

Why Batman was Bad

A Scandinavian debate about children's consumption of comics and literature in the 1950s

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Abstract

This article contains an analysis of public debates about children's consumption of comics in Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway and Sweden) in the mid 1950s. With this analysis I aim to contribute to the understanding of how adult public "consumption politics" regarding children's consumption of cultural products has been articulated at a specific time and place. By historicising adult debates about children's consumption of cultural products (e.g. films, comics, books) from a cultural history perspective, I attempt to make the arguments of the 1950s debates appear coherent and logical, rather than old-fashioned and disproportionate, as they seem to us in a modern context.

"We do not want our children to be raised in the name of violence, race-hatred, gangsters and pin-ups as it is the case in the inappropriate comics of mostly American origin. We want our children to be reared as good, harmonic and optimistic human beings with respect for their fellow humans, tolerant and able to live their lives in peace. Inappropriate comics encourage the first and hinder the last."¹

This quotation is from an open letter to the Swedish government, written at a public meeting in Malmö May 13th 1954, organised by the *Malmö Peace*

¹ All quotations in Danish, Swedish and Norwegian as well as names of organisations and book titles have been translated into English by the author.

Committee and Swedish Women's Left Union (the letter was published in the Swedish newspaper *Ny Dag*, 13 May 1954). The letter was published on behalf of the couple of hundred parents who had attended the meeting hoping to encourage the government to stop importing American comics into Sweden. Today it can seem ridiculous that Swedish parents, as well as the vast majority of other Scandinavian adults in the 1950s, assumed that the consumption of comics such as *Superman*, *Batman* and *The Phantom* would hinder children from growing up as good human beings. Nowadays toys, films, comics and many other products featuring these almost "classic" American superheroes have become a natural part of Western childhood, and no Scandinavian politician, teacher or librarian would argue that the consumption of these comics could be the ruin of democracy as many did in the 1950s. So how can we understand the consumption politics that dominated the Scandinavian public fifty/sixty years ago ("politics" here means a set of notions shared by a specific interpretive community, see below)?² What were the premises that created a fertile ground for the consumption politics that deemed comics an inappropriate cultural product for children in 1950s Scandinavia?

This article contains an analysis of public debates about children's consumption of comics in Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway and Sweden) in the mid 1950s. With this analysis I aim to contribute to the understanding of how adult public "consumption politics" regarding children's consumption of cultural products has been articulated at a specific time and place. By historicising adult debates about children's consumption of cultural products (e.g. films, comics, books) from a cultural history perspective, I attempt to make arguments that could otherwise seem old-fashioned and disproportionate, appear logical and coherent from the point of view of the 1950s debaters.

Theoretical framework: cultural history and consumption politics

A significant part of the research on childhood from the last twenty years can be seen as having fostered a linearity in thinking about progressive conditions for the (Western) childhood with a rejection of an "old-

² For an explanation of the term "consumption politics" see below.

fashioned" view of children as "becomings".³ This means that former notions of childhood, and the policies regarding children's consumption of cultural products it led to, in some cases, have been dismissed as backwards.⁴ It is not only in scholarly research that past opinions on childhood provide a backdrop for today's discussions; assumptions about childhood in the 1950s and 1970s are widely used in current public debates on childhood. Historicising the views of childhood in one of these periods through historical research, as this article does, is thus relevant for both today's public and scholarly debates. It is not to say that something was better or worse in the past, since normative judgements are tidily bound by timely and spatial ties, but to enlarge our knowledge of the discourses and practices at a given time and place.

The fundamental outset for my investigations of the Scandinavian comics debate in the 1950s is the version of cultural history one finds in the writings of, for instance, Joan Scott, Lynn Hunt and Peter Burke, who all opt for a version in which social structures are also taken into account. (See e.g. Scott 2007, Hunt 1989, Burke 2008.) This means that I am interested in what Peter Burke has called "the social who" (Burke 2008: 116); that formations of social, political, professional and cultural groups around certain "consumption politics" are a vital part of my study. Seeking an answer to my research questions from the perspective of cultural history also means I am interested in the internal logic behind the arguments for certain "consumption politics".

My initial inspiration for examining these politics as deliberate, rational reactions to a perceived problem regarding children's consumption of comics came from reading Barbara H. Rosenwein's essay *Worrying about Emotions in History*, an essay in which she suggests a new and different way of studying emotions in history (Rosenwein 2002). In the essay, she argues for studying emotions as social constructions – a part of "a process of perception and appraisal" in contrast to seeing them as irrational, untrammelled expressions, the way emotions had been viewed in earlier historical studies (Rosenwein 2002, par. 29–30). The parallel between my aim to study the arguments from the 1950s comics debate as rational and coherent, and the way in which Rosenwein rejects writing the history of emotions as a history of irrationality resonated with me, since many histories written about adult debates about children's media con-

³ This point follows the line of reasoning in Burmingham 2005 and Egenfeldt-Nielsen 2000.

⁴ This is for instance the case in Juncker 2006 and Hake 2006.

sumption have used Stanley Cohen's theory of "moral panic", with the result that the central arguments in these debates have come across as backwards, hysterical and out of proportion (Cohen 1972).⁵

Using the theory of "moral panic" as a tool in the analysis of public debates does have the tendency of making the reactions of participants in such debates appear irrational, and make the debates seem like excuses for retaining social control using the warnings against a certain type of media or social behaviour.⁶ Indeed, the studies that have characterised the Scandinavian comics debate as a "moral panic" have claimed that the 1950s debaters were guided by an irrational fear and had underlying motives for arguing against children's consumption of comics.⁷ Thus, when viewing the 1950s comics debate through the lens of "moral panic", the explicit arguments put forward by the debaters themselves cannot be understood as the "genuine" reason behind their dismissive attitudes. This separation between the direct utterances of the debaters and the social and cultural motives behind these, which can be found in the "moral panic" theory, is a separation which is irrelevant to the aims of this article.⁸ My aim, as said, is to historicise the Scandinavian comics debate from the point of view of cultural history, and the focus must thus be to understand the reasoning and the arguments produced around a certain topic as directly embedded in the values, norms and logics of the communities to which the debaters belonged.⁹

Rosenwein uses the term "emotional communities" to identify the systems of feelings the researcher should study when wanting to write a history of emotions in the way she suggests (Rosenwein 2002, par. 35). The systems of reasoning around "consumption politics" regarding children's consumption of cultural products could simply be called "interpretive communities", using Stanley Fish's term for the discursive communities that determine the meaning in a given time and place (Fish 1980). The different groups whose consumption politics I am interested in analysing are, in my view, thus seen as interpretive communities sharing a common idea about which cultural products were considered appropriate or inap-

⁵ Cohen's theory has for instance been used in Boëthius 1989, Knutsson 1995, Møller 1997.

⁶ See e.g. Cohen 1972, Critcher 2008.

⁷ See e.g. Knutsson 1995.

⁸ Later theories that have grown out of "moral panic", such as for instance "media panic" (e.g. Drotner 1992) have been more sensitive towards the historical context of the "panics".

⁹ A longer theoretical discussion of "moral panic" lay outside the scope of this article, but is a part of my PhD thesis which I am currently working on.

appropriate for children to consume at a given time, in a given place. And it is the reasons for these communities' arguments about why certain cultural products were seen as appropriate or inappropriate for children to consume which my analysis seeks to uncover, by asking what role they intended cultural products to play in children's lives.

In this article, I follow up on the closeness between a specific place and time and a certain interpretation of the world which is similarly emphasised in the, otherwise very different, works of Rosenwein and Fish. Choosing to do an analysis across the national borders of Scandinavia – a relatively homogeneous cultural and social area in this particular case where the contexts are educational and democratic issues – I aim to emphasise the impact which specific historical circumstances have had on the debates I am studying.¹⁰

Consumption politics

In the book *The Politics of Consumption*, Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton make a collective suggestion on how to study “the politics of consumption” – understood as the reasoning behind the recommendation or discouragement of the consumption of certain commodities. The methodological and theoretical suggestions are based on the book's thirteen individual contributions which argue that “the politics of consumption have always been marked by single-issue campaigns, fragile alliances and ever-changing agendas” (Daunton & Hilton 2001: 3). The fluidity and fragmented nature of consumption politics, according to Daunton and Hilton, matches the short-lived alliances that have formed in the debates about children's consumption of cultural products in Scandinavia in the last half of the twentieth century across e.g. political and professional boundaries. In *The Politics of Consumption*, “politics” is used to relate to governmental systems, even though the authors emphasise that their term does not cover a coherent ideological movement. I am, however, using the term “consumption politics” to explain how a set of assumptions about what role cultural products should play in children's lives (shared by a group of people at a certain time, in a certain place) have led to the classification of

¹⁰ The possibility of studying Scandinavia as a homogeneous region with smaller differences rather than three different nation states when it comes to matters that deal with consumption politics directed against children's consumption of cultural products is further explored in my PhD project. Already existing literature that underline the similarities in the Scandinavian/Nordic countries in educational and democratic matters are e.g. Brembeck et al. 2004, Einarsdottir and Wagner 2006, Christiansen et al. 2006.

certain cultural products as either appropriate or inappropriate. This means that I use the concept "politics" to cover a further ranging set of relations of power, resistance and authority than that which is connected to governmental systems. In this way I aim to expand the term and analysis of "consumption politics" to include the "politics" regarding children's consumption of cultural products that takes place as a struggle in everyday life.

The two authors point out a number of relevant key themes for the study of consumption politics: the particular moralities connected to certain goods, the representatives of the consumers and the distribution systems. Although made for another purpose than the study of the specific consumption politics through which adults want to steer children's consumption of cultural products, the suggestions of which questions to ask in one's research of consumption politics, are interesting and helpful to my research.

When I know why for instance *Superman* and *Batman* and other, especially American, comics were seen as the worst cultural products Scandinavian children could consume in the 1950s according to the dominant discourse in the newspapers at the time, it is useful to look at: what particular moralities were connected to these comics, who the representatives of this particular discourse/politics were and what significance they subscribed to the distribution system. The relationship between the commodities, the state and the consumers in the cases Daunton and Hilton are interested in creating a road map for, are however slightly different to my case. In my analysis, the members of the interpretive communities I am interested in are the adults who formulated certain politics, but who were not themselves the intended end-consumer of their politics – that were the children. The role cultural products are supposed to play in children's lives – the reason why children should consume/or resist consuming a certain product – is thus related to how the child is perceived. As such determining who the intended end-consumer is in the politics that is being investigated is extremely important. Questions about gender, class, age, ethnic origin and other characteristics must be taken into account, as must the special distribution patterns that often involve an adult middle-man; a librarian, parent, teacher or other. To sum up, the following three questions can be seen as central when wanting to study the formations of specific consumption politics regarding children's consumption of cultural products:

- What role were the cultural products supposed to play in children's lives? (Edify, entertain, educate...)
- Who was supposed to control/supervise/provide the products for consumption? (Market, state, family...)
- What were the notions of children and childhood enclosed in the different politics of consumption?

These three questions will guide the following analysis of the Scandinavian comics debate in the 1950s.

Why books were better than Batman: 1950s Scandinavian comic debate

In 1947, Swedish schoolmaster Lorentz Larson published a large-scale study on the leisure reading habits of 15,000 Swedish children; boys and girls aged 4 to 20 (Larson 1947). In his study Larson concluded that the reading material children said they were mostly reading – such as short stories in weekly magazines and comics in newspapers – were far from the books he and other authorities on children's literature would like them to read. The same situation had been found in similar Norwegian and Danish studies in the post-war years.¹¹ This gap between the ideals and perceived reality regarding children's consumption of literature cannot have come as a complete surprise to teachers and librarians, the two main groups of professionals involved in these studies, since debates about children's consumption of inappropriate magazines and films were nothing new. (See e.g. de Coninck-Smith 1999, Boëthius 1989.) However, children's consumption of inappropriate reading material, as opposed to proper books, was seen as an increasing threat to the stability and growth of the expanding welfare state by leading Scandinavian authorities on children and literature, amongst whom Larson was one of the most respected. In the mid 1950s concerns about the discrepancies between the ideals and the as-

¹¹ In Denmark the study of spare time interests of young people (aged 15–25) was carried out by *Ungdomskommisionen* [the youth commission] from 1945 until 1953. It was followed up in 1952 by a study of younger children's reading habits – very similar to the Swedish and Norwegian. (See *Børns Læsning* [children's reading] published by the pedagogical organisation *Unge Pædagoger* in 1952.) In Sweden and Norway studies of children's spare time reading was carried out 1947. (For more information see Sweden: Larson 1947, Bejerot 1954: 202, Fransson 1954: 199, Norway: Sletvold 1953).

sumed reality for most Scandinavian children, turned into a debate about comics versus books that reached far into Scandinavian societies. The special focus on comics was given a further boost by growing international interest in the relationship between children and mass media. (See e.g. Bauchard 1952.)

From 1953 to 1957 children's consumption of comics was debated all over Scandinavia. Newspapers in every corner of the region, from national to local, published articles on the subject; journals for all kinds of professional groups, from teachers to policemen, did the same. In all, more than 300 articles that debate this issue can be found from this period, and together they represent the most comprehensive insight into the (published) views on children's consumption of cultural products in Scandinavia in the 1950s.¹² The reason these articles can be said to provide their reader with insight into, not only the consumption politics on children's consumption of comics, but also other cultural products, such as films and books, is that they also frequently touch on these while debating the comic issue. As, for instance, Danish schoolmaster Christian Winther, a front man in the Danish debates, wrote in the Danish teachers union's periodical *Folkeskolen* on August 12th, 1954: "... the comic problem is not an isolated phenomenon, but closely connected to, not only the inappropriate book-series, but also films, radio and television" (Winter 1954: 854). While films, radio and television – the mass media – were often associated with the inappropriate comics in terms of consumption politics, books were, if they were not part of the book-series, just as often drawn into the comic debates as the appropriate alternative. Having read all accessible articles that express views on children's consumption of cultural products in this period, I think it is reasonable to view the comics debate as a specific articulation of the views that existed on consumption politics regarding children's consumption of cultural products in Scandinavia in the mid 1950s.

Besides articles in newspapers, periodicals and journals, the Scandinavian debates about comics also took place in other media and more restrictive public spheres: Swedish, Danish and Norwegian radio broadcast discussions and lectures about comics took place; no less than four debate-books were published in Scandinavia on the topic in this period, and several committees, both national and Nordic, were appointed to look in to the matter. (Books: Bejerot 1954, Larson and Women's International League

¹² The articles have been found through respectively the Danish, Swedish and Norwegian journal article indexes as well as the Danish and Swedish feature and newspaper article indexes and the Norwegian database *A-tekst*.

for Peace and Freedom 1954, Haxthausen 1955, Allwood 1956. For commission reports and other sources see the bibliography.) The high frequency with which references to the comics debate in the other Scandinavian countries appeared in all types of articles in Sweden, Norway and Denmark shows that the transfer of ideas on an inter-Scandinavian level was so significant, that the analysis of the Scandinavian comics debate benefits from being treated as a regional study rather than a comparative one.¹³

Why consumption of Batman could ruin the lives of children

As previously stated, the Scandinavian studies of children's leisure reading habits identified a gap between adult ideals and children's reality as it appeared in the surveys. In the late 1940s this mismatch was mostly debated with a focus on book-series (e.g. Scandinavian versions of Enid Blyton's books), short stories in weekly magazines and comics, which also appeared in magazines and newspapers. However, from the beginning of the 1950s the focus of the discussion changed as it intensified, and comics became the focus of articles that debated children's consumption of inappropriate reading material. This change had international roots. In 1952–53 UNESCO took the initiative to study several aspects of the relationship between children and mass media. This was an offshoot of a specific study of entertainment films for juvenile audiences conducted in 1951–52 (Germeten 1953). The UNESCO report on children and mass media *The Child Audience: A Report on Press, Film and Radio for Children* was initiated due to ongoing debates in the US and Europe that expressed concerns about children's consumption of comics (Bauchard 1952, preface and introduction). The rise of a particularly Scandinavian interest in children's consumption of comics, and especially comic books, can thus be seen as occurring in an international environment where concern about the relationship between children and mass media focused on this in particular.¹⁴ The fact that the first Scandinavian initiative to conduct a public study of children's consumptions of cartoons and the establishment of an "advisory committee" on the problems this might entail, was made due to a direct request from the Norwegian UNESCO committee in 1952 demonstrates

¹³ A comparison with other debates about comics in e.g. the UK, the US, France and Italy would however be interesting, but this lies beyond the scope of this particular article.

¹⁴ Scandinavian debaters' influence from the UNESCO report can be seen in e.g. Bejerot 1954, Winther, 5 February 1955, the Norwegian paper "Instilling i tegneseriesaka" from 1954.

this international influence.¹⁵ The international opinion of comics being inappropriate reading material for children was also reflected in the targeting of one type of comic as particularly bad for children: the superhero comic. This particular type of comic was singled out as the worst in the UNESCO report from 1953: "...by undermining or warping the traditional values of each country, the superman myth is becoming a kind of international monster" (Bauchard 1952: 37–38).

In the dominating discourse that can be detected in the Scandinavian comics debate, shared by professional groups of mainly teachers, children's books librarians and people with a degree in psychology or pedagogy, the American comics that featured *Batman*, *Superman*, *The Phantom*, *Hopalong Cassidy* or similar superheroes were considered the worst comics children could consume. In 1953 the aforementioned Norwegian "advisory committee" on comics gave the following description of the superhero comics:

The impression one is left with after having read this visual-literature is, that it is, for the moment, dominated by crimes, spiced up with fights, knock-outs, shootings, car accidents and plane crashes. Peaceful animals are thrown through the air in a sprinkle of suns and stars. Women in flowing robes or tight corsets are tied to trees, locked in basements for the purpose of creating hidden terrors only to be rescued by Superman, Batman or some other superhero. The main characteristics for a vast part of the comics are that all actions are violent, at high-speed, men are supernaturally strong and either complete villains or superb heroes (Problemet tegneserier: 1954).

The black and white picture of the world the comics were seen to paint was by far the greatest concern of debates in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. As the Swedish schoolmaster Lorentz Larson asked rhetorically in an article in a Norwegian journal for pedagogical research: "How is the spiritual life of children and the youth affected by these infantile fantasy worlds, stereotypical descriptions of humans, with emphasis on vulgar sex appeal, brutal evolutionary cult and simpleminded happiness?" (Larson 1954: 17). The answer to this was given in the largest part of the articles in

¹⁵ "Instilling i tegneseriesaka" 1954, "Rapport fra det rådgivende udvalg for tegneserier" 1956.

the comic debate: such simplified and unrealistic descriptions of the world would no doubt affect its reader's assumptions about the world they lived in, and the conclusion that superhero comics led to a distorted picture of the world was widely shared by leading debaters.¹⁶

The dismissal of the superhero comics as proper reading material for children must be seen in a context where democratic values were something children's reading material should not undermine by being unrealistic and idolising humans who dealt with social problems outside the democratic system. Danish schoolmistress, Anne Marie Nørvig expressed this concern in an article from 1952: "One can make it clear that for endangered children the comics can, together with other circumstances, hinder a normal adjustment to the laws of society" (Nørvig 1952). This was later quoted in the official report from the Norwegian advisory committee of 1954. One could wonder why the debaters thought that superhero comics were bad for democracy and society, since *Superman* and *The Phantom* normally catch the criminals and help people in need. However this was done in a way that was incompatible with the democratic values in Scandinavia, as Norwegian Knut Ingar Hansen wrote in the Norwegian religious periodical *Prismet*: "By and large we can say that the skills that make them [the superheroes] fit for the job [saving the world] is physical strength and the ability to use guns, something we do not promote in our society. It is by force and violence and often by using the same means as his opponents that they get themselves an excellent career in the minds of children all over the world" (Hansen 1955: 258). The means by which superheroes saved the world was thus the thing that made them unsuitable idols for children.

The experiences of the Second World War, though different in all Scandinavian countries, played an important role in the leading debaters' dismissal of the superhero comics. In an article named *Killers in Our Midst*, Nils Bejerot – who in 1954 published the controversial and influential book *Children Comics Society* – argued that the violence in the superhero comics would make children violent, even potential murderers and rear them to participate in creating war, not peace (Bejerot 1953, 1954). This was exactly the opposite of what the Scandinavian countries had seen themselves working towards after the war: to create a larger awareness of democratic values and promoting peace. Through membership of the In-

¹⁶ See e.g. Karl Ivre in *Smålands Folkeblad*, 8 February 1954, Sv. Aa. Olsen in *Göteborgsposten* 10 January 1954, Karl Høker in *Kristlig Dagblad*, 21 December 1954.

ternational Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), Norway and Sweden especially, participated in the organisation's attempts to raise "the international understanding" amongst children through the children's book (Tenfjord 1953). The opposition between how leading debaters in the Scandinavian comics debate explained the influence popular superhero comics had on children, and the desired influence of the children's book in influential organisations such as IBBY, could not have been stronger.

It was, however, not only the content of the comics which leading debaters perceived as violent, anti-democratic and discriminatory. Taking a closer look at the professions of the leading debaters and their status in the growing Scandinavian welfare states, as I will do in the following, we can also see that the mode of distribution and spatial issues regarding the consumption of comics contributed to the categorisation of them as inappropriate.

The market versus the school and the library

The Swede, Lorentz Larson, recognised by his contemporaries as the leading Scandinavian authority on children's reading, is a good example of the debaters that set out the leading discourse in the comic debate. His background was in the Swedish education system as teacher and schoolmaster, and his authority in the field was already established before the debates took place (Nilson 1969). Not all the debaters were working as teachers, but Christian Winther and the Norwegian Sverre Sletvold who published several articles during the debate also belonged to this profession and, like Larson, were widely recognised as experts who knew what children should and should not read. Other debaters, such as politicians, librarians and psychologists often referred to the works of the teachers and saw them as authorities in the field. The reason why teachers played a central role in all three Scandinavian countries as key authorities on children and childhood, is connected to the central role the idea of an undivided, comprehensive school system played in the national aims for a strong welfare state.¹⁷ In the Scandinavian countries the aim of equality among citizens, regardless of social and cultural background, was part of the political programme in the 1950s, an idea which had its roots in welfare reforms from the interwar period. Free and equal education was seen as the way to achieve this goal, as well as to secure future welfare. Securing the future welfare societies through equal education of all children was thus a main responsibility of

¹⁷ On the idea of the comprehensive school system see Sjöberg (2003: 55).

Scandinavian teachers and others working in the education systems in the 1950s (e.g. psychologists, nursery teachers and educational specialists).

The education all children would ideally get from school was supposed to make children cultured humans, and the teachers who participated in the debate saw a contradiction between this goal and what children “learnt” from the comics consumed in their spare time. As Christian Winther said in a speech given at the annual general meeting of the Danish Teacher’s Federation of Unions: “The comics – and bad films – are precisely working against what the school tries to develop. [...] If it continues, in a couple of generations, it will be useless to teach children how to read and write since they will all have become illiterate” (printed version: Winther 1954: 856). The clash between the comics and the school was clear for Winther. The Swedish teacher Evald Fransson, reiterated this in his article *The Comics – a Rearing Problem* published in the Swedish teacher unions’ periodical in 1953 and in *Norsk Pædagogisk Tidsskrift* in 1954: “As a principle the school must, in this fight [between the book and the comic], side with the word [the book]” (Fransson 1953: 19). The teachers saw it as the school’s job to take control of children’s reading habits both inside and outside the classroom, in order to ensure that leisure reading did not ruin their educational efforts. In Fransson’s quotation it is worth noticing that he sees the comic as a medium in itself – no matter what the content – which is inappropriate reading material because it provides a “reading” of pictures rather than plain text. However there was not clear agreement among debaters who dismissed comics as inappropriate cultural products for children, about whether such a dismissal would also necessarily include comics that contained content similar to that of appropriate children’s books.¹⁸

The books available to Scandinavian children, either in the school library, the public library or through so-called “book collections” available at Norwegian schools were, in the comic debates, presented as appropriate alternative cultural products to comics. The reason these books were seen as appropriate was that they had been selected by teachers, librarians or people with another kind of pedagogical expertise with regard to both content and reader-friendliness. These books, which, when named, were almost all adapted versions of established classics such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, books by Jules Verne (*Around the World in Eighty Days*) and Lisa Teztner (*The Children from No. 67*). The pedagogical cri-

¹⁸ See the diverse opinions in Winther 1954 and Larson 1953.

teria that were accentuated when debaters pointed to the appropriateness of the books in libraries and schools, often specified their known appropriateness for a specific age group and that their moral values were in concordance with those of the school and establishment. Exposing children to good children's books was seen as a way in which the child could become familiar with established cultural and social values. However this was not only a passive and receiving act; reading was also seen as *creating* values and norms – as Danish librarian Elenora Sørensen said in 1953: “A child's leisure reading creates values for society” (Sørensen, 17 February 1953).

Whereas books depicted in the comic debate were described as being consumed in spaces controlled by public employees, whose morals and pedagogical principles were guaranteed by their education and pedagogical training, comics were perceived as being consumed in uncontrolled spaces such as in the school yard, in toilets, on the street or at home. The irresponsible attitudes teachers and librarians ascribed to both the sellers of comics – kiosk owners – and the parents who knowingly or carelessly let their children consume comics, were considerable. The fact that very few printed objections to these accusations existed, helped the professional groups who worked with children to maintain their monopoly over the spaces in which appropriate reading took place.

Besides being seen as a product which existed outside the controlled and protective pedagogical space, comics were also strongly associated with peer-culture. As opposed to books lent by the library or given to children by their parents, comics were seen as something children bought themselves or which were lent to them by friends. (See e.g. Nørvig 27 November 1953.) Children's independent agency in relation to this was seen as leading them to the consumption of inappropriate comics whereas consumption that was controlled by adults – especially professionals working with children – were depicted as leading them to consume appropriate cultural products. This association of children's adult-independent consumption with choices of inappropriate products can also be observed in contemporary articles about children's consumption of films and books from book-series (e.g. Blyton's works). When adults, with an interest in children's consumption of films – mostly people with a background in psychology – identified what they saw as the main reasons for children choosing films they felt were inappropriate for them, they almost always identified peer-pressure and a lack of parental interest (Siersted 1953, Granat 19 & 27 March 1953, Germeten 1953). Likewise, the choice of children, when clubbing together to get a friend a birthday present, to buy books

from book-series such as those by Enid Blyton (*Famous Five*) or Scandinavian equivalents, was often viewed as a bad choice made due to a lack of adult advice.

Children's choices of inappropriate cultural products – in particular comics – was thus interpreted as a consequence of a lack of knowledge about what was best for them, in the eyes of the debaters that dominated debates about children's consumption of cultural products in 1950s Scandinavia. At the same time as children were understood to be active and powerful consumers – the adult debaters seldom missed an opportunity to express their indignation about the huge amount of money they believed children spent on comics (films and inappropriate books) – children were also understood to be completely incapable of choosing what was best for them unless provided with adult supervision. (See e.g. Larson and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom 1954.)

The only source available in print from the Scandinavian comic debate written by some of the children, shows us, when viewed with the response of the editor of the magazine which published it, how useless children's own opinions of their reading material were seen as. The source is a letter by two boys who wrote in response to a Danish radio debate entitled *What does the youth read and why is it not supposed to do that* broadcasted on March 27th 1953 (Rasmussen & Poulsen 1953). The letter was sent to the journal for children's libraries *Children and Books* [Børn og Bøger]. In the letter the two boys (age unknown) ask what adults want them to read if not *Superman*, since the boys do not want to read books and become what they call "killjoys". The boys argued that the "Superman club" which the *Superman* magazine allowed its readers to enrol in, and which they both were regional chairmen of, was a good way of keeping in contact with other *Superman* readers, especially American ones. The letter is not very well written (it contains both syntactical and grammatical errors), and from the *Children and Books*' editorial comment it is clear that the editor distanced herself from its content (Franck 1953). Most likely the boys' letter was only printed to prove how bad *Superman*'s influence was on children (in terms of writing, producing arguments etc.), since the entire content of the letter (a defence of *Superman*) directly opposed the general attitudes against comics and all non-classical literature found in the rest of the *Children and Books* journal. There seems to be no impact of the letter in later editions of the journal; presumably it was simply ignored.

The disregard with which children's opinions were treated is in some way even more telling when compared to the way Lorentz Larson, and the

others who interviewed children about their consumption of comics for scientific studies, treated children's statements. Larson for instance, studied hundreds of children's interests in comics, but only saw their interest in comics and their identification with the leading characters as alarming: when it came to the children's opinions of their own consumption of comics, Larson was indifferent, since he did not consider them competent enough to choose what was best for themselves (Larson and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom 1954).

The endangered children

The aforementioned study by Lorentz Larson showed that almost all children consumed comics, even those who were too young to actually *read* the text (Larson and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom 1954: 13). This observation, that boys and girls, toddlers and teenagers, to some degree all read comics was also noted in other places, such as in newspaper articles from throughout Scandinavia. This can also be seen as the reason why the debaters often used the generic term "child" or "children" when they wrote their contributions to the debate. However it is evident, if one takes a closer look at the articles, that some children were seen as more endangered than others when reading comics. In the following I will look firstly at why comics were seen as inappropriate for children in general by analysing how children and childhood were defined in the debates, and secondly I will take a closer look at the reasons why some children – mostly working-class boys living in cities – were seen as those most exposed to the danger reading comics entailed.

Larson characterised the children who were part of his study, which included both boys and girls aged 4 to 15, as: honest, impulsive and expressive, open-hearted and without any hidden agendas. He thus depicted the child as innocent and vulnerable. In relation to children's reading, he said that children identified themselves with what they read (literally speaking). If we connect his conception of children to that of children's reading, we can understand why he thought children reading comics was so alarming – in Larson's view children would identify themselves completely with the world found in the comics. In a very similar way Swedish debater, Nils Bejerot, claimed that children "imitated" what they saw and that they would thus imitate what they saw in comics (Bejerot 1954: 158). Bejerot said that in the case of older children this imitation was not as direct as for younger ones as they transformed it into something else: "If a lad reads about the perfect bank robbery it is not strange if he transforms it

into a dream about the perfect kiosk robbery or something similar. The comics' train raids may become the throwing of stones at cars or trains, or torture with a red hot iron can become the meaningless beating of a classmate with a sharp pen" (Bejerot 1954: 158–159). According to Bejerot, it was the nature of children to imitate what they read in comics. "Reading, playing and living becomes one for children. Their experience of what they read is different to the adult experience" was a similar message in an editorial in the Norwegian periodical for teachers in 1953 (Editorial, *Norsk Skuleblad*, no. 12, 1953).

In the Norwegian advisory committee's report from 1954, it is also noted that comics were inappropriate reading material from the point of view of upbringing, and that children were bound to be influenced by some of the content in the worst comics (Arbeidsudvalget for Statens Folkeopplysningsråd 1954: 3–4). That a child was someone who should be reared and protected from harmful things was a widespread and common conception amongst almost all of the debaters who participated in the comic debate, even if they might not have agreed on what precisely "a good upbringing" meant. An interesting thing, this notwithstanding, is that in some of the articles, for instance in the above mentioned periodical for the Norwegian teachers association, *Norsk Skuleblad*, there was a disassociation from a directly moralising approach when trying to get children to consume things other than comics (and other cultural products found to be inappropriate). In 1953 two articles about children's consumption of comics, both of which were very much within the editorial lines of the period, argued that adults should not "moralise" when trying to persuade children to consume appropriate books instead of comics. Instead adults – parents as well as teachers – should recognise that besides being innocent and vulnerable, children were also interested in drama and thrills, an interest that draws them towards comics and away from moralising books (By 1953). The conclusion was thus that children's drive for excitement and drama should be nurtured in the children's books that were offered to them, as an alternative to comics, if children should choose these of their own free will. This is interesting because it means that even though children were not seen as able to choose what was best for themselves, this did not lead to a complete dismissal of their interests (for thrills and excitement). On the contrary, it was seen as necessary to cater for these if one wanted children to choose the appropriate alternatives to comics.

Though there was a shared conviction amongst most debaters of children's consumption of comics that almost all children in some way or the

other were exposed to inherent dangers when reading comics, it is clear that some children were seen as more endangered than others. In 1955 Jesper Florander, head of department at the *Danish Pedagogical Institute*, published his research on children's reading of comics in the Nordic journal for psychology, *Nordisk Psykologi*. Florander explicitly linked his research to the writings of people such as Larson and Bejerot and, as a whole, his research can be utilised to explain how comic readers were categorised in the leading Scandinavian debate books and studies that had influenced the comic debate.¹⁹

Florander's research underpinned the general claim that can be found in the leading views on comic readers in the Scandinavian comic debate; namely that the children (always boys if they were specified!) who were the most keen comics readers had personal problems, were attracted to the violence in comics and came from a difficult domestic situation (Florander 1955). In an interesting article from the Danish newspaper *Vendsyssels Tidende* from October 16th 1955, Florander elaborated on the results of his research by giving a detailed description of some of the schoolboys that were part of it. In Florander's view it was boys in their pre-teens (from about age 9–13) who were most attracted to comics and therefore most likely to fall under their bad influence. However girls were also seen as being in danger of falling under the spell of comics in the long run. In the newspaper interview, Florander gives the following description of what he calls "the typical comic reader": "The boy D.C. has, in the lessons where the research [on comic reading] was conducted, "devoured" comic books 24 times. This is the record. Fourteen times he has chosen American comic books, which he cannot read, but apparently gets a lot from the pictures. He is the typical comic-devourer. The psychological tests have shown that there is something wrong with him. What hides within this little fellow and his noticeable interest in comics? – His parents are divorced." (Interview. Florander and Forchhammer in *Vendsyssel Tidende*, 16 October 1955.)

The way in which Florander interprets the "family circumstances" (that the boy is a child of divorced parents) as a distinct reason for his extensive consumption of comics also applies for the other boys Florander

¹⁹ The following analysis of Florander's profiling and characterisation of comic readers is based on his two 1955 articles in respectively *Nordisk Psykologi* vol. 7, and *Dansk Pædagogisk Tidsskrift* no. 9, as well as an interview with Florander in the Danish newspaper *Vendsyssel Tidende* 16 October 1955. Florander's research puts forward a very typical example of what, at the time amongst the leading debaters, was seen as the most typical and endangered comic readers.

highlights as particularly exposed to the seductive nature of comics. In Florander's description of the other "typical" comic readers from his "research sample" this is also pointed out: one was a boy whose parents are not interested in his whereabouts, another a boy whose mother is working outside the home, another a boy with what is described as "not good" family circumstances and lastly but not least, a boy whose parents have divorced. The family and class background of the endangered boys is singled out as the prime reason for what Florander calls a common problem of "soul-imbalance" (ibid). For these boys comic reading was said to be something that exacerbated their problems and increased their enjoyment of violence and excitement. In contrast to Florander, the Norwegian schoolmaster Sverre By, did not only think that it was boys that were endangered, but all "children who are physically and psychologically inferior are especially at risk" – as such By also includes girls (By 1953: 201).

Why Batman was bad

"Since we still recognise the book as a means of cultural diffusion – rather than radio, television, film and comics – we must at least demand that the child's leisure time reading has a developmental function" (Buttenschøn in *Aarhus Stiftstidende*, 6 June 1954). These lines, written by Danish children's librarian Ellen Buttenschøn in 1954, are a good exemplification of why the dominating policy on children's consumption of cultural products looked as it did in Scandinavia in the mid 1950s. When seeing the book and the child's leisure reading as a central part of cultural socialisation it becomes apparent why comics, especially American superhero ones which were perceived as promoting violence, undemocratic values and an unhealthy need for excitement, were largely rejected by the professional educators in Scandinavia at this time. These comics were, in the view of the leading debaters, in direct opposition to the edifying and educative goals the welfare state educators aimed at. Teachers, librarians and other debaters who formulated the dominant discourse in the comic debates placed huge emphasis on the importance of leisure reading, and believed that children were deeply touched by what they read. Therefore they had to refuse the comics as appropriate reading material when they thought these contained values that would make children unfit for the world they were growing up in. Hence, since *Batman* and the rest of the comics' superheroes failed to teach children about the cultural and social values of the Scandinavian societies, and thus could not fulfil the educative function children's cultural products were supposed to fulfil in children's lives, all

these American comic-heroes were deemed unsuitable friends for children in the eyes of the debaters in the 1950's comics debate.

Batman, Superman, The Phantom and *Hopalong Cassidy* were also unwelcome company for children because their content "seduced" children who were seen as fragile adults-to-be who could not withstand this seduction and thus failed to make the right choices. This is also why adults had to make these choices for the children in order to ensure that they got cultural products that were edifying. This applied to all kinds of cultural products: films, comics and books – children had to be carefully supervised to make the correct, edifying and educational choices. Children were considered in their role as future, but not yet developed, citizens in the comics debate; all the things they would have to learn and adjust to had to be central in their lives – *Batman* and Co. failed to help with this task.

It is very interesting to observe how parents (mostly mothers) were on the one hand urged to take more responsibility for their children's leisure time consumption of cultural products: accompany them to the cinema, read more books aloud at home and persuade them to read good books instead of comics. On the other hand many teachers and librarians depicted parents as being unable to choose the "right" products as they did not have the required specialised knowledge. This mixed picture seems to stem from a clash of norms regarding child rearing in respectively the "new" institutions of the Scandinavian welfare state such as nurseries and comprehensive schools, and the more traditional type of rearing in the family or at work. In the welfare state institutions, specialised knowledge about children was seen as a necessary requirement to raise a child according to the needs of the (future) society – something the average family, and especially the average working class family, from this perspective, no longer possessed in sufficient quantities.

In the 1950's, in the comics debate, it was a central argument that the people responsible for adapting children to the educational needs of the welfare state, teachers and their professionally trained colleagues, had to control and supervise children's consumption of various cultural products. The consumption patterns with which comics were related made them a threat to this control. This is also why the peer culture that the consumption of comics, inappropriate films and the purchasing of cheap series-books were surrounded by was perceived as something destructive. It was not, however, seen as a *deliberate* destructive action (a type of counterculture) since children were considered unable to make informed choices. They were seen as victims of greater powers, such as the seductive nature

of comics, advertising, or neglectful parents who failed to monitor their leisure activities.

The widespread consensus on the policy of children's consumption of comics among those who participated in the Scandinavian comic debates seems partly to be rooted in a widespread coherent understanding of what national (or Scandinavian) cultural values and norms were across professional, generational and to some extent, political borders, and that these norms had to be protected and nurtured. The rejection of cultural products from America and the urge to promote national or Scandinavian cultural products are an indicator of this, as is the political consensus that was detectable throughout the debates. Whether it was comics as a medium, or the content of the available comics on the Scandinavian market, they were seen as unable to mediate the virtues and norms children were supposed to acquire while growing up.

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