

Book Reviews

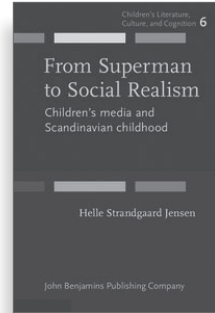
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Helle Strandgaard Jensen

From Superman to Social Realism:

Children's Media and Scandinavian Childhood

John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017, 188 p.



In the book 'From Superman to Social Realism,' Helle Strandgaard Jensen examines public debates about children and media in Denmark, Sweden and Norway during the mid-1950s, the late 1960s to the early 1970s and the early 1980s – points in time when the debates about children and media were especially active. The main argument throughout the book is “[...] what connects attitudes towards children’s media across different media types are their underlying ideals about childhood and the roles media should play in children’s lives” (p. 4). What is to be labelled appropriate and inappropriate media for children is a key question, and is explained by “[...] the messages and values media products were believed to offer children and how their match, or mismatch, with dominant childhood ideals led to their rejection or approval” (p. 4).

Strandgaard Jensen positions herself in the tradition of childhood history and new sociology of childhood. How we perceive childhood and children’s media use, at a certain point of time in society, is the outcome of historical, social and cultural ideas rather than explained by biological factors or a child’s psychological life-stage. Thus, the book addresses a key issue within media

and communication studies: how to actually understand media technology in relation to societal processes. Strandgaard Jensen’s work can be placed within the framework of ‘social shaping of technology’ (Baym, 2010), bringing to the fore the importance of looking at, in addition to the medium and its messages, how symbolic meanings around a medium are part of an ongoing struggle of negotiations and resistance between various public debaters (such as psychologists, scholars, educators and librarians) in society.

The presented analysis is based on data from newspapers and periodicals. In total, Strandgaard Jensen collected 3052 articles from the periods 1953-1957, 1968-1972, 1980-1984. After the initial analysis, where key debaters, events and arguments are identified, Strandgaard Jensen adds an intertextual reading approach to her material. To broaden our understanding and knowledge of identified dominating debates in the Scandinavian countries, the author connects these to other sources that stretch beyond the abovementioned periods. These additional sources consist of, for example, policy papers, conference reports, books, minutes of union meetings and leaflets with parental advice.

Chapters 1 and 2 cover the period 1945-1960. The Scandinavian post-war society is introduced, focussing on education, family life and the development of the welfare state. In the first chapter, Strandgaard Jensen examines the public debates on comics and superhero comics. During this period, critical voices are raised about comics' inappropriateness for children, not only in terms of concerns about mental health, but also in terms of providing children with wrong images of what constitutes a democratic society. As the welfare state in Scandinavia expands, a stronger focus on education and social-cultural equality is seen. In contrast to comics, classic children's books are viewed as a much more appropriate medium, assuring children's enculturation in the welfare state. Films at the time, like comics, are seen as inappropriate due to children's non-developed mental capacity and maturity. Great concern is raised about violent comics resulting in violent behaviour and attitudes among the young. But also providing a too simple and unrealistic world view, being solely the output of (American) consumer culture. Thus, the media effect paradigm, with its theoretical roots in behaviourism and perceiving the child as a tabula rasa, permeates the public debates in Scandinavia. A closer look is taken, in chapter 2, on what criteria define appropriate books. Several criteria are mentioned, such as appropriateness in relation to children's age and developmental stage, providing the child with valuable experiences and good examples that could not be gained from other media. Arguments in the public debate are also brought to the fore about the increasing need to provide children with access to public libraries as a means for becoming democratic citizens.

During the period 1960-1975, the previous consensus on children's media use among debaters is challenged and put into question. The competent child is emphasised – a child capable of making decisions about what media to use – moving away from a dominating discourse about protecting children. The emerging competent child discourse also questions the low status of children in soci-

ety, being the outcome of conservative adult power. Strandgaard Jensen links this shift in the public debate to socio-cultural changes in Scandinavia as a result of the '1968 youth rebellion' and the new left wing. Children's roles are redefined as a result of new ideas of family life, parenthood and childcare. In chapter 3, the changing norms for children's literature are examined. A call for realistic literature is made, where the child's own wishes and needs are important. Appropriate literature should be about children's experiences and become a means for child empowerment. Critical voices are also, during this period, raised about the degree of state control and growing institutionalisation of children's literature. Chapter 4 provides a detailed analysis of a symposium arranged by the Nordic Council (1969) due to the heated public debates in Scandinavia about appropriated media products. At the time, Ambjörnsson's book 'Trash Culture for Children' evokes much debate, advocating that children's media products must become less dependent on commercial interests – new types of content are called for. Chapter 5 turns its gaze towards the late 1960s when television becomes part of Scandinavian media culture and children's television is highly debated: is television to be seen as a spokesperson for children, as mainly a new form of entertainment or as a potential support for educational needs? As for the former, television is seen as a liberating force for children, increasing their freedom in relation to family and school and, thus, becoming an additional means of emancipation. The extent to which children's own choices and preferences should be included in the definition of appropriate media becomes a key issue among public debaters. This, in turn, leads to a redefinition of the library's role in a democratic society; with the period's more child-oriented approach, the earlier abolishment of comics and low-quality books is reconsidered.

Finally, in chapters 6 and 7, the period 1975-1985 is discussed. By the end of 1970s, a fundamental change takes place in the perception of childhood in Scandinavia, which

in turn has implications for the definitions of what constitutes appropriate media for children. As video, cable and satellite television enter the Scandinavian media landscape, new concerns about true children's culture in terms of play and creativity emerge. In her analysis of this shift, Strandgaard Jensen considers the international financial crisis during the 1970s and new political agendas, which lead to a more free-market-oriented Scandinavian welfare state – one characterised by an increased individualism. Compared to the previously examined periods, parental responsibility is emphasised. Through parental guidance, children's use of electronic media could be made appropriate. The academic and public debates on electronic media during this period are concerned about its socio-cultural consequences, new forms of aesthetic expressions and the negative effects of violent content on children.

Throughout the chapters, I greatly enjoyed the author's sensitivity to the richness of the material in the attempt to understand past debates on (in)appropriate children's media. This sensitivity is seen through Strandgaard Jensen's delicate and explorative way of understanding the examined debates by not only making cross-media comparisons, but also placing dominating debaters' voices in various historical, cultural and political contexts. With her dialectic approach to the material, Strandgaard Jensen provides us with thoughtful and important insights into how the rationale for debaters' arguments is formed by these contexts. Attention is especially drawn to public debaters' and scholars' different ways of defining the ideal childhood – which in turn has consequences for whether a medium is seen as appropriate or not – from viewing childhood as a period in life for the incomplete child to learn about adulthood (1950s), to understanding the child as having rights, to thinking of childhood as a crucial time for creativity and imaginations (1980s). Conducted diachronic and synchronic comparisons offer the reader a better understanding of not only what formed the public debates on children and media at a specific point of time, but

also how different views are interlinked over time, an interlinkage shaped by socio-cultural struggles. An additional analytical point of departure is Strandgaard Jensen's focus on Scandinavia as a region, building upon current pan-Scandinavian research on childhood. This approach shows how public debaters in Sweden, Norway and Denmark are influenced by each other, sharing the belief of a welfare state, built on solidarity and equality, while also considering national differences in the material. The conducted multi-layered historical analyses are a great strength of the presented work.

With her book, Strandgaard Jensen reminds us of the importance of understanding today's debates about children's media use through a historical lens. Similarities can here be found with Foucault's reasoning of the 'history of the present' through a genealogical approach (Garland, 2014). Hidden conflicts and negotiations in society, with a specific focus on key debaters in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, are made visible, pointing out their implications for existing central definitions of appropriate and inappropriate media for children during the selected periods. Definitions originating from various ways of conceptualising childhood and the child in specific socio-cultural and political structures. Strandgaard Jensen warns us against the risk of 'presentism' and states that current debates on children and media need a "multifaceted backdrop of reflection" (p. 150). I would, though, liked to have seen this elaborated more in the book: What implications do the conducted historical analyses have for scholars' understanding of today's children in a digital media landscape? For contemporary views on childhood? That is, how can historical analyses become a means to re-value and question contemporary media culture for children and to force us, as academic scholars, to reflect upon the questions we ask? Perhaps more importantly, how can these analyses encourage our consideration of what issues are not asked about – and why? How can researchers in childhood history and media

studies actively intervene in public debates? Such interventions would move us beyond a dichotomous way of thinking that has permeated not only public debates, but also research on children and media (where the child is often seen as a child at risk or as a competent child empowered by media technology). Finally, what new research areas are emerging through conducted historical analyses? The book 'From Superman to Social Realism' evokes many questions about today's media landscape. Furthermore, with her work, Strandgaard Jensen makes us once more aware of the socio-cultural and politi-

cal embeddedness of research, which always needs to be critically reflected upon.

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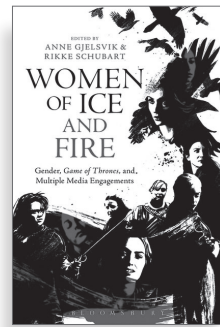
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Anne Gjelsvik & Rikke Schubart (eds.)

Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones, and Multiple Media Engagements

Bloomsbury, 2016, 277 p.



One of the most influential television shows of our time, *Game of Thrones*, has been both celebrated and severely criticised for its portrayal of female characters. Rape, sexual violence, a patriarchal world, torture and nudity, but also powerful female characters who take part in the political game, are some of the topics that are recurrent in discussions about gender among fans, critics and scholars. *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones, and Multiple Media Engagements* (2016) explores the female characters of the intermedial universe surrounding *Game of Thrones* in one introduction and eleven chapters. This book focuses on different aspects of the universe connected to both the television show and George R. R. Martin's books. The chapters focus on gender in relation to different characters, different intermedial contexts and different themes.

The editors, Anne Gjelsvik and Rikke Schubart, argue that the depiction of female

characters has contributed to both the books' and the TV show's success: "Female characters are, we think, key to the originality and thus, to the appeal and popularity of the GoT [*Game of Thrones*] universe" (p. 1). The anthology has two different intertwined aims: "[O]ur anthology explores the female characters of GoT, and how a transmedial GoT is inhabited and used by women, both fictional characters and real women" (p. 1). In the following, I will discuss in what ways this anthology adds new knowledge to the research on Martin's works and *Game of Thrones*. I will also highlight some overarching issues with the approach taken in specific chapters.

The anthology's different chapters provide an analysis of several different female characters within the GoT Universe. For example, in Chapter 6 "Power Play and Family Ties: Hybrid Fantasy, Network Narrative, and Female Characters" Helle Kannik Haastrup analyses

the episode “The Children” (Season 4, episode 10). She provides an insightful overview of the different plot lines in the episode and how they interact with each other (p. 141–144). She analyses the audiovisual themes and style, and all these aspects are tied to the depiction of female characters, such as Cersei Lannister and Daenerys Targaryen.

Several chapters focus on an intermedial approach to the GoT universe, where differences and similarities between books, movies and games are analysed, and the impact of these aspects on the interpretation are discussed. In chapter 3, “Unspeakable Acts of (Sexual) Terror as/in Quality Television”, Anne Gjelsvik presents an excellent analysis of how the adaptation from books to television show changes the ideological implications regarding (sexual) terror, illustrating “the changes in the depiction of sex and violence, and how the adaptation transforms different forms of power into sexual victimization” (p. 57). Felix Schröter’s analysis of three different video games based on GoT in chapter 4 provides a pedagogical introduction to theories about characters in video games. He argues that “the genre-specific mediality of each game substantially affects the way female characters are represented” (p. 96), and illustrates how the female characters are portrayed differently in the three games. Thereby, he not only focuses on the specific qualities of video games, but nuances this description by analysing different types of video games. The differences between how the mothers Cersei Lannister and Catelyn Stark are portrayed in the books and the TV show are highlighted in Marta Eivåg’s superb intermedial analysis in chapter 7, “Maiden, Mother, and Crone’: Motherhood in the World of Ice and Fire”.

A few chapters problematise patriarchy, gender and feminism in very thoughtful ways, such as Elizabeth Eaton’s chapter 9, “Female Machiavellians in Westeros”. Eaton argues that “Daenerys has more agency than any other female character in the series—she is the Machiavellian prince not only in situation, but also in deed” (p. 204). The Machiavellian prince becomes a theoretical tool

for exploring female characters’ roles in the political game of thrones. However, in terms of problematising the concept of feminism, Stéphanie Genz’s chapter 11, “‘I’m not Going to Fight Them, I’m Going to Fuck Them’: Sexist Liberalism and Gender (A)Politics in *Game of Thrones*” takes this discussion one step further. Genz discusses the consequences of perceiving the GoT universe as feminist, and she argues that its depiction of female characters is far more complicated: “[W]hat makes any denomination of feminism in the series problematic is the absence of an overt moral position or structure that sets up parameters of beliefs between what is and is not permissible” (p. 256). This chapter provides a theoretical background to the other articles, which I would have preferred to read before the other articles. By using this article as a critical framework, the anthology could have been more problematising and nuanced in its application of gender theory.

Another theoretical frame that could have made the analysis of female characters even more nuanced is an intersectional approach to power. In chapter 8, “Women Warriors from Chivalry to Vengeance”, Yvonne Tasker and Lindsay Steenberg address intersectionality when they discuss Daenerys not only as a female character but also as a white female character who becomes the saviour of slaves, which they relate to Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism. By theoretically framing the anthology in Genz’s article and an intersectional approach, the gender aspects could have been analysed more critically.

Some of the chapters rely on assumed interpretations of “the viewer” or “the reader”, without providing any empirical evidence for the claims. For example, Rikke Schubart’s chapter 5, “Woman with Dragons: Daenerys, Pride, and Postfeminist Possibilities”, assumes that her interpretation is universal when she states that “we are drawn to Daenerys’s story like moths to a flame” (p. 120). This tendency is further enforced in the conclusion to the chapter: “Daenerys’s emotions and qualities transcend clear-cut ideological positions. They are neither left nor right wing

but empowering and adaptive to any reader and viewer whether we are male or female, feminist or postfeminist” (p. 123). Through textual analysis alone, it is impossible to draw conclusions about other readers’ or viewers’ interpretations, and in an anthology which includes empirical chapters about fan receptions, such as Susana Tosca and Lisbeth Klustrup’s chapter 10, “The Expert Female Fan Recap on YouTube”, there is simply no need for these kinds of claims.

My main concern with this anthology is how it treats the concept of fantasy fiction. There is no consistent definition of fantasy or high fantasy that is being applied throughout the anthology. The concepts are discussed in the introduction, but since this discussion is not thoroughly grounded in fantasy research it does not provide a theoretical basis that the other chapters can rely on. Instead, there is confusion about the difference between fantasy and fantastic genres in Schubart’s, and Tasker and Steenberg’s chapters. For example, the latter argue that “contemporary fantasy fictions” can be divided into three different types, where one is stories set in “the dystopic future (e.g. *Hunger Games*)” (p. 175). Thus, the distinction between fantasy and “fantastic literature” as an umbrella term that includes all types of literature that does not aim to portray a realistic world, including fantasy and science fiction, is erased, and *The Hunger Games* can be misinterpreted as a work of fantasy, when in reality it is a clear example of science fiction, more specifically a young adult dystopia, with its focus on technological innovations that could potentially exist in a possible future. By discussing central definitions of fantasy such as those in Brian Attebery’s *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992) and Farah Mendlesohn’s *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008) in the introduction, this confusion could have been avoided.

Furthermore, in Gjelsvik and Schubart’s introduction they clarify that they view GoT as an original take on high fantasy, but they do not use any source when they define this concept. They do mention that Martin’s work can be seen as an example of “pitch-black fantasy” (p. 6), but they do not discuss the concept of dark fantasy. Overviews of dark

fantasy, such as Roz Kavaney’s (2012), could have provided a more thorough understanding of this particular branch of fantasy. The concept of dark fantasy would have been useful in several of the chapters, especially Haastруп’s, in which she analyses the genre mosaic of the GoT universe. In an otherwise intriguing analysis of different genre formulas, dark fantasy is never mentioned, which would have been the most obvious genre for me if I were to discuss genres in the GoT universe.

The anthology would have been more coherent and more theoretically nuanced if the introduction had provided readers of this otherwise thought-provoking and insightful work with a more thorough understanding of fantasy fiction, high fantasy and dark fantasy, and if Genz’s chapter which problematises the concept of feminism had been the first chapter after the introduction. In addition, an explicit intersectional approach throughout the volume would have contributed to an even more nuanced analysis of the gender related power dynamics at play. As a unit, the different chapters together provide a lot of new knowledge about the intermedial GoT universe. Simultaneously, the fascinating female characters of this universe receive the critical attention that they deserve. Thus, the anthology succeeds in “carving out new roads in the gendered terrain of GoT, and also mapping new territory in women’s engagement with transmedial fantasy” (p. 2).

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