The Commercialization of Childhood

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Commercialism has left its mark on all aspects of children's everyday lives today. It constitutes a shared world of experience, permeating relations between children and within the family. The article discusses the possibilities of an in-depth analysis from an ethnological perspective. One possibility is to study commercialization from the children's perspective as practice, social activity, or lifestyle. This is exemplified primarily with children's computer games. Another possibility is to study in a historical perspective how consumerism has been gradually introduced, established, institutionalized, and finally made into a seemingly self-evident part of the children's world. The authors discuss how the process could be studied through archival sources such as advertisements and price-lists. The article concludes with a discussion of the new images of family relations and children's competences that emerge from the commercial media. In advertisements for computers, children are presented as competent and superior. In television series, parents are often portrayed as pathetic, as clumsy fathers and nagging mothers, while the children are enterprising and crafty. What does that say about actual changes in family relations and problems in today's families?

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Commercialism has created a world of signs and symbols that in many respects is the first world with which children come into contact today, a world that becomes virtually as real as the actual world out there. Helene found an example one day on her way home, when she saw a notice stuck to a lamp-post, and further on another one, both with the same message: "Has anyone seen my cat Ludde? He looks just like the cat in the Pussi ad. Please call ..." followed by the name and telephone number of the eleven-year-old owner. Just a few decades ago, lost animals would have been described in a completely different way, in terms of colour, markings, and distinctive features, with comparisons taken from the world of nature. For today's children, designations such as lime-blossom green or straw-coloured scarcely have any relevance, but a comparison to "the cat in the Pussi ad" does. The cat that advertises Pussi cat food is not just any cat. It is a black cat with a white nose, the white mark running up and tapering in the shape of the Eiffel Tower. The Pussi cat is a celebrity for many children today. It lives its own life in television commercials and has its own personality, in a way that gives the tins on the supermarket shelf a special charge. Learning and interpreting the symbolic world of advertising is as essential for a child as understanding the underlying process by which the meat ends up in the tin.

In consumption studies this shared world of experience is often primarily described as a symbolic world associated with an accelerated post-modernization of culture. This symbolism provides models, language, signs to play with, and dreams, wishes, fantasies to be charmed by and urged to realize. The example above shows that there is a great deal of truth in this description. Yet commercialization cannot be understood solely as an illusory world floating above the real world, available to those who seek inspiration for an escape from reality or an identity construction. It is much more pervasive than that.

To begin with, the symbols of commercialism are a shared world of experience for children today to play with and associate with. When our

children meet their holiday friends once again and have to find something to talk about on the long summer evenings, with no television or video, there are two natural topics of conversation: their favourite comics in the Disney magazine, and the cartoons and advertisements on television: best, worst, most exciting, corniest, neatest graphics, best music, and so on. Everyone can join in, associating, talking and laughing, even if there are a few years' difference in age or if the gang consists of both girls and boys.

Commercialism also pervades relations between children. In the children's world there are often different styles, and children have clear perceptions of what is neatest or corniest, best or worst, cutest or ugliest. The symbolic value of things gives the potential to express something about who one is or wants to be, which world one wants to express solidarity with or from which one wishes to dissociate oneself. At the age of just eight, children are fully fledged consumers, as Stephen Kline says in *Out of the Garden: Toys, TV and Children's Culture in the Age of Marketing* (1993). They know all about the range of goods on offer in the convenience store, they know how to convert their pocket-money into hard currency in the children's world in the form of ice hockey cards, sweets, and scented erasers.

Commercialism also makes its mark on relations between parents and children. Parents buy things for their children as a token of their love and affinity, to reward and to delight, perhaps to salve a guilty conscience about not being at home enough or not having enough time for the children. The children soon learn negotiation techniques. Appealing to the symbolic value of objects as pleasure, consolation, protection against guilty consciences, pointing out that "everyone else has …", and hence playing on the parents' fears that their children will be left outside, ostracized, or bullied. Or collecting activity points by making beds, sweeping floors, taking out the rubbish, points which can then be converted into money with which to buy things and hence fulfil oneself.

Commercialism thus pervades and affects all parts of children's lives today. It forms a shared frame of reference and affects the perception of the surrounding world. It permeates games and relations in children's culture. It sets its stamp on relations to the adult world. It penetrates identity formation, serving as a reference point for the child's perception of who he is. It creates dreams and frustrations about what is best, biggest, and most beautiful. And it always indicates the same solutions when the images of how one should act, look, or dress become too contradictory or deviate too much from the everyday reality in which children live – consume more, something different, something new! Commercialism is not something we can ignore. It is an integral part of our everyday lives today, whether we like it or not. That is why it has been said that the ideology of postmodernity is *consumerism*, which means that consumption is more than an activity; it is a way of life and thus indissolubly connected to identity. The identity of post-modern man is linked to consumption, not to production as it used to be. The time is long gone since we consumed solely for our material needs. According to Baudrillard (Bocock 1993), it is primarily emotional needs that today's consumer tries to satisfy.

How did it end up this way? How are we to perceive "this brave new world" in which we live, with all its commercialism? And how can we as ethnologists contribute to an understanding of this world, what it does to us and our children, and what we do to it? These were the questions we considered in our work with the anthology *Postmodern barndom* ("Post-modern Childhood", Brembeck and Johansson 1996), for which the students were sent out to document different "post-modern tendencies" in today's childhood. It was shown time and again that commercialism was at the centre.

Consumption as Lifestyle

One way to take the pulse of today's childhood is to get under the surface, to investigate opinions and attitudes from the perspective of the users, the children and the parents, and to see commercialism not just as a structure or dimension but also as a practice. Is it possible to trace consumerism in present-day children's consumption? Yes, for we can see how the advertisers succeed in their purpose: to get the children

to want to have a multitude of products which they do not need in material terms. We who were small in the 1960s perhaps had a Barbie and a Ken that we bought clothes for. The girls of the 1990s, in contrast, buy and ask for new dolls all the time. Even if they already have twelve Barbie dolls, they still want that special "Party Barbie", or "Pocahontas" or "Riding Barbie" that they have seen in the alluring advertisements. With her new clothes, her accessories, and special attributes such as the length and colour of her hair or the colour of her skin, each doll has an individual personality. The doll is more than the wearer of a set of clothes; it offers a role, an identity. Barbie is the postmodern dream of changing identity as easily as one changes clothes.

Another way in which consumption satisfies emotional needs is by becoming a social activity, for example, a shared family activity. Instead of a walk in the forest, the family can spend a Saturday afternoon at the shopping mall. When children play together, their play requires them to have the same toys or to watch the same television programmes. A special case is the ice hockey cards that children collect, swap, buy, and sell. It is nothing new for children to collect things, nor that there are obvious economic incentives; collections of stamps and coins can acquire a high value. What is new about ice hockey cards is that the trade in the pictures has become as important as the actual collecting, thus showing a clear similarity to adult speculation in stocks and shares – an example of boundaries between generations being transcended.

Consumerism thus means that the concept of consumption is broadened. Until now we have mentioned the expanded symbolic meaning of the consumed products. The goods stand for much more than their practical use, they have an important symbolic function. This is a necessary condition if consumption is to be a lifestyle. In addition, there has been an expansion of the things encompassed by consumption. What was formerly connected to the individual's personality and perhaps did not change through a whole lifetime – such as taste, style, interests, political and religious affiliation – is now an object for consumption. Everything becomes a commodity and hence can be exchanged, even one's own identity.

Using the Media

When one speaks of the commercialization of childhood, about the power of advertising over children and the heavy impact of the media, it is easy to take the view that children are victims. This has long been the common attitude in media studies. Scholars have studied what has gone *into* the children in the form of violence, action, and stereotyped pictures, and then what has come *out* in the form of aggressive behaviour, anxiety, and prejudice. In recent years, however, many scholars have rejected this view of children as passive receivers and instead studied the effect of advertising and the media as an active process from the children's side as well. There is of course no reason to try to deny that children are influenced by what they see, hear, and experience – the whole school system is based on this – but the perspective changes if the child is placed as an active subject in the centre of the process. In particular, this makes it much easier to understand why children are influenced to such different extents. Of four children who see a violent scene on television, one may be inspired to go out and fight, while another may be upset and reject violence, a third may find inspiration for a game, while the fourth may be wholly unaffected. It all depends on the circumstances of the child.

These circumstances, however, should not be reduced to an individual psychological level. The repertoire and the options are not infinite in the culture of which the child is part, and the things that children, each in their own way, practise and learn to manage as well as possible in the society in which they live.

What is it that the children learn, what do they practise, what is it that they need to bring out in life? Whereas man's task in the early days of industrial society was to do one's work in the factory as quickly and efficiently as possible, with no unnecessary talk, in our later industrial society it is instead a matter of solving problems, discussion, communicating, arriving at the solutions together. Since much of what is produced is information, it is obvious that the
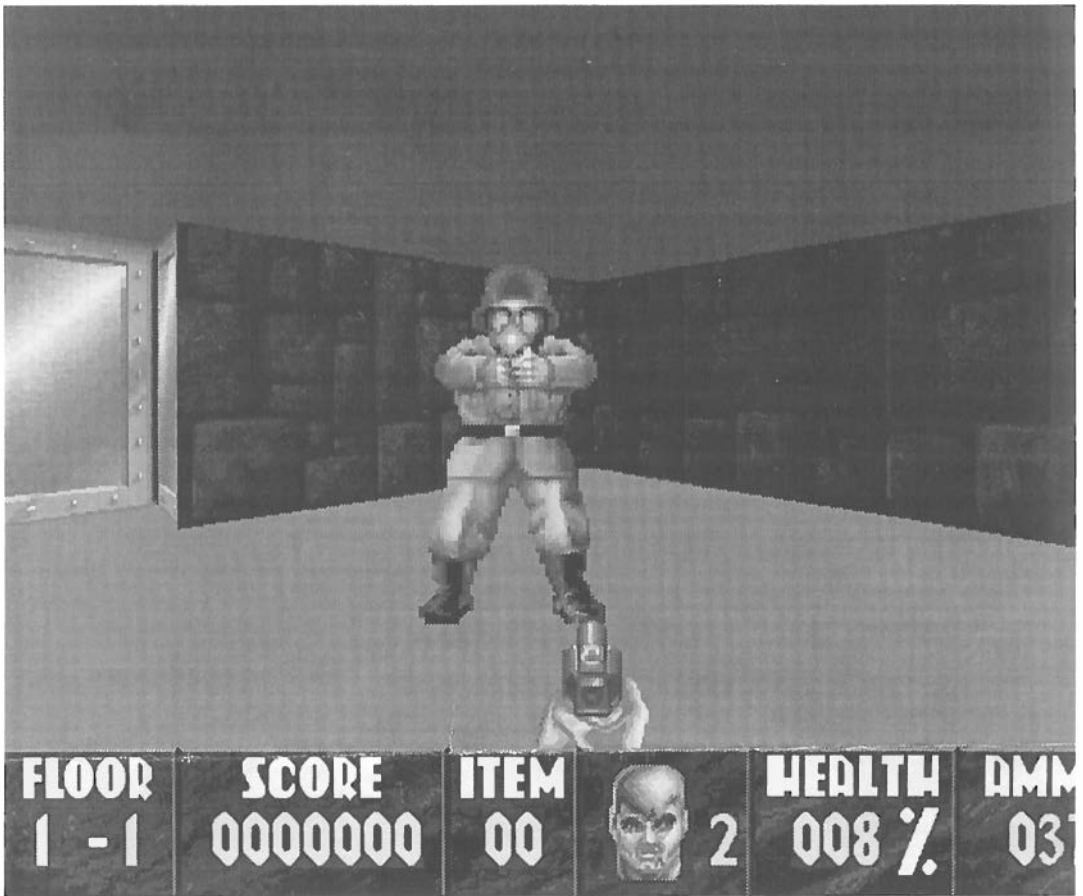
Fig. 1. There is no simple association between media violence and aggressive behaviour in children. Most children make a sharp distinction between playing violent games and using real violence. This picture is from the computer game *Wolfenstein*, in which the player fights Nazis in a German bunker. The player's own injuries are shown in a box.

skill that is valued most highly today is communicative competence (Frönes 1987).

Children practise this competence in their games, which is why games today look very different from games in the past (Rönnberg 1987). Children today live in small nuclear families and rarely have any insight into their parents' jobs. The media are therefore an important source for understanding the world. It may seem as if there is a contradiction in the claim that children actively construct themselves and acquire communicative competence in interaction with other people, while at the same time they spend so many hours seemingly passive in front of the television set or the computer. Yet Rönnberg (1987) argues that,

even if children are physically passive in front of the television, they are creative and active on the mental level. According to Rönnberg, television gives rise to two different kinds of play. There is play on the mental level, a game of thought or a looking game. In addition, the media function as a collectively shared play model, serving as a basis for "media games" when the television is switched off.

The media can thus be said to favour communicative competence by functioning as a model and as a knowledge bank. As a model, the media inform us about how communication takes place. The children get ideas and suggestions as to what to do and how to behave in encounters with others. As a knowledge bank, the media

supply children with shared frames of reference which can serve as a basis for communication between them. They can play Björne (a man dressed as a bear in a favourite Swedish children's television programme) or Power Rangers, and they can invent their own commercials based on television advertising.

A Good Childhood

Behind every advertisement that children and their parents meet, there are a number of assumptions about the world which the receivers are expected to share. Let us take a product that is now spreading like wildfire in schools and families, with the support of intensive marketing: the computer. There is a generally accepted view that the computer is a thing of the future. "What your children need to know for the future, they can now learn in their spare time" is the slogan used by Futurekids in their advertisement, playing on the Swedish words *framtid* "future" and *fritid* "leisure time". It is not just in advertisements but also in articles about children and computers that the connection between computers and future is made to appear self-evident. A school in which the children use computers is called "the school of the future" and the children are called "the children of the future", although all this obviously takes place in the present. And the latest computer technology is said to be "only the beginning"; after just a few years, computer models are antiquated. In addition, we are constantly reminded that we must hurry. "Full speed ahead. Those who don't keep up only have themselves to blame" (Hadenius 1995). It is essential not to miss the train and be left on the platform among the losers in the computer society.

Yet there is also a discourse to the opposite effect, which argues that "children must be allowed to be children". It is felt to be fundamentally unnatural that children sit in front of a computer screen instead of being outside climbing trees, building little houses, and playing tag. Instead of emphasizing the importance of children having sharp elbows and getting to the future as fast as possible, this view urges that they should have opportunities for play, fantasy, and peace and quiet, in contrast to the dazzling, high-speed multimedia effects of the computer world.

It is easy to see this complex of ideas as a reaction to the "future discourse", and it is obvious that the two discourses stand out more clearly as a result of the polarization between them. In order to better understand what happens, however, it is important to see that these opposed ideas have not arisen in our days with the introduction of computers for children. We can trace the historical roots back in time, to see how new techniques have always created great expectations – in the 1960s (which was symptomatically called the space age), for example, people dreamed of a small space rocket for every family – and have always encountered reactions in the form of fears, critique, and usually anxiety about how this will affect the children. The reaction has often taken the form of moral panic, which has been provoked by videos, television, comics, and even children's books when they started to appear. Back in the eighteenth century Rousseau warned of the danger of letting children learn to read, since it would mean the end of the innocent and natural childhood. There is thus a deep-rooted dichotomy between "the natural" and "the artificial", and even between nature and culture, a dichotomy which can also be taken as a starting point for defining a "good childhood".

Reading History from Advertisements

A fascinating point of departure for a continued study of the commercialization of childhood would therefore be to take a step backwards and study the present in the light of history. A tested ethnological method for understanding something complex and contradictory of which we ourselves as modern people are part is to study the phenomenon as a stage in a process in which the "roots" and part of the explanation lie one or perhaps more generations in the past. One way is to apply the "formation perspective" advocated by Orvar Löfgren (1990). This means that the focus is on how new phenomena are formed, established, institutionalized, routinized, and eventually taken for granted, trivialized, or mystified.

Here too, we have a multitude of possible

methods and materials, many of which have been successfully tested in the Lund project "Welfare Dreams and Everyday Life: Consumption in Post-war Sweden", under Löfgren's leadership (e.g. Löfgren 1992, 1993, 1996). In our continued work we shall confine ourselves exclusively to archival material such as advertisements, price-lists, books of advice, and so on in the field of toys, children's fashions, and children's use of the media. Part of the reason for this is that we start our study in 1900. The decades around the turn of the century have been described as a period of upheaval in the field of children's culture (e.g. Kline 1993). Industrialization and industrial technology had attained a level that enabled mass production. The increased range of goods reached families in all social classes – not just the rich – and they could all increasingly afford it.

It may be wondered what can be derived from advertisements apart from the fact that they function like the "tradesmen's entrances" that Löfgren (1990) recommends, like "peep-holes" into a culture or "texts" from which we can read a society. Do they give us any information that we could not get elsewhere? Can we really arrive at a deeper understanding of the complex reality in which children live today by studying, for example, toy advertisements from the 1930s, pram advertisements from the 1910s, or sweet advertisements from the 1950s? As Löfgren (1996) has pointed out, reading culture as a text has proved to be "a narrow and one-dimensional metaphor for the multifaceted character of everyday culture". With the articles in *Postmodern barndom* in mind, we can only agree with this. At the same time, we believe that an advertisement for, say, toys or children's clothes must be understood as something more powerful than just a "text".

Teddy Bears for Good Children

Let us look at an advertisement for a teddy bear from 1903 by the Steiff Toy Manufacturing Company. It shows a small girl in a white dress hugging a giant teddy bear, gently leaning her cheek against its shaggy head. How should we understand an advertisement like this? First of all, it is an expression of the societal and ideo-

Fig. 2. "What parent can resist granting his child the joy that a teddy bear brings?" Steiff advertisement from 1903.

logical changes occurring at the turn of the century.[1]

Industrialization and urbanization had drastically affected the social position of children. Most children in towns – possibly with the exception of the very poorest strata of the working class – were no longer involved in working life. They were on the contrary released from work, and it was the responsibility of society, or at least the adult world, to lead them on to the right track. It could be said that childhood as a cultural category was created now, not just for the children of the bourgeoisie but also for broad groups of children, at least in the cities. Parallel to this, the concept of "child" was recharged in bourgeois circles during the nineteenth century. Whereas children had previously been regarded as blank slates to be filled with knowledge, as bearers of original sin, or as small adults who just needed to grow in strength and knowledge to be able to enter adult roles, in

the nineteenth century there arose a rival, romanticized view of children – or at least bourgeois children – as pure and unspoiled, good through and through, the bearers of a superior morality, God's angels on earth.

At the same time, there arose the idea of the excellence of toys. Bourgeois children were to be educated, stimulated, and trained from their very first years to assimilate all the bourgeois virtues and attain the same economic and social position as their parents. Toys were perceived as excellent aids to this end. This applied in particular to the abundance of educational toys that began to fill the bourgeois nurseries towards the end of the nineteenth century, such as games, mechanical kits, steam engines, and peep-shows (Bjurman 1981:104). Even very young infants, who had been of very little interest to secular and ecclesiastical authorities and had scarcely been perceived even by their parents as being educable, were now to be exposed to education and intensive stimulation.

With the breakthrough of Freudian psychology around 1900, infancy came to be regarded as the most significant phase of childhood, when a child had to be subjected to intensive education. The child was at the mercy of drives which had to be channelled in the right direction. Incorrect action on the part of the parents could have devastating consequences for the child later in life. Although psychology stressed the importance of emotional intimacy and warmth, too much "corporeality" and fondling between parent and child was viewed negatively. The baby had to cope on its own even in the cradle, and be able to occupy itself for long periods alone in the nursery. The practice of having the nanny sleep with the children was abandoned, and the nursery became a private, secluded children's land, supervised from a distance by the nanny (Kildegaard Hansen 1987).

On top of this came the mass launching of factory-made toys. In this way one can find a multitude of explanations for the specific design of the Steiff teddy bear advertisement. Yet this cannot solely be understood as a reflection of the contemporary social and ideological climate; it is also in large measure a human construction. The increased use of technology in industry, new conditions for the children of the bourgeoisie, a new view of children – all this might have had little effect if there had been no marketers. Without them, the production of teddy bears would scarcely have increased with the incredible speed that it did: from the first teddy bear at the toy fair in Leipzig in 1903 until a production volume of 974,000 bears just three years later.

The Loving Comrade

In the same way as advertisers today, the Steiff family's advertising designers enlisted all the contemporary psychological theories to try to convince parents of the necessity of toys. A central aspect of all toy marketing is to give the object meanings which were not originally there. The marketers thus tried to give the teddy bear a symbolic charge, listening attentively to "the needs of the market" so that they could strike the right chord.

The picture painted by Steiff and other large toy manufacturers was of the teddy bear as a loving comrade and companion, not just in childhood but throughout life. A soft, cuddly friend, always by your side, with whom you can share your sorrows and joys, a good listener, always willing to comfort you in childhood when you have been scolded by mother, in your teens when your boyfriend has let you down, or in adult life when you encounter setbacks at work or in family life. The teddy bear was moreover legitimate for boys too. Girls already had dolls to hug. With a teddy bear at one's side any Victorian empire-builder could stand firm and unmoved when the wind blew.

We can thus see how advertisements not just reproduce culture but also produce it, or rather how that class of people that Mike Featherstone (1994) calls "symbol producers" skilfully capture our dreams and give them a certain shape – one of an infinite number of possibilities, to which we direct our desire. Why teddy bears and not donkeys, pigs, or camels, which were also to be found in Margarete Steiff's collection? Ask the marketers and their skill in "listening to the market". Stephen Kline describes how "my Little Pony" was created after American surveys of what girls think of before they fall asleep, dreams that were realized in

the form of small, pastel-coloured plastic ponies with long, combable manes and tails. In other words, the girlish longing to have a horse of one's own to look after was given a specific form, which simultaneously excluded all others, and this form perhaps says more about the inside of a marketer's head and about our cultural stereotypes about girls, about male and female, and not very much about the inside of a little girl's head before she falls asleep.

Advertisements thus give us models for how we should act, how we should think, what we should own. Although there are other models, they give us suggestions which are mixed and matched with all the force of commercial culture. Advertisements and other types of archival material are thus not just "innocent" reflections of their time, but also to a great extent help to create modern man and to change children's identities in today's post-modern society.

The Mythologization of Children

Further examples may be given of the significance of a historical perspective in the study of the commercialization of childhood. Today we see teddy bears everywhere. In advertisements for baby food, toothbrushes, and high chairs, as trendy accessories in furniture stores, as decoration on everything from mugs and wallpaper to shirts and underpants. The path of the teddy bear from the nursery to the shirt collar can only be explained in historical perspective, for example, through the gradual mythologization described by Roland Barthes (1970).

A myth is created, according to Barthes, when a representation, an "image" – the Swedish flag in a letterhead, for instance – is used to represent something completely different from the piece of blue and yellow cloth in itself, such as "Swedishness" or "nationalism". In the same way, the teddy bear as a myth has been constructed by means of several layers of meaning and symbolic recharges. With a rising degree of abstraction, the teddy bear has come to represent, for example, children, childhood, security. In the symbolic world, the myth of the teddy bear in addition interacts with other myths to build up an image of innocence, playfulness, goodness, and so on. An advertisement like that

Fig. 3. What is the teddy bear doing beside the packet of infant formula? Perhaps it is trying to tell us that we give our children a real childhood when we buy Findus wholemeal formula.

used by Findus to sell its infant formula – an advertisement that is geared to parents, not children – can only be understood in connection with the ability of the teddy bear figure to trigger a complete battery of associations and to convince parents that they are giving their children a "real" childhood by buying Findus's wholemeal formula.

Part of the explanation for the design of advertisements can also be found in the encounter of the global, or at least transnational, meanings with the national ones. As Hannerz and Löfgren (1992) have rightly pointed out, there has been a special relationship between market, state, and popular movements in Sweden, as a result of which commercialism has been integrated in a special way and charged with special symbols. An example that we have found in our work on the anthology is that the hedonistic message of the American toy industry – "Make your child's day a happy one, buy a toy" – finds it difficult to gain full acceptance among Swedish parents. Instead, it seems to be more important to convince hesitant Swedish parents of all social classes that the toys have an educational value; this indicates the special role played by state experts in Sweden, in competition with the market's symbol producers.

Pathetic Parents and Crafty Children

We assume that commercial culture has changed children's conditions in such a profound way that it also affects the most intimate relations and the sense of who one is. In our work with *Postmodern barndom* we detected many such areas where far-reaching changes had occurred. One example is the competence that children possess, their perception of time and place, and – not least of all – their relation to their parents. We shall round off this article by looking more closely at the latter.

In *Postmodern barndom*, both Linda Mauthe and Lotta Edin examine how advertising now bypasses the parents and appeals directly to the children, and how parents are portrayed in advertisements as twits who are easily outwitted and humiliated by their children. This development is obvious in Mauthe's analysis of forty years of advertisements in Swedish Disney comics, in which parents are gradually reduced from dependable, caring adults to powerless tools for the children's consumption. In the 1950s, parents were depicted as sensible adults buying bactericides and helping their children to write the address on the envelope. In the 1980s and 1990s, the children are the active subjects, highly aware consumers, who are expected to be able to look after themselves and take advantage of what the market has to offer, for example, to "take Mum and Dad to EuroDisney in Paris". In a competition organized by a Swedish sweet manufacturer, a child could even win an adult as a prize, the comedian Stellan Sundahl, who would be delivered to the winner along with a supply of sweets. "With his clever jokes, hilarious stories, and crazy pranks, he will make your day a birthday to remember." The roles are reversed: the adult is crazy and irresponsible, the child is the sensible and perhaps critical consumer.

Ellen Seiter (1993) describes the stereotyped presentation of adults in American television commercials aimed at children. White men are either conscientious workers or boring parents. Black men stand for the bodily or sensual aspects to do with sport or music. In advertisements for children, the attraction of the product often lies in the fact that it is the opposite of the adult world. The adults are the constant losers, those who vainly try to deprive the children of the pleasures of life, in the form of sweets and snacks. The point of the advertisements is often that an adult is exposed as stupid, false, or childish.

One could claim with Seiter that this is a clever way to design advertisements for children, to make them laugh and buy more. This in itself need not say very much about relations in the real world. It is no doubt possible to trace this mockery of the adult world further back in time in children's media. In *Postmodern barndom* Anne Simu and Lena Åkerman present a study of a children's television programme, *Fem myror är fler än fyra elefanter*, a Swedish variant of *Sesame Street*. They show how Brasse Brännström played the role of a shrewd and crafty child who often outwitted the adults in the form of the motherly Eva Remaeus and the schoolmasterly Magnus Härenstam. From our own childhood we remember a scatterbrained inventor father in Edith Unnerstedt's book *Kastrullresan (The Saucepan Journey)*, and Astrid Lindgren undoubtedly let Pippi Longstocking make fun of the adult world. Yet the moral panic that Pippi Longstocking provoked shows how unique and daring her mockery of the adult world was. This mockery has been multiplied to such an extent in the 1990s in advertisements and commercial television for children that it does not upset anyone or cause the slightest moral panic. In fact, it leaves the adult world unmoved, which might suggest that something rather radical has happened in relations between parents and children. In any case, it was not parents that Pippi made fun of; it was rather the pompous representatives of authority, such as policemen and superintendents of children's homes. Tommy and Annika's parents, like Pippi's own father and mother, were portrayed as good, worth all respect, and with an unquestioned authority, in a way that is increasingly uncommon in children's television nowadays.

The Family in Front of the Television

Even more thought-provoking are the images of parents that we see in television series which a

re not primarily geared to children, being more family series. These abound in prim mothers and scatterbrained fathers who can hardly take a step without falling over. A clear example is the 1996 advent calendar, a series of television programmes leading up to Christmas; here the mother was a rational perfectionist and the father a failed inventor who made all the television sets in Sweden spark. Another example is the popular Swedish sitcom *Svensson, Svensson*. The series is about a "typical" Swedish family with two children, living in a suburban terrace house, and their everyday problems. The father constantly makes unsuccessful attempts to maintain his masculinity and family authority, accompanied by the sarcastic comments of the mother, a bank executive. Examples from outside Sweden are *The Wonder Years* and *The Simpsons*. Where do all the daft fathers and all the cheerless, priggish mothers come from? A historical perspective would presumably show that this phenomenon is nothing new either. It has gradually emerged and has been accentuated. One of the family favourites of the 1980s was *Cosby*, in which the two parents – he a doctor, she a psychologist – smoothly solved all the problems that arose in the large, rowdy family. *Cosby* is more than anything else a popular form of advice on child-rearing. From our own childhood we remember *Father Knows Best* and western series like *Little House on the Prairie* and *Bonanza*, in which the adults were always wise and understanding and the fathers were the true heroes.

According to viewing figures for 1996, *Svensson, Svensson* was the most popular programme in Sweden, with a maximum of 3.4 million viewers on an ordinary Sunday evening (*Göteborgs-Posten* 24 Jan. 1997). What made so many Swedish people, both young and old, sit and watch Allan Svensson and his family? What did they laugh at? Themselves? Their own parents? Or at the typical Swede who usually goes under the name "Svensson"? Is it a distorting mirror in which certain familiar features are grotesquely exaggerated? Or is it a contrasting picture which allows people to say, "At least I'm not like that"? Or could it be a dream image: "Imagine having the nerve to behave like that just once!"? And who laughs at it? Is it the children and the young parents who laugh at their own parents' failures? Is it the middle-aged generation's parody of disintegrating parental authority? Or is it the media makers' ironic commentary on their own parenthood?

Is the success of *Svensson, Svensson* due to the fact that the series has something more to say over and above the opportunities for laughter and identification that the characters in the series provide? Is it in fact a study of the modern problems of the parental role, and particularly the father's role? Does it test new ways to be a child in the family? The smart son in the family often outwits the adults, just as in the advertisements aimed at children, as a mixture of the traditional naughty boy and the boy genius (Seiter 1993:126). The boy genius is a new character in the commercial media, the only one for whom intellectual and verbal skills are highly valued, according to Seiter. He is a clever type who is cool in an individualistic way, far from the image of the traditional bespectacled nerd. Is this perhaps the revenge of the computer boys?

Television researchers, such as David Morley (1986), have stressed how the family is "constructed" in television series, but also by the real family in the social situation that watching television constitutes. Different families have different viewing styles, and a family can arrive at a shared understanding of how to perceive programmes and characters, an understanding that differs from that of other families. Morley's studies also show that the father in the viewing situation often adopts a playful role towards the children, while the mother has a more supervisory function. Perhaps it is primarily the family in the viewing situation that is parodied in *Svensson, Svensson*. Maybe family television viewing plays yet another role: cuddling up in the sofa in front of the television is perhaps the only chance that families have to sit close together. Morley argues that television viewing is the only activity in which this snuggling is really permitted between adults and children or between men and women – an act of intimacy, solidarity, and family togetherness. This enhances the significance of what happens both on the television screen and in front of it.

Fig. 4. When they use the modern media, children quickly become experts in the "new literacy", which brings a better eye for visual impressions and a greater ability to acquire simultaneous information.

New Competences

Do media discourses about pathetic parents and crafty children have a counterpart in reality? Most people can no doubt confirm that a great deal has changed in inter-generation relations in just a few generations. The self-evident authority once enjoyed by the schoolteacher and the father has been dissolved. Today schoolchildren can force through their demand that they too – and not just the teachers – should be allowed to eat biscuits during the school breaks, in the name of fairness. In the home it is often the children who urge a change to environment-friendly detergent and sorting of waste. Smoking parents may find it difficult to persist in their vice when they are confronted with the well-formulated arguments and severe sanctions of the children's anti-smoking campaigns. Children not only know more than adults in many fields, they also have the ability to argue for their views, showing their increased communicative competence.

When changes occur so quickly nowadays from one generation to the next, and the parents are no longer those who know best and have the answers to all the questions, it is natural for children to turn to their coevals to learn how to act in life. Nowadays, with rapid staff turnover in kindergartens and schools, with divorces and single parents with frequent changes of partner, it is perhaps a child's friends and not the parents that represent continuity.

Another example of something that never ceases to amaze parents is how easy it is for children to learn to use computers. It is not long after the PC is installed at home that the parents need the help of the son or daughter, who have experimented and learned things that the adult cannot find in the thick manuals. It is characteristic that a three-year-old girl who still cannot read, but who has sat playing with a drawing program and become skilled in clicking her way through the dialogue windows, can tell astonished visitors that "it's mostly

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Daddy and me that use the computer, Mummy doesn't know so much, but she tries a bit".

It appears as if our information society in which pictures are so important requires new competences. To establish connections and understanding in the huge flow of simultaneous information, especially visual information, one must be able to grasp, interpret, and act quickly. One needs skills in reading pictures and learning the digital language, acquiring a coherent picture of what may seem to the untrained eye to be a mass of disconnected fragments. This new type of literacy is what children and young people practise when they zap between channels, read advertisements, and play computer games (Ziehe 1992). In contrast to the printed word, computer games are built up of interactive picture worlds. Unlike a book, one does not follow a set course from beginning to end; you can choose your own way through the virtual landscape. It is your choice, and you must accept responsibility for it. You never know what is waiting round the corner; someone can sneak up from behind at any moment. You have to be attentive in every direction, ever-prepared to act (Johansson 1996).

In the same way as with other language acquisition, it is the children who learn easiest and quickest, while adults will always speak it with a foreign accent. It is easy to see a parallel with the family that moves abroad and the children are the first to learn the language and culture of the new country, having to act as an intermediary for the parents.

"Post-modern" Technology

The example of the three-year-old girl is far from unique. The new adult–child relationship stands out with particular clarity when one looks at how adults and children relate to computer technology, a world in which adults are generally more cautious, showing greater respect for the computer, sticking to one or just a few programs which they more or less master. The typical attitude of the child, on the other hand, is inquisitive, testing, playful, and irreverent.

One can see in many ways how the computer fits into modern society, in which large quantities of information have to be handled quickly, in which priority is attached to flexibility in working life, where quick and long-distance communication is essential. In the post-modern era, when the grand narratives have been abandoned and life is characterized by fragmentation, a tourist existence (Bauman 1993), transcended boundaries, and a seemingly infinite number of options, the computer and the Internet afford the possibility of leaving the confines of everyday life and surfing in cyberspace. This in turn further reinforces these post-modern tendencies.

In the same way, we can see how the changed relationship between children and adults is supported by computer technology. It is not just that parents and teachers have to ask the children for help when they want to use the computer; the adults' control of the children is reduced. It is impossible to keep track of what the children download from the Internet, and they quickly learn how to hide their documents on the hard disk, safe from the eyes of curious adults. Yet it is not just children who appear more adult; the computer also gives adults an outlet for their more childish tendencies, as people know who have sat for hours – perhaps to their own amazement – wasting time with some computer game. Unlike children, however, adults have a tendency to stick to one game to which they constantly return, often a simple game that does not require any great intellectual effort. The children notice this and comment on it: "Daddy usually plays with a boat sailing on the sea and there's a lot of shooting" or "Mummy's always sitting playing patience". It is particularly bad, of course, when the adult is ashamed of his addiction to computer games and plays them furtively. One girl could tell about her father who would sit down at the computer to work and then, when she had left the room, she could hear the little tune from his favourite game. There is scope here for all kinds of attitudes on the part of the children, from scorn to gentle indulgence.

The Merger of Childish and Adult Behaviour

In the general discourse, in both popular sci-

ence and serious research, we often glimpse pictures of young people who do not enter the adult role in the same way as previous generations did. Thomas Ziehe speaks in positive terms about a "normalization", in which the artificial boundaries which, in his view, modernity set up between adults and children, are now disappearing, and childhood is once again attaining its normal status as a part of adult culture. Others view this normalization as rather more problematic. The Italian sociologist Alberto Melucci (1992), for example, sees the dissolution of routinized transitions between different phases of life as a great danger for the process of becoming an adult. Perhaps we will have a society of eternal children with no responsible adults. Robert Bly, in his latest book *The Sibling Society* (1996), argues that adults are not just more immature than they were in the past; they have even been "infantilized" and thus lost the ability to bring up the next generation. He blames commercialism, which has had the effect that our rational brain, "the new mammalian brain" cannot curb the more primitive parts of the brain, "the reptilian brain" and "the old mammalian brain" but is flooded by hedonistic desire, sloth, and lust.

On the basis of the examples cited here, it seems as if the generational change is about something more complex than the normalization of which Ziehe speaks and the infantilization that Melucci and Bly fear. Perhaps we may look at it as increased interplay between "childish" and "adult", which are not so closely attached to specific age groups but instead have begun to flow freely between different generations. This can be seen in schoolboys who start computer companies and in grandmothers who dress as youthfully as their grandchildren. We see adults in television shows building towers out of beer crates and competing to see who can burst most balloons in a minute, and we see children who start national collections to save the rainforest.

The different interpretations may be seen as an attempt to read the signs of the times, signs which find fairly unambiguous expression in the media. In the same way as the Steiff advertisement can function as a peephole into bygone ideas about children and childhood, today's media images of children and adults may function as lookout points in a study of changed relations between adults and children. Contemporary studies give us ethnologists a chance to combine pure cultural analysis with studies of the meanings that children and parents create in the television-viewing situation, of how their use of the media can function as veritable identity-building work in the consumption society. All this provides a fascinating basis for new ethnological research.

Translation: Alan Crozier

Notes

1. Parallel to, or perhaps even before the Steiff bear, the American teddy bear began to be produced and marketed at the turn of the century, using largely the same advertising language.

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