

# **THE CHILD IN SWEDISH CINEMA**

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**DECLARATION**

I declare that this dissertation titled "The Child in Swedish Cinema" submitted by me at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in Cinema Studies, is an original work and has not been submitted so far, in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other university or institution.

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**CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that the dissertation titled "The Child in Swedish Cinema" submitted by Ramesh Kumar at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in Cinema Studies, is his own work and has not been submitted so far, in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other university or institution. We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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**Dedicated to Dagmar Brunow for being a delightful child-adult and allowing me to be  
a particularly annoying one...**

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A large number of films from Sweden have young children, preteens and teenagers as their protagonists. My dissertation attempts to understand this Swedish phenomenon by identifying and investigating the many factors that bring into force such favored representation of youngsters in Swedish cinema. Through an exploration of the cinematic portrayals of the Swedish young, I attempt to identify their dominant onscreen identities while analyzing the relationship between these onscreen cinematic images and the real-worldly social and cultural identities of the Swedish young. I also investigate the meanings and definitions of such commonly used terms as 'childhood innocence' and 'coming-of-age' and establish how they are understood differently by Swedish society and by the western world at large, in the process also exploring how such meanings have changed over time.

The impetus for my research comes more from a desire to understand the on-screen child than from a desire to make meaning of Swedish cinema. I see Swedish cinema as an interesting case in point to investigate how the cinematic child becomes a point of convergence for various social, cultural, institutional, political and commercial forces that shape his/her on-screen image. Through an investigation based on empirical observations of one particular geographic region, I propose to demonstrate that the image of the cinematic child is a complex construction that may be deconstructed. Sweden and its cinema offers itself well for such investigations because of being socially, politically and culturally more committed to the child than most other regions of the world.

My explorations adopt an interdisciplinary approach treating films not as texts but as sites operating in a force field of cultural production. As an Indian, an outsider to the terrain under investigation, my familiarity with Swedish society and culture is restricted; with my lack of knowledge of Swedish language and the limited availability of source material further compounding the task on hand. Attempting to work through the same, I base my study primarily on empirical observation by using the films themselves as main material together with critical reviews, articles from the popular media, documents on State policies and social analysis available mainly in the English language. With a desire

to provide insights into the entire terrain under consideration, I trace the evolution of the child in Swedish cinema right from its beginnings while ending my analysis with the year 2005. My intentions, however, are not to provide a historical overview but to explore some dominant and recurring ways in which the Swedish child has been imaged through its cinematic portrayals.

My research is theoretically grounded in the writings of some philosophers, cultural theorists and art historians while methodological tools have been borrowed specifically from the fields of media and cinema studies. However, my dissertation does not base itself on any one such academic or ideological paradigm and is eclectic in its choice of elements borrowed from various disciplines and key thinkers.

## **Rationale**

In Ingmar Bergman's critically acclaimed film *Fanny and Alexander*<sup>1</sup>, the widower bishop Edvard Vergerus asks his fiancée Emilie Ekdahl, the recently widowed mother of the children Fanny and Alexander, to abandon everything from her past life and join him in marriage without any worldly possessions. "*I want you to leave behind your home, your clothes, jewels, furniture...your valuables...your friends, habits and thoughts.*" he implores. An awkwardly diffident Emilie responds with "*And the children? Their toys, dolls, books? I can decide for myself, but not for the children. I must ask them*". This seemingly insignificant cinematic moment, while appearing *prima-facie* as an emotionally charged statement by a caring mother, also acts as an interesting pointer towards the attention given to children and their needs in the Swedish cultural sphere. A conscious investment in the child pervades every aspect of contemporary Swedish society, with a child's entertainment being considered as important as its rights. The same is also clearly discernable in the large body of Swedish children's films and the ways in which they choose to image the child. Together with them, various other cultural products like literature, theatre and television as well as Swedish State policies all act as

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I refer to the various films under consideration using the English translations of their titles. Along with these English titles, the corresponding Swedish titles and other details about the director and the year of release are mentioned in the filmography included in the end.

clear markers of the emphasis the nation puts on its children and their specific needs, in the process granting them a marked autonomy and individuality matched by few other places in the world.

As a nation, Sweden appears to be almost obsessed with its children; its entire collective consciousness geared towards the welfare of its young ones. Not many other countries can boast of being called “*kid-friendly*” and the “*child-rearing Nirvana of the world*,”<sup>2</sup> where new parents get eighteen months of paid parental leave between them, with a minimum of two months each, in addition to exceptional child-support provisions. A cursory look through any newspaper, magazine or other media in Sweden reveals a large amount of space being devoted to content on (and for) children. Everything from the buses to metro-stations is carefully designed to be child-friendly, and almost every public space has some features and activities meant especially for the young. Strolling down the streets of Stockholm, one invariably comes across scores of parents pushing toddlers in perambulators with preteens in tow; the point of consideration here being that Swedes generally tend to have an extraordinary amount of time and energy for their youngsters. Such statements on my part run the risk of sounding like empty rhetoric since they are difficult to establish empirically. For any facts, figures or policies I use to validate such claims, similar ones may also be found in other western nations. However, lived experience in contemporary Sweden demonstrates that Swedish society repeatedly takes such investments one step beyond its counterparts and sets a precedent for other nations to follow. Studies conducted by the United Nations is better evidence, for Sweden has consistently been ranked among the top nations in the world in terms of overall child well-being.<sup>3</sup>

Swedish society’s investment in its children can be traced back through hundreds of years in what has so often been described as “*traditionally a liberal and anti-authoritarian*” attitude towards the young (Norlin 1990: 3). The idea of ‘a great Swedish

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<sup>2</sup> Sweden as described in numerous media reports and articles. One specific online reference may be found in Jenny Lepley, “Sweden: paradise for parents?” in *The Local: Sweden’s News in English*, June 9, 2006. (<http://www.thelocal.se/4025/20060609/>)

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF, “Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries” in *Innocenti Report Card 7*. UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2007.



children's culture' has preceded its own recognition and identification, and over the last century, has become a national ideal that constantly recycles itself through the collective consciousness of Swedish society. In contemporary Sweden, it has almost become a way of life, appearing invisible to the average Swede who takes it for granted, while successfully influencing every aspect of Swedish governance and policymaking. The same is also reflected through Swedish cinema with its sustained emphasis on the production and promotion of feature films, documentaries and shorts with children as protagonists. As an outsider hailing from India, such a collective investment of Swedish society in the cinematic images of children appears extraordinary, unusual and extremely fascinating to my eyes, more so since in spite of being the largest film producing nation in the world, India has produced remarkably few examples of films with children as protagonists. With a few exceptions, onscreen Indian children are largely represented as shallow and stereotypical sidekicks to the lead pair, offering a sharp contrast to their complex and carefully etched out Swedish counterparts. In the following sections, my dissertation attempts to make meaning of these complex images of children in Swedish cinema which offer a contrast not only to the virtually nonexistent children in Indian cinema but also to the ways in which the dominant western world images children.

However, films with children as their protagonists are not unique to Sweden. For decades now, America has had a well developed genre of 'teen cinema' and of films dealing with coming-of-age themes, while such diverse geographic regions as Russia, Japan, Korea and Australia have produced remarkable examples of cinema for children. A number of European countries also produce films dealing with similar themes, notable among which are France, Germany and Italy. Nevertheless, in international cinema circles, it is the entire Nordic region, together with Iran, which has emerged prominently for having a long standing tradition of producing quality cinema featuring the lives of youngsters. The conventional understanding of children as reflected in most cinemas from outside the Nordic region largely presumes them to alternate between two extremes – the innocent imaginative infant living in the sheltered world of dream fantasy, and the youthful sadist enjoying an adult world whose fantasy deals with sexuality, violence and death. Exemplifying the general tendencies of the Nordic region at large, Swedish

cinematic endeavors encourage a rethinking of the same. Through extraordinary sensitivity in the onscreen portrayals of children, they greatly complicate the conventional cinematic child and break away from the moulds that have shaped the commonly encountered cinematic images of the child. However, regional and cultural similarities notwithstanding, the Nordic region cannot be considered as a single entity for any in-depth analysis of children's culture or children's cinema, for in spite of numerous commonalities and a number of cooperative efforts, each Nordic nation has its own separate history of children's culture which is rarely ever dependent on its immediate neighbors despite being heavily influenced by them. Sweden leads the cinematic efforts in numerous ways, but Denmark is not far behind, and has historically even beaten Sweden to the task by winning many international awards and setting pioneering examples in various policy matters that were later adopted by other nations.<sup>4</sup> However, my concerns here are limited to Sweden, the largest film producing nation in the Nordic region, and to the full-length fictional feature films produced by it.<sup>5</sup>

## **Intervention**

The questions centered on the representation of the child in cinema are numerous, for they seek to address a doubly marginal subject – the marginalized child in society<sup>6</sup> being given a marginal representation in cinema.<sup>7</sup> The figure of the child has been employed as a complex symbol and a multiple *entendre* in numerous cinematic examples from across the world for achieving ends that are far greater than painting the joys and anxieties of growing up. The child in cinema can be a perspective, a metaphor or a plot device – employed to provide insights into the absurdities and irrationalities of the adult

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<sup>4</sup> Denmark's case is especially notable in this regard also because since 1984, the nation has earmarked 25% of its annual State film budget for children's films.

<sup>5</sup> Taking into consideration the constraint of time and resources, I limit my efforts here only to feature films while keeping documentaries and shorts outside the purview of this dissertation.

<sup>6</sup> My reference to the child as "marginal" in society is made keeping in mind the problematic desire of the adult world to group children together into a homogenous mass sans individuality. While it may be argued that even "adults" are grouped together in a similar manner, my intention here is to point to the general lack of individual recognition given to the needs and desires of children when compared to adults.

<sup>7</sup> Despite the efforts made by numerous filmmakers to specifically target the eyeballs of young audiences for commercial considerations, only a small percentage of films produced internationally have children as their protagonists. Even among those, the portrayal of children is largely stereotypical basing itself on a few semi-truthful assumptions that are made by the adult world about children at large.

world by counterpoising them against the naïve but imaginative worldview of the child; as a symbolic bridge between conflicting moral and ethical positions; and most notably, as an entry point into the annals of time for investigating the meta-narratives of major historical upheavals. An investigation of such thematic explorations of the cinematic child, while appearing extremely productive as a research project, runs the risk of being too abstract to answer to concrete empirical formulations. It does not take into account the culture specific processes that go into constructing the imaginary child whom we see on the cinema screen. By rooting my investigations in the cinemas of a specific geographical region, I attempt to engage with such thematic explorations in a more empirical manner by tracing the circulation of specific elements between the real world and the cinematic child that emerges out of it.

The term 'children's cinema' has been interpreted variously and remains more loosely understood than what it appears to be in the first instance. Numerous scholars, writing primarily about films made in the United States, have chosen to define children's cinema diversely in their academic works. For Neil Sinyard, children's cinema from Hollywood is that featuring children aged thirteen or below (1992), while for John Holmstrom, who adopts a similar approach, the boy in cinema is one whose voice is not yet broken, generally between five and fourteen years of age (1996). For them, children and adolescents are two distinct categories to be dealt with separately; the onset of puberty being the defining line between the two. It is with Ruth M Goldstein and Edith Zornow that we see young children and adolescents being classified together as 'youth' (1980), while Considine chooses to deal exclusively with cinemas of adolescence (1985). As evident, all these approaches centre on the films that feature children, but exclude films that may be enjoyed by children without featuring them or may feature them but not necessarily as protagonists. For instance, a number of major Hollywood productions such as *Terminator & Men in Black*, family films like *Lassie* and *Babe*, and animated films such as *Finding Nemo* and *Lion King* are all extremely popular with children but not all of them are classified as children's films. On the other hand are the likes of *Stand by Me* and *Kids*, films with children as protagonists but not meant to be seen by them because of the prevalent film censorship laws of the country they were made in. Thus, any attempts

at definitions and classifications, even while simplifying the terrain, invariably end up excluding more than what is ideally desired.

Ian Wojcik-Andrews adopts a more sophisticated approach by choosing not to define children's cinema and treating it as a loose force field instead (2000). Almost dismissive of such categorization, he claims that there is no such thing as children's cinema, only films aimed at children, films with children, films about children etc. My discussion in the following pages will adopt a similar approach, and also taking a cue from the prevalent Swedish category of *Barn och Ungdom Film* (Children and Youth Cinema), will include young children as well as preteens, early-adolescents as well as late-teens, featured both in films targeted exclusively at children as well as those meant for adults. However, I will exclude films which do not feature children but are merely popular with them, thus concerning myself with the onscreen images of children irrespective of their occurrence in variously classifiable films. This appears to be the best possible approach in the Swedish context because many Swedish films are often too complex to be easily classified otherwise, for they often tread a thin line between onscreen childhood and adulthood, and also between films meant for children or those meant for adults but featuring children. For the sake of textual simplicity, I shall refer to all such films together as Swedish children's cinema even when discussing films with young men and women in their late-teens. Thus, my understanding of children's cinema includes all films featuring as protagonists people who are not adults.

Some publications in the recent past have dealt with the cinematic child in the form of encyclopedic compilations listing and describing various films with children and young adults as their protagonists (Considine 1985, Goldstein 1980, Holmstrom 1996, Jefferson 2006, Sinyard 1992). Even while working well as indicative reference material, such publications fail to provide an integrated perspective and a deep engagement with the terrain under investigation. Others have focused on making meaning of youth and teen-culture in cinema, but have largely based their analysis on cinemas of individual nations and more specifically on the 'teen-film' genre of Hollywood while ignoring the cinemas produced elsewhere (Bernstein 1997, Doherty 2002, Jackson 1986, Low 2002,

Lury 2000 etc.). Additionally, a number of individual articles dealing with specific cinematic examples have appeared in journals and books worldwide. Most of them attempt textual analyses of individual films using conventional variables such as caste, class and gender. Despite some interesting interventions, such works appear fairly limited in their endeavors and conduct uncomplicated investigations. They treat the cinematic image as a given, and do not attempt to analyze the construction of the image. On the other hand, contemporary scholarship of Swedish cinema (and Nordic cinemas in general) is largely being conducted in regional languages in various local cinema departments. Most English language scholarship from these regions has been dominated by auteur studies of directors like Ingmar Bergman. In the recent past, a select few English works on Nordic cinemas in general have also been published (Cowie 1992, Hardy 1952, Nestingen 2005, Soila 1998 and 2005, Thomson 2006), but most other publications tend to be preoccupied with questions of national cinemas and nationhood (Cowie 1991, Hjort 2005, Hjort and Bondebjerg 2000, Kwiatkowski 1983, Qvist and Bagh 2000) with little or no attention to children's cinema. Malena Janson's recently completed dissertation *Bio för Barnens Bästa* emerges as the sole academic work dedicated to understanding Swedish children's cinema, but being in Swedish, the work is inaccessible to me as well as to the international community at large (2007). Additionally, the English language summary of Janson's dissertation suggests that her investigation rests itself heavily on the Foucauldian paradigm arguing that children's cinema in Sweden is by and large "a cinema of best intentions," designed and developed in such a way as to exercise a virtual ideological control over the children of the nation while gearing them towards becoming real life extensions of their highly idealized onscreen images. While appearing partially true, the same is able to account only for a part of the large body of Swedish children's cinema and not the whole. Further, her work is more descriptive than analytical, while also being limited in its choice of films explored and the trends they seem to signify. Through the following sections of this dissertation, I seek to combine and extend some of the efforts by all these abovementioned scholars while also looking beyond the discipline of cinema studies to make meaning of the onscreen Swedish child.

## **Early impulses for the development of children's cinema**

Children's cinema in Sweden has a long and tumultuous history. It has its definitive beginnings, gradual development, 'golden-age', times of crisis and partial revival. It has its phases and stages, and discernable patterns and trends. For the most part, the evolution of children's cinema appears subservient to Swedish cinema history in general, but it still displays enough significant milestones to weave together a narrative of its own. The two histories follow their own separate trajectories, but run alongside one another and are closely intertwined, constantly crossing paths and acting upon each other while simultaneously being shaped by a multitude of forces both local and international.

Swedish children's cinema is a complex cultural product that cannot be viewed in isolation, for it is part of a much larger Swedish children's culture that has its own established history. For over a century now, Swedish society, the intelligentsia, and the general populace have collectively favored an increased emphasis on children and their needs. It is no coincidence that Sweden has consistently produced such a large body of films with children and young adults as protagonists. Over the years, the collective effort of Swedish society in general, together with a series of policy decisions and the setting up of various organizations and institutions, have all led to a vibrant children's cinema culture in the nation. While some of these organizations have received some form of support from the State, more often than not, State interventions have been an afterthought, a response to the widespread demands made in the Swedish public sphere for a conscious investment in children's cinema and culture.

The first Swedish feature-films with children as protagonists made their appearance in the 1920s, and the numbers have steadily increased over the years placing Sweden at the forefront of children's cinema internationally. It is difficult to suggest the specific reasons behind such regional emphasis on the entertainment needs of youngsters, but it is apparent that the development of children's cinema owes a lot to the generally 'closed' Swedish culture which is marked by a resistance towards foreign influences and a suspicion of the foreign media and its influence on children. As explicated in the following pages, Swedish children's cinema is as much an indigenous cultural product as

it as a cultural response to the threat of foreign cultural invasion (Kölker and Meijers 2001: 13). Underlying the huge success of Swedish children's films is the collective didactic intent of a society wishing to shelter its young ones especially from the harmful effects of foreign media content, largely appearing in line with Malena Janson's argument about the Foucauldian paradigm in Swedish children's films. Over the years, the United States has emerged as the biggest perceived threat for Sweden in this regard, not in the least because of its propensity for violent content, monopolizing market practices and hegemony over international mass-media, tendencies that have generally been looked down upon in the Swedish cultural sphere. Coupled together with a generally conducive social environment that insists in treating children as sensible individuals, the same seems to have resulted in the vibrant Swedish children's cinema culture witnessed by us today.

Children's cinema history in Sweden does not start with the medium of cinema. Instead, it begins with a general collective awakening of a sense of responsibility towards children. While the precise date of such an awakening may never be known, most evidences point towards the developments around the turn of the twentieth century. In the year 1900, the well-known Swedish writer Ellen Key wrote *The Century of the Child*, an enormously influential book in which she proposed that the central work of society during the next century should be for the benefit of children. The book is essentially a treatise on education, in which Key examines society and suggests major reforms in the way the child is reared. She campaigns for investing in the child for securing a better future, and argues that nurturing the development of children into free-thinking and independent individuals would ensure the collective benefit of society.

The book is short, but nonetheless a fairly detailed and well-reasoned text whose central arguments may be summed up as follows. Key sees the newborn child as a noble being that is gradually corrupted by the existing ways of the world. At the turn of the century, when the world witnesses the advent of modernity and a crisis of the traditional family, she hopes that a rich home life will continue to be held in high regard. Rejecting the proposition of collective child welfare, she conceptualizes the home as the principal

site for the development of a child, and sees family members as the people responsible for it. For her, contemporary homes (perceptibly in larger cities) are increasingly failing to fulfill their intended purpose as people shy away from their responsibilities towards homemaking. Proposing to change the same, she envisions an ideal home where each family member understands his duties and responsibilities and the mother and father act as role-models for their children. Through a system of rewards and natural punishment (but never corporal punishment), she expects that children will develop basic human values that will enable them to exercise their own free will but also teach them to be considerate towards others. She campaigns for the abolition of examinations and promotes learning through example. Her writings place simplicity against luxury, countryside against cities, nature against urbanization, and argues for the former while also teaching children to adapt well to any kind of surroundings. However, her contentions are based not merely on simplistic polar oppositions, for she weaves together an eclectic discourse that picks up from numerous seemingly contradictory positions to visualize a more responsible society built on the shoulders of its future citizens: well educated children.

Key was a prominent figure in the Swedish cultural sphere and one of the few Swedish writers to achieve a formidable international reputation. She was a prolific writer, best known as a feminist, but her writings covered a much wider subject area ranging from art, literature and religion to politics, women's suffrage and the question of marriage. Her ideas on the child often emerge as an interesting amalgam of Goethe's neo-humanist ideals and Nietzsche's individualism, while her views on education exhibit a direct lineage from Rousseau's *Emile*. Another prominent line of thought in her works can be traced back to Comte, Mill and Spencer whose writings on altruism confronting egoism in human nature can be seen manifesting themselves in the way Key interprets personal freedom as that which does not deprive others of the same. While sounding clichéd today, her words had a freshness in thought and loud resonance that inspired many lively debates and discussions both in Sweden and in other countries throughout her writing career (Lengborn 1993: 825-837).



*The Century of the Child* is often considered a key text for such disciplines as the Philosophy of Childhood, the Philosophy of Education and Childhood Studies. The book emerges as the first documented evidence of Sweden's investment in the figure of the child, but it remains to be established whether Ellen Key's writings came first or Sweden's conscious attention to the child did. Such questioning may never be able to escape the classical chicken or egg dilemma. However, despite Key's high-standing in academic circles, her writings on childhood and education may actually have had less influence within Sweden than in other countries at the time they were published. As argued by some scholars, while her radical views on various other subjects (especially women's suffrage) attracted a lot of attention and even made her an object of persecution from time to time, her ideas on education and the child caused little debate in contemporary Sweden (ibid.). It was only a long time later that her thoughts began to be put into effect in Swedish schools. Nevertheless, the book remains a crucial text for understanding the nature and scope of the vibrant children's culture that was to follow in the years to come. It acts as a harbinger for four characteristic traits – a deep pedagogical intent, focus on the family as the basic unit of society, an affinity for natural surroundings, and advocating individualism – all of which also dominate the children's cinema that was to arrive much later. Most importantly, the book is an exposition in high idealism. However, Ellen Key was not alone in her idealistic beliefs, for it was a characteristic of Swedish society in general.

It may not be a coincidence that the views on childhood expressed by this otherwise controversial author did not generate much debate at the time they were expressed in her home country. Apparently, they were merely an articulation of not only her own thoughts but also the general intellectual flavor of Sweden in the early decades of the century.<sup>8</sup> The ideas merely needed a passage of time before they could be put into practice. If *The Century of the Child* did make a significant impact, the Swedish intelligentsia seems to have interpreted Key's "society" less as the world and more as the Swedish nation-state. Between her book and the 1920s, her "child" continued to remain

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<sup>8</sup> An excellent account of the debates around eugenics in Sweden is found in Ylya Habel, *Modern Media Modern Audiences*, Stockholm University, 2005, 59-61.

in focus, but became less an independent individual and more a 'prospective adult' who had to be groomed with the right characteristics to make him an ideal future citizen of the country. Her thoughts on individual development and personal freedom became subservient to the idea of a progressive nation, and her "*family*" learnt to accommodate itself as a sub-unit of Swedish society. While it may be argued that subsequent developments did not follow Key's vision to the core, they still maintained, in spirit, an allegiance to many of her ideas. It may be appropriate to say that such idealism continues to pervade Swedish culture, and the child is undoubtedly one of its focus areas. How it led to the development of a vibrant children's cinema in Sweden is a different but related narrative.

### **The arrival of children's cinema**

At the turn of the twentieth century, children's literature was already a flourishing field in Sweden, while discourses in the area of childhood, as seen in Key's writings, were also making a gradual appearance. In the year 1900 itself, 129 children's books, 13 articles and 3 pieces of theoretical children's literature were published.<sup>9</sup> By 1920, the total figure had climbed up to 210 for that year,<sup>10</sup> and over the next two decades, a cultural transition from literature to cinema was underway with as many as a dozen full-length feature-films being made in this period to address child audiences (Norlin: 3). Most of them were based on popular children's books; thus laying the foundation stones of a long tradition of text-to-screen adaptations which was to characterize most Swedish children's films in the decades to come. By the 1940s, when most other European countries were taking their first faltering steps into children's cinema, Sweden was already building upon previous experience and broadening its activities. The decade witnessed the making of twelve feature-films for children in addition to a few documentaries (Norlin: 5), proclaiming the arrival of a distinct children's cinema in Sweden. The timing, however, was not a mere coincidence.

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<sup>9</sup> Online database of Swedish Institute for Children's Books (<http://www.sbi.kb.se/>)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

As early as the first decade, parents and educators had started voicing their resentment about the ill-effects of cinema as a medium, and their anxieties found a platform in 1908 when the Pedagogy Society (Pedagogiska Sällskapet) organized a discussion in Stockholm about the possible harmful effects of films on children (ibid.). By 1911, the Swedish state had introduced a censorship law and defined a minimum age limit for viewing certain kinds of films, and by 1940s, a serious debate was ranging in the country about the moral decay of Swedish youth and the significant role of mass media in fostering the same (Kölker and Meijers: 13). The entertainment market was dominated by foreign films, most notably American, which came to be seen as the root of all evil from which the Swedish youngsters needed to be protected. Since the proliferation of cinema in itself was seen as inevitable, it was deemed better to exercise a control over what the children could see, and loud demands for an alternate children's culture started being made regularly all across the nation (Norlin: 5). The rapid emergence of children's cinema and a separate children's culture in the 1940s was a direct response to such demands. In line with Janson's argument about Foucauldian reflections, didacticism was very dominant in such films. Additionally, the later-half of the 1940s was a period of post-war reconstruction in Europe, when children's upbringing and their general situation were much in focus. Despite Sweden's neutral status during the war, it was not impervious to the influences of the times. The newly founded social welfare system established through the Nordic countries placed the family at centre-stage in all political decision-making and legislation. Extensive school reforms changed the duration and content of children's education. In general, there emerged a new awareness about the necessity of offering children meaningful cultural experiences, and film was one of the obvious areas for expansion. After witnessing the enormous potential of the celluloid strip that was used both as alarming propaganda material and as documentary truth during the preceding years, a newfound feeling of responsibility was felt towards the medium. Intellectuals, who had previously seen film from an aesthetic or film-historical viewpoint, now felt the need to view film as a sociological phenomenon and a mass medium. In the entire schema, children were assumed to be a particularly impressionable and vulnerable audience (Marcussen 1995: 15-16).

In 1948, such a milieu led to the creation of the Children's Film Committee (*Barnfilmskommittén*), the first of its kind in the world (Marcussen: 16). The Committee had a staff of eager volunteers who, armed with films and brochures, travelled around the country meeting parents, politicians and local cinema owners to provide information and advice on children's films as well as work towards reforms in the area. Soon, they were joined in their efforts by several leading teachers', parents' and educational organizations which continued to assist the Committee during the three decades of its existence (*ibid.*). Interestingly, the Committee was formed as a result of the combined efforts of four women's organizations; in some ways remindful of the legacy of the feminist Ellen Key and her thoughts on the subject. Meanwhile, in neighboring Denmark, a pioneering study was receiving a lot of attention. Between 1948 and 1952, child psychologist and psychotherapist Ellen Siersted conducted a survey of feature film responses by kindergarten and first-year primary school kids. The children, accompanied by their teachers, were shown a repertoire of films consisting of *Three Little Pigs*, any one of the *Tarzan*<sup>11</sup> films, a Russian animation film, a Czech puppet film and a short film about a Mexican boy. Their reactions were recorded using infra-red film, invisible flashes and concealed tape recorders. Afterwards, the accompanying adults completed a questionnaire while the children's parents were interviewed. In the Nordic context, this was a completely new type of study both in terms of its scope as well as methods. The resultant material revealed some young children hiding behind their seats or pulling down their caps over their eyes and ears when viewing many apparently enjoyable (usually violent) cinematic moments. Many others cried, while some also clapped and stamped their feet, but only to feel nauseous afterwards. The study concluded that an animated film was just as realistic for young children as any other film. It led to reaffirm the belief that cinema content for children needs to be regulated, and alternatives needed to be offered. The study had a significant impact throughout the Nordic region (Marcussen: 18-19). Around the same time, in Sweden, a Children's Film Jury started functioning together with the Children's Film Committee. The Jury comprised of a few psychologists and a group of children aged seven to fifteen, who began examining films that had been

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<sup>11</sup> A series of *Tarzan* films were produced in the US in the 1930s and 40s. It is not known which one of these were specifically shown to the children for this study.

classified as suitable for children under fifteen. The psychologists observed and recorded the children's reactions and talked to them afterwards. While acknowledging inherent uncertainties in such sampling, the information so gathered was used to prepare lists of suitable films and recommended age limits, which were placed in several leading newspapers prior to children's matinees on Saturdays and Sundays (ibid.). The Jury's work functioned as a springboard for the Committee to propose new age limits, tax exemptions and production subsidies. It also enabled the Committee to work as an umbrella organization for children's film clubs around the country (ibid.).

However, despite such activities, the film industry in general (let alone children's cinema) was yet to attract any significant attention from the State. Cinema was still waiting to be recognized as an art form, and the State was yet to feel the need for supporting and encouraging it. Things changed by 1951 when the government started offering subsidies to films for the first time by implementing a popularity dependent refund system on entertainment tax. Such benefits were finally extended to children's films in 1957 (Norlin: 5). In the meanwhile, children's films were growing in popularity and so was the great grandmother of Swedish children's literature – Astrid Lindgren. To call her popular would be an understatement, for three generations of Swedes (and millions of others across the world) vouch for having grown-up imagining themselves featured in the worlds so painstakingly created by her. Her team of mischievous but adorable rascals – led by Pippi Longstocking and followed by Rasmus and the gang from Bullerby Village – was being idealized by children across the country while making gradual inroads into the celluloid worlds. The first Astrid Lindgren film to be adapted for the screen appeared way back in 1947<sup>12</sup>, but it was not until the arrival of Olle Hellbom that the cinematic adaptations of her characters living in idyllic dream-worlds made a lasting impression. Other directors also attempted to translate Lindgren and other children's book writers to screen, but were less successful. Very soon, the director-writer duo had earned a lot of local acclaim and begun to be noticed internationally.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Master Detective Blomkvist*

By late 1950s, the pioneering spirit in Swedish children's films first displayed during the previous decade had managed to become a successful export and captivate the imagination of thousands of children and their families in other countries. Alongside, teenagers were becoming a growing part of the Swedish film audience, and there were films being made especially for this difficult to please age-group (Norlin: 5). The Lindgren-Hellbom collaboration reached its peak in the 1960s, and after Bergman, Hellbom became the most well-known Swedish filmmaker abroad. He came to be known as the face of Swedish children's cinema, and for a thirty-year period from 1947 to 1977, he was the unofficial ambassador of Swedish children's films around the world (Kölker and Meijers: 8). He even managed the difficult feat of turning the genre into a sound financial investment as his films were sold in over 40 countries worldwide (Norlin, p 9). The State could not ignore the success of children's cinema any more, and the first forms of recognition came from Swedish Television which started financing several children's film projects (Kölker and Meijers: 8). What followed was Swedish children's cinema gradually getting more institutionalized.

### **The Institutionalization of Children's Cinema**

Technically, the institutionalization of children's cinema began with the formation of the Children's Film Committee, the Children's Film Jury and numerous other organizations and associations that were spread across the nation. However, all such organizations worked independently, receiving little support or encouragement from the Swedish State. Moreover, their activities had been limited to judging, regulating and channelizing the finished product without concerning themselves with its production. In 1963, a cultural policy agreement was signed between the State and the film industry, and as a result, the Swedish Film Institute (SFI) came into existence. The SFI was set up as a non-profit autonomous body with the express purpose of promoting the production and distribution of quality Swedish films. Its mission was to function as Sweden's official film-organ, acting as an umbrella organization for conducting a number of film related activities. It was to work as a production company for interesting film projects, provide logistical and financial support to producers and showcase and distribute quality films. A

year after its founding, things took a positive turn for children's cinema when the Swedish Film Institute started its own Children's Film Department (Marcussen: 17). The move, however, did not have any significant impact immediately. Alongside SFI's Children's Film Department, the Children's Film Jury and Children's Film Committee continued to function independently. Television made its presence felt in the meanwhile, and there emerged a newfound interest across Europe in the ill-effects of the media. Sweden was an enthusiastic participant, and children again found themselves being considered as the most vulnerable audience. By late 1960s, debates around children and the media had resurfaced, and the ghosts exorcised from two decades ago threatened Swedish children not only with foreign films but also with foreign television shows. However, Sweden was not alone in its fears. Across Europe, in early 1970s, a number of studies were conducted to understand the impact of the new mass-media on children. The older generation had not grown up with TV, but was now faced with a situation where cable television was making a gradual appearance and invading people's homes by offering subscribers a generous fare of commercial channels. For long, the Swedish State had maintained a monopoly over the airwaves through its public service TV, which forbade commercials, but the direct satellite beaming of foreign broadcasts into the country gave rise to a new situation. Serious public demands were made for greater investment in children's culture and protecting them from the "*damaging effects of commercialism*" (Norlin: 18). Cinema was an obvious target, and local production was encouraged to counterbalance foreign evils.

In 1975, another independent institution, the Children's Film Board (Barnfilmrådet), was set-up by the State for the expert purpose of research and experimental work in children's films. It was designed to collaborate and work alongside the SFI's Children's Film Department, but was organizationally attached to the State Youth Council (Marcussen: 17-18). This board finally replaced the Swedish Film Committee formed almost three decades ago. However, this existing multitude of institutions still appeared insufficient to some eyes, and two more national organizations were founded in this period: the independent United Film Studios for Children and Young Adults (SFBF), and the social-democratic oriented Children Cinema Contrast

(Barnens Bio Kontrast). These organizations even had their own magazines. The socio-cultural milieu was extremely conducive for children's cinema, and the film industry responded by producing a consistent volume of children's films. This was also helped in part by some financial support offered by the State, channeled through the SFI which worked together with children's television in search for more efficient ways to use the money (Kölker and Meijers: 15).

Meanwhile, the marriage between the Swedish Film Institute and the Children's Film Board was short-lived. By 1977, a serious rupture had occurred between the two organizations. The reasons for the dispute were threefold - the nature of children's cinema activities, the individuals best qualified to lead the work, and the internal distribution of funds (Marcussen: 17-18). The conflict got wide media coverage with such headlines as "*Grown-ups squabble over Children's Films*". Nonetheless, the activists were happy, for while previously it had been necessary to fight for children's films, it was now a fight over children's films. Eventually, the Swedish Film Institute won the battle and became the organization recognized as being responsible for children's cinema (ibid.). Despite such institutional squabbles, children's film production continued to grow, and by the end of the 1970s, Swedish children's cinema was experiencing its 'golden-age' by becoming a roaring phenomenon. The euphoria, however, was short-lived, for an invasion by video was right around the corner.

Unlike many other parts of the world, video had little impact in Sweden throughout the 1970s. In 1982, this medium suddenly developed explosively. Children and young adults were the ones most attracted to it, in no small part since video was yet to come under the jurisdiction of censors. The media sounded alarm-bells. What followed were heated public debates and a huge public outcry as alarmed parents and pedagogues blamed video violence for virtually all degeneration in society (Norlin: 20). The United States played a significant but indirect part in the debate, contributing through the colossal amount of research that was generated following the 1972 Surgeon-General's



Report on the impact of television violence.<sup>13</sup> A number of research findings from the United States were indiscriminately applied to the Swedish conditions without observing how the actual situation differed from the American one (ibid.). This created a condition of hostility towards moving images of all kinds, and society responded by collectively practicing self-censorship and caution. Meanwhile, the Children's Film Board, after existing for only six years, was also liquidated in 1982. The SFI agreement was renewed to include a video branch, and new funds allocated to support film activities. However, in the new schema, there existed no special fund particularly for children's cinema (Kölker and Meijers: 16). Children's films had to compete for support along with other film projects.

Thus, through the 1980s, from its 'golden-age' barely a few years ago, children's cinema became a not-too-fertile field. The quality of films suffered as more and more producers decided to play it safe and stick to time-tested content rather than experiment and face the collective wrath of society. Audience numbers shrank greatly and children's cinema experienced a period of stagnation. In part, this was due to the absence of strong lobbyists to promote and protect the interests of children's films. The cultural field was a highly contested area, and the government's tendency to see cinema in general as an industry or a commercial business made children's cinema a particularly soft target for cost-cutting. Also, by the 1980s, the large body of Astrid Lindgren books and other children's literature upon which children's cinema had thrived had been exhausted (25). Circumstances only got better by the late 1980s when the video boom finally ended, video shops voluntarily cleaned up their shelves and age limits came to be imposed. Research became more moderate in tone, and many educators finally came around from their fright of the moving-image (Norlin: 20). However, there was a surprise gainer in the entire unfolding of events – animation – which grew manifold during the 1980s and achieved daring and cliché free innovations through virtual characters what their real-world counterparts could not (Kölker and Meijers: 16). A discussion on the same, however, lies outside the purview of my considerations.

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<sup>13</sup> *Television and Growing Up: The Impact of Televised Violence, Report to the Surgeon General, United States Public Health Service.* United States National Institute of Mental Health, 2007.

By the early 1990s, media-hate had abated considerably, and people started taking active interest in cinema again. The functioning of the SFI was questioned, particularly with regard to the nature of films being selected for support. Many were of the opinion that the film commission responsible for the selections was not daring enough in their choices, which resulted in monotony in the films with certain themes, characters and settings being favored over the rest.<sup>14</sup> It was felt that there was a lack of strategy, which had resulted in the undervaluing of the quality aspect of films over the last few years. In 1993, the contracts of the SFI were reworked to include the television companies as well, and a decision was made to change the support system for films. The model followed was that of the Danish Film Institute. In the new schema, instead of a joint team or commission, a set of Film Consultants were appointed to oversee the functioning of one category of films each. Initially, there were four consultants, one for documentaries and short films, two for feature films for adults and one for children's films. The structure has been revised ever since to increase the number of consultants by separating documentaries and short films and creating a special education and training section. These consultants were to have a face, an opinion and a responsibility towards the public and they alone had the power to decide if a film should be subsidized. What it meant was that one person would be responsible for all the decisions made in order to support or refuse new projects. This allowed for individual visions and decision-making without the need for compromises. It was believed that with such a system, more 'risky' and daring productions would also be made and lead to a qualitative improvement in the films. Since each consultant was to be engaged only for a limited period of time, individual vision of the consultants could not define the film production for long thereby allowing for a greater variety in the films produced under different consultants. The model has proven to be quite successful, and has allowed for a number of remarkable children's films being produced in the recent years.

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<sup>14</sup> It needs to be mentioned here that when the SFI was set-up initially, there were two commissions, one consisting of people from the workers union and the other of people from the industry. It was thought that two commissions would allow for two kinds of choices and that would keep the judging of projects fair. In actual practice, it was observed that the same kinds of projects were being chosen by both commissions, and therefore in the late 1980s, these commissions were reduced to one consisting of five people from the film industry.



As evident from the above discussion, Swedish children's cinema has been an extremely interesting field with a long and active history. In what is clearly a remarkable display of public activism, and an even more remarkable State response to the demands made by public voices, the activities of a set of organizations and institutions have made possible the sustained development and current prolific status of Swedish children's cinema. However, it needs to be stated that the institutions and their children-friendly policies were not fresh initiatives in themselves. Instead, the institutions mostly acted as consolidated fronts for impulses that started elsewhere in the Swedish public sphere and finally got institutionalized. Despite receiving some indirect forms of State support subsequently, the institutionalizing was not a State led process. Additionally, such institutes as the SFI function as autonomous bodies with little or no interference from the State in their policy and decision-making endeavors. Over the years, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that the accountability of such institutions is more towards the voices in the public sphere than directly towards the Swedish State. Nonetheless, all the above mentioned impulses have collectively made Sweden produce a large number of quality children's films and earn a prominent position in children's cinema worldwide.

However, this large body of Swedish children's films has historically been so varied that it is extremely difficult to classify them thematically. For the sake of structural congruity, I have worked with a rough age based classification in my dissertation by treating the portrayals of young children (ten or below), preteens (eleven and twelve) and teenagers (thirteen to nineteen) as three separate categories (with some overlaps) while tracing some recurring ways of imaging them. More than the age of the protagonists, I focus on the prominent tendencies displayed in the films of each category, in the process occasionally relaxing the age groups to fit thematically similar films in the same chapter. Following the introduction, my second chapter deals with films that portray young children, their onscreen images characterized by the representation of early childhood as an age of innocence. Paying allegiance to the dominant ways of imaging children in world cinema, these films choose to represent the young children primarily as naïve and cute youngsters living in idyllic worlds. The next chapter deals with the portrayals of preteens, a relatively small age group that warrants a separate chapter because of the

large number of Swedish films with preteens as their protagonists. Intricate and meticulously detailed, these highly individualized portrayals of preteens characterize them as smart and obstinate beings with a heart and mind of their own, in the process challenging the conventions of imaging children in world cinema. The following chapter discusses the many fragmented ways in which teenagers find representations in Swedish cinema, surfacing as rebels & delinquents, responsible lovers and sexual beings. Their portrayals are numerous, and despite some remarkable examples, the onscreen teenagers appear qualitatively weaker when compared to their younger counterparts. By working through such an age based classification, I attempt to make some meaning of the complex terrain of Swedish children's cinema.

## CHAPTER 2: EARLY CHILDHOOD AS THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

For the last three centuries, technological progression in the west has helped produce an unprecedented plethora of visual images. We inhabit worlds of visuality today, aptly described by WJT Mitchell as the ‘Pictorial Turn’ (Mitchell 2002: 165-182). Moving images enjoy a central position in our visual worlds, greatly extending the roles played by their predecessors the photograph, the mass reproduced image and the painting. None of these mediums have necessarily replaced the others, but have together created the dense fabric of visuality that defines our contemporary public culture. Their continued co-existence has been characterized by an active exchange of visual codes amongst them, and the norms of one medium have greatly influenced the forms of the others. In the process, complex networks of meanings and knowledges have been generated which stretch across all visual media, mould new images and also get altered by them. Deeply enmeshed within these knowledge networks are images of children, which have been most commonplace in this era of visuality. They have gazed at us from billboards, posters and magazine covers; graced greeting cards, lunch boxes and milk cartons; and occupied a prominent position in the motion pictures. In a continuous process of encoding and decoding, they have shaped our understanding of childhood as essentially an age of innocence. Various dominant ways of imaging the child routinely work towards strengthening this association between childhood and innocence, both by overtly corresponding to it and through contrast by portraying the exceptional child as having been deprived of its right to innocence. For a large part of their history, the cinematic images of Swedish children also extend such sentiments and pay allegiance to the assumed associations of childhood with innocence. In this chapter, I shall explore the various ways in which Swedish children’s cinema acts as a fertile playfield for these tendencies, especially in its on-screen portrayals of very young children mostly aged ten or below. Before embarking on the same, however, let us begin by exploring both ‘childhood’ and ‘innocence’ a little further, for they are loaded terms that contain more meaning within them than they are generally credited with.

## Imaging Childhood

Childhood as we understand today is a concept and a trope. It is a cultural invention of the adult world. Distinctly different from the lives of real children, it works through abstraction, but accumulates meaning through our individual lived experiences. And by virtue of having its referents in our past, it is inherently nostalgic. In the book titled *Centuries of Childhood*, the historian Philippe Ariès demonstrates that the concept of childhood is a relatively recent historic development in the west. He argues that prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, children as young as seven were seen as adults and incorporated into the adult world. The idea of childhood emerged only in the modern period, ever since acquiring connotations of a distinct age to be treasured and protected. For a large part of the book, Ariès furthers his arguments through images of children found in medieval and modern paintings, demonstrating how paintings in medieval times represented children as ‘miniature adults’, merely smaller versions of their adult counterparts rather than making them look distinctly childlike. Simply put, in medieval visual representations, children were dressed like adults and behaved like adults. They did not look innocent – socially, psychically or sexually – indicating that the need to image them as children was never felt since childhood as a concept did not exist. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, however, there emerged a newfound interest in children as visible in the pedagogical discourses of moralists and educationalists, who for the first time in western history started treating children as a separate group needing special care and attention. A corresponding change was witnessed in visual representations, which gradually chose to impart children with more childlike characteristics over the next two centuries thereby giving them a distinct cultural identity as a recognized social group that was strictly defined by its difference from adults, which led to the creation of the child-adult binary as we know it today. Together with other evidences, Ariès sees these as indicating the emergence of childhood as a concept during this period, summarizing that it came into existence in the west within the upper-classes in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, consolidated itself further in the 18<sup>th</sup> century upper-classes, and finally mushroomed on the scene in both upper and lower-classes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But as a number of critics have pointed out, some of the conclusions that Ariès draws from such images appear flawed, for he relies too much on

paintings to build his case, and frequently blurs the line between childhood as a concept and the lives of real children. He appears to jump the gun when arguing that these images are reflective of the social status granted to children in those times; just as he does in writing that adults were far less protective and caring even for their own children before the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Picking up atypical examples, he employs evidences out of context and plots a historic trajectory based on data drawn from idealized images (Hendrick 1992). Similarly, in using the discourses of pedagogues to support his arguments, he confuses prescription with practice. Nonetheless, his observations and ideas still hold merit for our purposes, for they give us insights into the earliest ways of imaging and representing childhood, marking the emergence of childhood as a concept, a cultural invention and an ideal that found its way into paintings and was promoted and propagated through images.

Interestingly, Ariès was not alone in demonstrating this transition, for a number of art-historians have also claimed that images of children underwent a major transformation during the enlightenment. In line with Ariès' observations, they also see the pre-18<sup>th</sup> century images of children being pictured in the same way as adults. Curiously, similar to him, they also treat this shift in visual representations as the discovery of a natural truth rather than a brilliant pictorial version of an invented definition. Departing from her peers, art-historian Anne Higonnet chooses to exert caution and keep childhood and real children apart, arguing that precisely because the conception of childhood was an invented cultural ideal, it required representations, and it was these representations that played a special role in consolidating and crystallizing the modern definition of childhood (Higonnet 1998). With time, the idealized understanding of childhood acquired its contemporary connotations of innocence, gradually becoming a visual regime which continues to influence our ways of imaging children as well as reading them. Let us refer to this as the regime of childhood innocence and understand its history and spread, for the cinematic images of young Swedish children were greatly indebted to this visual regime.

## The Regime of Childhood Innocence

Childhood's turn towards innocence took place in 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain through the portrait paintings of Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Lawrence and Henry Raeburn. Described by many as natural and timeless, their works depict very young children in idyllic settings and poses that now seem familiar to our eyes accustomed to similar representations. In her book titled *Images of Childhood*, Anne Higonnet describes the phase as marking the arrival of the romantic child, epitomized through such artworks as *The Age of Innocence*, *Portrait of Mrs. John Angerstein and her son John Julius William*, and *Boy and Rabbit*. These images of children marked a definitive departure from their adult-like predecessors and revolved around child bodies; bodies defined by their difference from adult bodies. They attempted to make us forget most aspects of adult society, appearing to be classless, thoughtless, and even genderless, choosing instead to show soft backgrounds, proximity to nature and animals, and gazes into nothingness. They were characterized by cuteness, naïveté, purity and asexuality; which have together come to constitute our understanding of innocence in the context of childhood. Claiming that such images of childhood innocence simply did not exist before the modern era, Higonnet, similar to Ariès, states that these images whose timelessness now seems axiomatic actually have a history, a fact ignored by most contemporary scholars. Using various examples of paintings from the renaissance period, she demonstrates how the images of renaissance children were far from being innocent, packing within them an acute sense of individuality and adult-worldly consciousness. Thus, it was the romantic child in which the regime of childhood innocence took root.

From his emergence in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the romantic child soon became a common feature in popular 19<sup>th</sup> century genre paintings, which, while depicting scenes from everyday life, incorporated the family and the child into their ambit. Art markets expanded successfully with the growth of the middle class. Even as art scholarship busied itself with impressionism as the rebellious avant-garde, the most financially and institutionally successful artists were those who created works that perpetuated traditional moral standards and pleased the middle class public. All over Europe and the United



States, paintings of children proliferated, with some of the most socially respected painters making them. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, romanticism waned, but childhood remained romantic. The subject of childhood became intellectually marginal, gender roles polarized, the image of the child became increasingly associated with maternity while childhood became a subject for women. This was an age of many Madonnas and their children, further perpetuating childhood innocence. Alongside, a development in print technology enabled rapid reproduction of children's images and allowed them to enter the mass markets. While mainstream art institutions busied themselves with male artists and their acclaimed artworks, such artists as the London based Kate Greenaway worked silently in the commercial industry and produced a multitude of innocent childhood images that were circulated through the western world in the form of illustrated advertisements, greeting cards, calendars and magazine centerfolds. Across the Atlantic, her North American counterparts Alice Barber Stephens, Mary Cassatt and Jesse Willcox Smith continued with the trend, producing numerous variants of the innocent child motif. As stated by Higonnet, the golden age of American illustration, lasting from the 1880s to the great depression, was also the golden age of the illustrated child. It was led primarily by female artists, all of whom alluded to the romantic child in creating their worlds of childhood innocence.<sup>15</sup>

By the beginning of the 20th century, the illustrated child was giving way to the photographed child. All the visual signs of childhood innocence, invented and refined by paintings, prints and illustrations from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, were transposed into photography. The shift, of course, was not immediate, nor was it a substitution of the older forms by photography. Rather, in numerous ways, photography worked more towards relaying and furthering the same ideas of innocence than replacing them. Many early 20<sup>th</sup> century works deliberately blurred the line between photography and painting, both to ascribe the status of an 'art form' to this newly developing medium as well as to keep alive references to older visual mediums. Thus, recycled endlessly through centuries

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<sup>15</sup> However, it needs to be stated that the romantic child did not completely sweep its visual field. There persistently emerged alternative visions of the child's body and that body's symbolic significance. Nonetheless, the most important of these alternatives have not been conscious violations of the romantic ideal but pictures that sprang from the ideal itself, and which in doing so have revealed the tensions, limitations and contradictions of romantic childhood.

of reproduction, these images of childhood innocence have permeated every aspect of popular consciousness and worked their way through a series of different visual mediums. It is not without reason that the cute baby photos by Anne Geddes and Betsy Cameron remain one of the most widely circulated images in the western world today, gracing everything from greeting cards to advertisements and posters and setting new records in commercial success. With the availability of inexpensive personal cameras, it wasn't long before such imagery influenced our private worlds and made us attempt to reproduce it in every Kodak-Moment we captured with our dear children. Refined and developed over hundreds of years, such images have collectively established a regime of childhood innocence in our visual culture, which has spread itself through the numerous children's images that we encounter on a daily basis, all of them packing within them oodles of sentimental appeal and cuteness imaged through lost gazes, round cheeks, smiles and poses, silken hair, plump dimpled bodies, perfect skin, proximity to nature and animals, and seen as clad in classical dresses. This visual regime has continued to dominate our visual imagination through the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Higonnet's brilliant pan-western historical meta-narrative of innocent childhood images is extremely fascinating. My use of her observations to explain the regime of childhood innocence appears to largely hold true in the dominant contemporary western context. She only mentions films fleetingly while focusing her efforts on still images, perhaps an obvious choice stemming from the limitations imposed by the book form; however extending her schema, it may be appropriate to treat the cinematic images of children as one among the many in our visual worlds. Similar to the still images described by Higonnet, our cinematic imaginations have also been dominated by this regime of childhood innocence, creating screen images of children that are predominantly characterized by cuteness, naïveté, purity and asexuality. For a large part but not the whole, the cinematic images of Swedish children also follow this schema. Similar to the west's cultural invention of childhood, its subsequent attempts at giving visual representations to childhood through individualized portrayals of children, and then making a move towards idealizing childhood and painting it innocent, Swedish cinema also starts with a few random portrayals of children of all ages before giving them a

distinct identity and then following it with images of very young and innocent children living idealized childhoods.

### **Early Years of Swedish Children's Cinema: Mischievous Pranksters and Orphaned Youngsters**

One of the earliest examples of a Swedish film with a child as protagonist was *Anderssonskans Kalle*, a lighthearted comedy directed by Sigurd Wallén in 1922. Based on a novel by Emil Norlanders, the film depicts the misadventures of a young boy of about eleven years, a typical "Söderkis"<sup>16</sup>, who is very fond of practical jokes. His mother and some other elders in the filmily see him as a mischievous but extremely intelligent and well-meaning boy, but for the domestic helps in his household and one local policeman, he is the devil himself who misses no opportunities to annoy them. The narrative follows him through a series of unimaginative pranks that he and his friends unleash upon their victims – tying up one of the domestic helps and tormenting her with firecrackers, letting loose a mischief of mice on the deck of a large boat, ragging the policeman, and exploding a cake at a birthday party – among many others. The film has its moments of brilliance, for instance a beautiful sequence showing people hopping from one large sheet of ice to another as they break free from the frozen lakes, and also a fleeting attempt at self-reflexivity when the kids decide to record their own pranks using a makeshift film camera, but for the most part, it remains a succession of pranks loosely held together by a thin storyline. Nonetheless, it seems to have struck a chord with the audience, for it was successful enough to be remade as many as three times over the next five decades – in 1934, in 1950 and in 1972 – while a further two films were made as sequels to the earlier ones – in 1923<sup>17</sup> and 1973<sup>18</sup>.

The mischievous pranksters are seen again in *Pirates on Lake Malaren*, first made in 1923 and remade twice in 1960 and 1987, in which three teenage boys steal boats and have a merry time sailing in the summer while everyone else believes them to have died

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<sup>16</sup> A slang used to describe the kids from Södermalm, a very affluent Stockholm neighborhood.

<sup>17</sup> *Anderssonskans Kalle på nya upptåg*(English title unavailable)

<sup>18</sup> *Anderssonskans Kalle i busform*(English title unavailable)

in a storm. Adapted from a novel by Sigfrid Siwertz, the Malaren films were far more sober attempts than those featuring Anderssonskans, and grew progressively serious with each remake. Even while basing themselves on the prankster theme, they dealt with more mature content featuring adolescents encountering the wild side of life, disturbed people and dead bodies. The pranksters can be found again in *Two Years in Each Class*, made in 1938 by Sigurd Wallén from a novel by Erik Zetterströms, by which time the visual regime's influence can be seen creeping in and children can be seen becoming younger and more innocent. As evident, the pranksters were a recurring motif, especially in many films made between 1920 and 1944, which have been described by some film historians as "*rascal films*" (Soila 2005: 199) and films with "*young scallywags*" (Norlin: 3). Often portrayed as a group of very young children and occasionally older kids, they were usually led by one or two 'leaders' guiding their troublemaking. Comprised mostly of boys, these groups also included a few girls, who for the most part adhered to conventional gender roles within the group and played second-fiddle to the boys.

By 1944, however, the focus shifted temporarily from such stereotypical portrayals to a more individualized representation of youngsters, almost mirroring in Swedish cinema the phase when children's representations in paintings came into their own in 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain. The opening credits of the film *Guttersnipes*, made in 1944 and based on a play written by Åke Hodell, are superimposed onto the space created by a young boy shattering a window pane with his catapult; thereby placing the film firmly within the prankster tradition. But while the film does feature a group of mischievous but well-meaning children living in an orphanage, the protagonist of the film is an adorable nine-year-old girl named Ninni who is paralyzed from the waist down. When her mother dies, she is taken care of by a male family friend, a warm-hearted but unsuccessful artist whose penniless existence is made worse by the constant harsh treatment meted out to him by his landlady and other neighbors. Marked by class conflict and a rich poor divide, *Guttersnipes* is as much a social statement as it is a narrative focusing on the young girl's dreams and desires. Through a series of interconnected events, the painter gains fame and fortune from a portrait he paints of Ninni, and he and his female friend are shown coming together as the girl's foster parents. The film ends with them helping Ninni realize her

most cherished dreams – being able to walk one day and to leave the city, go out into the countryside and play among flowers in their natural surroundings. Not surprisingly, the feel-good tale was remade into a film again in 1974.

1945 marked an important milestone, for it saw the making of Rolf Husberg's *The Children of Frostmo Mountain*, a landmark film in the history of Swedish children's cinema. Based on a novel by Laura Fitinghoff, it tells the tale of seven children, aged two to fourteen, living in cold Northern Sweden in the middle of the 19th century. Having lost their mother early-on in the film, the orphaned children and their goat set-off on a long walk southwards to avoid being taken in by the authorities and thrown into a poorhouse. They make their way through snow covered terrain, brave blizzards, and in the process experience a series of hardships and misadventures. As the narrative unfolds, they get lost, get separated, fall sick, go hungry and are mistreated by people and chased by hounds. The two eldest children assume the roles of caretaker-parents in the absence of adults. They lead the younger children, seeking help from various people they meet en-route, and ensure that each of their siblings is taken care of. By the end of the film, all of them are able to find foster homes and families while the oldest boy finds his calling in becoming a priest.

*The Children of Frostmo Mountain* is often referred to as the first 'real' children's film in Sweden. As pointed out by Malena Janson, reasons for the same lie in the film's apparent direct address to a child audience. Beyond the fact that it stars seven children in the leading roles, the film employs such cinematic devices as easily comprehensible dialogue, a soundtrack containing recognizable children's songs, a distinct narrative order and a limited range of action elements (159). While many of these are also found in some previous examples, in particular in *Guttersnipes*, *The Children of Frostmo Mountain* stands apart from its predecessors through its efforts to etch out each of the seven youngsters as individuals. While the plot foregrounds the older children, it also ensures that all seven children are depicted as being uniquely different from the other siblings, and therefore suitably accommodated with a family that likes him/her for what s/he represents and desires. Seen in its contemporaneous context, *The Children of Frostmo*

*Mountain* marked a pregnant moment when children came to be recognized as a separate target audience requiring their own distinguished forms of entertainment. In paying attention to their individuality, the film preempted the tendencies that were to strongly characterize children's cinema much later. Over the next few decades, children's moving images were to earn a distinct place in the Swedish cultural sphere.

All the abovementioned films were adapted to screen from various children's books and novels. As evident, children's literature has played an extremely important part in facilitating the growth and development of cinema in Sweden. Over the years, a number of Swedish films have been based on already successful literary works rather than being written for the screen. In what has been called 'literary cinema', these films adapted from appreciated works of fiction have helped raise the low status of cinema as a medium. The same played an even more significant role in children's cinema, imparting legitimacy to this otherwise marginalized category and helping the films get financiers and audiences. With the exception of *Pirates on Lake Malaren*, each of the films mentioned above can also be seen paying allegiance to the regime of childhood innocence in some way or the other. While the prankster films depicted the youngsters indulging in cute innocuous pranks, *Guttersnipes* portrayed both a set of well meaning pranksters and a sweet innocent Ninni. *The Children of Frostmo Mountain*, despite appearing harsh and unrelenting, was a fairly timid effort which worked through contrasts by presenting childhood as an age of lost and regained innocence. However, it was with the screen adaptations of Astrid Lindgren's tales that Swedish children's cinema abandoned its individualistic pursuits for some time, turned to stereotypical portrayals of groups of children, featured an increasingly younger set of children and made a definitive transition into depicting childhood as the age of innocence. This was also the phase in which the Foucauldian paradigm can be seen manifesting itself through the portrayals of children.

## **Astrid Lindgren's Children: Young Detectives, Superhuman Kids and Innocent Youngsters in Idyllic Settings**

Beginning mid 1940s, it was Astrid Lindgren's vision that dominated the ways in which cinematic children were imaged over the next three decades, which in turn was deeply colored by the regime of childhood innocence. While Lindgren was by no means the only person responsible for a thriving children's cinema in this period, her contributions to children's literature and their subsequent cinematic adaptations remain unparalleled in Swedish history (and perhaps also the world over). The earliest of the Lindgren stories to be adapted into films were her detective novels, leading to the creation of another important screen identity for children, that of young detectives, but the motif was not introduced by her.

The figure of the detective was already popular in Swedish cinema for adults by mid 1940s, and its entry into children's cinema was almost a logical progression. The earliest detective children can be found in the previously mentioned *Guttersnipes*, in which one of the subplots deals with young orphaned kids solving a mysterious theft, catching two musicians who are the real culprits, and successfully freeing their friend, the painter, who is wrongly accused of the crime. In 1947, *The Master Detective Blomkvist* became the first of Astrid Lindgren's novels to be made into a film. The plot features a fourteen-year-old boy Kalle Blomkvist as the protagonist. The simplistic narrative unfolds when crimes are committed in the neighborhood and Kalle's curiosity gets the better of him. Assisted by his gang of loyal friends, he is able to solve the mysterious crimes and report the perpetrators to the law enforcers in the nick of time. The film was an instant success with the audience, as was its sequel *The Master Detective and Rasmus* in 1953. Primarily aimed at preteens and adolescents, both films contain several elements that are characteristic of other detective films of the period. They deal with children's collectives assuming the roles of investigators in urban proletariat environments, peripherally bringing contemporary cinematic concerns of social realism into the realm of children's cinema.

Meanwhile, the motif of children as young detectives continued when in 1957, Olle Hellbom made his debut directing *The Master Detective Lives Dangerously*, again written by Astrid Lindgren, which was remade as recently as in 1996. The way Tytti Soila sees it, the rise and success of films featuring young detectives in this period owed itself to the representation of dramatic construction and distinct conflict which other contemporary films seemed to lack (199). These detective films were not very artistically innovative or refreshing, working instead through clichéd formulaic narratives with the mandatory solved cases and happy endings. Nonetheless, they helped define an important screen identity for children while also acting as precursors to the tendencies that were to feature prominently in children's cinema in the coming decades. As Soila points out, many of the early detective films are sited in:

...small, sleepy towns where the sun shines and the lilacs perfume the summer breeze that sweeps over tidy houses. With their well-tended lawns and gardens, they form a reassuring unlikely contrast to such powerful passions that lead to nasty murders (199).

Over the next few decades, Lindgren seems to have taken it upon herself to focus on this reassuring contrast by isolating these summer breezes, tidy houses and well-tended lawns to create idyllic conflict-free cinematic worlds in her children's tales. Realism gradually gave way to idealism and fantasy, and her logic driven narratives with intelligent young detectives gave way to idyllic picture postcard settings inhabited by superhuman kids and innocent younglings. Filmmakers followed her lead, and extending the idyllic images of childhood innocence, social conflicts, different classes in society, injustices and discriminatory aspects of Swedish life were pushed out of children's cinema. From the individualized representations in *The Children of Frostmo Mountain* and the stories of intelligent young detectives, simplistic narratives featuring superhuman kids and groups of ideal youngsters in near-perfect worlds became the dominant ways of imaging children. These tendencies did not necessarily follow one another, but emerged almost simultaneously and continued to coexist for a while before taking a turn towards idealism.



One of the earliest products of this idealist vision was Pippi Longstocking, a fantasy character created by Astrid Lindgren in 1945 and described as "*the strongest girl in the world*", who went on to become Lindgren's most successful literary creation. Over the years, Pippi books have been translated into 89 languages and chains of Pippi merchandise created, while her character has been referenced a number of times in popular media from across the globe; even appearing on postage stamps in Sweden as well as Germany. Assertive, rich, and in possession of superhuman strength, Pippi was a very unconventional child character. She was conceived with crude mannerisms, an unusual dress sense marked by long stockings (of two different colors) and a tattered dress, topped by her fiery red hair worn in braids so tight that they stuck out sideways from her head. Living alone with her monkey and horse in an old house in a small village, she lacked formal education, but was very intelligent. She frequently told lies, mocked the adults she encountered and routinely outsmarted them, reserving her worst behavior for the most pompous and condescending of adults. On the face of it, Pippi appeared to be a deviation from the idealized children's images dictated by the visual regime, but only partly so, for her mischievousness was not without its own inherent cuteness and innocence, further reinforced by her well-honed sense of justice and fair play which ensured that her misadventures never put her best friends Tommy and Annika in harm's way. Set against the idealized countryside and other natural settings, the backgrounds for her harmless misadventures further alluded to the visual regime. However, in creating such an unusual character in the mid 1940s, Astrid Lindgren dared to reject many established conventions for children's books, and although Pippi was well received by most critics, she was also very unpopular among some social conservatives who desired children's characters to be overtly moralizing and set good examples through their actions, expecting them to be more in line with the oft-seen idealized images of innocent children. In later developments, films featuring Pippi were kept out of the programs of the Children's Film Board for almost 20 years. However, such efforts did precious little to curtail her immense popularity which continued to grow over time.

Pippi was brought to life on celluloid in 1949 with *Pippi Longstocking* directed by Per Gunvall. Over the next five decades, she appeared in seven more film adaptations and

sequels by various directors – two in 1969 (*Pippi Longstocking* and *Here Comes Pippi Longstocking*), two in 1970 (*Pippi in the South Seas* and *Pippi on the Run*), one in 1988 (*The New Adventures of Pippi Longstocking*), plus two animated films in 1997 (*Pippi Longstocking*) and 1999 (*Pippi in the South Seas*). Additionally, she was also featured in two television series in 1969 (*Pippi Longstocking*) and 1998 (*Pippi Longstocking*). A typical Pippi film unfolds as a series of interrelated adventures which Pippi shares with her best friends Tommy and Annika, all aged nine or ten. She and her friends encounter strange people, mysterious places and frequently find themselves in trouble, requiring Pippi to use her superhuman strength and wisdom to bail them out of tricky situations. All the Pippi films follow this formulaic narrative thereby ensuring her immense popularity over the years.

But Pippi was not alone in her success, for accompanying her were also other popular characters by Lindgren, for instance the eight-year-old orphaned boy Rasmus who appeared in six films between 1953 and 2001. Far more ‘real’ than Pippi, Rasmus and his many friends possess no superhuman qualities. However, like Pippi, they also have many adventures in which innocent mischief, petty crimes and beautiful surroundings are frequent motifs. In such films as *The Master Detective and Rasmus* (1953), *Rasmus and the Vagabond* (1955) and *Rasmus, Pontus and Toker* (1956), they frequently find themselves getting in and out of trouble while being surrounded by nature’s abundances, animals and clearly marked good and bad people. A defining moment, however, was reached when Astrid Lindgren and Olle Hellbom collaborated as director–screenplay writer for creating *The Children of Bullerby Village* in 1960. Technically, Lindgren and Hellbom had first come together for *The Master Detective Lives Dangerously*, in 1957, but it was their collaboration with producer Olle Nordemar, starting with *The Children of Bullerby Village*, which resulted in an extremely successful tripartite partnership that lasted for almost three decades and marked the peak of representing childhood as the age of innocence in Swedish children’s films.

Markedly different from the fantasy tales of Pippi, *The Children of Bullerby Village* tells the story of six very young children living among tranquil surroundings in a

small Swedish village comprising of three farms. The film relegates all adults and their struggles to the background, focusing instead on creating a private enclave of benign uncomplicated emotions against an eternally-beautiful summer sun and blue skies. The plot in itself has very little to offer, for it does not have a definitive plotline and is merely a slice-of-life film featuring a series of events. But the film is characterized by a distinctive form of cinematic narration that defines most of the Hellbom-Lindgren-Nordemar films that were to follow. As Malena Janson puts it:

The narrative pace is slow and repetitive, the chronological order broken down into detached episodes and the cinematography is extremely beautiful...The Bullerby children lead their lives in complete bliss, totally unaware of the banality and threat of everyday reality. In their paradise, there are no conflicts, no threats; indeed, no contact whatsoever with the adult realm. The children are isolated in a country of innocence with no view into the 'real' world where grown-ups, i.e. power, is situated (160)

Such a narration became the norm in children's cinema in the decades to come. The allegiance of these children's images to the regime of childhood innocence is undeniable with the films attempting to make us forget most aspects of adult society, with the cinematic children appearing classless and thoughtless, and with their portrayals being set against soft backgrounds in close proximity to nature and animals. But over and above the same, Astrid Lindgren's idealist vision (which echoed the sentiments put forth by Ellen Key in her book on the child at the turn of the century), together with a number of socio-cultural factors specific to contemporaneous Sweden also contributed towards a sustained period of such portrayals. As Lisa Kölker and Corine Meijer suggest, the Swedish Welfare State had an important part to play in such developments. Due to the prevalence of progressive economic growth policies, there was a sustained movement of people from the countryside to urban cities, which contributed to the countryside being romanticized and viewed with nostalgia as reflected in these films (21). Also, as Margaret Norlin points out, the preponderance of such films corresponded with the mood of the times in children's culture (5). Vigorous contemporaneous debates around the ill-effects of mass-media on youngsters caused critics to keep a particularly sharp eye on films for young audiences and crack down on anything with a hint of thrills, violence or conflict. As a result, producers no longer dared to back children's film projects with social overtones, preferring works featuring the 'miracles of healthy innocence' instead. As

added by Norlin, this was a period when there was a tacit, wide-ranging demand for freedom from conflict especially in children's worlds, both in Sweden as well as internationally. On the dubious advice of psychologists and educators, parents threw away all those cruel old children's stories (10). Many experts urged that the violence contained in the traditional fairy-tales and myths be expelled from children's worlds altogether, and effects of such international tendencies were reflected in the screen images of Swedish children as well.

Such 'Bullerby tendencies' continued to mark Swedish children's cinema through sequels and remakes for a long time. The Hellbom-Lindgren-Nordemar trio continued to collaborate till mid 1980s, making around twenty films, all of which were very successful and helped make children's cinema a commercially viable category. Together with stories featuring Pippi, Rasmus and the Bullerby children, these films also featured young boys like Tjovern and Emil, and the flying man-boy Karlsson. Alternatively, Lindgren's characters were also brought to screen by others such as Johanna Hald in her films featuring the clever little girl Lotta, and were also made into various television series. Severe conflicts are hardly present in these films; their plots develop through simple cause and effect relationships designed to be comprehensible to very young children. Nature and animals play a vital part, while the use of slapstick humor, childish suspense techniques and repetition are quite common. The children in themselves have little depth to their characters, usually portrayed as members of homogenous groups or as two-dimensional caricatures. With the exceptions of Pippi, in most cases, gender roles are clearly defined following traditional models, with a majority of films showing the boys as leading characters while the girls are often portrayed as helping characters. These were the films that marked the pinnacle of representing childhood as the age of innocence in Swedish children's films, characterized by a definitive move away from relatively large groups of 'real' children in urban proletariat environs to much smaller groups in the idyllic confined locations of small picturesque towns and amidst the Swedish archipelago. In film after film, children were represented as sweet innocent individuals while Sweden was pictured as a land of open blue skies, bright sun and eternal summers;

often signifying a concept of 'freedom' for the characters from the harsh realities of the real world. As Maaret Koskinen puts it, these films were:

orgies in nostalgia...being set in those optimistic fifties when everything still seemed possible and it was summer most of the time: a paradise lost, in the guise of a Swedish never-neverland, indistinguishable from the Land of Childhood (1996: 33)

In subsequent developments, however, two films emerged as minor exceptions to Lindgren's oeuvre of idyllic children's films. These were *The Brothers Lionheart*, made in 1977, and *Ronja the Robber's Daughter*, made in 1983, which despite essentially being reflective of the Bullerby tendencies, brought back complex myths and fairytales into children's stories and portrayed them in much more sophisticated ways than their predecessors. First in line was *Brothers Lionheart*, a surprising and rare fairytale coming from the Hellbom-Lindgren-Nordemar trio in 1977 which stretched the boundaries of their oeuvre by bringing in the more mature themes of death and rebirth into their storytelling. The film tells the tale of two young boys, nine-year-old Karl and his fourteen-year-old brother Jonathan. Karl is suffering from tuberculosis, and is aware of the fact that he shall die soon. The thought of not meeting his brother again upsets the young boy more than his impending death, and in order to comfort him, Jonathan tells him about the paradisiacal land of Nangijala where he promises to join him once he dies. In a surprising twist in the tale, instead of Karl, Jonathan meets with his death first while saving some children from a raging fire. Upon Karl's subsequent death, he finds his older brother waiting for him in Nangijala. But the paradisiacal land turns out to be less promising than expected, for despite all the delights of a healthy life in their part of the magical land called Cherry Blossom Valley, there exists another part, the Briar Bush Valley, which is ruled by an evil knight. The plot develops as the two brave brothers, now rechristened as the Lionhearts, help the tyrannized people in the other valley fight a war to overthrow their oppressor and regain their freedom. In the process, both brothers lose their lives, once again, only to be reunited in another paradisiacal land depicting an endless cycle of births and deaths.

This exceptional fairytale packs within it a complex set of ideas that problematizes the very category it belongs to. In addition to the obviously unusual elements of evil and death in paradise, the film is quite violent when compared to the others in its class, for it features an evil fire-breathing dragon, elaborate battle sequences, and dead people. Also, it portrays many characters as multidimensional individuals, for instance Hubert, whose ethical orientation is not as clearly discernable as one would expect from the typical Hellbom-Lindgren fare. Because of being emotionally unusually stirring, the film was thought to be unsuitable for very young children, and this led to one of the most heated debates on film censorship in the history of Swedish cinema. The debate was resolved by the creation of a new age limit for children aged seven (Norlin: 14).

1983 marked the making of *Ronja the Robber's Daughter*. A spatio-temporally ambiguous fairytale, the film marks the second exceptional work after *The Brothers Lionheart* in the otherwise banal series of children's films that were based on Lindgren's books. Directed by Tage Danielsson and not by Olle Hellbom, it tells the tale of an eleven-year-old girl named Ronja who is born to the leader of a band of robbers, living in a castle high upon a rock in the middle of a large forest. Realizing that her girl is growing-up, her father and the other band members want her to gradually venture out of the confines of her comfortable castle life and meet the real world outside. They encourage her to spend time in the forest, learn to survive on her own and train herself against the various dangers it contains within itself. One after the other, the girl encounters the many perils that await her in the world outside – grey dwarves, evil vultures, the wild river, a deep gorge called the Hellmouth and many more – and learns to survive them. In the process, she meets a young boy named Birk, who, unknown to her father, was born to his rival robber Borka the same night as Ronja. Having grown up in the forest, Birk is far more independent and aware of the wilderness, and helps Ronja learn to fend for herself. When informed of the young Birk, Ronja's father is furious about his very existence, and forbids her from interacting with him. The young girl is bitter and unwilling to yield. A few months later, as harsh weather arrives, the Borka band forcibly moves into a now disused and disconnected part of the same castle,

resulting in old rivalries being fuelled further and small battles being fought. However, the youngsters choose to continue meeting discreetly till the young boy Birk is caught one day and used by Ronja's father to ask his rival to vacate the castle. Angry at her father's heartless actions, Ronja repudiates him and helps Birk escape. In subsequent developments, much to her father's dismay, Ronja decides to leave the castle and stay with Birk in the forest so that both the children can get away from the daily nagging and meaningless rivalry. Together, they start a fresh life in a bear cave in the forest, refusing to give in to their parents' pressure and return to their homes. A series of twists and turns later, because of the children's efforts, the two rival fathers agree to have a duel against each other and accept the winner, Ronja's father, as the leader. He learns to tolerate Borka and his son and command his newly increased band, while the families reconcile and all start living together in the same castle despite their differences.

As evident, *Ronja the Robber's Daughter* is about growing up, trust, betrayal, choosing sides, leaving home and fending for oneself, and also involves fights and confronting death through an old beloved grandfather figure. What makes the film stand apart from its predecessors is the emphasis on the girl child as protagonist, who, with the exception of the superhuman Pippi and a few minor characters, had to satisfy herself with being a tagalong for the boys till then. While the traditional gender roles are not done away with completely, in this film, Lindgren gives the girl child Ronja a brain, a heart and a free will making her more independent and stronger a character than most of her previous creations. The film was a resounding success, winning awards at Berlin, and locally earning the status of a classic.

Despite being simplistic children's films, both *The Brothers Lionheart* and *Ronja the Robber's Daughter* take youngsters seriously, each in its own way, and do not let traditional wisdom prevent them from presenting novel perspectives in representing children. The storytelling speaks of a complexity and sophistication that had largely been kept out of the children's fairytale films category. As pointed out by Margareta Norlin, they also reflect the debates in Sweden in this later period that were influenced by voices from abroad which emphasized the importance of fairytales for the liberation of

children's minds, and the vital function of symbolism in these tales (11). While Swedish children's cinema chose to largely ignore such impulses in the earlier period under Lindgren's influence, even she had to let them creep into her tales in the later period. However, similar to most other Lindgren films, the emphasis in these exceptional tales is again on humanism and on closeness to nature and animals, with a moral message being quite evident even while being adjusted to suit children's tastes. The use of semi-civilized settings, ancient tools and dresses, shabby appearances and traditional warfare takes us back into an unspecified time and place which reaffirms the films as being two more in the series depicting childhood as the age of idyllic innocence.

As reflected through all the abovementioned films, the regime of childhood innocence has had a major influence on the ways in which children have been imaged in Swedish children's cinema, just as they have been in the rest of the western world. By virtue of being a part of mainland Europe, Sweden has obviously been influenced by the cultural impulses from the visual regime. However, because of Sweden's location in northern Europe, it has also enjoyed a certain cultural insularity that has allowed it to reconfigure, reinterpret and adopt dominant western influences in a manner far more localized to the Nordic region. While the regime of childhood innocence did permeate the Swedish social fabric, it was allowed to do so in a markedly distinct Swedish manner. It did get reflected in Swedish children's films, especially in the Astrid Lindgren led cinemas featuring children in idyllic settings as described above, but it also had to simultaneously adjust and accommodate itself to the specificities of the Swedish socio-cultural milieu. And in no respect is this more evident than in the representations of nudity in children's films, for unlike in the dominant west, nudity and innocent children's cinema are not viewed as mutually exclusive in the Swedish socio-cultural milieu.

### **Innocent Asexual Nudity in Swedish Children's Films**

On September 13, 2007, *Aftonbladet*, one of the largest circulating daily newspapers in Nordic countries, published an article titled "*Nudity warnings for*



"Maggie" <sup>19</sup>. The short write-up reported how IMDb, an immensely popular internet movie database, described such Astrid Lindgren films as *You are out of your mind Maggie*, *The Children of Bullerby Village*, *Ronja the Robber's Daughter* and other Swedish children's film classics in poor taste by tagging them with the keywords "child nudity", "bare butt", "nude bathing", "nude in public", "nude swimming", "female frontal nudity", "male nudity", "infant nudity" etc. Interpreting the tagging as a form of warning, the reporter Susanna Vidlund questioned their appropriateness to describe films that were much more than just a few instances of nudity. She presented the thoughts of various Swedish people on the subject, and while some of them were almost dismissive of her concerns saying "Nobody needs a warning because there are naked children in a film", other were more cautious to argue that while such tags in themselves were not inappropriate, they may attract "wrong people" like pedophiles while discouraging others who may misread the films for what they were not. Still others, like the director of the Swedish Censor Board, argued that the tags did their job in suggesting what the film contained but did not necessarily indicate any child pornography, and thus were only as problematic as similar tags for films containing adult nudity. The exact effect of the report cannot be established, but subsequent developments saw most such tags from the website either being removed or made less prominent, perhaps a result of the many comments that were left by the users of the website who could also intervene in the tagging system and make suggestions that could be affected with approval from the site administrators.

One section of the report dealt with the cultural differences in interpreting these tags, rightly pointing out that the United States based website and its American visitors were likely to be far more sensitive about the tags and the instances of nudity they referred to than their Swedish counterparts. A cursory glance through various comments written by visitors to the website also corroborates the same, and every few days, one invariably finds a few long threads on the message boards of the website where the nudity in such films gets debated. A number of people claiming to be from different parts

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<sup>19</sup> I have used rough English translations of the original Swedish titles in most cases in this chapter. The original Swedish title read as "Nakenvarning för "Madicken"" in *Aftonbladet*, September 13, 2007. Since the English translation of the film title renames Madicken as Maggie, I have used the same.

of the world, but especially representing the United States and different countries in Europe, engage in discussing the appropriateness of such nudity, and the debates usually end as passionate attacks with the American visitors calling their European counterparts “*way too liberal and crazy*”, while the European people shrug-off the nudity and call the Americans “*too prudish*”. With the moderators intervening, the messages usually disappear in a few days. Such mudslinging notwithstanding, the article and the website do highlight the cultural differences between the dominant United States and many smaller countries of continental Europe in attitudes towards on-screen child nudity.

For long, there has existed an America-Europe duality in the western psyche, which assumes a near polar quality when viewed with regard to attitudes towards nudity. Traditionally, Europe has been far more tolerant of the nude body and its representations, which have not automatically been associated with shame and sexuality when displayed on-screen. In part, this may be explained by the code-governed machinery of the American film industry as opposed to the more decentralized independent film production in Europe. However, the reasons appear equally cultural, resulting from a fundamental difference in societal attitudes which appear even starker between the United States and various Nordic countries, especially Sweden. In the Swedish context, the on-screen nude body has long held within itself connotations of innocence, of purity and of return to an uncorrupted alternate-self, meanings that have allowed the innocence of the visual regime to be interpreted locally in ways that accommodate on-screen child nudity within its ambit. Nudity in Sweden has been seen as a state of closeness to nature, marking a site of sound physical and mental health. These connotations are by no means unique to Sweden, for they have universal resonances, but in the Swedish context, they remain valid for all on-screen representations irrespective of age and gender, and are therefore equally true for images of children and adolescents, offering a point of departure from the generally accepted idea of childhood innocence. On the other hand, the dominant understanding of childhood innocence originating in American society generally tends to conflate nudity and sexuality, and therefore sees onscreen child nudity as offensive. Over the last few decades, this has become even more profound, and has gradually taken a turn in which every nude body, especially that of a child, has assumed

sexual connotations. Images of nude children are no longer acceptable in the United States. In the recent past, with increasing fervor, they have been automatically associated with child pornography. For instance, Edward Weston's critically acclaimed artworks featuring his naked son Neil have suddenly turned offensive while many of Sally Mann's fascinating photographs have been attacked as being pedophilic. The concept of 'underage' has taken over the American psyche, and the innocent connotations of nudity have lost their meaning. With long-hidden dirty-secrets of the church being revealed, a paranoia over pedophilia and child sexual abuse has gripped the United States and led to such absurdities as innocent mothers being charged by the police for daring to photograph their adorable toddlers in the bath. While the social crisis of child sexual abuse is real indeed, such displacement of our moral panic onto the images of children validates WTJ Mitchell's statements when he states that "*images are convenient scapegoats, and the offensive eye is ritually plucked out by ruthless critique*" (171).

As demonstrated by the *Aftonbladet* report, marginal western cultures as Sweden have not been impervious to the effects of the abovementioned paranoia that had spilled over the boundaries of the United States through its hegemonic control of the global media. But viewed against the knowledge networks generated by such media which make child nudity problematic, Sweden's cinematic children still appear to enjoy a relative freedom that is no longer available to their counterparts in the United States, or for that matter in most other parts of the world barring the Nordic region, Netherlands, France, Germany and to a certain extent Eastern Europe and some Asian nations. As evident from our discussion, nude children are quite common in Swedish cinema, in Swedish television as well as in other visual representations. A number of Swedish children's films contain sequences of nude youngsters in various situations, which neither assume sexual connotations automatically nor offer a strict resistance to the regime of childhood innocence. Instead, such instances have their own subtle set of social meanings that are heavily dependent on the context in which they are featured. They therefore warrant a closer examination from within their local social-cultural milieu which reveals some distinct thematic patterns.

A number of cinematic sequences featuring nude children are found in children's films based on the Astrid Lindgren stories, where the children are depicted in idyllic settings and their nudity used to convey closeness to nature and return to the 'primal' state of being. Not surprisingly, the most commonly employed context for such depictions is skinny-dipping in outdoor ponds and lakes. *The Children of Bullerby Village* stands as a typical example, where the sequence is captured in long shots and edited together with other sequences of children's leisure activities. Often accompanied by background music and sounds of gleeful laughter, such sequences invariably depict the youngsters as happy innocent souls frolicking amongst the abundances offered by Mother Nature. The state of their nudity, by implication, is that of merging together with their surroundings, which in this case happens to be an ahistorical quintessential Swedish countryside. Intercut or edited closely together with shots of animals, such moments effectively convey an unbroken link between nature, animals and children while successfully portraying the youngsters as one among many of nature's beings. Marking such instances as key moments in the film and defining the films through them, as attempted by IMDb, goes against the social meanings ascribed to the films in the Swedish context. As pointed out by the abovementioned article, it is a tendency most likely to be exhibited by foreigners unfamiliar with Swedish culture; in particular Americans from the dominant west who are unused to such representations in their moving images.

*Ronja the Robber's Daughter* offers us another similar example. Here again, the skinny-dipping is placed close to a sequence where the young boy and girl tame wild horses, milk them and ride on them. Edited in between two sequences of horse riding, their bath in a lake is further intercut with shots of owls, deer and cranes to reaffirm the 'children of nature' effect. Such sequences have no place for sexuality. The soft contours of the children's bodies are filmed against a backdrop of wilderness and water, with the formal devices of the narration negating any sexual meanings by depicting the body in deglamorized long shots and wiping away all traces of eroticism with a flood of natural light. A short sequence in the film depicts the naked youngsters lying face-down in lush green grass next to a glistening lake surface, presumably immediately after a swim in the lake. The boy turns his attention to his companion and lovingly caresses her hair before

lying down again, while the girl reacts by smiling and lifting her feet up in the air. For young audiences, the sequence appears innocent as it is: a sweet tender moment between two young lovers; their love speaking of friendship and mutual admiration but devoid of any sexual undertones. However, for the sexually aware adult audiences, the sequence creates the effect of innocence precisely by negating the sexual charge. The whole setting is remindful of the Garden of Eden, but very clearly *before* the apple or the snake makes a corrupting arrival. It is a denial of sexuality which lends credibility to the claims of innocence. These children, though not characterized as being altogether innocent, are still sexually naïve and therefore meant to be left alone by adult sexuality. The unmistakable allegiance here is to the regime of childhood innocence. Despite the Edenic settings and proximity of two naked bodies, these cinematic moments do not offer a stiff resistance to the visual regime, for they allude to our nostalgia for our seemingly pure childhood existence and extend the visual regime by keeping intact all its characteristics including asexuality. Any attempts at reading sexuality into such saccharine moments would be an obvious assault upon the visual regime, and would appear totally out-of-context and unwarranted.

Interestingly, the asexuality of such nude children has not been a privilege enjoyed by young underdeveloped bodies alone, for even Swedish adults and their on-screen representations have had the same characteristics ascribed to them in certain contexts. As a matter of fact, it is not uncommon to find adults appearing in the nude even in children's films, for instance in *Elvis! Elvis!* In which a young boy and his grandfather go skinny-dipping together. Far from being sexual, the nudity in such cases is employed to impart additional meanings to the narrative content, in this case a unique bond based on care and understanding which Elvis does not share with anyone else. In *Ronja the Robber's Daughter*, there is another extended sequence where all the male members of the household run out naked into the snow; having been forcefully instructed to do so by the lady of the house who deems it necessary that they clean themselves in this manner. The naked men are portrayed like a bunch of reluctant boys, romping around in the snow while hysterically shivering and shouting from the thrill of the experience. The emphasis here is on revealing the inner childlike qualities they possess despite being

a hardened band of robbers. In *The Brothers Lionheart*, the adolescent boy and his kid brother are shown fishing and talking by a riverside, with the camera seemingly oblivious to their nudity. The young protagonists are shown almost merging into their surroundings, a paradisiacal place called Nangijala. Clearly, in such instances, irrespective of age and gender, the body without clothes is marked by innocence. The nudity emphasizes the 'spiritual purity' of the protagonists, for they have been able to reach paradise only by way of their virtuous deeds.

However, such nudity is not limited to idyllic natural settings alone. Onscreen nudity has been a regular feature in numerous children's films even in urban settings, and is depicted as incidental and matter-of-fact while retaining its innocent connotations. In *Truth or Dare*, a seemingly realist film, the pubescent protagonist is shown taking a shower in school and saving her overweight classmate from being tormented by her friends. Neither underplayed nor highlighted, the nudity in such instances helps us identify with the protagonist and her inner feelings. The visibility of her bare skin offers a psychological transparency, symbolically revealing her soul for all to see and therefore harboring no guile within. It is offered as a contrast to the surrounding bodies, in this case the tormentors, who are shown semi-clothed and apparently masking their ill-feelings. In many other occurrences, the nude body appears in the most unexpected sequences, fleetingly and without having much import. In *Elvis! Elvis* for instance, Elvis's mother is shown getting into the bathtub before readying herself for her son's first day at school. Similarly, in *Truth or Dare*, the schoolgirl Sabina's father is shown emerging out of the shower when her friend Nora visits her at home, while in *Seppan*, a girl and her friend are shown talking to the friend's grandfather even as he takes off his clothes, gets into the bathtub and gets his back scrubbed by another relative. Such instances have very little to offer, for their presence in the films neither gives nor takes anything from the narrative. Yet, they appear, mostly as routine occurrences requiring little narrative justification. Far from being sexual, such instances are indebted to the practice of nudism that is woven into Swedish social fabric, making it routine and acceptable on-screen. Placing Swedish children's films against the backdrop of nudism in the nation would help us better understand the meanings of such innocent nude instances.

## **Nudism and Nudist Movements in Sweden and their relationship with Innocence**

Nudism has an interesting history in Sweden that has received little scholarly attention. A part of Ylva Habel's dissertation titled *Modern Media Modern Audiences* explores the spread of nudist movements in Sweden. Situating nudism at the intersection of modernity, social discourses and the mass media, she demonstrates a link between nudism, body culture and health & hygiene. Habel's work is specific to certain socio-historic junctures, but offers us interesting insights into how the abovementioned innocent and asexual associations of the nude body may have taken root in Swedish public culture and enjoyed a foothold long after ceasing to do so in the dominant west.

As Habel explicates it, nudism surfaced in Sweden as an organized practice through such movements as "*Health through Nude Culture*" (HgN) in the 1930s. The HgN was led by a well-known medical professor Johan Almkvist, who promoted nudist culture through a series of books and pamphlets he wrote. He was inspired by the German nudist movement and a few influential articles and poems that were published closer-home around the turn of the century. However, as demonstrated by Habel, the genealogy of nudism in Sweden can actually be traced all the way back to an influential article titled "*The Sanitary Question*" published in 1851 by a well-known sanitary expert Dr. C G Grähs. In the essay, Grähs furthered the idea that there was a direct link between dirt and moral degeneration, while hygiene was a path to physical, mental and spiritual health. Over the next few decades, his essay and other contemporaneous developments led to the emergence of a nationwide medico-social hygiene discourse. As a result, health and hygiene became master metaphors and constituted the basis for a discursive construction of public health as concept. Social, racial and sexual hygiene, together with sports and sobriety movements, became seeming remedies to all societal degeneration supposedly resulting from various social upheavals and urbanization. By the turn of the century, there emerged a romantic naturalist discourse that promoted a return to nature, especially in the wake of rapid urbanization. It wasn't long before this was connected with health, and nudity, seen as the natural state of being, was declared as ennobling and purifying both for the body as well as the soul.

By 1930s, Almkvist seems to have absorbed all these influences, and weaving them together as a compelling rhetoric of physical, mental and moral purity, promoted nudism as a superior lifestyle. By virtue of his prestigious professional and social standing, his movement quickly gained a following in Stockholm and other provincial cities where he acted as a travelling lecturer on the subject. Alongside, the publishing of four independent nudist journals helped spread the movement even further. Almkvist also contributed regularly to two of these journals. From his perspective on social relations, bad health and bad physical-spiritual hygiene reflected mutually on each other, while conversely, clean bare skin was a visible signifier of inner as well as outward purity. Since nudism was to be a mixed sex group activity, he maintained that sexual advances between men and women would be difficult to initiate. The freedom promised by nudity intensified the nudist's spontaneous self-surveillance impulses and demanded that the participants demonstrated a readiness to subdue nudity's presumed sexual pleasure. As Habel states it:

Focusing on health and hygiene as key arguments for naked culture in physical as well as psychological respects, [Almkvist] argues that clothes not only hindered the body ventilation and movements, but furthermore cause and exacerbate unsound erotic titillation, creating an atmosphere of wanton and artificial sensuality between the sexes...Nakedness, he argued, would restore innocence and beauty to the body, metaphorically wiping away the stamp of shame, a construction of Western society. He envisioned a coming generation of level headed, responsible, naturally and moderately sexualized men and women, whose interaction in mixed parties was imbued by comradeship, not eroticism. The absence of clothes should encourage improved hygiene as well as hardening body care, and thus doubly improve the nudists' health status. Joint activities, like sunbathing, swimming and gymnastics would strengthen them and enhance their well-being – at the same time keeping their minds off sexual matters (168).

The rhetoric employed by both Almkvist and the nudist journals compared their movements to the lifestyle of people from ancient Greece. They maintained a distinction between “*naked primitives*” in other underdeveloped parts of the world and the far more superior and sophisticated Hellenistic “*culture of nakedness*”.<sup>20</sup> Through such activities, nudity was promoted as a new reconstituted state of being, with the bare skin acting as a

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<sup>20</sup> A direct ideological affiliation between the previously mentioned eugenics movement and nudism cannot be claimed, but the rhetoric of ‘health and hygiene through nudism’ does seem to contain within itself traces of thoughts on racial and physical superiority. However, the emphasis seems to have been more on developing a superior physical and mental state of existence than on claiming to harness already existing superior racial qualities.



site of conflation for human evolution, maturity and responsible behavior on the one hand, and a return to innocence on the other. The rhetoric seems to have worked, for very soon, large nudist camps were being organized throughout the nation, especially close to major urban sites. Such activities invited a number of protests from some factions of society and even ridicule from certain sections of the press. Nonetheless, the nudist movements seem to have taken a firm root in the Sweden of 1930s and helped spread and legitimize nudism in the public sphere. While it never assumed the form of popular culture, it still made its presence felt fairly strongly.

This genealogy holds true especially for organized nudist movements and activities in the nation, though not necessarily for the practice of nudism itself. It needs to be kept in mind that the cultural raw material necessary for the relatively ready acceptance and spread of such a movement was already present in the Swedish social fabric. For one, the health & hygiene discourse was already well established in Swedish society, and two, social nudism was not uncommon prior to this era, although in entirely different familial contexts and more widespread in the Swedish countryside. The HgN and its counterparts appear to be a crystallizing process, a coming together of already existent social impulses that got structured and assumed the characteristics of a movement in wake of rapid urbanization and apparent moral decay of the society. They mark a phase when nudism entered the public sphere and the field-of-vision of the mass media, for it received a fair amount of coverage from most sections of the press.

It wasn't long before the movement achieved an important milestone and made a transition into cinema. In 1933, the German nudist film *Back to Nature* was released to the public by none other than Svenska Filmindustri, the most important production company in the nation. Soon after, Almkvist also shot and released an HgN newsreel, perhaps the first such Swedish production. In line with his rhetoric, the images of nudity in these early films were also projected as 'natural', their framing and angle emphasizing the athletic abilities of the bodies on display and their healthy closeness to nature. Not surprisingly, these films disappointed adolescent boys and young men who expected erotic sensationalism, and a number of newspapers subjected the films to acrid reviews.

At the same time, some provincial papers were quietly positive about the films, but most newspapers included a standardized publicity article which neither criticized nor promoted the movements<sup>21</sup>. It may be appropriate to read the latter as indicative of the socio-cultural milieu which tended to be fairly tolerant towards such on-screen nudity. However, the seeming asexuality of these images was not as easily accepted as Almkvist wanted it to be. As Habel points out, this revealed itself as an undercurrent of anxiety in his rhetoric that attempted to legitimize nudity in wake of the sexual threat it held captive within itself. While appearing in an interview in his film, Almkvist attempted to downplay the sexual connotation of cinematic nudity, even going to the extent of negating it outright:

Note that the life depicted in these images does not show any traits of scheming lustfulness, or obscure movements. No courtship or flirtation. No coquettish smoking, no drinking of alcohol. Note instead how these images show comradeship between men and women, and how gymnastics, bathing and sports in full community, are carried out in joyful, refreshing heartiness! See how their social life is characterized by open, honest joy! And without any traces of sexuality (169).

Habel's account doesn't take us further, nor does it make any mention of the role played by children in these nudist movements. It does not indicate whether later presence of nudity in cinema could be seen as being indebted to these movements and their visual representations. Still, it might be fair to assume that these widespread movements did have a bearing upon subsequent media practices in the nation. This seems especially true when one takes into account the emphasis laid by Almkvist and his tribe on using films as a pedagogical medium to promote their movements; a fact elaborated upon by Habel in her dissertation. The rhetoric generated by the nudist movements seems to work as a discursive field, making contributions towards legitimizing on-screen nudity. Placed against the backdrop of such a discursive paradigm, the presence of abundant nudity in children's cinema appears to have more meaning. The ideological similarities between Almkvist's discourse and the composition of the previously mentioned scenes of nudity are strikingly similar. While it is true that the abovementioned films were made much later and in different time periods, in emphasizing the link between nudity and nature,

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<sup>21</sup> However, as Ylva points out, most papers agreed on the point that when compared to their German counterpart, people in the Swedish footage appeared far more 'natural and authentic'.

nudity and hygiene and nudity and moral purity, they almost appear to use Almkvist's rhetoric as their user-manual while simultaneously also appearing to work from under the effects of the regime of childhood innocence. With idealism and pedagogy being defining markers of both the nudist movements as well as children's cinema, it may be valid to claim that such innocent nude moments in idyllic children's cinema are located at the intersection between the regime of childhood innocence and the nudist movements in Sweden. As a consequence, the cinematic representations of Swedish youngsters described above, whether with or without on-screen nudity, can be seen as essentially representing childhood as an age of innocence.

### CHAPTER 3: PRETEEN AS THE AGE OF THOUGHTFUL OBSTINANCE

In the previous chapter, I discussed how a substantial part of the large body of Swedish children's films paid allegiance to the pan-western regime of childhood innocence by depicting childhood as an age of idyllic innocence. However, if one were to momentarily return to our original source for understanding the visual regime – Higonnet's historical meta-narrative of innocent childhood images – and look at it more closely, one observes that she seems to make a small oversight in her analysis. She works with an assumption that her account can answer for the whole of the 'west', a term that she employs in ways too generous at times. In view of the shared social and technological histories of various western nations, their interdependence and cultural similarities are undeniable, just as is the rapid movement of cultural influences from one corner of the western world to the other. However, in Higonnet's narrative, one witnesses a tendency to construe the dominant part as the whole. Her discussion is clearly centered on the United States and its transatlantic ally the United Kingdom. They share amongst them a common language in addition to similarities in monopolizing market practices and a hegemony over international mass media. As a result, the knowledge networks generated by children's images have their dominant influences in these two nations and leave indelible cultural influences in other regions of the world. A closely related phenomenon is the dominance of English in international academia, which has meant that the oft-used international references are those originating in these nations, and similar to Orientalism, this 'Cult of the Occident' has resulted in the knowledges produced in these countries trying to speak for the whole of the western world, in the process neglecting minor and marginal narratives that unfold in the smaller nations. Sweden's children's cinema weaves together one such minor narrative, which both alludes to Higonnet's meta-narrative as well as departs from it in some major ways. While innocent childhood films continued to be made till the 1980s, as mentioned previously, portrayals of childhood as the age of innocence comprised only a part and not the whole of Swedish children's cinema. It cannot be claimed that the cinematic images of Swedish children are merely an extension of the regime of childhood innocence, for Swedish children's films also depart from the dominant ways of imaging children and problematize them in numerous ways.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, one important point of departure is the presence of nudity in these films which, depending on the context it gets employed in, does not necessarily offer a strict resistance to the understanding of childhood innocence but gets adjusted and accommodated under it. But over and above such relatively minor departures, a number of Swedish children's films deliberately attempted to run against the grain of this visual regime and systematically challenged and dismantled the conventional portrayals of innocent children. Far from the films with cute youngsters living in idyllic settings, these non-moralizing films featured children as strong and complex individuals with their own independent thought processes and complicated lives, and it was such unconventional films that earned Sweden a prominent position in children's cinema internationally.

### **Challenging the Conventions: Thoughtful Emotional Younglings**

As early as the mid 1960s, the Astrid Lindgren brand of films representing children as two-dimensional souls living in eternally idyllic neverlands started facing increasing criticism for being free from all social contexts, and children's media and culture became a debated subject in Sweden once again. Political discussions in society at large were becoming more radical around this time, and as a result, much of what went on in children's culture also had political overtones (Norlin: 10). The terms of the debate focused on giving back children their individuality, treating them not merely as innocent younglings but as creatures with minds and hearts of their own. Social critics promoted the idea of a more imaginative and emotionally powerful cultural life for children, advocating deeper and subtly shaded films that made journeys into the child's psyche while also making children's films more socially conscious and real-worldly. These demands were not met by moving images immediately. Nonetheless, a change in the scenario first became visible in television and gradually made a transition to the cinema screen (*ibid.*). It started being reflected as a distinct kind of cinema which emerged as a response to its predecessors, departing from the prevalent idyllic children's worlds and marking a shift from portraying children as social groups and superhuman characters to focusing on them as thinking and feeling individuals who inhabited the real worlds.

Starting the 1970s, there emerged a strong children's cinema that was characterized by highly individualized portrayals of thoughtful and emotional children, especially preteens, and these are the films that represent the best of what Swedish children's cinema has to offer. The trend was started with a focus on the thoughts and emotions of very young children before gradually moving on to preteens while locating their portrayals in more complex social setups.

One of the first children's films to exhibit a bold move away from its innocent predecessors was *Hugo and Josephine*, made in 1967, which marked the directorial debut of Kjell Grede. The film has a linear and simplistic plot, featuring a six-year-old girl Josephine who lives an isolated life in the countryside where her father is the new minister. Polite, withdrawn and awkwardly different from her peers, Josephine has no friends, and therefore spends her time wandering around all alone; looking at the objects around her, exercising her fantastic imagination with them and longing for companionship. In walks Hugo, a self-confident, free-spirited boy of her age who prefers hiking through the woods to sitting in the class-room. He helps Josephine gain confidence, and together, they have fun and enjoy creating their own private kingdom amongst the abundances of nature while indulging in a series of innocuous little adventures. They befriend a wise and caring parsonage gardener who acts as their guardian. He guides them, soothes their perplexities about life, comforts Josephine and watches over them as they explore and learn from their surroundings. The narrative ends with the gardener bidding the children a tearful farewell and moving to a new town.

Despite the simplistic plot, what casts a spell in this minor masterpiece is its sheer visual brilliance and master craftsmanship. As in the case of the Hellbom-Lindgren collaborations, the film belongs as much to the director as it does to its writer Maria Gripe. But far from the banality of the Bullerby worlds, *Hugo and Josephine* is poetic, almost surreal in its treatment of Gripe's work which is woven together by her not merely as a continuing story but as a series of vivid images. In his cinematic adaptation of the text, Kjell Grede successfully takes Gripe's vision to a new level. Appearing part real and part fantasy, the incidents in the film unfold quietly from the viewpoint of the youngsters,

flowing naturally, beautifully and often amusingly, with numerous wordless stretches where the wondrously real settings absorb the children even as they dominate the picture.

The film is not as much a moving story as it is a delightful succession of brilliant moments exploring the children's mindscapes. In one sequence, the children hesitantly explore the dark interiors of a factory setting, only to have young Hugo explode on to the screen in broad daylight, triumphantly wheeling down the road on an old penny-farthing bicycle with his small legs struggling to reach the pedals. In another sequence, Hugo and Josephine, intending to make a kaleidoscope, find themselves transposed to a garbage dump, and are then shown sliding down huge dirt-mounds even as loose dirt reaches the screen before they do, flowing into the frame like water from a stream. The editing of the film appears jarring, almost fragmented and anti-narrative, for when Hugo sniffs on a piece of wood, he is transported from his classroom to the outdoors, just as on dozing-off on his desk, he is startled by gunshots that transpose him to the scene of a hunt in the woods. Josephine's father remains a mere voice in the entire film, but still manages to emerge as a strong character. The most poignant of sequences, however, is saved for the very end, when in order to make the children happy, the parting gardener stops his pickup-truck, unloads his furniture in the middle of the road, and proceeds to have a ceremonial supper with his young friends even as darkness sets-in all around. When he finally leaves, the table and chairs remain on the road, with candles burning on them and the young kids seated at the table, while the gardener drives away into the distance.

As evident, *Hugo and Josephine* is no ordinary fare, and not surprisingly, it attracted a lot of attention in European circles. For many, the film appeared artistically extremely innovative, and through such endeavors, children's cinema received a further elevation in its status and became artistically innovative and critically appreciated cinema. Critics hailed the film as:

the first in-depth portrait of children in Swedish film...; [a] reminder of what children's films should be like, with an emphasis on quality and a serious approach that was often lacking in the international children's cinema (Norlin: 10).

While such encomiums remain essentially true and the film does mark the beginning of a new age of Swedish children's cinema, what remains noteworthy is its dependence on nature and idyllic country settings to achieve its effect; not in the least departing from its predecessors in this regard. However, the place where it does depart is in its surreal treatment of the text and focus on a child's psyche, for all its delightful episodes unfold through the freshness of a child's viewpoint, and it was in this direction that subsequent cinematic developments were to occur, systematically challenging the previous ways of imaging children as two dimensional souls with little or no emotional and mental depth.

The endeavors were taken further with Kay Pollak's *Elvis! Elvis!* in 1977, which imparted children's cinema with even more sophistication, and similar to *Hugo and Josephine*, caused another minor sensation. The film also marks a moment when idyllic surroundings gave way to the narrative being set against the backdrop of a city. *Elvis! Elvis!* tells the story of a seven-year-old boy, Elvis Karlsson, living in an apartment with his parents and named so after his mother's idol Elvis Presley. He is lonely and misunderstood, inhabiting a mental world that appears meaningful only through his perspective, and therefore finds solace in some toys and his overactive imagination. The plot involves some twists and turns and includes a number of characters, but in essence, it develops as a series of daily struggles that Elvis has to face in order to fit his mother's conception of her child, for he is quite unlike what she would want him to be, and she is unable to understand him for what he is. The people whom he likes are all disliked by his mother, who loves him dearly but forbids him to spend time with them. Time and again, he attempts to reach out to her and express himself, only to end up disappointing her over and over again. And he just can't comprehend why his mother's face lights up with excitement on seeing the 'real' Elvis on TV but not her own son. In desperation, he asks her, "*Whose Elvis am I?*"

In many ways, *Elvis! Elvis!* and *Hugo and Josephine* are quite similar, and not in the least because they were both based on Maria Gripe's novels. As pointed out by Malena Janson, Gripe's works appeared as goldmines for the artistically ambitious



children's film directors, for they dealt with loneliness, alienation, frightful imaginations, occultism and fairytales of death and violence (172). Like *Hugo and Josephine*, *Elvis! Elvis!* is also a slice-of life-film. It is a psychological journey rather than merely being a children's tale, which routinely departs from realistic representations to affect an alternate kind of psychological realism. It is dark and brooding, almost pessimistic in its outlook. Taking the viewers into the child's mind, it makes the audience experience his inner turmoil by presenting him lying wide awake in his dark bed, small, helpless and all shriveled as he overhears his mom discuss his troublesome behavior with his dad at night. It symbolizes his struggles by showing him staring up a blank never-ending wall that seems to offer him no point of resolution. Symbolically suggesting the wall to be his mother, the film shows our young protagonist trying to please the wall by planting a line of tender flowers along its base. As the film comes to an end, it offers no happy closures, for after disappointing his mother yet again, Elvis begs her for forgiveness once more, repeatedly muttering "*I will be good, mom, I will be.*"

To achieve the desired effect, both films work by using a number of formal devices that help the audiences identify with the young protagonists and see the world through their perspective. For instance, in both films, the camera is often brought down to the eye-level of the child, and it constantly chooses to freeze on the faces of the young protagonists who appear far too real to be merely acting the emotions of the characters they portray. Similarly, the dialogues are offered as simple and fragmented thoughts intercut with long periods of silence, with the plots remaining essentially simple and the overall pace of the film being very slow and laid back. Despite appearing bleak and pessimistic at times, especially *Elvis! Elvis!*, both films demonstrate an extraordinary sensitivity in their portrayals of children while offering a sharp contrast to the idyllic worlds and their inhabitants created by Lindgren. As Margareta Norlin chooses to put it:

[In these films] children are taken seriously and speak about what they have on their minds, instead of 'hiding' their thoughts like before. The films presumed to show that the world of children, psychologically and socially is not the slightest bit cuter than the adult world, and that children will not necessarily be injured when you talk with them about love, pain, violence, sorrow or joy. This conception started a wave of energy, which led to a new vitality and dramatic approaches in the Swedish children's cinema (p 14).

Taking a cue from these films, a number of other directors also tried similar flesh-and-blood portrayals of young children, but were far less successful in their attempts. For instance, in 1974, six years after *Hugo and Josephine* but three years before *Elvis! Elvis!*, Bo Widerberg made *Stubby*, a little-known and largely unrecognized film from the otherwise famous critic/director. Widerberg initially earned a name for himself with his polemics against the film industry in the newspaper *Expressen*, routinely urging film companies to “assume their responsibility” and represent their opinions about contemporary issues in society. He seldom attacked individuals, but Ingmar Bergman and Arne Sucksdorff, Sweden’s most visible internationally known filmmakers of preceding decades, were his favored scapegoats. Having previously made the critically acclaimed *Raven’s End*, *Elvira Madigan* and *Adalen Riots*, Widerberg’s *Stubby* is a disappointment to say the least, and nowhere close to *Hugo and Josephine* and *Elvis! Elvis!* qualitatively. Nonetheless, it merits a mention not as much for its content and presentation as for the age of its protagonist and the theme it chooses to portray. *Stubby* tells the tale of six-year-old Johan and his extraordinary gift for the game of football. An accidental encounter with a star football player leaves the player psychologically shattered while the young boy’s talents get discovered and known to the world. In a not-too-logical stretch of cinematic imagination, the child soon finds himself playing with professional players, and goes on to become a part of the national team and represents Sweden in international games. While he enjoys all the attention, his heart remains that of a six year-old, desiring the smaller pleasures of life and taking solace in mundane activities. He becomes a national idol very soon and everybody, especially the media, wants to have a piece of him. His personal life and school take a backseat as adult expectations take over, and he is left inhabiting a world that his young brain cannot quite comprehend.

The seemingly ordinary narrative has its moments, for instance the many sequences on the football field which appear to borrow pages from the neo-realist tradition and thus give a documentary feel to the film. Casting members of the Swedish football team, Widerberg makes the young Johan play with them, not necessarily as an exalted star but as one of the many members of the team – passing the ball, scoring a few goals, but largely being an ordinary player who is incidentally extraordinary because of

his age. In one particular sequence, Johan disrupts the flow of the game by asking another star player to tie his shoelaces even as the opponents score a goal. In another similar sequence, members of the team complain to the coach about having to read the same bedtime stories to the young boy over and over again. Appearing mildly amusing in such moments, *Stubby*, together with its contemporaries, marks the importance of a mature and socially conscious children's cinema in the Swedish context even for such seasoned critics like Widerberg. Treading a thin line between being meant for children and being meant for adults but featuring children, such tales portraying thoughtful emotional younglings continued to be made suggesting a conscious departure from their predecessors. However, over the following decades, such alternate cinema came of its own not through exploring the mindscape of very young children but through films dealing with the angsts and anxieties of preteens, portrayed in film after film as extremely smart but obstinate individuals with a mind of their own. Leaving behind idyllic worlds and innocent children for good, these films chose to represent mid childhood as a delicate age of transition with the children struggling to affirm their identities as strong souls while finding a place for themselves in the worlds they inhabit.

### **Innocent No More: Smart Obstinate Preteens**

The smart obstinate preteen came into prominence in the 1980s, with one of the first films featuring a preteen as a strong individual being *Children's Island*, made in 1980 by the director of *Elvis! Elvis!* – Kay Pollak. The film is a portrait of an eleven-year-old boy named Reine who cruises through life as though every day were an adventure. Finding the adult world selfish and stupid, he obsesses over his few remaining days as a child and tries hard to live them to the hilt. Over summer, he is deported by his mother to a summer camp named Children's Island. However, he thinks he is too smart to be wasting his time in a camp like a regular child. Duping his mother into believing that he is at the summer camp, he returns to their empty house and struggles to survive through the next few weeks while his mother, oblivious to the fact, is busy working in another town. Facing the world on his own, he ventures into the city, encounters various people and makes a few friends and enemies. Suffering from hunger, he manages to find

work and money, and feeling fearful and lonely, he finds companionship with a disabled woman while comforting her with his presence. He joins a troupe of theatre performers to play a young Björn Borg and learns to accept his mother's cynical boyfriend who tries hard to reach out to him. Befriending a group of juvenile delinquents, he takes to substance abuse and petty criminal activities while also managing to fulfill his long cherished desire of setting new records in breathing underwater. Through all this, his young mind explores the concepts of love, lust and the monotony of adult life. He attempts to make meaning of complex existential questions about god and religion, expressing his thoughts as musings addressed to a voice-recorder that keeps him constant company. In the end, he resigns to the natural progression of time, outgrows his childhood and embraces adulthood, kissing goodbye to his beloved voice-recorder that is set free into the big wide world as it floats away tied to a large gas balloon.

Based on a book by P C Jersild, there is nothing cute or innocent about *Children's Island*. Instead, the film appears almost cynical at times, its overall brooding worldview infused only with a few moments of feel-good delights. It was a moderate success when released, winning some key Swedish awards while being nominated for one major international award, and remains an important milestone, for it attempts to impart a philosophical dimension to the thoughts of a preteen child even while grounding him in real-worldly events encountered in the city on a daily basis. "*Man is a swine. To be in control of things is to be alone.*", muses Reine after yet another particularly rough run-in with life. "*Is there a hell, I don't know for sure. Is there anyone else but me?*", he reflects. While *Hugo and Josephine* and *Elvis! Elvis!* brought the camera down to the level of the children, they still limited their efforts to imaging children's worlds as being markedly different from the adult worlds. *Children's Island* brought together these two distinct worlds and took it a level further by successfully reversing the cinematic viewpoint from that of adults imaging children to children imaging adults. Focusing on the thoughts and emotions of a smart obstinate preteen living in the real world rather than young children inhabiting semi-phantasmal mindscapes against the backdrop of idyllic countryside, it pits the adult world against the child's viewpoint and chooses to portray the adults as seen through his eyes – shallow, two-dimensional and caricatured –

characteristics which were previously imparted to children's portrayals. In the process, it also reinforces the traditional child-adult binary but balances it further by giving the children and their perspective as much place in cinematic worlds as that of the adults.

In 1982, with *Fanny and Alexander*, Ingmar Bergman made the portrayals of Swedish preteens take a temporary but sharp turn towards fantasy and mysticism. Originally made for television, the film was conceived as a four part TV movie which spanned 312 minutes. A version lasting only 188 minutes was created later for cinematic release, winning numerous awards and accolades worldwide and earning itself a place among the finest of films to have ever graced the silver screen internationally. Scripted by Bergman himself, *Fanny and Alexander* is a period film, set in the early twentieth century and telling the tale of an eleven-year-old boy named Alexander, his sister Fanny, and their well-to-do extended family of the Ekdahls. The plot involves a number of characters, but for the most part develops through Alexander's perspective, unfolding as a complex multi-layered narrative of death, cruelty and the paranormal. The children's parents are a happily married couple, deeply involved with their work at the theatre, till the father meets with an untimely death. Shortly afterwards, the mother finds a new suitor in the local bishop, a handsome widower, and accepts his proposal of marriage. But far from being a happy union, the move leaves the mother and children extremely distressed, for the bishop is a cruel unforgiving man whose strict puritanical principles allow no space for the children's playfulness or their imaginative worlds. The bishop's family is no different, and the children and their mother find themselves living as virtual prisoners in his home after having given up everything from their past life upon his request. A series of confrontations follow, especially between the young Alexander and his stepfather, before the Ekdahl family finally intervenes. With help from an old friend, a Jewish merchant, and some unexplainable magic, the children are smuggled out of the house, but the bishop refuses to be bribed or coaxed into divorcing the mother. Pregnant by now, she slips him sedatives and flees as he sleeps, after which a fire breaks out and the bishop is burnt to death. In the meantime, Alexander meets the Jewish merchant's mysterious son and fantasizes about his stepfather's death – it is as if Alexander's fantasy comes true as he dreams it. The story ends on a mainly happy, life-affirming note, with the christening

of the children's new sibling and the illegitimate daughter of one of the Ekdahl men, but Alexander encounters both his father's and the bishop's ghost, signaling that his past will continue to haunt him forever.

The film is replete with dense symbolism, dealing with love, estrangement, ghosts, the paranormal and Bergmanesque existentialism. For instance, when the children's father suffers his fatal heart attack, he is playing the ghost of the dead King in *Hamlet*; while the figure of the bishop, and what happens to him, are reminiscent of Claudius' usurpation and the young Prince's final revenge.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the film explores the themes of Christianity, repentance, submission to authority and the questioning of god's existence, creating a fantastic narrative that is as marked by Bergman's agony and angst as it is by a celebration of opulent Swedish familial existence. For our purposes, however, this cinematic masterpiece invites attention because of the centrality of Alexander's perspective to the plot, for even while the film does not focus solely on him, it refrains from drifting too far away either inviting us into the depths of his imaginative psyche as he conducts puppet theater performances, talks to his dead father, fictionalizes the cruel death of the bishop's ex-wife and kids and fantasizes about his stepfather being burnt. Such sequences make us experience Alexander's passions and his indignation. When he goes exploring the mystical workshop, encounters the mummy and has a run in with the androgynous son of the merchant, we are drawn into his mental landscape and experience his curious fear.

The sequences depicting Alexander's confrontations with his stepfather, showcasing a never ending battle of wits between the bishop's forced paternal order and Alexander's obstinacy, remain one of the most engaging portrayals of a child's intellections in cinema. Their face-offs place a child against an adult, in the process symbolically pitting childhood against adulthood, and lending a classical universality to the specificities of Alexander's struggles. In an extended sequence, an angered bishop confronts Alexander for lying yet again, reminding him of the conversation they had a year back about the evils of lying. A remorseless Alexander reminds the bishop that it

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<sup>22</sup> Wikipedia article on Fanny and Alexander ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fanny\\_&\\_Alexander](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fanny_&_Alexander))

was not a conversation but a monologue, adding that he has grown much wiser since then. “*You mean you lie much better?*” asks an outraged bishop, only to hear Alexander reply “*More or less*”. Through such moments, Alexander ceases to be a mere child, becoming instead a deeply engaging individual whose existential angst appears even more profound than that of the adults around him. In perfect sync with many other cinematic works of the time, *Fanny and Alexander* reaffirms the centrality of children’s worlds in the Swedish cultural sphere while representing an obstinate preteen who refuses to give in.

1983 saw the continuation of such portrayals with Lasse Hallström’s *My Life as a Dog*, which also marked an increasing move towards autobiographical stories and personalized childhood recollections. Set in the Sweden of 1959, the film tells the tale of a fatherless working-class twelve-year-old boy named Ingemar who has a predilection for getting into all kinds of trouble and driving his mother up the wall. Unknown to him, however, is his mother’s terminal illness, and when his mischief becomes too much for her to handle, he and his older brother are sent-off to live with relatives in two separate places. Ingemar ends up with uncle Gunnar and his wife in a small rural town in Småland, where he finds himself surrounded by a number of interesting people – an assertive tomboy his own age who hates the fact that she is growing up into a woman, a man who continually fixes the roof of his house, an old man living downstairs who gets Ingemar to read to him from a lingerie catalog, and the loving uncle who is obsessed with building a cabin in the backyard and repeatedly listening to the Swedish version of *I’ve Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconut* – among many others. Through the various experiences that Ingemar’s stay offers, he finds genuine love, friendship and understanding that had remained largely unknown to him previously. He learns to survive the vagaries of his life by naively comparing himself to those who are worse off – for instance the man who became famous after getting a new kidney in Boston but died nonetheless, or the man who took a shortcut onto the field during a track meet and was killed by a javelin, and especially Laika the Russian space dog who was rocketed to her death but had no say in the matter – and finds solace in the fact that he is doing much better than them. He is soon reunited with his family, but only to be sent to live with another uncle as his

mother's condition deteriorates rapidly and she is taken to the hospital. She meets her death soon, and an emotionally shattered Ingemar is sent back to Småland to live with uncle Gunnar, where much to his dismay, he also discovers that his beloved dog Sickan has been put to sleep with nobody willing to take care of him. A new series of events unfold, and the sensitive young Ingemar is forced to reflect on his mother's death, his life, the loss of his dog and a changing world. He no longer rationalizes his life by comparing himself to those less fortunate, and conjuring up pleasant memories, learns to reconcile himself to living a life that is sometimes tough.

Based on an autobiographical novel by Reidar Jönsson, *My Life as a Dog* went on to win two Oscars in addition to a number of national and international awards. The film is characterized by a continuous voice-over by the protagonist, presented as an expression of Ingemar's thoughts and reflections on his experiences not dissimilar to Reine's addresses to his voice-recorder in *Children's Island*. The same works towards providing comic relief from time to time, but also reflects a deep and serious engagement with a child's thought process while articulating his feelings succinctly. "*I should have told her everything while she still had strength*", Ingemar muses about his sick mother, and posing for photographs with his dog a little later, he adds, "*I think I love Sickan as much as I love mom*". The voice continues to return throughout, often as a meta-narrative, for instance when the screen shows Ingemar being sent away to his uncle's place for the first time. Presenting obvious parallels between his fate and that of the dog Laika, the voice states "*It really bothers me when I think of Laika. Terrible, sending a dog up in space without enough food. She had to do it for human progress, she didn't ask to go.*" Through such utterances, the journeys into the child's psyche continues, marking him not merely as an emotional being but also as a thinking and philosophizing individual.

While such portrayals continued in the years to come, things took an unexpected and grim turn towards the representation of ill-adjusted immigrant children with Agneta Fagerström-Olsson directorial debut *Seppan*, made in 1986, which received limited theatrical release in the nation. Following its lead, a number of Swedish films in the recent decades have featured immigrant children trying hard to adjust to the vagaries of



life in a land which doesn't quite want to call them its own. The integration of immigrants has been an acknowledged social problem for the Swedish State. Thus, these films represent an aspect of Swedish life that is important enough to even seep into children's cinema. *Seppan* deals with the childhood recollections of a group of immigrant children over a period of one year, emerging as the first in a series of films with young immigrants as protagonists. It locates itself in 1961, portraying the lives of a group of children whose parents moved to Sweden as World War II refugees from Finland, Russia and Austria, among others, living in a boarding-house for immigrants named Seppan. The overcrowded Seppan functions as a cultural cauldron, a busy transit point for families from all over Europe, with its dreary building and surroundings being the only places the immigrant children have daily access to. Growing up in such environs is not an easy task, for it is a place where passions run high and fuel romances, political disagreements and rivalries of all kinds. Witnessing such hostilities on a daily basis, the children toughen up and learn to deal with their surroundings better than their parents do, but not without adult differences trickling down into their interactions as well and affecting their relationships.

*Seppan* marked a temporary move away from the individual and back to the children's collectives of the previous generations. The film is not as much a story as it is a series of interrelated recollections, an atmospheric film generating a gloomy overcast mood rather than offering a well-structured narrative. There are sequences showcasing growing up, an unenthusiastic examination of the relationships of parents and children, a dalliance with a look at childhood friendship, some episodes dealing with the cruelty of children, and a handful of tragedies. Life for the children is never easy, for being ill-adjusted immigrants, most of them face hostilities on a daily basis – from their classmates, teachers, the parents of their friends and other people they encounter. While one of the teenage boys carries a jackknife in his pocket and tries to impress a girl by cutting his hand with it, another boy dies by drowning even as the first one disappears from the collective never to return. One girl's father gets arrested by the police, while another one meets her tragic end playing near an approaching train – her death presented

as an insignificant unsurprising event leading to little excitement. The other children merely touch her blood that has splattered the trees nearby, and continue with their lives.

The film has a few joyous moments as well, mostly resulting from some interesting camerawork, for instance a boy riding floating sheets of ice on a lake, a father and daughter having a mock boxing match, and two young girls admiring a swan in a lake. For the most part, however, it is dark, harsh and brooding, dealing with the mature themes of daily bickering, drunkards, crime, sexuality and death, all seen through the eyes of its child protagonists, especially two girls on the verge of adolescence, one immigrant, one local, while also portraying their extended group of friends who spend their time flying kites, playing along railroads, attending a school, having mud-fights and gazing at the stars. Their individuality makes an appearance only fleetingly, remaining largely subservient to the surroundings they inhabit.

While the immigrant child was to return prominently in many later films, 1993 saw the obstinate preteen reappear as the twelve-year-old protagonist of *The Slingshot* by Åke Sandgren. The film sites itself in the Stockholm of the 1930s, telling the tale of the boy Roland's encounters with life surrounded by his pontificating socialist father, immigrant Jewish mother and a bullying boxer brother. Imaginative and innovative, Roland is a self-absorbed kid who, similar to Ingemar from *My Life as a Dog*, also has a penchant for getting himself into trouble. The film follows him through a series of interconnected misadventures in which his tongue gets stuck to an iron pole, he injures his nose three times and gets his finger sewn into the sewing machine. Witty and satirical, the plot unfolds through his eyes as his socialist father symbolically embarrasses the feudalists by posing as the king for an artist, his mother almost gets arrested for selling condoms illegally and his brother faints in his most important boxing match without exchanging a single blow. Alongside, an enterprising Roland plays the inventor and much to the dismay of his parents, thinks of many ways to redefine condom usage – as water socks for the feet, as balloons with knobs and as slingshots – and then proceeds to make money selling his inventions. By being a socialist and a Jew together, and a stubborn one to add to that, he earns the wrath of his school teachers who miss no opportunities to flog

and punish him. In an extended sequence, Roland's teacher asks him to refrain from singing the prayers since he is a Jew, only to have him disrupt the prayer session by joining in and singing louder and faster than the rest. The angry teacher confronts the stubborn Roland with:

Your mother is a Russian Jewess and your father a revolutionary. I wonder why they send you to study here. But while you are in my class, I won't tolerate sabotage. You must learn to respect our customs!

An obstinate Roland replies "*I am a baptized Christian, and I am not circumcised. You want to see my dick, sir?*" As expected, he is sent off for yet another flogging session, but not without Roland getting back at his teachers towards the end by infecting them with lice placed on the toilet seat.

Amusing and light-hearted when mocking stereotypes in the beginning, *The Slingshot* gets more and more somber as the narrative progresses and caricatured portrayals give way to some serious twists and turns. Law enforcers raid a communist meeting and book Roland's parents for anti-State activities; his father struggles with an extremely painful sciatica needing regular morphine shots and his brother finds it hard to keep up to his father's expectations of becoming a boxing champion. Things get no better for Roland himself. He befriends a young prostitute who tragically commits suicide, and he then gets arrested for being an accomplice in theft. Unknown to him, the bicycles which he helps repair in his workshop have all been stolen by his friends, who when questioned, gang up against him to name him as the culprit, forcing him to sign a confession and get sent to a reformatory. In the end, a far more mature and sensible Roland learns to accept the consequences of his actions and adapt to his changed circumstances. Talking to his pet toad at the reformatory, he states "*That's right, Eriksson, that's right. We just set our body temperature according to the climate around us.*"

As evident, all these films were extremely detailed efforts that took childhood seriously and painted it bleak. However, not all preteen films were so, for instance *A Summer Tale* made by Ulf Malmros in 2000, which was set against the backdrop of the

1958 Soccer World Cup in Sweden. Despite dealing with the dark themes of death, orphaned children and acute loneliness, the film was far more light-hearted, a feel-good tale about two unrelated orphaned kids Mårten and Annika, around eleven or twelve, who are sent by the Child Welfare Board to spend a summer with the undertaker of a small sleepy Swedish town. Part somber-part amusing, the narrative unfolds through the eyes of Mårten, who constantly writes his thoughts into letters addressed to his dead mother, presented again as a voice over meta-narrative that seems to have caught the fancy of a number of filmmakers in this period. The two children are welcomed and taken home by the warm but insecure undertaker who, desperate to earn some respect, tries to educate and discipline them and teach them to live by the rules. He ends up appearing grumpy and authoritarian instead, and the kids take to hating him, finding many innovative ways of breaking the rules and end up falling in love with each other. However, sensing his loneliness, they try to help him (and themselves in the process) by successfully pairing him with the equally lonely school teacher whom he has a crush on. A series of upsets, confusions, heartbreaks and rivalries later, they all come together as a family and learn to accept each other, only to be threatened with separation by the authorities who think the undertaker is unfit to take care of the children. With the children dramatically threatening to jump off the roof of a building if forcefully separated, the undertaker steps in to fight for their custody and the situation finally finds the expected happy resolution after some amusing emotional showdowns.

Despite a simplistic plot and being far less intense than its predecessors, *A Summer Tale* is again a very detailed effort, with the plot full of subtleties and the lead characters carefully etched out to appear remarkably lifelike. One of the ways in which it leaves a significant mark is in portraying a strong girl child and affecting a classical reversal of the traditional gender roles; for between the two kids, it is Annika who is smarter, bolder and more stubborn when compared to the meek, introverted and contemplative Mårten. For the most part, Annika leads and Mårten follows, her initiatory ways counterbalancing his thoughtfulness, sensitivity and resultant inertia. In the preteen category, while one sees a similar effort with the character of the tomboy Saga in *My Life as a Dog*, the reversal remains incomplete there, for the film ends on a mild note with

Saga accepting her traditional gender role by dressing up in a girl's dress and playing second fiddle to Ingemar's character. Later, in *Ronja the Robber's Daughter*, the girl child is given autonomy but still left to be Birk's slightly softer female companion while he is shown to be even more independent. *A Summer Tale* doesn't feel it necessary to offer similar resolutions and keeps both children in equal focus throughout while imparting the girl child with a stronger temperament.

2002 offered us another such portrayal of an obstinate preteen in the form of *Elina: As if I Wasn't There*, a Swedish-Finnish coproduction directed by Klaus Härö which can also be seen peripherally as a representation of an immigrant child. The film is set in the 1950s and features Elina, a member of a minority group of poor Finnish speaking people living in the desolate Norrbotten in northern Sweden. Her father, whom she loved dearly, died of tuberculosis a few years ago, and the lonely Elina believes she can still talk to him out on the dangerous moors behind her house. Returning to school after her own recent bout of tuberculosis, Elina is obliged to repeat a school year, but is confronted by a hostile teacher – the headmistress Ms Holm – who refuses to pay attention to her sickness, her circumstances and difficult background and insists on grooming her to look and behave like a prim and proper Swedish girl overnight. Ms Holm's ideal vision of Elina includes her appearing less disheveled and wearing tidy clothes and shoes, which Elina's poor mother cannot afford; making her speak pure Swedish with no Finnish phrases, which Elina finds difficult to grasp at first; and insisting that Elina concede to her authority. Ms Holm proceeds to penalize Elina for failing to keep up, and belittles her father and her Finnish nationality for making her so stubborn. The shy and silent Elina, offended by so little attempt to understand her situation, rebels against the way Ms Holm treats her. Conjuring up her pride, she refuses to cooperate with Ms Holm and helps her Finnish classmates while speaking Finnish despite being warned against it. A battle of wits ensues, and the headmistress responds by refusing to let Elina eat in the school cafeteria and ignoring her presence until she apologizes and learns to behave the way she is expected to. Elina's mother, sister, and a new male teacher all try to mediate and diffuse the situation, but both the teacher and the pupil refuse to give in to each other's demands. With Elina's classmates being too scared

to challenge Ms Holm's authority and therefore treating Elina with indifference, the situation becomes unbearable for her and she constantly seeks solace in the company of her dead father on the moors. After a particularly nasty standoff in the classroom with Ms Holm, Elina rushes out to the moors again, only to be followed by Ms Holm who orders her to come back but in vain. Intending to teach her a lesson, the headmistress decides to act tough and leaves her all alone. Elina gets trapped this time around and almost loses her life on the moors before a caring male teacher and her mother come to her rescue. However, at school the next day, things are different, for none of the other children and teachers will be intimidated by Ms Holm anymore. They all side with Elina and boycott the lunch, forcing the teacher to eat humble pie and apologize to Elina publicly.

The film is marked by some excellent photography and very strong performances by both the actresses playing the child and the headmistress, helping it win a bagful of local and international film awards. In some ways, Elina's confrontations with Ms Holm are reminiscent of the stand-off between Alexander and his stepfather in *Fanny and Alexander*, although much milder and in a different context. Nonetheless, Elina still emerges as a character with an extremely strong streak of individuality. With a resolution in favor of the child despite the child's own obstinacy, the film makes a vehement case for the advocacy of child-rights and for stripping adult authoritarian figures of the unquestioned power society has allowed them to enjoy over children. In vesting the minority/immigrant child with the power to question such long standing practices, *Elina: As if I Wasn't There* marks a particularly remarkable cinematic effort.

The trend continued with *Zozo*, made by Josef Fares in 2005. The generally mild and feel-good film tells the tale of an eleven-year-old boy from Beirut who is forced to immigrate to Sweden after his house is attacked by a rocket in the Lebanese civil-war and his entire family is wiped-out. The narrative opens as Zozo and his family prepare for their first trip to meet the youngster's grandparents who are settled in Sweden. While Zozo is away doing some last minute shopping, his family meets with its death and the devastated youngster is left wondering what to do with his life. Support comes in the form of friends and his pet chick which can talk to him when nobody else is around. With

his ticket to Sweden still in his possession, Zozo decides to make the journey, but not before falling in love with a girl who is mistreated by her father. They decide to elope together, only to be caught by the authorities who are hand-in-glove with the girl's father. While the girl is forcefully restrained and handed back to her father, Zozo is sent off to Sweden to settle with his grandparents. But Sweden turns out to be less than the 'promised land', for Zozo is soon left facing constant bullying in the school because of being an immigrant. His only friend, the loser of the class, is also harassed because of being close to him. Faced with such hostilities on a daily basis, Zozo constantly hallucinates about the war in Lebanon following him to Sweden as well, and is haunted by visions of his school playground being bombarded and his schoolmates being killed. Gradually, with help from his warm and free-spirited grandfather, he comes to terms with his new life and overcomes his fears.

The film is a moderate effort when compared to the others in its category, coming from the Lebanese-Swedish Fares who had already made a name for himself as an immigrant comedy director with *The Best Man's Wedding* and *Kopps*. Nonetheless, it managed to attract more mainstream attention for the marginal figure of the immigrant preteen who seems all poised to characterize a number of Swedish films in the years to come. Through such portrayals, the thoughts and emotions of preteens found a loud onscreen representation, while their obstinacy got acknowledged alternatively either as reasonable individualism or as offensive behavior needing correction. Rather than choosing one of these positions over the other, most of these films refused to make simplistic choices by occupying both positions even within the same narrative and problematizing such either/or perspectives. They dealt with these children as individuals with a unique set of existential requirements, surrounded by a dissimilar set of circumstances, and therefore needing distinct ways of understanding and imaging them when placed in different contexts even within the same plot. In the process, they dealt as much with the children's individuality as they did with their numerous ways of growing-up, ways that are often described as 'coming-of-age' in international circles. In the Swedish context, as reflected through these portrayals of preteens, coming-of-age packed within it a very diverse set of meanings ranging from emotional stability and the

acceptance of adulthood as seen in *Children's Island*, *My Life as a Dog* and *Seppan*; reaffirmation of one's identity as in *Fanny and Alexander* and *Elina: As if I Wasn't There*; assuming social responsibility as with *The Slingshot*; or just as the experience of complicated kids struggling to find a place in the world as in *A Summer Tale* and *Zozo*. But along with such meanings, coming-of-age in the Swedish context has also been characterized by elaborate explorations of the budding sexuality of cinematic preteens, which form prominent subplots in numerous Swedish films and effectively mark the end of innocence for onscreen children. In addition to the previously mentioned asexual nudity, these explorations make a further departure from the dominant ways of imaging children and also bring to the fore a varied set of concerns requiring a closer examination.

#### **Preteen Sexuality in Swedish Children's Cinema and Film Censorship Laws**

In the 1959 Hollywood film *A Summer Place*, the anguished mother of a young girl complains to her husband: "No decent girl lets a boy kiss her the first night they meet. I suppose it's your Swedish blood!" While science is yet to firmly establish such a link between genes and morality, the dialogue does highlight a long standing stereotype about Sweden being a sexually liberal and promiscuous place, especially for the dominant west led by the United States. To a large extent, the stereotype is based on Swedish cinema, which became a major exporter of sexually explicit films to the United States starting in the 1960s. As pointed out by Tytti Soila, the trend was a result of small film companies trying hard to survive under the shadows of the three Swedish biggies – Svensk Filmindustri, Sandrews and Europa-Film – which held an unchallenged monopoly over the Swedish film business from the 1930s onwards (Soila 1998: 302). By the 1960s, there emerged a major turning point in Swedish filmmaking in terms of financing and production methods as well as cinematic styles. It was also a period of far reaching structural changes as reflected through the setting up of the Swedish Film Institute, which led to the emergence of a new generation of film directors and an exploration of new thematic fields, especially sexual. This was made possible by the increasingly liberal views of a society that was won over by the artistic claims of sexuality through the films of celebrated directors like Ingmar Bergman and Vilgot



Sjöman. Benefitting from their filmmaking, smaller film companies that had previously survived by making cheap comedies, industrial documentaries, newsreels and advertisements found a new commercially viable niche in sex films and exploited it to the hilt with such explicit and highly controversial productions as ...*As the Naked Wind from the Sea*, *The Language of Love* and many other lesser known productions.

While it cannot be claimed that the sexually explicit content meant for adults had a direct bearing upon the way children were imaged in Swedish cinema, the presence of such films does seem to suggest an overall socio-cultural milieu where explicit onscreen sexuality was less of a taboo subject for Sweden than for most other western nations. Viewed against the backdrop of such films, the stereotype of a sexually liberal Sweden comes as no surprise, and Swedish children's cinema also seems to be reinforcing the stereotype with its numerous portrayals of children in sexual situations. Swedish society does seem to have traditionally been far more liberal and permissive towards onscreen sexuality than most other parts of the world. A look at Swedish film censorship laws also validates the same, for despite being the first nation in the world to formally implement film censorship as early as 1911, and despite essentially formulating film censorship laws to shield and protect children from the harmful effects of cinema, the eyebrows of Swedish censor officials have routinely been raised not by sequences depicting nudity and sexuality or even religious and politically charged content, but rather by violent and brutalizing content of any kinds. Eric Lawrence, writing for the *Hollywood Quarterly* in 1951, states the following:

...it might be interesting to note that in Sweden censorship of films dealing with relations between the sexes is far more liberal than the American equivalent, provided no sensational or pornographic scenes are shown, while, on the contrary, the gangster films and westerns are much more harshly censored in Sweden than here [in United States]. For example, *The Outlaw* was banned in Sweden, not because of the manners and décolletage of the heroine (which was the reason for its being banned in many of our states), but because of the rude and tough elements in it, and what was called the misleading ethics of the film (267-268).

Assuming that censorship laws mirror the collective social attitudes of people at large, Swedish society seems to be quite tolerant of onscreen nudity and sexuality. The same seems to have trickled down into the cinematic portrayals of children, for many films have frank onscreen explorations of their budding sexuality even while scenes depicting onscreen violence are few and far apart. Instead of being indebted to the sexually explicit adult content, these non-pornographic and relatively more modest cinematic instances seem to be more in line with the realist tendencies of Swedish cinema which dictates that things be shown as they are. Paying allegiance to the artistic claims of sexuality, these depictions are neither glorified nor underplayed, appearing instead as matter-of-fact sequences showing childhood sexual explorations as one of the many aspects of growing up and extending the individualist tendencies of children's cinema to the domain of the child's sexuality as well. Some of the earlier films containing these sequences do not strictly belong to the conventionally understood category of children's cinema, but still assume importance for our purposes since they involve onscreen portrayals of children.

One of the earliest traces of sexuality in children's representations can be found in the 1960 version of *Pirates on Lake Malaren*, where it is offered as a small subplot. A brief and largely inconsequential sequence in the film depicts a group of boys secretly looking at girls taking a bath and one of the boys feeling very distraught by the episode. In 1963, the artistic claims of cinematic sexuality made a loud entry through Ingmar Bergman's *The Silence*, a critically acclaimed masterpiece dealing with the emotional isolation of two sisters travelling together with a young boy, the son of the younger sister. The complex narrative touches upon a number of issues, for instance the relationship between the sisters, acute loneliness, emotional angst and sexual hunger, to name a few. A major subplot of the film involves the relationship between the eleven-year-old boy and his extremely attractive mother who showers her son with a lot of affection. Perhaps Bergman never intended it to be so, but in sequences where the son is shown scrubbing the mother's back in the bathtub, rubbing his cheeks tenderly against hers and sleeping in the nude next to his naked mother, their love appears sexually charged and almost burning with oedipal desires. By 1966, the actress-turned-director Mai Zetterling had

confronted these desires head-on and made *Night Games*, another dark and risqué film dealing with angst and sexual repression that appears to be deeply influenced by Bergman's *The Silence* both thematically and stylistically. The film features a middle-aged man named Jan as protagonist, who is fighting impotence and anguished childhood memories in a decadent Swedish castle. A prominent subplot in the film deals with Jan's recollections of his almost incestuous relationship with his mother as a twelve-year-old boy, interestingly played by the same actor as the young boy in *The Silence*. An extended sequence in the film shows the naked boy being put to bed by his mother who repeatedly kisses him all over, rubs against him, tucks him in affectionately and starts reading to him; only to discover the boy masturbating under the sheets and catching him in the act. Such sequences challenged the conventions of children's representations with regard to sexuality both locally as well as internationally.

From these artistically oriented early portrayals, the theme of child sexuality made a gradual transition into mainstream films over the next few years. A definitive entry of sexuality into preteen cinema was made with *Children's Island* in 1980. As mentioned previously, the film portrays the adventures of an eleven-year-old-boy named Reine who finds the adult world selfish and stupid, and therefore obsesses over his few remaining days as a child and tries hard to live them to the hilt. The film is replete with nudity and many frank sexual references, for instance the boy exclaiming "*I'll never get a boner, and I'll never fuck I promise*", a statement made to his beloved voice-recorder and followed by a daily inspection of his genitals to make sure that there is no pubic hair sprouting-up. As the narrative unfolds, nature does win over his reluctance to grow up, and a distraught Reine attains puberty, gets kissed, sees naked women, fantasizes about them, experiences his first erection, and learns to explore and live with his sexuality.

Lasse Hallström's *My Life as a Dog*, made in 1985, took the theme a step further and gave it a comic turn. It portrayed the young boy Ingemar getting into trouble when his penis gets stuck in the mouth of a bottle; for his older brother uses him as a live model to demonstrate to his friends how babies are made! Further on in the film, his sexual curiosity gets him into trouble again, for he crashes through a glass roof while attempting

to catch a sneak-peek at a woman posing naked for an artist. However, the place where *My Life as a Dog* really marks an important milestone is in shifting the focus from the sexuality of young boys to that of young girls. Very early in the film, Ingemar's understanding girlfriend Little Flog asks him to join her under a small railway bridge where partially undressed, she is eagerly waiting for him to consummate their 'marriage' that has taken place a little while ago. A reluctant Ingemar finally complies, and still dressed, momentarily rests himself atop her; only to be caught by the girl's father almost immediately and threatened with dire consequences as he runs away hurriedly. Later, the film shows Ingemar's other love interest, the tomboyish Saga, dread puberty and struggle hard to hide her growing breasts. With help from Ingemar, she tries to cover them up with bandages, but finally realizes that they cannot be hidden anymore. She therefore attempts to get him interested in them, while also insisting that he expose himself to her. A diffident Ingemar chooses to run away instead. In such moments, despite the nudity, the children's budding sexuality appears cute and non-serious, offering comic relief in the complex and multi-layered plot.

However, by the following year, things took a more serious turn with *Seppan* in which young girls are shown awaiting puberty, looking at their parent's porn collection, checking the color of their private parts and enjoying the sight of a bull mating with a cow, and not in a light vein. An important and extremely tender sequence in the film shows one of the girls experiencing her first period, and feeling embarrassed, taking off her underwear and washing it in a nearby lake. From a distance, her father sees her in the act, and walks up to her. Gently taking her underwear from her, he puts it into his pocket, kisses his little girl, picks her up with his hands around her hips and comfortingly carries her away as he has always done. In *The Slingshot* in 1993, the young Roland is shown paying a prostitute to look at her genitals, only to end up forging friendly emotional ties with her and feeling extremely distraught by her suicide a little while later. Over the years, a number of such explorations have continued to characterize the portrayal of children in Swedish cinema. The sensitivity with which these sequences handle the sexual maturation of children is unparalleled in most other cinemas of the world.

However, as evident, their occurrence in films involving preteens appears as a major departure from the norms of imaging childhood as dictated by the dominant west.

For long, the dominant western world has by and large chosen to keep sexuality mutually exclusive from young children and preteens, treating it as a corrupting force of the adult world that threatens to rob children of their innocence. Even while the motif of sexual maturation of children has been a common theme in many coming-of-age films internationally, it has usually been depicted in portrayals of older teenagers rather than young children and preteens, and usually involves little or no child nudity unlike the abovementioned examples. As discussed previously, over the last few decades, an increasing awareness of pedophilia and child sexual abuse in the western world has resulted in the images of children becoming sites onto which the society's collective anxiety about the safety of real children has been displaced and acted out. Children's images have therefore been more regulated than ever before, even being routinely implicated in crimes committed against youngsters while making the indexicality of children's images account for much more than their real worth at times. Even academic pursuits in the area of child sexuality have been looked at with increasing suspicion. For instance, despite the centrality of child sexuality in Freudian theories, explorations into this aspect of his ideas have largely been met with collective resistance. Alfred Kinsey and his fascinating books on human sexual behavior have been questioned for involving children in some of their findings (Kinsey 1948 and 1953), while Rind, Tromovitch and Bauserman have been attacked for attempting to show that consensual sexual activity with children is not necessarily abusive (Rind et al. 1998).

In such a charged contemporary socio-cultural milieu in the dominant west where child sexuality has become a taboo subject of the highest order, the presence of overt nudity and sexuality in Swedish cinematic images involving children invariably brings to the fore notions of morality, which in turn are greatly dependent on the collective sensibilities of individual societies. As reflected through the abovementioned cinematic instances, there is a marked difference between the collective sensibilities of Sweden and other western nations in this regard, which is also supported through various studies on

sexuality that have been conducted in the recent past. For instance, in Juliette and Roland Goldman's comparative study of children's sexual thinking between Australia, North America, Britain and Sweden, the duo summarize their findings on Clothes and Nakedness by stating that "*The North American children appear to be most adamant about the wearing of clothes while the Swedish children the least, both interestingly living in very cold winter climates.*" (Goldman 1982: 324-340). In the process, the duo suggest that nakedness and sexuality are not necessarily seen as belonging together by the Swedish children and the generally accepted belief that clothing habits are dependent only on the climate is largely a myth. Reflecting on the sexual experiences of the Swedish young, the same study warns against misconceptions concerning the sexual habits of young people, particularly caused by mass media programs selecting and interviewing promiscuous young people and presenting them as typical, and makes a strong case for Swedish children being more careful and sensible in their sexual habits than their counterparts in many other nations (34). In particular, the study states that:

Considerable time lags appear in most of the items which compose children's sexual thinking [in the four nations that were studied], revealing [a] low level [of] thinking and problem solving. These time lags are often so long that they could be described as representing a retardation in children's sexual thinking, except among Swedish children (391).

It further adds that:

The evidence from the Swedish sample indicates that the retardation observed in the English speaking children of this study may be due to cultural and educational differences and that children are capable of understanding quite complex biological concepts much earlier than was at first thought (ibid.)

If such studies and cinematic images of Swedish children are any evidence of the ways in which Swedish society understands childhood and sexuality, it appears that Sweden considers its children to be less threatened by their sexuality and its onscreen portrayals than the dominant western nations, for Swedish society seems to understand its children as being more mature, responsible and level headed than their peers and capable of handling sexual themes at a much younger age than their counterparts from the dominant west. The film classification system followed by Sweden fixes the age of fifteen as the maximum limit, beyond which no cinematic content is censored as fifteen-

year-olds are seen as being mature enough to handle any and all cinematic content without censorship<sup>23</sup>. Paying attention to the context in which they appear, most of the abovementioned films containing depictions of preteen sexuality are classified by the Swedish Censor Board as being suitable for viewing by eleven-year-olds, while the same films are rated as NC17 and R when released in the United States<sup>24</sup>. Despite appearing realistic, matter-of-fact, acceptable and inoffensive to the eyes of the Swedish public, these same films get rated almost equivalent to pornography in the United States, highlighting a major difference in social attitudes between the two nations while marking Sweden as one of the last places in the western world whose sensibilities are yet to be taken over completely by the relatively recent paranoia over pedophilia that insists on treating child sexuality as a disease and disinfecting its representations.

Having said so, Sweden has obviously not remained impervious to the cultural impulses from the dominant west, and the meanings ascribed to images of children in the nation have undergone major transformations over the last few decades especially under influence from the United States. Most of the abovementioned cinematic sequences belong to the 1970s and 1980s, and much has changed in the Swedish cultural sphere ever since, especially the ways in which children have been imaged. A particularly interesting and illustrative case in point is found in an artwork titled *Pippi Examples* made in 2001 by Palle Torsson, a Stockholm based artist. The 25 minute long film consisted of short sequences in slow motion from various Pippi Longstocking films and promotional stills made three decades ago. The original images contained no nudity or overt sexual connotations, but reframed under the artist's gaze, they were edited together as an out-of-context montage of bare legs and briefly flashed knickers. This gave the previously innocuous Pippi images a dangerous sexual turn, which, the artist argued, was intended to demonstrate "*how the common gaze had been sexualized since 1970*"<sup>25</sup>. Soon after, the Swedish magazine BON<sup>26</sup> published an interview with the artist, in which his

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<sup>23</sup> As mentioned on the website of the Swedish Censor Board and in various documents available with the Board. (<http://statensbiografbyra.se>)

<sup>24</sup> Established from the DVDs of the discussed films and their censor ratings as given on movie databases

<sup>25</sup> As described on a website for which the artist contributes and works since 2005

([www.artliberated.com](http://www.artliberated.com))

<sup>26</sup> BON, Nr 2, 2002.

artwork was discussed alongside still images from it. This gave the little known artwork much publicity and increased its visibility, eliciting strong negative responses from many factions of society and placing it at the centre of a raging public debate that was waged through newspapers and other mass media. Pippi's creator Astrid Lindgren was reportedly "*greatly anguished*", while Inger Nilsson, who played Pippi in numerous films, angrily attacked it as a "*vitriolic slur on director Hellbom and her own onscreen role*".<sup>27</sup> Torsson's supporters, though greatly outnumbered, argued for his right to freedom of expression.

The terms of the debate obviously centered on the moral implications of such an artwork on society. Strong demands were made by various social groups for preventing the exhibition of the artwork. The artwork could not be censored directly since that would have violated the artist's constitutional rights. The Swedish Film Institute decided to step in and act as a moral guardian of society announcing that it would stop the film's circulation via the court of law.<sup>28</sup> A legal solution was found in the form of copyright laws, and a case built against the artist on the grounds that he had used copyrighted images to produce his artwork without obtaining the necessary clearances. The film was declared illegal. The artist attempted to pursue the case initially, but discontinued his efforts on discovering that legal costs for fighting the case would amount to more than 6 million Swedish Crowns. He chose an out-of-court settlement instead, and the agreement between the two parties stipulated that all copies of *Pippi Examples* be destroyed.<sup>29</sup> He complied reluctantly, but not without declaring on his website that the project was far from being over and he would make available a book on the subject very soon.<sup>30</sup> Seven years have passed ever since, but not surprisingly, the book is yet to be published.

Torsson's artwork and the ensuing public outrage speak a lot about the area under discussion. With her troublemaking skills, tongue-in-cheek comments and crass dress-

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<sup>27</sup> As reported in many write-ups on the subject, a specific instance of which may be found in Nigel J. Burrell's *Pippi Longstocking, Superstar!!!* (<http://www.kiddiematinee.com/pippi.html>)

<sup>28</sup> As claimed by the artist in his version of the account, available on multiple websites including the one mentioned above. A corresponding version by the SFI, however, was nowhere to be found in the English media.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> As mentioned on the artists' own website (<http://www.palletorsson.com/pippi.php>)



sense, Pippi was no conventional moralizing icon. But since she was an iconic child character, she was expected to be innocent by implication. Even while she could be mischievous, she was not allowed to be interpreted as ‘naughty’ and sexualized. With an increasing awareness of pedophilia and child sexual abuse, such a scenario seems logical, while the reaction received by Pippi Examples appears almost obvious in the contemporary milieu. However, it becomes less so when we place the Pippi Examples imbroglio against the backdrop of the Swedish cultural sphere which has conventionally been very tolerant of children’s sexuality and its representations in various media. The point of aberration in this case was not as much about entering the forbidden fortress of children’s sexuality as it was about deliberately perverting asexual children’s images with adult sexuality. Thus, it had less to do with the content and more with the context – a decontextualizing and recontextualizing affected by reframing the images and seemingly misrepresenting them in the process. However, in all likelihood, the same artwork would have failed to elicit similar responses a few decades ago, for reactions to it in Sweden would have been marked by indifference rather than indignation. If anything, the collective censoring of Torsson’s artwork by society actually lends credibility to his claims and proves that the common gaze in Sweden has indeed been progressively sexualized over the last few decades. The same is visible in Swedish children’s cinema as well, which has increasingly exhibited more and more caution while representing children in sexual situations. With the criminalizing of child pornography in early 1990s, the more recent portrayals of children have chosen to exercise responsible caution, and while depictions of child sexuality have continued, they have gradually made a move towards being far more suggestive and far less explicit while being featured on teenagers rather than preteens.

To delineate my position on the subject, I am neither advocating onscreen child sexual activity nor condemning it, seeing it instead as one of the many ‘normal’ ways of representing the growing-up of children which has increasingly earned the status of a taboo subject in our cinematic imaginations. The threat offered by child sexual abusers in the real world is very palpable indeed, but the role played by such images of children in encouraging them has not been established empirically. Onscreen child sexual activity

may perhaps be fodder for child sex abusers, but only as much as rape sequences in cinema are fodder for sexual offenders of adult victims. Despite appearing as an obvious reaction to the societal crisis of child sexual abuse, taking recourse to singling out representations of child sexuality as a forbidden fortress does not appear to be the best possible approach to deal with it. The abovementioned representation of children's sexuality have assumed unusual properties not in the context in which they were originally produced but in the charged socio-cultural milieu of the contemporary west where these cinematic instances have become exotic by becoming rare and forbidden. By treating the subject of child sexuality with an overdose of skepticism, we are collectively engaging in making it even more forbidden, and therefore more tempting to say the least. A more mature approach may be to follow the Swedish example and not let our sensibilities be taken over by an unjust fear of the sexual child. Extending the sentiments of the pioneer of the Swedish nudist movement, Johan Almkvist, I suggest that as and when required, and depending on the context, a continued portrayal of such nudity and child sexual activity onscreen may actually work towards creating a coming generation of level headed, responsible, naturally and moderately sexualized men and women, whose interaction in mixed groups will be imbued with comradeship and not eroticism. While one can only hope that such a generation will indeed emerge with time, reflections of their idealized images can be found in a few Swedish cinematic examples. These films represent them as level headed and moderately sexualized individuals, portraying them as romancing teenagers whose idealized love appears almost ethereal onscreen. But these rare examples were to appear lost amongst the scattered and highly irregular terrain of teenage representations in Swedish children's cinema.

## CHAPTER 4: TEENAGE AS THE AGE OF REBELS & DELINQUENTS, RESPONSIBLE LOVERS AND SEXUAL BEINGS

The teenager in Swedish cinema is by and large a fragmented figure, for s/he is imaged in varied ways that appear much more scattered and less consistent as compared to the cinematic portrayals of young children and preteens. On the one hand, the cinematic images of teenagers are far more diverse than their younger counterparts, while on the other, this diversity again produces a set of oft-repeated onscreen images that tend to appear quite routine, shallow and stereotypical. Despite being represented in thematically interesting ways as vulnerable rebels & juvenile delinquents, responsible lovers and sexual beings (with numerous overlaps), the Swedish cinematic teenager is qualitatively no match for the previously discussed young children and preteens whose portrayals are far more carefully etched out and detailed. The thematic similarities that bind the representations of teenagers do not necessarily correspond to specific time periods. Instead, most similarly themed portrayals are separated by huge time gaps between them, reappearing every few years in ways that have little resonance with other contemporaneous films of their time. Nonetheless, as expected from a nation so invested in the cinematic child, Swedish cinema has over the years produced some remarkable examples of cinematic teenagers that have redefined and stretched the boundaries of onscreen teenage portrayals worldwide. But these meticulously crafted portrayals were to arrive much later than expected, for early children's cinema largely chose to focus its energies on young children and preteens while limiting teenagers to dispersed cinematic representations that were few and far apart. The ball was set rolling by imaging teenagers as vulnerable rebels, who were to surface much later as juvenile delinquents.

### **Vulnerable Rebels and Juvenile Delinquents**

The earliest cinematic teenagers in Swedish cinema were mischievous pranksters and adolescent detectives who, as discussed previously, were ideologically the precursors of innocent Bullerby children. But in addition to such films with innocent teenagers, as early as 1944, Alf Sjöberg made *Frenzy*, a high-tension drama that had at its core a teenage love story between a high-school senior Jan-Erik and a young store attendant

Berta. Scripted by Ingmar Bergman, the film tells the tale of Jan-Erik's confrontations with his Latin teacher Caligula, a much feared sadist who misses no opportunities to humiliate and torment his students with Jan-Erik his favorite victim. Things are no better at home for the young man with an unsympathetic authoritarian father who is extremely displeased with the complaints of misconduct from his son's schoolteachers. As the narrative unfolds, Berta informs the increasingly rebellious Jan-Erik of a mysterious man who has been harassing her for weeks by making threatening phone calls to her, shadowing her, disturbing her belongings and indulging in a series of activities that leave behind telltale signs of his presence in her life. With time, the harassment becomes so acute that Berta becomes a nervous wreck and takes to alcohol abuse to relieve herself of the psychological trauma. Jan-Erik has little choice but to get involved, only to discover that the tormentor is none other than Caligula himself, who is by now aware of the blossoming romance between the two and threatens Jan-Erik with dire consequences if he chooses to interfere. What follows is a series of events that result in Berta getting so frightened that in a state of shock, she drinks herself to death on being confronted by Caligula. The young and vulnerable Jan-Erik proves to be no match for the conniving Caligula, for despite being found onsite by Jan-Erik, Caligula manages to go scot free by feigning a weak heart even as the cause of Berta's death is medically established as excessive drinking. However, Caligula gets Jan-Erik expelled from the school by framing him for cheating in examinations and alleging that he lied when accusing Caligula of being responsible for the death of a girl of ill-repute. Towards the end, a shattered Jan-Erik gradually picks up the dispersed threads of his life and with help from another caring teacher, learns to think of a new life away from the shadows of his sadist tormentor.

As evident, *Frenzy* was an extremely dark and adult oriented film that deserves mention here only for choosing to portray the lives of school going kids, albeit played by slightly older actors. Appearing at a time when children's cinema was yet to develop as a separate category, it defined teenagers as rebellious but vulnerable young adults. The trend continued intermittently, and similar but more promising images of teenagers appeared in the form of Eric and Clarence through *The Last Ring*, made in 1955 by Gunnar Skoglund, where the high school friends are shown struggling to negotiate with

class differences and markedly different expectations from life. By 1961, Arne Sucksdorff had brought together his interests in nature, animals and children to make *The Boy in the Tree*, the portrait of a vulnerable sixteen-year-old Gote who is torn between his love for animals and his desire to rebel. At odds with his family, he doesn't seem to know his own mind too well either. Feeling generally discontented with life, he joins hands with two mean-spirited game poachers despite his deep love for animals and nature. What follows is this contradiction between his feelings and his need to rebel reaching a climax when a forest ranger starts to track down the young men in ever-tightening circles. Framed around an idea with great potential, the film ends up becoming a routine melodrama that does not quite live up to its central concept. Nonetheless, it marks one of the first instances when a teenager is shown having a serious brush with the law.

Over the next decade, the onscreen teenagers' vulnerability gave way to organized rebellion while their brush with the law took the form of dangerous criminal activity. This surfaced in portrayals that featured them as groups of misunderstood individuals in urban settings who increasingly took to crime and substance abuse while being extremely dissatisfied with their surroundings. The same can be seen in Jan Halldoff's *The Stone Face*, a little-known and largely-forgotten film made in 1973 that exhibits a number of elements that were to characterize the portrayals of teenagers in subsequent years. The film tells the tale of a cynical middle-aged man who moves to a suburb in Stockholm after losing his son to a traffic accident and his wife to a mental illness. On being confronted by a tough gang of local teenagers, he decides to befriend them instead, and for the rest of the narrative, engages their services to help him murder a number of bureaucrats and ministers whose decisions have led to the creation of difficult living conditions in his suburb. The opening sequence of the film shows the gang of teenagers torment passengers outside a metro station, rough-up a few passer-bys, beat-up a drunkard and mug a woman as she tries to get into an elevator in an apartment building; thereby setting the pulse for the rest of the narrative. As the plot unfolds, their actions get more and more reckless, including forcefully stripping one of their girlfriends and assisting their patron in murdering the bureaucrats. A failed robbery attempt, new gang members and internal differences later, the gang splits despite their patron's attempts at

reasoning with them and keeping them together. The film ends on a gloomy and pessimistic note with the patron angering them enough to become their next victim, signifying no end to the mayhem caused by urbanization and seemingly faulty policymaking that has 'created' such delinquents.

As evident, the film tries to link urbanization with crime and ghettoization and images teenagers as its perpetrators as well as victims, portraying them as insensitive and remorseless juvenile delinquents who are disillusioned with the world they inhabit. Appearing stereotypical and shallow, the children are presented merely as a group of angry youngsters who act tough, smoke and drink, torment people, have differences with their families, get into fights and have run-ins with the law. While ambitiously attempting to be a trenchant critique of the political project of building suburbs designed only for workers to sleep in, the film falls flat on all fronts from production values to script and performances.

Such disappointing portrayals continued through a number of films in the following years, and also in the following decade. For instance, *G*, made by Staffan Hildebrand in 1983, repeated a few of the elements from its predecessors while packaging them in a relatively more pleasing manner. The film locates itself in a nightclub named *G*, which becomes the meeting point for three friends who have just left the compulsory school. The plot unfolds as all three, who now consider themselves to be grown-up and mature at the age of sixteen, set-off to experience the world in their own different ways. As the narrative progresses, one of them becomes a drug addict, another tries his luck with a rock band and the third one works towards winning the girl of his dreams. While the first one has a brush with the law, the second one gets disillusioned with his rich but shallow life as a rock star and the third one struggles to make inroads into the adult world. Towards the end, all three are saner after their run-ins with the wild side of life. While the drug addict agrees to assist the police in catching drug peddlers, the rock band member gives up the band and the third guy gets his girl. They all reunite against the backdrop of *G* to find companionship with each other.

Despite its moralizing message, the film was quite popular with teenage audiences, not in the least because of a fairly good musical soundtrack. While its representation of teenagers was far less pessimistic and more fleshed-out than its predecessors, it was nonetheless banal and clichéd, indicating a rapid decline in the quality of their portrayals during this period. If anything, onscreen teenagers only got worse through the 1990s with such films as *The Seekers*, made in 1993 by Daniel Fridell and Peter Carriers, which tells the story of a troubled boy in his late teens named Jocke who keeps getting into fights and slips further and further into a life of crime before meeting with a tragic end. Over the next few years, the trend continued with film after film showcasing teenagers as sex and drug addicts, as criminals and as angry and misunderstood young people. Simultaneously, racism made an entry in such portrayals, albeit in a n unremarkable manner, and a number of films superficially scratched its surface to hastily put together easily forgettable narratives. While *Cry* by Daniel Fridell in 1995 flirted with racism through an interracial teenage romance and immigrants fighting skinheads against the backdrop of Stockholm, *Night Bus 807* by David Flamholz in 1997 played with it, depicting teenagers from various races getting in and out of trouble on a night bus travelling through the city. Appearing at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Bullerby children, these violent teenagers were everything which their predecessors of the previous generation were not – old and mature instead of young and the innocent, conflict ridden instead of conflict free, and inhabiting cruel cities rather than idyllic countryside. Portrayed as shallow and stereotypical juvenile delinquents who are continually at odds with their surroundings, these teenagers were a far cry from the meticulously crafted and highly individualized portrayals of preteens in such films as *My Life as a Dog* and *The Slingshot*.

However, 2003 saw the making of *Evil* by Mikael Håfström, arriving on the scene as a much needed breath of fresh air in this terrain of late-teen portrayals that reeked of mediocrity for the most part. Based on a bestselling autobiographical novel by the journalist Jan Guillou, this brutal tale of primal aggression tells the tale of a troubled teenager Eric Ponti who learns to deal with an abusive authoritarian step-father by giving vent to his repressed anger through bloody fistfights in school. After yet another serious

confrontation between the duo, Eric responds by beating to pulp a co-student and being threatened with expulsion from the school barely a year before he is to graduate. Sensing his troubled existence, his caring mother sends him off to a boarding school. Only, there, he confronts abuse and authoritarianism again in the form of senior students; bullies who rule over the younger ones with terror and torture, a system secretly sanctioned by the teachers of the school. Trying hard to fight his violent tendencies, the non-conformist Eric responds by suffering their daily 'punishments' silently while refusing to yield to their bullying, in the process inviting serious wrath from his tormentors. Things get really out of hand when his love interest, a member of the kitchen staff, is targeted instead of him, and his roommate cum best buddy gets tortured and humiliated because of Eric's stubbornness. Unable to deal with the situation, both the girl and the buddy are forced to leave the school. Having had enough, Eric goes on the offensive and systematically targets his tormentors and the school management who are hand-in-glove with them. With a combination of his vicious physical strength and cunning brains, he emerges victorious in the end while in the process also gaining enough courage to turn the tables on his stepfather and make him eat a piece of his own cake.

Detailed and intricate, *Evil* was one of the few impressive portrayals of late-teens in the recent past, allowing it to sweep the local awards that year. In particular, what set the film apart from its predecessors was its technical finesse and the successful abstraction of the concept of evil that makes teenagers merely act as agents of evil, albeit agents with a lot of individual agency. Strong and powerful, the film and its protagonists emerge as stark contrasts to their mediocre predecessors despite being thematically linked to them.

Extending such occasionally impressive attempts to the portrayals of younger teenagers was Reza Parsa's directorial debut *Before the Storm*, a powerful film made in 2000 that wove together a diverse set of themes into a single narrative – bullying, teenage love, delinquency, the State's exploitative practices, ethnicity and terrorism – while attempting to negotiate with some serious moral and ethical questions in the process. Despite featuring a number of protagonists, the film successfully brought into focus the



mindscape of a young delinquent Leo, a shy and sensitive fourteen-year-old boy who gets harassed and humiliated by the school bullies on a daily basis. Pushed to the hilt, he strikes back by shooting one of his tormentors, and is confronted with the question of turning himself in to the police or continuing to lie to save his skin. On the other hand is Ali, the immigrant father of the girl Leo has a crush on, who unknown to his family has a dark past as an extremely skilled but reluctant mercenary in his native Arab country. Having deserted his organization and fled to Sweden, he has started life afresh, but is survived by his wife and son back home whom he has abandoned. As the narrative unfolds, Ali is approached by a messenger from his long forgotten organization who reminds him of his past and asks him to take up one last assignment – assassinate a corrupt Swedish State official – or get his families killed. While both Leo and Ali are struggling with their moral dilemmas, their paths intersect and they end up drawing strength and support from each other. The film ends with Leo's tormentor surviving his attack, Leo turning himself in and being sent to a reform school; while Ali sabotages his assassination attack, spares the minister's life and tricks the organization into believing that he has completed his job. Only, just after the release of his Arab family, rockets attack their village and they get killed nonetheless, but his Swedish family is safe as the messenger also dies in a car chase in Sweden.

Dark and tragic, the film is a remarkably subtle attempt with very strong performances by the lead characters, appearing even more so when seen in the light of its qualitatively poor predecessors. While some of the themes it handles seem clichéd, the manner in which it represents them compensates for the lack of freshness in ideas. In particular, Leo's struggles against his bullying tormentors, his thirst for revenge and the ensuing moral dilemma are dealt-with with extreme sensitivity. In one particular sequence, Leo's mother, a cop whose gun he used, confronts her son in the car with the discovery of his deeds and asks him what course of action to take. A calm and remorseless Leo answers by asking her to skip soccer that day, forcing her to lose her composure and start beating him recklessly before trying to cuddle and comfort him. While both weep in each other's arms, his ignorant father and kid brother join them, and a confused Leo responds to the situation by running away and telling his mother to "go to

hell” even as she apologizes for hitting him. Capturing teenage indecisiveness and stubbornness beautifully, such moments are many in the film, painting Leo as a troubled delinquent who is trying hard to fit in. Leo’s love for Ali’s daughter Sara is also addressed with similar subtlety, offering us a harsh look at unrequited teenage love while showing Sara take an unconventional decision. While Leo tries his best to impress her and make her feel cared for, she responds to his advances with elusive indifference and in a surprising move, chooses his tormentor over him. Such complex subplots of love were to characterize a few exceptional teenage portrayals over the years, but in addition to them, as mentioned previously, some Swedish cinematic examples chose to portray teenagers as mature and responsible lovers which tended to challenge their conventional portrayals in a major way. While teenage love *per se* has been a recurring motif in a number of Swedish films, it is the emphasis on idealized love and mutual admiration that set these cinematic examples apart from the others.

### **Responsible lovers**

The universal language of love has been a treasured ideal worldwide and its on-screen representations need no introduction. After initially surfacing in such films as *Frenzy* featuring older teenagers and recurring in a number of mediocre films like *G* and *Cry*, love made a prominent but gentle reappearance through *A Swedish Love Story*, made in 1970 by Roy Andersson. Perhaps one of the most poignant adolescent romances to have ever graced the silver-screen, the film explores the emotional worlds of two almost-fourteen-year-olds in love. The boy and girl from different class-backgrounds meet, hesitantly fall in love, experience a few ups and downs, and reaffirm their love for each other. Through a series of small but interconnected events, the film journeys far into the mindscapes of the protagonists to convey their anxious love and longing. The narrative is multi-layered and meticulously detailed, as realistic as it is mystical, offering a part-bleak part-optimistic view of Swedish society. In particular, it represents the crisis of middle-class existence in a seemingly equal welfare society where class manifests itself as a rural-urban divide and the prestige associated with one’s job.

*The Swedish Love Story* has a well-defined narrative structure, but the plot remains slightly abstract and open-ended. It assumes surreal characteristics towards the end, but only to break the illusion with real-worldly reasoning. Far from the idyllic settings found in the films from the preceding decades, the film locates the boy and the girl in real socio-cultural set-ups encountering daily lived experiences in contemporary Sweden. Using the country-city binary as one of its plot elements, it chooses to portray both, but focuses on the city as the backdrop in front of which to unravel the young romance. The countryside, even while being momentarily idyllic, turns into a mysterious playfield for the celebration of eerie darkness and apparent death. The characters of the teenage protagonists are etched out meticulously, dismissing stereotypical portrayals of youngsters and deliberately sweeping away many previously held conventions governing their representations. Similar to *Children's Island*, the adults are imaged through the eyes of the children and treated as caricatures reversing the traditional stereotyping. But over and above such tendencies, the area in which the film marks a significant milestone is in its representation of idealized love between responsible teenagers.

The idea of 'pure love', characterized by mutual admiration, respect and a sense of responsibility, has generally been seen as a promise of adult life in our cinematic worlds. When representing love between teenagers, our cinematic imaginations usually follow one of the two dominant strands –either wipe out all traces of sexuality from their relationship making it correspond to the idea of 'puppy love', or else make the teenagers so overtly sexualized that sexuality becomes the fundamental force guiding their interactions with the opposite sex. Additionally, especially in the latter schema, their love does not usually get the approval of the adults around them, who in most cases are relegated to the background as annoying peripheral figures. For instance, Hollywood's dominant way of understanding teenage love is through jumping hormones and sexual curiosity. Portrayals of responsible young adults capable of genuine love and sensible decision making are so few and far apart in the United States that American filmmakers seem to believe that adolescents are not capable of level-headed thinking. Romances featuring thirteen or fourteen-year-olds are almost nonexistent in the Hollywood schema unless they are sugar coated as asexual puppy love, for instance the cute romantic

comedy *Casper* or all of the *Free Willy* films where the romance gets to be a subplot. Even in the portrayals of older teenagers, adolescent sexuality is clearly regarded as threatening; not to mention that it is almost always featured with the teenagers played by much older actors. As early as 1930, in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, teenage sexual activity was associated with death. In film after film, Hollywood reminded us that teenage sexuality was a negative activity to be punished with pregnancy and social stigma. With *Splendor in the Grass* in 1961, Elia Kazan made it explicitly clear that if a boy really loved a girl, he cannot expect to have sex with her. Following in its footsteps, over the years, Hollywood has chosen to create cinematic worlds in which there emerged a clear polarity between pure love and sexual love in the portrayals of teenagers. If at all things have changed since the 1970s, they have surely not moved towards more mature representations. Instead, repressed teenage sexuality has exploded onto the American screen as a series of mindless 'teenpics' that work through placing exaggerated sexuality in comedy situations. One only needs to be reminded of the stereotypical teenagers in *Little Darlings*, *The Last American Virgin* and *American Pie*, insecure no-brainers whose only interest in the opposite-sex is libidinal. Dying to lose their virginity, they try hard to impress each other and make elaborate plans about how they would do 'it'. If not in the form of sex-comedies, the sexual angst is displaced onto horror and supernatural films through teenage werewolves and vampires instead. One might argue that such examples are formulaic entertainment flicks not meant to be socially relevant; but things don't necessarily get any better with the offbeat films. Even in such independent productions as Larry Clark's critically acclaimed *Kids*, teenage sexual activity is depicted in a negative light and punished with AIDS, and the trend doesn't end with it but continues to date.

*The Swedish Love Story*, on the other hand, emerges as a far more sophisticated portrayal of teenage romance, steering clear of any extremes and treading a mature middle ground that is remarkable even in the Swedish cinematic milieu. Featuring level-headed and responsible youngsters, the film represents them as unique individuals who can think and feel, and do not necessarily behave like stereotypical teenagers. Their love is treated by the narrative as almost ethereal, magical, for the most part appearing to contrast with the absurdities of the adult world surrounding them – fighting parents, an

eternally lonely grandparent, a melancholic aunt, some hostile unsympathetic peers and cynical relatives. The children's integrity towards each other is never put under suspicion, nor does their pairing lead to any hostilities. On the contrary, it is accepted as something very natural, with both sets of parents acknowledging it and supporting it, so much so that the children visit each other in their respective homes (one in the city and the other in the countryside) and the parents and their extended families come together to have a large gathering in the countryside. The children's love is treated with much respect with the overall emphasis in the film being on idealized love. While physical intimacy is not explicitly sanctioned by the elders (the kids are made to sleep in different rooms), it is also not forbidden or swept under the carpet. Instead, it is acknowledged and treated matter-of-factly, without much hullabaloo, while sexual activity is woven into the narrative as a subplot, a natural progression of love between two individuals.

The film contains no nudity, but in an extremely beautiful and tender sequence, the children are shown getting physically intimate after their parents leave them alone in the house. The next shot shows them sleeping together in the same bed at night. The following morning, they are embarrassed by Annika's aunt who walks in unexpectedly while they are enjoying a memorable dance on the bed – in a state of partial undress while sharing one night suit between them. The aunt, visibly surprised but thoughtful, greets Pär with a stern knowing look, a forced smile, and leaves them alone. Appearing diffident, Annika follows her aunt out of the room and pretends to set her hair in the mirror while waiting for her aunt's reaction. The ensuing conversation between them is worth noting:

Aunt: *Did I scare you when I came in?*

Girl: *Yeah.*

Aunt: *Why?*

Girl: *I don't know.*

Aunt: *Have you had fun?*

Girl: *Hmm.*

Aunt: *And they are coming tonight. How old are you again?*

Girl: *Almost fourteen.* Aunt: *(silence) I came up because...I don't know why I came up. (breaking into tears) I am so lonely...* (the film cuts to another sequence).

In a later scene, the kids are shown slipping away into a shed and getting intimate while their drunken parents are celebrating. Also featured in the film are sequences of the children enjoying a smoke with their older relatives and sharing raunchy jokes with them at the dinner table. Far from appearing offensive, such sequences project the young teenagers as responsible adults who are treated as individuals and allowed to take their own decisions including the decision to get physically intimate with their loved ones..

If the abovementioned sequences appear too enmeshed within the 'liberal' discourses of the 1970s, *Eva and Adam: Four Weddings and a Fiasco*, made as recently as 1991, offers us another interesting example. The film is a cute and nondescript tale of two middle-class children, the fourteen-year-olds Eva and Adam, struggling with their love and longing for each other against the backdrop of a bright and sunny city. The film is based on a popular long-running sitcom which follows the romance between Eva Strömdahl and Adam Kieslowski for three years, ever since they were eleven-years-old. Acting as a sequel to the sitcom, the film portrays a moment of crisis in their love-life as they turn fourteen. Similar to *A Swedish Love Story*, Eva and Adam are portrayed as responsible young adults with their love being readily accepted and acknowledged by their social circle. The people surrounding them are depicted as being so used to seeing them together that they have started treating them as a married couple, with some of their friends even going to the extent of calling them "*Mr. and Mrs. Kieslowski*". Their parents are no different. Depicted as being absolutely delighted by their children's pairing, they can't imagine seeing the children without each other. At parties, weddings and social

gatherings, the children are invited as a couple and expected to be together. The two families even decide to take their holidays together. The plot unfolds with Eva feeling trapped by this web of expectations, and therefore deciding to break-free while remaining good friends with Adam. For the rest of the narrative, the children try hard to keep the split in their relationship a secret from their parents who may not be ready to accept it. Four weddings, some fooling-around and one fiasco later, all's well and they are united back.

In the entire schema, there are no late-night curfews defining the movements of children nor are the girl's parents busy issuing warnings to the boy telling him to keep his hands off their teenage daughter. At the same time, there is no nudity in the film, nor is there any overt sexuality. Instead, there is a lot of kissing and hugging, physical display of genuine love and affection, both when alone as well as in the company of their family and friends, without the children being made to feel embarrassed or guilty. Clearly, the kids are treated as sensible individuals, almost adults, and their physical intimacy is as readily accepted as their relationship. They are depicted inhabiting a world in which sexuality also plays its part – their parents are momentarily seen groping each other, one of their teenage friends gets pregnant and Eva thinks about Adam and she having kids – but sexuality doesn't assume a central role in the narrative. While it is never clearly indicated if they themselves are sexually active, the subject is not treated as a taboo either. In an extended sequence, the families are seen projecting their holiday photos and videos onto a screen, and upon coming across pictures of Eva and Adam kissing each other, they rave about how cute the children look together. One of the parents slyly inquires Adam what was on his mind, while Eva's brother reminds the others how Adam had insisted on sleeping with Eva. Everybody has a good laugh and the sequence ends. Thus, while the plot chooses to underline adolescent love with sexual feelings, it is almost dismissive of sexuality, acknowledging it but relegating it to the background. In no place is this more apparent than in a sequence where Adam follows Eva out of a party. As he sees her leave with another guy, two adolescent girls are shown kissing softly in the background, their images gradually blurring as the camera chooses to focus on Adam's heartbroken face instead.

A few such romances continued to characterize onscreen Swedish teenagers for years to come. Remindful of the generation of level headed, responsible, naturally and moderately sexualized men and women as envisioned by the pioneer of Swedish nudist movements, Almkvist, such portrayals also seem to take us further back in history, into the pre-childhood era when children did not necessarily have to behave like children. But such examples were few and far apart, and as expected from a nation where onscreen sexuality has traditionally had a loud presence, the portrayals of teenagers also had its fair share of sexuality, and in ways that were far more interesting than many other cinemas of the world.

### **Sexual beings**

As discussed previously, through the 1960s, sexuality emerged as a recurring motif in Swedish cinema, and it was inevitable that it made a strong presence felt in some portrayals of teenagers as well. A particularly striking example was Torgny Wickman's *Swedish and Underage*, a sexploitation film with social overtones about pedophilia and collective social apathy made in 1969. Bold and adult oriented, the film had as its protagonist a fourteen-year-old outcast girl from Stockholm who discovers that offering sex to adults allows her to maintain contact with society and win favors. Working through a series of flashbacks, the film unfolds as the girl Eva recounts her many flings when questioned by police officers, and gradually reveals that almost every prominent male member of society has had sexual encounters with her, a trend that started when she was barely eight years old. Many questioning sessions and a long trial later, everybody who has taken advantage of her is convicted, while she finds a caring mother figure in a female psychiatrist. This otherwise mediocre film assumes importance by being based on real incidents and by bringing into prominence the concept of the underage. Despite offering a very strong social critique and aligning itself with the victimized girl, the film raises some serious questions about the agency of the child and refuses to paint the exploited girl merely as an innocent victim. The opening scene itself shows Eva seductively show her breasts to an older man in a field even as her friend feels disturbed by the incident, and as the narrative unfolds, she is shown offering her body to a number



of people. During her interrogation, Eva tells the police that she never knew that the activities of her exploiters were illegal (while her own actions were not) as she thought sex was for everybody and she had been sleeping with men ever since she was a little girl. Not surprisingly, this sexually explicit film had a much older actress play the fourteen-year-old Eva, one of the few such exceptions in Swedish cinema that is otherwise dominated by the norms of realism dictating that actors play their real age (the abovementioned *Evil* being another such exception). But as with the previously discussed sexually charged portrayals of preteens, *Swedish and Underage* again marked a major departure from the dominant ways of imaging teenagers.

Far less explicit explorations of teenage sexuality continued with such films as *Mackan*, made in 1977 by Birgitta Svensson. Set in the 1960s, this slice-of-life film depicts the world through the point of view of a lonely fourteen-year-old girl Mackan. The narrative unfolds to offer us a look at her insipid life surrounded by dull parents, mean teachers and boring school mates. She finds some meaning in her life by getting romantically involved with a slightly older boy and experimenting with sex, only to find such activities to be equally uninspiring. Dull and distanced, the easily forgettable film had little to offer apart from bringing female teenage sexuality into focus, a tendency in which it was neither the pioneer nor an extraordinary example. It was with the brilliant *Show Me Love* by Lukas Moodysson in 1998 that female teenage sexuality exploded onto the scene with a big bang.

*Show Me Love* tells the story of two teenage girls living in the small Swedish town of Åmål, which for them is “*the most boring place on earth*”. The fourteen-year-old Elin is outgoing and extremely popular, but finds her life unsatisfying and devoid of excitement, while the sixteen-year-old Agnes, who attends the same school, is a misfit and has no friends making her feel unwanted and depressed. She is also secretly in love with Elin. The plot unfolds as Agnes's parents worry about their daughter, and despite her reluctance, try to make her happy by throwing a party on her sixteenth birthday. Only, nobody but a girl in a wheelchair turns up, confirming her worst fears. A little later, Elin and her elder sister arrive at Agnes' doorstep, mainly as an excuse to avoid going to

another party being attended by a boy Elin doesn't want to meet. Having heard the rumor that Agnes is a lesbian, Elin's older sister dares Elin to kiss Agnes. An irresponsible Elin completes the dare and runs laughing out of Agnes's house and announces it to all her friends making Agnes feel suicidal. But feeling guilty for having humiliated Agnes like that, Elin returns to Agnes' house and apologizes a little later, saving her life unknowingly and even managing to persuade Agnes to attend the other party with her. On their way, both share their feelings with each other and end up enjoying a 'real' kiss in the back seat of a car they hitch a ride in. Elin discovers that she is attracted to Agnes, but being afraid to admit it to her circle of 'cool' people, she pretends to be in love with a boy and starts avoiding Agnes over the next few days. A few twists and turns later, Elin and Agnes eventually acknowledge each other's feelings, and after a climactic scene in a school bathroom, decide to literally out their relationship to the whole school towards the end of the film.

As evident, *Show Me Love* was highly unconventional with its groundbreaking portrayal of lesbian love involving teenagers. A deliberate masterstroke by Moodysson, the film effectively dismantled most norms governing the portrayals of teenagers both in Sweden as well as internationally. It became the highest-grossing movie of all times in Sweden, bagging eighteen local and international awards while being nominated for many more. Moodysson's sensitivity and understanding of anxious teenagers is reflected especially through the dialogues of *Show Me Love*, particularly Elin's, which have a distinctive ring of teenage irritation and restlessness. Disgusted with school and friends, she says, "I want to go for a rave! Or we could mug a pensioner!" When she hears that raves are in the "out" column of lifestyle magazines, she is inconsolable, responding with "We've got to move to a place where things happen...and not after they are already out from the rest of the world!" When she learns from her sister that she's earning a wicked reputation for herself by indulging too many boys, she reacts with "At least no one's putting anything in me ... OK maybe fingers".

Similar to *A Swedish Love Story* and *Children's Island*, *Show Me Love* shows the adult world through the perspective of children, imaging the adults as cynical, absurd and

hypocritical, especially Agnes's well-meaning but clueless mother, and emphatically argues for granting children more autonomy and individuality. When Agnes's little brother asks his mother what a lesbian is, she explains it with admirable cool, but when he says people are calling Agnes a lesbian, she is shocked and raids Agnes' computer to expose her daughter's love for Elin. But instead of justifying the mother's actions, Moodysson lets Agnes have the last laugh by denouncing her tearfully repentant mother for the break-in, making Agnes throw the distraught woman out of her room, and successfully subordinating the lesbian issue to her mother's unforgivable crime of invading her privacy. As evident, the film is also an overt feminist statement by the politically conscious Moodysson, especially empowering for the girl child, for he misses no opportunities to belittle the boys who are depicted as annoying, conventional, sexist and juvenile. The feminist message, while running throughout the film, is made explicit in the sequence where Elin argues with her sister's boyfriend who thinks "*girls cannot understand technology, bikes, porn films etc*" but are nonetheless "*good at some other things like make-up, looks and clothes*". An infuriated Elin calls him a "*fucking idiot*" and breaks-up with her flabbergasted boyfriend, to whom she has recently lost her virginity, for failing to disagree with his moronic friend.

After the resounding success of *Show Me Love*, a number of films attempted such complex and sophisticated portrayals of teenage sexuality. Another interesting example was Teresa Fabik's *The Ketchup Effect*, made in 2004, with which the feminist concerns of *Show Me Love* made an emphatic reentry. The film tells the tale of thirteen-year-old Sofie who attends a party with her friends but gets too drunk and falls asleep. Taking advantage of the situation, a bullying boy from her school, whom she has a crush on, undresses her in front of everybody and takes compromising pictures, which he then circulates through the school giving her the reputation of being a promiscuous whore. Sofie's world starts falling apart as she has no recollections of the event while her best friends abandon her and her schoolmates start calling her names. Refusing to be victimized, she responds violently to their physical and verbal abuse, but instead of reprimanding her tormentors, her teachers advice her to remain calm and take it in her stride. To make matters worse, her single father, who is himself a teacher in the same

school, is sent her pictures by one of the students, and he blames her for inviting the situation upon herself by dressing provocatively and drinking too much. With all her efforts at fighting back failing, she is unable to handle the pressure anymore and attempts suicide, only to survive and gain her father's support in the process. She then fights back again, learns to mock those who mock her and gives the bully a taste of his own pie, finally gaining back her self esteem, her friends, her social life and a boyfriend who tries to understand her.

Thematically clichéd and clearly didactic, *The Ketchup Effect* is not as refreshing as *Show Me Love*, but nonetheless packs within itself some very interesting cinematic moments and powerful performances by some of the actors in addition to offering us a refreshing look at sexual harassment. A sequence in the school cafeteria a few days after the party stands out in particular, in which Sofie's private parts are caressed by the bully when she refuses to sit back and listen to her schoolmates poking fun at her. In desperation, she gets into a fistfight with him and is dragged out of the classroom by a lady teacher. Helping her with her bleeding nose, the teacher attempts to reason with her and comfort her. However, the way she chooses to do it makes Sofie angrier still, for the teacher suggests that since Sofie is so attractive and the bully so immature, molesting her was his way of reaching out to her and making contact with her. She suggests that Sofie take his behavior as a compliment rather than as an insult, to which Sophie reacts aggressively by grabbing the teacher's breasts claiming she is giving her a compliment! In another sequence, Sophie's new boyfriend remarks favorably on her ears, making her laugh and tell him that it was the most absurd compliment she had heard, for most others get stuck on her breasts. Taking it as a cue, the boyfriend compliments her on her breasts, and then proceeds to kiss her while attempting to fondle her breasts. She pushes him away violently, calling him "*the same as everyone else, a pervert*", and storms out. Through such moments, Teresa Fabik displays extreme subtlety in dealing with a very sensitive topic, and instead of blanketing it under the rhetoric of the pains of growing-up, chooses to confront the issue of sexual harassment among school children head-on. But as with most Swedish films, she also chooses to limit her efforts to Sofie's emotional

battles and does not place her narrative in the larger socio-cultural milieu or attempt to offer social and legal solutions to the problem.

But even as such portrayals with a sharp focus on the sexuality of teenage girls continued, Bo Widerberg momentarily brought male teen sexuality into some focus with his subtle and remarkable effort *All Things Fair* in 1995. The opening shot of the film offers us a passage from *Lectures on Sexuality* by Carolus Linnaeus, thereby defining the sexual nature of the film. However, the narrative unfolds as a tale of complex relationships, especially the steamy love affair between a fifteen-year-old schoolboy Stig and his married teacher Viola. Making deep inroads into the psyche of its protagonists, the film also explores the repressed sexuality of the alienated husband and the budding sexual desires of a fourteen-year-old girl infatuated with Stig. However, the plot's focus remains on Stig and Viola, whose passionate relationship is shown turning violent and bitter even as the husband learns to turn a blind-eye to his wife's affair and the other girl is finally able to seduce Stig.

Such portrayals of sexuality continued to be a recurring motif in a number of films to come, for instance in the previously mentioned *Before the Storm* in 2002 where they took the form of humiliation when the school bully forces the teenager Leo to strip and enter the girl's changing room, then asking him to wear the underwear of the girl he has a crush on even as all the girls look on in a state of partial undress. The same year, the focus returned to the teenage girl with Lukas Moodysson's *Lilya4-ever*, an unremittingly brutal and realistic story dealing with human trafficking and the sexual slavery of a sixteen-year-old girl living in the former Soviet Union. The plot unfolds as the essentially regular teenage girl Lilya is excitedly informed by her mother that they are immigrating to the United States with her new boyfriend. At the last minute, however, Lilya is abandoned by her mother and left behind in the care of an opportunist aunt who takes over their large apartment while forcing her to move into a squalid flat. With no money or adult supervision, a directionless Lilya finds comfort in the company of friends, one of who encourages her to prostitute herself for some quick cash. In a club, Lilya backs out when propositioned while the friend finds a client, but when her friend's father discovers

the money she has earned, she pleads innocence by declaring Lilya to be the prostitute. The story soon goes around her school and a gang of neighborhood goons viciously rape Lilya. Lonely, abandoned and emotionally shattered, she has little choice but to earn money through offering her body. She forms a tender protective relationship with the thirteen-year-old Volodya, himself abused and rejected by his alcoholic father, and together they find support and companionship in each other.

In walks Andrei, a suave charming young man who sweet talks Lilya, courts her, becomes her boyfriend and asks her to move to Sweden with him where he promises a decent job waiting for her. When she agrees to take up his offer, a jealous but thoughtful Volodya, fearing the worst, implores her not to leave him and the country, but seduced by the prospects of a better life, she chooses to ignore him. Arriving in Sweden from her unnamed Soviet Bloc country, she realizes that he was right, for she is greeted by a pimp who takes her to an empty apartment where he imprisons her and pushes her further into prostitution and sexual abuse while reaping all the financial gains. Meanwhile, Volodya commits suicide back home, devastated that Lilya had abandoned him. His ghost comes to Lilya to look over her, support her and help her through tough times. Towards the end of the narrative, unable to take the daily physical and sexual abuse, Lilya commits suicide and is united with Volodya, now both dead and angelic, happily playing basketball on the roof of some tenement building while feeling safe from all harm the world can do to them.

The poignant and heart-wrenching *Lilya 4-ever* is a particularly cruel portrait of a teenager. It concerns itself with the universal problem of illegal human trafficking of girls, in this case the specific occurrences between the poorer Eastern Bloc countries and the more prosperous nations in the west and north of Europe. While Lilya and Volodya are portrayed as misfortunate children plagued by the difficult circumstances they find themselves in, the film also depicts Lilya as an immigrant child and Sweden as the land of lost hopes and shattered dreams. In many ways, the film tells a universal tale of physical and emotional suffering, a task that a number of the abovementioned teenage films also attempt. As evident, these films are markedly different from the cinematic

portrayals of their younger counterparts. Imaging teenage as a dark and bleak phase, these cinematic representations can be seen deliberately reaching out and connecting with the contemporary tendencies in the artistically inclined cinemas of Europe where strongly emotional tales of human suffering continue to do the rounds. Appearing to be thematically in sync with their European counterparts, these Swedish examples are at the same time markedly local in the style and treatment. Maintaining a slightly distanced and neutral view on the themes portrayed, these films try to problematize and question the very notions of morality, ethics and suffering, in the process opening up numerous discursive fields and allowing their narratives to have multiple interpretations.

Viewed in isolation, these portrayals may not appear to be extraordinary because of their similarities with other examples from different cinemas of the world, but viewed together with their younger counterparts, the very young children, the preteens and the teenagers collectively form an impressive oeuvre of children's cinema that gains value not merely by being qualitatively superior and more complex than most portrayals of children from across the world but also by consistently being involved in the process of producing such images for a sustained period of time spanning almost a century. Hoping that the cinematic child continues to find such a favored representation in Swedish cinema and we get to spend more time enjoying its company, I end my discussion with an interesting quote by Fran Lebowitz, who states that:

I must take issue with the term "a mere child", for it has been my invariable experience that the company of a mere child is infinitely preferable to that of a mere adult. (Merchey 2007)

## CONCLUSION

It has been my attempt in this dissertation to make meaning of the phenomenon of a sustained emphasis on the production of quality children's cinema in Sweden. As an outsider hailing from India, I see Sweden as one of the few film producing nations in the west which has over the years produced an extraordinary body of children's films marked by a minutely detailed emphasis on granting more autonomy and individuality to onscreen children than most other cinemas in the world. But such an emphasis as reflected through Swedish cinema is not limited to children's onscreen portrayals alone, for as I establish, the cinematic images of Swedish children are nothing but an extension of the conscious investment in the child which has pervaded every aspect of Swedish society and culture for more than a century now. Additionally, acknowledging that such an investment in a vibrant children's culture is not merely a Swedish phenomenon but a characteristic of the entire Nordic region, I maintain that despite such cultural similarities, the entire region cannot be considered together for any in depth analysis of children's culture owing to the specificities of national and cultural differences. I therefore chose to limit my analysis to Sweden, the largest film producing nation in the Nordic region, and to its children's cinema which has to a great extent been fostered by recurring demands from the public sphere and by the sustained activities of a set of organizations and institutions dedicated to its cause. Delineating that the impetus for my dissertation came more from a desire to understand the on-screen child than from a desire to make meaning of Swedish cinema, I state that Swedish cinema for me appears to be an interesting case in point to investigate how the cinematic child becomes a point of convergence for various social, cultural, institutional, political and commercial forces that shape his/her onscreen image.

Swedish children's cinema history is closely intertwined with the history of children's culture in the nation, which dates back to hundreds of years. As I establish, the earliest documented evidence of Sweden's investment in the child can be seen articulated in the thoughts of Ellen Key at the turn of the twentieth century. Through her writings, she made a strong case for a conscious investment in the child while delineating the



various ways in which such an investment would result in producing better future citizens for Swedish society. Her writings were marked by a deep pedagogical intent, focus on the family as the basic unit of society, an affinity for natural surroundings, and advocated individualism, all of which can be seen surfacing strongly in the children's cinema that was to arrive a few decades later. Meanwhile, a little after the arrival of the medium of cinema in the nation, Swedish society started voicing its resentment against its ill-effects, especially foreign content from the United States which was flooding the Swedish markets and was being perceived as harmful and degrading especially for the minds of young impressionable children. As a consequence, strong demands were made in the public sphere for an investment in the entertainment needs of children, and the Swedish children's cinema that made a subsequent arrival was a direct response to the threat of foreign media content felt by the generally closed Swedish society.

By the 1920s, the earliest examples of children's cinema started being made, and very soon gained a separate identity of their own. Alongside, the society's collective interest in child welfare saw the setting-up of a number of independent committees and organizations which, helped by developments in child psychology, started rating and classifying children's films while also helping in regulating their circulation and distribution. With the sustained efforts of such organizations, over time, the Swedish State started taking a more active interest in children's films and extended financial subsidies to children's cinema by 1951. With subsequent developments in the film industry, children's cinema became an extremely successful and commercially viable category in the coming decades. What followed was a gradual institutionalizing of children's cinema through such bodies as the Children's Film Department of the Swedish Film Institute and numerous other autonomous bodies that started overseeing the production of children's films. Meanwhile, by the late 1960s, debates around children and foreign media had resurfaced with the entry of cable television, and local production was once again actively encouraged to counterbalance foreign evils. A growth in video technology by the 1980s saw the debates resurface explosively, and Swedish society respond collectively by displaying a fear of all moving images which resulted in children's film production in particular suffering qualitatively as producers decided to

play it safe. By the 1990s, however, the media hate had abated considerably, and with a reworking of the contracts of the Swedish Film Institute, a qualitative investment in children's cinema was encouraged again through the newly appointed children's film consultants whose job it was to promote and oversee the production of quality children's films. With such combined efforts on the part of Swedish society, various autonomous organizations and to a certain extent the Swedish State, Sweden has over the years emerged at the forefront of children's cinema internationally with a large body of films with children as protagonists.

This large body of films, however, has historically been so varied that it is extremely difficult to attempt a thematic classification. For the sake of structural congruity, I have worked with a rough age based classification in my dissertation by treating the portrayals of young children, preteens and teenagers as three separate categories (with some overlaps); each one of them displaying certain tendencies that are specific to the age group of children they choose to portray. Young children in cinemas worldwide have predominantly been imaged as naïve innocent younglings, and Swedish children's cinema is essentially no different. Analyzing this assumed understanding of childhood as an age of innocence, I explore 'childhood' and 'innocence' as loaded terms that pack within themselves more meaning than what they are generally credited with. Establishing that childhood is a trope, a cultural invention of the adult world, I demonstrate that the idea of childhood as we understand it today came into existence in the western world within the upper-classes in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, consolidated itself further in the 18<sup>th</sup> century upper-classes, and finally mushroomed on the scene in both the upper and the lower-classes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I mention how the earliest visual representations of childhood came about in the paintings of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of childhood had consolidated itself as a cultural ideal which was perpetuated and spread through various visual representations ever since, making an emphatic reentry through the dense visuality that surrounded us in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A defining feature of these idealized representations historically has been their imaging of childhood as an age of innocence, a trend that has continued through paintings, prints, other mass reproduced images and photographs through the ages. I argue that these

innocent childhood images, by way of repeatedly representing children as characterized by cuteness, naïveté, purity and asexuality, have led to the gradual establishment of a visual regime, the regime of childhood innocence, which continues to color our imaginations whenever we represent children, and the same can be seen permeating our cinematic imaginations as well. Placing the portrayals of early childhood in Swedish cinema against this visual regime, I demonstrate how they are deeply indebted to the regime and correspond with it in numerous ways.

After a period of scattered early representations, the dominant identities that were created for Swedish cinematic children in the first few decades of their portrayals were mischievous pranksters and orphaned youngsters, brought to screen through such films as *Anderssonskans Kalle*, *Pirates of Lake Malaren* and *Guttersnipes*, most of them featuring young children and displaying an allegiance to the visual regime by painting them cute, naïve and innocent. However, such innocent cinematic children were to come into their own (and very strongly so) under the vision of Astrid Lindgren, the great grandmother of Swedish children's tales, and her painstakingly created idyllic conflict-free worlds inhabited by sweet children indulging in innocuous little adventures in such films as *The Children of Bullerby Village*. Attempting to make us forget most aspects of the adult society, these cinematic children were imaged through lost gazes, round cheeks, smiles and poses, silken hair, plump dimpled bodies and perfect skin, and with their portrayals being set against soft backgrounds in close proximity to nature and animals, they appeared classless and thoughtless, displaying little or no resonance with the real socio-cultural milieu in the Swedish society. Consequently, they can be seen acting as direct reflections of the visual regime in numerous ways that treats childhood similarly as a classical and timeless age.

However, I argue that Swedish cinematic children are a slightly distorted reflection of the regime, for they can appear nude on screen, a privilege that is not available to onscreen children in the dominant cinema cultures worldwide. Establishing that such instances of nudity in children's cinema are ideologically aligned with the nudist movements in Swedish culture and their discourse on health and hygiene, I

demonstrate that far from being offensive, this nudity contains within itself connotations of purity and innocence in the Swedish context that only work towards reinforcing the ideals of innocence spread by the visual regime.

Nonetheless, it cannot be claimed that the Swedish cinematic children are merely an extension of the visual regime, for over and above such relatively small distortions of the regime, numerous examples of Swedish children's cinema offer a strict resistance to it as well. The trend started with such films as *Hugo and Josephine* and *Elvis! Elvis!* that consciously chose to depart from groups of innocent children in idyllic country settings and attempted psychological journeys into individual children's mindscapes by portraying them as thinking and feeling beings. Extending such sentiments, I see the highly individualized and meticulously crafted portrayals of preteens in Swedish cinema emerge as deliberate contrasts to the dominant ways of imaging children as dictated by the visual regime, and it is through these films that I see Swedish children's cinema make extraordinary contributions to the onscreen portrayals of children. As I demonstrate, such films as *Children's Island*, *My Life as a Dog*, *Fanny and Alexander* and *The Slingshot* etc work hard at imparting the onscreen child with a free will, a mind of his own, complex emotions and a streak of obstinance. Far from the idyllic worlds of their predecessors, they locate the children in real socio-cultural surroundings, especially urban settings, in the process systematically dismantling the norms of imaging childhood governed by the visual regime. Elaborating on the same, I argue that such portrayals impart the Swedish cinematic child with more autonomy and a stronger individuality than most other children's cinemas in the world and deliberately reverse the cinematic gaze from adults imaging children to children imaging adults. Extending such sentiments are also films like *Elina: As if I Wasn't There* and *Zozo* which make a further contribution to the cinematic worlds by interestingly choosing to portray the angsts and anxieties of immigrant children whose integration has been an acknowledged problem in the Swedish socio-cultural sphere. Together, I see all these portrayals of preteens impart 'coming-of-age' in the Swedish context with a very diverse set of meanings ranging from emotional stability and the acceptance of adulthood, reaffirmation of one's identity, assuming social responsibility or just being complicated kids struggling to find a place in the world.

But over and above such meanings, I point out that coming-of-age in the Swedish context has also been characterized by a marked emphasis on the explorations of children's budding sexuality, which offers a further challenge to the dominant norms of imaging children dictated by the visual regime. With children's sexuality becoming a taboo subject of the highest order in contemporary western societies because of a relatively recent paranoia over pedophilia and child sexual abuse, the onscreen explorations of the budding sexuality of preteens in Swedish cinema makes it one of the last cinemas in the world where such representations are still possible. Such instances exhibit a sharp contrast to the ways in which the dominant western world led by the United States treats the child as an asexual being while acting as indicative evidences of the cultural differences between Sweden and the United States in their understanding of the child. Having said so, Sweden has not been impervious to the effects of the cultural impulses from the dominant west, which can be seen in the gradual sanitizing of children's images over the last few decades through making the portrayals of children's sexuality more suggestive and modest while increasingly featuring them on older children. Neither advocating nor criticizing sexual activity by children in the real world, I make a case against such restrictive tendencies in cinema and argue for a continued representation of onscreen child sexuality when located in an appropriate cinematic context. I argue that attempts at sanitizing such images will only result in creating an unhealthy socio-cultural milieu where child sexuality becomes a forbidden fortress that gets to be even more tempting by way of being forbidden.

Closing my discussion with an exploration of the screen images of teenagers in Swedish cinema, I establish that the cinematic images of Swedish teenagers are far more fragmented than the images of very young children and preteens. I argue that the onscreen teenager in Sweden is qualitatively no match for his younger counterparts, for most of his representations appear shallow and stereotypical. Nonetheless, Swedish cinema has over the years produced some remarkable portrayals of teenagers which can be seen thematically connected with each other despite being separated by large time gaps between them. Elaborating on the same, I point out how one of the dominant ways of imaging teenagers in early examples was as vulnerable rebels in such films as *Frenzy*,

which can be seen resurfacing as portrayals of juvenile delinquents in later examples like *The Stone Face*; sex and drug addicts who increasingly take to criminal activity while being extremely dissatisfied with their surroundings. Another dominant onscreen identity for teenagers in Swedish cinema has been that of young lovers who were a recurring motif in a number of films. However, as I demonstrate, a few cinematic examples like *A Swedish Love Story* and *Eva and Adam: Four Weddings and a Fiasco* chose to portray teen lovers as responsible, mature and level-headed young adults capable of rational thinking unlike the dominant ways of imaging them in world cinema. They chose to represent teenage love as ethereal and magical, treating the lovers with much respect and legitimizing their love by giving it the approval of the adults around them as well as the society at large. In such films, the sexual explorations of the teen protagonists are neither underplayed nor highlighted, appearing instead as subplots of the film and a logical extension of the deep love between the teenagers; and this marks a major departure from the ways in which Hollywood depicts teenagers and their sexuality. However, with a nation so invested in the representations of sexuality, as expected, many portrayals of Swedish teenagers also chose to deal with it directly. While *Swedish and Underage* chose to explore it as the exploitation of a young girl, *Lilya 4-ever* adopted a similar approach to depict prostitution and sexual slavery. *Show Me Love* explored sexuality through the homosexual love between teenage girls while *All Things Fair* brought male teen sexuality into focus by dealing with the love affair between a schoolboy and his attractive teacher.

Through a discussion of such varied ways of cinematically imaging the Swedish child, I have attempted to provide a schematic map of the terrain of Swedish children's cinema. My efforts, however, are not comprehensive, and leave room for a number of further explorations. In particular, one important area for future research is exploring the ways in which the immigrant child is imaged in Swedish cinema. Over and above the previously discussed films featuring immigrant children, such fantastic examples as *The New Country* by Geir Hansteen Jorgensen offer us a fascinating account of Swedish xenophobia, cultural insularity and prejudices as seen through the eyes of an immigrant child. Connecting with similarly themed films from all over Europe, these immigrant-child films make children's cinema deal with more mainstream socio-political concerns.

They warrant a further investigation by being placed against Sweden's politically liberal attitude towards immigrants on the one hand and the indifferent to hostile (but not friendly) socio-cultural milieu towards immigrants on the other. Another interesting direction for further academic pursuits in this area can be the imaging of the child in the avant-garde films of such politically conscious filmmakers as Suzanne Osten. With her experiments at making adults play children in Swedish cinema and her exciting forays into children's theatre, Osten's work opens up childhood as an extremely interesting discursive field. Similarly, an investigation of the very prominent figure of the child in Arne Sucksdorff's oeuvre of documentaries, docu-features and feature films also warrants further investigations, while such figuration as 'the evil child' found in Bille August's *The Best Intentions* can also make for an interesting academic study.

As evident, Swedish children's cinema is an extremely interesting field that offers us much to explore. The nation has over the years given us some remarkable examples of children's images that have hardly been subject to theorization owing to the limitations of language and the fact that they get obscured by the high-points of European film history defined by such movements as French New-Wave and Italian Neorealism. Their largely introverted plots and simplistic narratives coupled with a relatively tame market economy and the lack of sensationalism in them have kept their circulation restricted to the domestic markets and film festival circles. My efforts in this dissertation have been fairly limited with the terrain under investigation allowing us many more ways of negotiating with it. Hoping that my work makes some contributions to the understanding of cinematic childhoods in general and the Swedish cinematic child in particular, I look forward to more scholarly pursuits into the representation of childhood in cinemas from the world over.

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