 youth revolt into the field of children's media. Though the youth revolt had many different factions, a shared conviction among these groups was that everything was political (Olsen/Andersen 2004). Despite the fact that Ambjörnsson never mentioned Critical Theory, her critique of the existence of (hidden) ideology in all children's books shares the basic ideas of the Frankfurt School, which had represented a substantial inspiration for the New Left (Wiggershaus 1994). This viewpoint can be considered one factor that led Ambjörnsson to be interested in the overarching group of children's media she wrote about in her book: literature, theatre, television and films. Her interest in media at large suited her interest in the collective impact the (ideological) content of media could have on children – the specificities of the singular medium was of lesser importance. The fact that she chose to analyse four media that were generally associated with what were deemed appropriate products can also be seen in relation to her interest in ideological criticism:

she wanted to ›reveal‹ the ideological bias of the well-established products and the institutions that surrounded them. Thus, it was not a single medium that was the focus of her attention, but the ideological bias of all kinds of content that could be found in children's media.

One conceptual result of the way in which Ambjörnsson, and the debates that followed the publication of her book, considered all types of media for children as a whole was the coining of the term ›children's culture‹ [Swedish: barnkultur; Norwegian: barnekultur; Danish: børnekultur]. When the term first emerged in discussions about Ambjörnsson's book, it was mainly used to refer to the various media products produced with children as the intended end consumers (children's literature, children's theatre, children's film and television programmes produced for children). Margareta Strömstedt was most likely the first in Scandinavia to use the term ›children's culture‹ in print, in a review of *Trash Culture for Children* (Strömstedt 1968). Grouping all forms of media products together, the debates in the late 1960s and early 1970s initiated by Ambjörnsson's book came to focus on general (ideological) issues, such as the relationship between adults and children, art, media and society, rather than one genre or one medium's relationship to another, as had been the case in the 1950s.

One of Ambjörnsson's solutions to what she perceived as the inappropriate state of media products available to Swedish children was to raise their status in the cultural hierarchy. This could be done by tearing down the divide that she believed existed between media products aimed at children and adults:

The first and most important step [in order to improve children's media products] must be to direct as much attention and interest towards the cultural needs of children, and apply the same values and chain of reasoning as exists for adults. We must relate the cultural needs of children to society in general, tear down the idyllic features, break out. We must integrate children's culture with that of adults'. Hereafter much will follow automatically. (Ambjörnsson 1968 a, p. 10)

For Ambjörnsson, the isolation in which children's media existed had to be undone so that media for children could be produced, discussed and reviewed on the same basis as that for adults. However, since her concept of art was utilitarian, like that of Hellsing's, this meant that applying aesthetic norms to children's media products without relating these to the needs of current society was not an option. Rather, she indicated that children's media production, as with all art and media, should be subject to political, social and cultural aims and debate. According to Ambjörnsson, in order to improve the quality of children's media products a politicisation of their aims and content was necessary, as she believed that children were entitled to receive information about the society they lived in. Media products for children, as well as for adults, should make their consumers engage in a dialogue with society. This, she believed, would automatically happen when they were subjected to the same criteria as all other art and media products.

Ambjörnsson's criticism of the great divide between adult and children's media products was often rather abstract as it aimed to uncover hidden ideological structures. Nevertheless, in some parts of her book we can get a glimpse of her concrete suggestions for improvement. With regards to existing children's literature, she found it to be either moralistic, referring to an unspecified canon of children's classics, or escapist, a label she reserved for the newcomers to the canon of Swedish children's literature who had written ›fantastic‹ and nonsensical stories: Astrid Lindgren, Lennart Hellsing and

Tove Jansson. Ambjörnsson saw both types of literature resulting from a desire to protect children:

I believe first and foremost that this segregation of children's books is rooted in the Romantic notion of the child: in the myth of the child as pure and innocent, who lives in another world, a child who has to be protected whatever the costs because he does not understand, and cannot handle, the hard reality of the adult world.
(Ibid., pp. 23–24)

The protective ideals, Ambjörnsson argued, associated with earlier Swedish and Western children's literature – and other media products for children – led children's media to preserve existing social and cultural values. The new and alternative media products which Ambjörnsson sought as a supplement to the existing ones, were social-realistic, non-idyllic stories that would make children aware of »the conflicts of interest that exist in everyday society« and would »imprint« children with a »critical and anti-authoritarian attitude« (Ibid., pp. 25–26). Existing media products for children, in Ambjörnsson's eyes, were not able to meet children's needs and desire for information about the society in which they lived. An explicit politicisation of children's media was high on Ambjörnsson's wish list because she believed children would be able to see the impact that all children's media had on them when they were exposed to new and different values. Showing children the influence their media experiences had in terms of imprinting them with certain norms and values was thus a way of teaching children critical awareness.

For Ambjörnsson, children's media products had to reflect this as children were part of everyday society in every respect – culturally and socially as well as economically and politically. This was the same view of the child as was evident in Hellsing's *Thoughts on Children's Literature*. Ambjörnsson's line of reasoning also drew upon Hagemann's call for realistic literature. In her book, Ambjörnsson pointed out that she thought children's interests were neglected in the production, distribution and consumption of media aimed at them. She indicated that by neglecting to inform children about things they encountered in their everyday lives (that is, sad or negative emotions, war and death on television, inequality and social unfairness at school, etc.), children's media became irrelevant. This neglect, she argued, drew children into the arms of commercial trash culture (Ibid., p. 24). In order to give children media products they would actually want, she thought that more realism was needed because children were much more interested in the surrounding society than they were given credit for by the producers, distributors, parents, and other adults who acted as co-consumers.

The power of the establishment in the production, distribution and consumption of children's media maintained the status quo that Ambjörnsson wanted to change, both for the betterment of children's media and for society as a whole. Ambjörnsson's call for media products that dealt with (what she, from her socialist viewpoint, saw as) society's problems was deeply intertwined with her wish to bring down established hierarchies between children and adults. Children in her view presented a critical, sociocultural potential that was suppressed by conservative adult powers, or as she wrote in an article in 1967: »Often enough children are better informed on certain points than their parents and may be even more capable of making assessments in a non-judgemental and realistic way.« (Ambjörnsson 1967 a, p. 127) The way in which Ambjörnsson described children thus bore a close resemblance to a kind of »natural socialist« whose inner potential had to be set free by children's media. Hence, although she wanted to get rid of the Romantic

ideals that were commonly applied in the judgement of art and media, her view of the child as having an innate ability to make the right decisions drew upon a similar conception of the child's natural, untainted nature.

6. Conclusion

This article has shown how approaches to childhood and art, in particular literature for children, changed in the 1960s. This was a transformation that altered norms and values in Scandinavian children's media at large. To understand the foundation for this great change in norms we must, however, understand the background against which it was established, as laid out in this article. The sociocultural modification of the Scandinavian welfare state from both inside and outside destabilised known beliefs and practices regarding family life, gender divisions, childcare and the status of children in society. Discussions about values and norms for and in children's literature were deeply imbedded in this context. Everything from Helsing's criticism of the norms of Zweigbergk and Bolin to Peterson and Buttenschøn's criticism of institutional power and Hagemann's critique of the ›protectionist‹ tradition, pushed the limits of how children's literature could be conceptualised in relation to both its traditional institutions and also, of course, to its readers. Children's literature was no longer solely in the hands of the welfare state's great social engineers of education, teachers and librarians, but was entering a much larger field where authors, critics and intellectuals at large questioned its role in children's lives. The ways in which Ambjörnsson's book drew upon this change tapped into a nascent international shift in children's literature: away from pedagogy and psychology and towards the broad field of the humanities, which in this period was loaded with critical questions about the producers' interests and ideologies (Butler 1972; Lanes 1971). When Ambjörnsson questioned the basis for the production, distribution and consumption of children's media, she transformed the questions from the environment of children's literature into a general discussion of enculturation via media consumption. Her challenge of established norms in children's media rested, as we have seen, on a strong belief in children's capabilities to act as competent, empowered citizens. This belief in children's social and political interest had a great impact on the ways in which the possibilities for an explicit political agenda in children's media were conceptualised in Scandinavia at large.⁵ In terms of the genres that came to dominate children's media in Scandinavia, this agenda meant that productions which emphasised realism and contained explicit political messages came to the fore in the following decade. This development was linked to international trends, including the belief in children's capability to react appropriately to an unjust world (Jenkins 2002; Lanes 1971; Rotskoff / Lovett 2012; Short-sleeve 2011). In Scandinavia the ›'68‹ youth rebellion's ideas of empowerment and equality converged with core policies within the welfare states and new conceptualisations of children, leading to a radical redefinition of the role children's media should play in children's lives.

⁵ See chapters 4 and 5 in Jensen 2017 for a detailed discussion of this development.

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Short CV

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