THE NoJSe REPORT 2025:

ARTISTIC POWER IN CHILDREN'S FILM

Creative Europe MEDIA

In Collaboration With:

Foreword

The NoJSe network consists of five children's film festivals from the Nordic region in Europe and has existed since 2017. The five festivals are BUFF in Sweden, BFF in Norway, BUSTER in Denmark, OULU in Finland and RIFF in Iceland. NoJSe is strengthening the dissemination of Nordic films for young audiences in the Nordic Region of Europe and aims at creating new and stronger meeting points for the children's media industries of the Nordic countries.

NoJSe works for:

- The Nordic European audiences to discover films for children and youth produced in the Nordic European region via streaming, festival screenings and film literacy initiatives
- The Industry of the Nordic European Regions to debate the status and future of children's media in the Nordics at designated NoJSe Network Industry events
- Knowledge to be shared between the festivals in the Network and the European Children and Youth Media Industry as a whole

This report builds on the work and thoughts of the second NoJSe Think Tank (2024). We extend our gratitude to all the Think Tank members for generously sharing their expertise and contributions:

Aka Hansen, director, Greenland
Alli Haapasalo, director, Finland
Erik Lundqvist, producer, Sweden
Gunnbjörg Gunnarsdóttir, director, Norway
Maria Torgard, director, Faroe Islands
Rikke Tambo Andersen, producer, Denmark
Sara Gunnarsdóttir, director, animator, Iceland

We also appreciate the valuable inputs provided by the observers of the Think Tank. A special acknowledgment goes to Johanna Koljonen at The Nostradamus Project, Göteborg Film Festival, for her diligent work in conducting the outcomes of the Think Tank into this report.

The NoJSe Network

- **BUFF Film Festival**
- **BFF Kristiansand International Children's Film Festival**
- **Oulu International Children's Film Festival**
- **RIFF YOUTH Reykjavik International Film Festival**
- **BUSTER Film Festival**

Introduction

This report is the second in a collaboration between the NoJSe Network of children's film festivals and Göteborg Film Festival's Nostradamus Project. It is a summary of and reflection on discussions from a day-long Think Tank on children's film, organized in conjunction with the 2024 BUSTER film festival in Copenhagen by the NoJSe Network.

During the day, the filmmakers Alli Haapasalo and Gunnbjörg Gunnarsdottir, and producer Erik Lundqvist, presented case studies of recent work. In the moderated conversation that followed, think tank members and other participants reflected on it around three themes: what attracts someone to making kids' content; what authentic storytelling means in this context, and what innovation looks like in connecting content with young audiences today.

In this report, you will find quotes from the case study presenters, and perspectives from filmmakers and producers Aka Hansen, Maria Tórgarð, Sara Gunnarsdóttir, and Rikke Tambo, as well as from voices representing funding and festivals: Estefanía Daza, Mette Damgaard Sørensen, Mariella Harpelunde Jensen, Sanne Juncker Pedersen, and Kristine Vinderskov.

Compared to last year's conversation, what emerged had a much closer focus on the creative process than on the state of the industry, with fascinating results. I have given as much room as possible to direct quotes. These have been cherry-picked from much longer discussions, edited for language and clarity, and re-organised in four thematic chapters for coherence and ease of reading, covering:

- the low status of children's film within our industries
- the increasing importance in a polarised age of seeing yourself of screen
- the strengths and weaknesses of pre-existing IP and IP development as used in Nordic children's media today
- aesthetic approaches to authenticity in children's film

Every chapter is followed by questions for reflection and discussion.

This work is also feeding into the 12th annual Nostradamus Report on the near future of the screen industries, which will be released at the Marché du Film in Cannes in May. Like the previous 11, it will be available for download at goteborgfilmfestival.se/nostradamus

Johanna Koljonen
Industry Analyst

1. Status of Working in Children's Film

The status of children's film within our local industries is irrationally low. When current work is not seen or discussed, even successes can affect filmmaker careers negatively. This disinterest compromises recruitment to the field and the artistic quality of the work, and contributes to a cultural inability to view artistic and commercial successes as repeatable.

> **Rikke Tambo:** *Children's and youth films aren't taken as seriously as adult films in terms of artistic recognition. Many directors aspire to Cannes, but these films often don't get the same prestige.*

> **Maria Tórgarð:** *When you're competing for resources to make what you want to make, especially if you come from a place with a smaller industry, it can be quite dangerous to get a label on you.*

> **Gunnbjörg Gunnarsdottir:** *In Norway, some directors use [children's film] as a stepping stone for "real" movies. I think a lot of directors know it's easier to get funding for family films, so we make one as our first film. But now I feel I don't want to get put in that category only, so my next movies are not children's films.*

> **Alli Haapasalo:** *In Finland, we have looked down on children's films a bit within the industry. We have also looked down on female directors. At least in my lifetime, in Finland, children's films have been what women directors can go do – which is terrible to say about children's films, and terrible to say about women directors! As a young director, I would not have taken a children's film as my first feature, even if someone handed me a brilliant script. I definitely would not have started to create a personal [children's film project], because it would have been a path to potentially getting labeled as someone who can only do that. I know directors who have made really great children's films and can't get an adult film off the ground.*

Film for children and young audiences has a relatively low status within the film industry overall, and the Nordics are no exception. This is true even though family films perform very well at the box office: even markets like Sweden, where domestic film is otherwise struggling, these successes somehow don't count.

One explanation seems to be that family adventure is a type of film that people see in groups, which in this context is understood as somehow cheating the box office – even though films for grownups that

people see in groups and treat as an outing are considered events or pop culture phenomena. At a time when the theatrical industry is praying for precisely that kind of title, as these are considered central to rekindling movie-going culture in the short term and its survival in the long term, local industries do not seem to perceive hit movies for children as important successes.

Paradoxically there also seems to be a perception that films for young audiences are successes automatically – that their quality is somehow irrelevant to the outcomes. Either because they are based on well-known IP, which audiences are assumed to show up for unthinkingly, or because going to the movies is viewed as a family activity that will happen regularly out of habit regardless of what is being screened. All of this is wrong.

To begin with, theatrical success is certainly not guaranteed. Films for children face enormous, high-quality competition in theatres from the worlds' biggest entertainment conglomerates, and this certainly extends into the family film space. Last year's biggest global hit, Inside Out 2, is a great example of a title that parents with children of very different ages chose to see together, and any domestic release regardless of name recognition would have struggled to compete in the first few weeks of its release.

Meanwhile, domestic films for teenagers are very difficult to communicate to the target audience at all, and even harder to actually make them show up in theatres for. Filmmakers sometimes confidently claim teens don't go to the movies; this is incorrect, and the 15-29 age bracket see more movies than all others. What's correct is that some teens don't care for the cinema (just as a huge proportion of adults never go), and that domestic titles for teens and young adults fare poorly in competition with the other films targeted to them, namely, almost all titles in the most commercial genres.

In this landscape, yes, a well-known IP can certainly help a domestic film break through, and obviously a film that kids see with their parents will sell more tickets than some others. But quality still matters enormously. Word-of-mouth will determine the film's staying power, and probably plays a big part in decisions about whether children will be accompanied by one or more adults.

> **Gunnbjörg Gunnarsdottir:** *Victoria Must Go premiered in February, and was in theatres for six months. I think children just kept talking about it. Ticket sales went up 60% from the first weekend to the second. That's rare, but kids were talking about it at school, telling their friends about this crazy movie they saw.*

Prejudice against the quality of children's content is not entirely irrational. Most adults have come across lousy, lazy, or manipulative storytelling that became popular anyway thanks to successful branding and advertising (not least aimed at the children themselves). Perhaps such experiences are unreflectingly applied even by film professionals on children's titles they have not personally seen – and therefore won't see, unless they are parents, or working with the young audiences themselves.

That others in the industry do not experience the best work by their Nordic colleagues, nor the best kids' content in the world curated for them by specialised festivals, impacts the filmmakers in the

field. Their achievements are casually dismissed even when they are commercially successful, and especially when they are not. An artistically successful film for grownups can be assumed at least to have some name recognition within the industry, reflecting positively on its makers as they develop other projects. As children's films are rarely reviewed or discussed in these terms, having made one can actually count as a strike against you later.

> **Mariella Harpelunde Jensen:** *There aren't that many children in my country, so if I make a children's film, it can never sell more than big-time adult fiction. The distributors and cinemas want Barbie; they're not going to give you the space to promote your film. I think [directors] are wise in saying, meeh, I don't know about children's film when it cannot make you rich and might not even make you famous.*

> **Alli Haapasalo:** *Because of the belittling of girls, of course, we belittle films about girls. I admit openly that in the beginning I had to find [some] big reason for myself, a sense of political importance, to make this film.*

The industry disinterest towards children's film must be impacting its quality, content, and prospects. Filmmakers are unlikely to be attracted to genres and audiences with which they are not familiar. Those who find a resonant project and get pulled in that way may not be aware of contemporary aesthetics and references, relying instead on the kinds of films they themselves have enjoyed as parents, or even as children decades earlier.

The dominant presence of nostalgia in children's content is a complex question (more on this in chapter 4), but to the degree it is a problem filmmakers starting work in the field twenty or thirty years out of date hardly helps. It is difficult to imagine another type of cinema that one might feel confident opining on, let alone work in, if the last examples one had seen were from the 1990s.

At the same time it is notable that even among the think tank's experts, the shared, cultural touchpoints that came up organically were often older, with titles like Fucking Åmål (Show Me Love, 1998) and Terkel i knibe (Terkel in Trouble, 2004) among them. When films break out and cross over, the panelists agreed, it opens a moment of opportunity for children's media in general to be taken seriously as an artistic and commercial endeavour. The problem is how quickly that window closes, again contributing to the industry's limited view of what is possible in children's film, what is permitted, and what interesting work can look like.

> **Alli Haapasalo:** *In Finland [changing the status] would basically take breaking the bank with a really kick-ass children's film.*

> **Erik Lundqvist:** *In Sweden that happened [in 1998], because of Lukas Moodysson and Fucking Åmål. He broke the bank with a youth film about two girls. In a sense that's always what everyone's been aiming at in Sweden since then.*

> **Alli Haapasalo:** *Fucking Åmål is a perfect example, and that was a while ago. Not many people did the same soon after, and it was still a reference for us [in the 2020s].*

Hits do have to be significant to make any impact across borders, and in the last decade or so breaking out at all has become objectively harder: since cinemas became digital, the widest releases have commanded an even larger share of screens for their premieres. It's not that kids' films haven't made a cultural impact since, it's just that they're mostly of the top 10 variety, as Frozen, Inside Out, Moana, and the Minions were successfully added to the global canon.

But there are still Nordic filmmakers whose stature would make work they made for younger audiences automatically interesting, or at least allow it to be judged seriously. There is also no reason to assume a strong Nordic or European family film should not reach blockbuster numbers at least in its local market. In Sweden in 2023, for instance, the family adventure Håkan Bråkan was 11th at the box office, highest of all domestic titles, while its 2024 sequel made it into the top 10, now as the highest-ranking Swedish fiction film.

While dynamics in theatrical releasing are obviously different to pre-digital and pre-streaming times, a more splintered but globalised media landscape also means that a "niche" audience like for instance teens can scale and ultimately cross over. In the face of the endless competition from all kinds of competition in the last decade, SKAM, Euphoria, Heartstopper, and Wednesday all managed to enter the cultural conversation through our living rooms.

Perhaps the greatest kids culture phenomenon of our time, Bluey, premiered in 2018 as an Australian public broadcasting show, and broke out because of its undeniable quality. Writing and filmmaking on this level of excellence is just as possible in the Nordics and Europe, and there is no reason why original work from here could not go on similar journeys. What it requires first of all is the ability to imagine filmmaking for children and young people as work for the very best filmmakers, and for everyone across our local industries to realize that children's film is a powerful engine both for commercial impact and audience-building over time.

Questions for discussion

- What can we do to make children's film and TV more present and relevant within the context of our local industries? Might annual "must-see"-lists play a role; if so, who would curate them and how would they be disseminated?
- What can be done for the creation and visibility of film and TV awards in the young audience categories?
- How can we help films that are commercial successes to be understood, reviewed, and discussed as examples of cinematic art within their genres?
- How can we help films that are artistic successes to contribute more to both shaping film storytelling for young audiences, and to shaping the cinematic grammar of the viewers themselves going forward?

2. Seeing themselves

Film storytelling ultimately helps determine what is viewed as normal and even who is viewed as human. A majority of our local audiences do still not see themselves represented well, and certain population groups, minorities, and communities are only starting to be able to tell their own stories. In a polarising society, protecting all kinds of cinematic diversity is vitally important. It is also an investment in audience size and the relevance of local content.

Aka Hansen:*"I grew up with things like an advent calendar show that everyone in Denmark knows, set in Greenland and made by a Danish filmmaker. That was the image of our people, from the perspective of someone from the outside. The people from my community were really ridiculous in this film. When I got into the business, especially with youth programming, there was a big need, and we were really value-based. Let's talk about being in love; we had a whole program about queer love and being accepted as queer. We talked about sport, showing people you can look up to.*

And later, the first feature-length children's film made exclusively in our language – can you imagine? It wasn't a high-level production. We made it with no funding. We got a sponsorship for a bus that's in the film, and everybody worked for free, even we who made it. It was the third most seen film in cinemas in Greenland ever, after Titanic and Avengers: Endgame. There was a need for it."

Erik Lundqvist:*"Audience surveys are a way for us to [help] finance films that have target audiences that may be harder to catch. Before Eagles, we did a study with hundreds of people from the target audience and followed that up for this film.*

It was very important in our communication with the financiers, [who thought], why should we go with your project? No IP, original stories, no big names... With our focus on the target audience and the survey results, we convinced them with facts. We [showed] how this is something this target audience doesn't have at all. This product is lacking both in cinemas and on streaming services. We felt it was strong, being able to fill a gap."

Alli Haapasalo: *"It was important to me that the film takes the girls and their problems seriously. I had this notion that everybody likes to look at teenage girls, but nobody wants to hear what they have to say. And I think they have tremendous wisdom. They're emotionally intelligent. They are deep thinkers. That doesn't mean that they can't have ponies and poetry and glitter.*

Audiences have felt very respected by Girl Picture, by the relevance of the story to them, but

also by the gaze of the film. They feel seen by it. That has been a very emotional experience for a lot of people.

These are not Finnish comments either; we premiered in Sundance [and] they're from all over the world, from Letterboxd and messages to us... A lot of older people have said they really wish that they'd had this film growing up. And after every Q&A, I always get approached by teary-eyed people who talk about the character Rönkkö's fears of asexuality, who say they've never seen anything, not even half a scene, of this theme in any film."

Kirstine Vinderskov: *"Often I get applications with very long, detailed analyses of anxiety and suicidal tendencies in young people. If you have a good story and it resonates with these problem areas, it's important, but you can't really start a good fiction film like that, in my opinion.*

It's a little bit worrying to [be pitched] a lot of problem films, when only a few of them are good stories that could basically be for everybody, because of strong emotional identification and honesty."

Questions of representation are taking on a special urgency at this moment as public discourse and the political landscape is veering to the right. This is especially likely to affect priorities, stories, and representation in mainstream American content, whose dominating presence in European children's culture gives its norms a disproportionate impact. At the same time it is clear that diversity for the sake of ticking a box, or starting film projects from data about a societal issue, does not in itself result in audience relevance or satisfied viewers.

Diverse representation is needed in two important but different ways. The first is about accurately and authentically reflecting the reality audiences live in. Huge strides have been made in the Nordics last decade in for instance casting groups of children with realistic diversity (what that looks like naturally varies depending on the setting), and in children's fiction with girls as protagonists. But it is also the case that the experiences, stories, and even cultures of a majority of any given Nordic population are not represented on screen consistently or well, or indeed at all.

Small Nordic nations and language groups with histories of colonisation are only now starting to tell their own stories. Even working with very limited resources, they generate enormous interest from audiences who may never have seen their lives represented – or who may only have been portrayed in belittling and stereotypical ways. It is especially worth considering what kinds of effects it might have on a child to only ever experience popular culture showing the adults in their lives as objects of ridicule.

This also problem is not limited to underprivileged population groups that might be, in the priorities of majority culture or the political platforms of populist groups, easily othered and dismissed. It extends to a great many members of majority cultures as well. Although more than half of the population is female, women are still underrepresented on screen, and especially teenage women are portrayed very

narrowly. Other majorities, like anyone living outside the major film production hubs in their country, may never see their own kind of town in a film or hear their dialect spoken (except perhaps to be laughed at).

Yet other fates, like experiencing economic hardship or living with restrictions from physical disability, might not be affecting the majority of people at any given time, but are certain to shape almost everyone's lives at some point.

> **Erik Lundqvist:** *We tried to have a good representation when it comes to ethnicity and gender, but we also wanted to just be normal. We don't make conflicts about [diverse] representation. We are just showing the way it is. My older brother has Down syndrome, so when that idea came up in Forever, I said sure, we should include that, because it is normal for me.*

> **Alli Haapasalo:** *Girl Picture is about regular girls. I felt like in order to let a girl be an interesting topic for a film, they needed to be somehow very special or unusual, to have a story of teenage pregnancy or some other big, dramatic thing. The rebel attitude here comes from the fact that these girls don't. This is about their growing pains and trying to draw your own contours in life, finding your own picture, what your identity is. Nothing more and nothing less.*

The other kind of diversity is that of representing minority groups or identities, or specific life experiences, that may not be common but deserve to be known. This kind of representation is often dismissed by political demagogues as pandering to some progressive agenda, or wasting the money of the many on niche concerns of the few.

It is true that audiences for films like these would be very small if they were only relevant to those who share experiences with the protagonists, but that is obviously not the expectation when they get greenlit. Naturally it is just as important to these individuals to see themselves on screen as it is for everyone else, and depending on the wording of local cultural policies they might also have a right to. But the greatest purpose of films like these is to make space in our shared imagination for stories about people whose lives in and experiences of our countries are different from our own. That they are previously under-told has the market benefit of these stories feeling fresh and interesting.

When films are good, we can enjoy them in precisely the same way women have genuinely enjoyed watching male heroes, small-town kids have watched urban environments, and queer folks have watched straight love stories. Implying that an average person might not be able to find relevance in a film about minority experiences is an underhanded way of questioning the humanity of their subjects. It behooves us, across the industry, to push back against such political narratives, especially as they might already be embraced by increasingly many parents, teachers, or other gatekeepers to young audiences. Where reasoning with such people about ideology might not work, filmmakers might still be able to actually reach them through powerful and irresistible storytelling.

In an age of political polarisation and an escalating climate crisis, who counts as normal and who

counts as human are existential questions and will remain so for the rest of our lives. Protecting the presence of minorities in film probably relies on also making sure all those unseen local majorities can experience seeing their experiences reflected, understood, and valued on screen. Accepting that films about people different from you can exist, and hopefully even enjoying them, is much easier when you know that your own life too has the same kind of interest and value to artists, cultural gatekeepers, and viewers.

In practical terms, the still-increasing access to regional film funding makes certain kinds of on-screen diversity easier to achieve. A huge potential for development in regional and municipal film offices would be to offer collaborations around the releases of films they have invested in. In an age where just thousands or tens of thousands of cinema admissions are considered a success, local partners with pride in the project can have an enormous impact on its outcomes. It is even possible to imagine models where a relatively local or demographically targeted release would be the core of the distribution strategy, and breaking out more universally could follow once the work had proved itself as a portrayal of something specific.

Gunnbjörg Gunnarsdottir: *The children in Bergen are so happy to see their hometown on the screen, because most of the movies in Norway are made in Oslo. Oh, they love it – and Bergen also looks quite good in this movie!*

Mette Damgaard Sørensen: *[In terms of reaching an audience] the regional stuff is interesting – the moment you make it someplace very specific, you obviously [bring in] a crowd, because they recognize things.*

Erik Lundqvist: *We placed the film in a small town very deliberately, because that's where the majority of the people in Sweden live. That was also the appeal of Eagles, which was set in a really small town. You want the target audience to identify. To me the small towns are also more authentic, they have their own identity. And you can actually get more of the whole town in one mood, instead of a big city where [there are always groups] you didn't represent.*

Maria Tórgarð: *Who is this film actually for? To me, my film was first and foremost for the people in it. Secondly, it was for the Faroese audience. There was [also] a Danish editor, co-director, and production company. We had really great teamwork and were mostly on the same wavelength even with our different perspectives. But the biggest discussion in the entire process was when the editor was just awestruck by a B-roll image of this crazy mountain with a waterfall in the ocean that's used in, like, all commercials. I didn't even really [mean] to shoot it. But the editor used it at this really important point in the film, and the producers and my co-director loved it. I said, no, I understand the symbolism and how it feels meaningful to you, but it has so many other connotations... We just really [could] not agree.*

I asked my younger brother to gather some friends to see the rough-cut of the film, and didn't say anything, just showed it. When this mountain comes on at this really serious point in the movie, they all just start laughing. They completely lose it. That was the proof I needed for [the

foreign partners]. I know the image doesn't have those connotations to almost anyone who's going to see the film, since the [audience in the] Faroe Islands is obviously small. But to me it was really, really important to take it out, because it made the whole film suddenly feel so much less authentic.

Alli Haapasalo: *Obviously I didn't invent feminist cinema! But there's a shocking lack, always [a single] film getting made, and then a break, and everybody forgets that there was this film in the 1990s... Then someone reinvents the wheel, and it all disappears again.*

Aka Hansen: *How can we make sure that this is not the case in the future? Why should we wait 15 years every time for a queer story, or for three women leading a film, or anything that's not been the traditional story? How can we make it traditional?*

Alli Haapasalo: *It's everybody's business. It's institutions, it's schools, it's every filmmaker, every director, every producer. We just have to fight the backlash, because that's always the next step. People are going to whine that women took all the money from the Finnish Film Foundation, and we need to say, sorry, you can't have it back, we will continue.*

Questions for discussion

- What groups, places, languages, experiences, or identities are not represented on screen in your local market?

- When historically underrepresented groups like women become visible or prominent on screen, their presence often feels dominating even though they are still not at parity. How can we make sure we make decisions based on data?

- How do we handle that audiences have also experienced changes toward fair representation as a threatening dominance of new perspectives?

- How can we support trusted curators across the value chain in the work to connect viewers with films that grow and enrich their understanding of their own countries and the human experience more broadly?

3. A Universe on a Timeline

An over-reliance on IP adaptations among funders contrasts with an under-use of IP development approaches among creators. The impact of familiar IP is somewhat more limited for young audiences than adults.

> **Mette Damgaard Sørensen:** *I was thinking of this DR advent calendar show about a time machine. It has characters [from two timelines], so they [published] a book connecting the two. They didn't do games, but [other Nordic advent calendar shows have]. My first reaction was, "oh my God, this is such a commercial way of thinking." But then I remembered, one year at SXSW, listening to some American independent producers and directors talking about always developing like that. Trying out a particular project as a podcast, because that was the cheapest and built an audience. That worked, so they made a documentary series. Then suddenly they had big stars calling them to say, if you want to do a feature, we're in. So they did. They created IP from necessity, because they were independent filmmakers, but it didn't come from a commercial way of thinking, but a creative way of thinking.*

> **Erik Lundqvist:** *The business as whole has gotten more and more into existing IP. Getting funding for projects that are originals is harder and harder, and that's reflective of the market. It's more hit or miss than before. You used to be able to have an original movie make 70-100,000 admissions, so it was okay if it didn't hit. Now it's 3000, and nobody wants to take that risk anymore.*

In the last many years, the importance and value of basing filmed entertainment on previously well-known IP has only grown. Communicating any new title in the current media landscape is very difficult, and there is savage competition for attention over all. A downward trend in cinema attendance, combined with an increased number of titles premiering has made it less likely for any individual title to perform well at the box office, resulting in a decreasing appetite for risk in the feature film space – a tendency contributed to by the rising cost of production. For all of these reasons, adapting well-loved works has been a reasonable strategy, which has also expanded to children's media, even shaping the priorities of public film funding.

In parallel to these reactive trends, we have also seen proactive IP development become increasingly important. What 10-15 years ago was discussed as "convergence culture" and "transmedia storytelling" has become completely normalised. Even mainstream consumers are happy to interact with the same storyworld in different formats, on different platforms, and in different media. Whether such approaches are leveraged to expand an IP through adaptations and spin-offs, for advertising purposes, merchandising, or pure fan service, the goal is ultimately the same: to build, deepen and capitalise on a relationship with the audience.

This is particularly important where the work is very new or the audience very small. Whether in impact documentaries, animation, or independent production, working strategically across platforms and formats has long been a way to build awareness and an audience gradually. Keeping production cost

apace with realistic audience expectations for each format is a sustainable way of building a bigger project, or to establish oneself as a creator or creator collective. A strong writer may create a podcast before attempting a screenplay; a passionate animator can develop and test what will become their short film and eventually a series; an inspired producer may launch a whole kids' IP on Youtube.

> **Mette Damgaard Sørensen:** *Are we shying away from something? We're dealing with an audience that pretty much lives in [story] universes. [Even in this] financing crisis we pretty much go for the most expensive medium first, using seven years to maybe or maybe not finance a film, where you might have gone another way, actually working on the idea in other media first – radio, YouTube, series, those that children choose themselves.*

It is worth keeping in mind, however, that some of these processes work a little bit differently in children's media. An adult who loves a novel will remain the potential audience of its film version two or five years from now, but a kids' book series that is popular now is not guaranteed to remain popular – and the children who once loved it rapidly age out of the target audience. With the exception of certain (mostly Anglo) bestsellers, children's books also travel less well than adult hits. Even when they do, the translations may be appearing years later in other markets, or not make an impact even close to that on their home audiences.

For all of these reasons, adapting popular children's IP is even less of a sure thing than a similar project for adults. It is just not correct to assume – as decision-makers across the industry lately have – that adapting any popular children's IP would automatically lead to better success than supporting an original script with true relevance to the moment. That said, there are obviously also children's books and other kids' IP that do remain relevant across years and decades, attracting new readers and fans. Adapting such work remains a very good idea. To target audiences whose movie-going is controlled by adults, it might also make sense to appeal to their childhood nostalgia.

> **Erik Lundqvist:** *The financiers are always looking for a chance for people to have heard about it. But it's also scary, because it's not that innovative to be retelling stories. You don't push the culture within film-making. It's scary how we are losing the audience more and more without realizing it, because we're just serving them the same thing over and over. If you have a great IP you should use it; it's just a balance, because you have to create new worlds too, not just [adapt] old ones.*

Building story universes gradually (as a method for developing the creative quality and actual audience of an IP) is highly relevant for the children's sector, as long as one keeps in mind the distinction between building relationships with rolling age cohorts and with individual viewers. As you probably won't deepen the relationship with the same individual children online over several years, the goal of building popularity for the work instead becomes to ensure the algorithm will continue to feed you new cohorts of the same target group.

This is particularly challenging if we imagine best-practice film-releasing for tween and teen audiences to involve a great deal of social media content, often beginning in pre-production. One has to plan such a campaign very carefully for individual relationships to feel relevant two years later, and to ensure the online content of the talent, if they are involved, is still age-appropriate to the target audience.

In addition to adapting existing IP, and using transmedial world-building to develop one gradually, a third approach to "building IP" is treating an original film or TV series as a potential transmedia universe from the get-go. This approach is probably under-utilised in the Nordics, where major commissioners and funders may feel pressure to support a diversity of projects on a limited budget. There is also only limited experience in coordinating commissions and production timelines across media types, and a risk of increased embarrassment if an ambitious project fails in a smaller market. Stakeholders would rather see the story or storyworld succeed on one platform first – which in turn activates all the challenges of the audience ageing discussed above.

This even applies to the most traditional IP exploitation in film, sequels. When it comes to the audience potential of a sequel or adaptation, the question to ask is not how successful a film was originally in cinemas, but how popular it is currently on streaming platforms. Even then it is important to know whether the work is attracting new viewers, or is a comfort watch for a teen who will not see a children's film in the cinema. (Unless they're very invested indeed, and old enough not to be embarrassed about it, as the 2022 "Gentleminions" phenomenon demonstrated). For legacy books, libraries are an excellent source of data about their current relevance.

For all of these reasons, and especially if the on-screen talent is central to the work (since they age too), it would make sense to plan relevant film or other media projects more like TV shows, where another season or other type of expansion is assumed to be a possibility. Or even better, to extract a proof-of-interest from the market in some less expensive format first, to create the confidence to film two installments economically back-to-back.

Working with the same storyworld for longer does require the creatives involved to be enormously invested in the world they have created, a mindset perhaps more commonly present in, say, the Nordic TV screenwriter than in the Nordic film director. These are cultural factors, intimately connected to what is valued in the industry and the culture as a whole.

> **Sara Gunnarsdóttir:** *You really have to be passionate about what you're doing and have stamina if you want to build a world – and then you're just only working with that world. As an artist, I love immersing myself in something, but it's also so satisfying to finish it and say, I'm so proud, but I'm [also] so ready to feel this again about something completely new.*

Monetising attention across different media types is financially attractive, but what ultimately makes familiar IP valuable is actually not how the storytelling is structured: it is about enabling an audience relationship built on mutual loyalty over time. Audiences do enjoy being allowed to stay in a storyworld they love, but other parts of the attraction include familiarity, decision fatigue (not always having to navigate new content to find something), and a sense of being valued by creators who "get" you.

These elements have been at the core of film fandom from the beginning, which is how we know that "IP relationship" can also be to on screen- or off-screen talent. It just can't be a one-way communication; that sense of mutuality and loyalty over time is what powers the feeling that what the artist is working on might be for me. This is obviously also the foundation of the creator economy. Developing one's own audience relationships strategically may become particularly necessary to the artists and companies involved primarily in telling original stories.

Gunnbjörg Gunnarsdottir: *If we're talking about that kind of IP usage, yes, I very quickly got the question "when are you making Victoria 2?" And I don't want that. I feel like I would be a sellout, that we would only do it for the wrong reasons.*

Alli Haapasalo: *You're building on this in an innovative way – [instead of IP, you're developing] a personal brand as a creator. Your next film will likely have very similar handwriting.*

Questions for discussion

- How good are creative teams and gatekeepers really at evaluating the potential of a project based on existing IP? Are original projects judged with equal care or on other parameters?

- What skills are needed in the value chain to potentially leverage the success of original projects into new, high-quality multi-platform IP?

- What are some local examples of gradually developed new IP? What can be learned from them?

- How does your perspective on the focus on pre-existing IP and IP development change if it is viewed instead as an investment in the audience relationship? How does it fit with traditional film industry structures, and how are they challenged by it?

4. Aesthetics of Authenticity and Nostalgia

Even obviously skilled filmmaking for children is often unreflectingly dismissed. In part because of prejudice, in part because the emotional intensity of young people's experiences lends itself to stylistic and narrative choices that would not always be plausible or appropriate in another context. In this rarely heard discussion, filmmakers reflect on strategies for authenticity in the context of young audiences, including the role of elevated aesthetics, co-creation with the relevant age groups, and both the potential and risks of nostalgia.

Alli Haapasalo: *Authenticity comes from the character, but it's not only about great acting or an authentic story. To me authenticity is cross-disciplinary. I like a long prep with my main artistic team, working from key principles to the aesthetics of the film, and from that, pulling out concrete methods. The form has to not just support the story, but to be in perfect sync with and elevate it...*

We tried to mirror the teenage experience in every aspect. The production designer designed very beautiful places where the locations told a story of growth and imperfection, [with] a growing city in the background and so on. She would never win an award for her work because it's so subtle, but every single set is thought through.

Maria Tórgarð: *In documentary, we talk a lot about authenticity. We actually created a really big discussion in the Faroe Islands because we had a lot of staged scenes. Is it really a documentary when you stage it? When you ask people to talk about something, but film it in a more fictional way? What we did a lot was creating together with the... I don't like to call them characters. The Danish "medvirkende" is better; it means participant, and maybe also co-creator.*

I think that's what makes the film feel more authentic. It doesn't look journalistic, like what I thought documentary was before I made this film. We really tried to co-create authentic scenes together. There's one where they drive around in their underwear and jump out in the mountains and scream – obviously, we staged that, but it was something that they told us they had done to somehow try to get a feeling of freedom.

Before we started I was very wary of collaborating with Danish filmmakers who would be looking from the outside in on Faroese culture. But because of the many, many talks we had, I think we managed to get both [perspectives], something authentic that a more global audience can [also] understand. The co-creation with the people in the film [probably contributed too]. They got to see a lot of material along the way, which is something you often choose not to do.

In a fascinating discussion in the think tank, participants discussed their aesthetic strategies for authenticity. Whether immediate or elevated, ostensibly naturalistic or styled to the last pixel, they found it through artistic discipline, a consistency of vision, and deep collaboration both within the team and with the young people on camera.
What is a genuine cinematic representation of a kid's perspective or the emotional roll-er-coaster of teen life? What is the function of an elevated aesthetic, and what is the role of nostalgia?

The conversation circles around a fascinating tension between the grownup perspective on youth and the immediate experience of it. Their adult perspective allows filmmakers to create symbolic and literal frames within which unfiltered immediacy can be portrayed and explored. But this also requires filmmakers to set aside their anxieties about being "too much", emotion-ally or aesthetically.

Erik Lundqvist: *This is what we love about youth drama: emotions you are feeling for the first time are world-shattering. Forever is about losing your best friend – that's the whole film. How big that loss is of growing up and growing apart. It's very important to not try to put on a filter of adulthood on that, not to muddle it with all the experience you as a grown-up have.*

Alli Haapasalo: *We filmmakers want to be subtle, we want to be cool. We're a little bit afraid of sentimentality. But for young people, everything is at stake all the time. It's easy to forget [that] they have zero perspective. You have to have the guts to really go there, to have a stadium-sized love ballad playing at the right moment! [For Girl Picture] this meant that we had to be able to slide on that disproportionate scale of emotion, from subtle to pathetic.*

The camera was documentary-inspired, to make the actors free in front of it, creating intimacy and very real performances. I had this motto: if it feels like a film, we're doing something wrong. That doesn't mean that we were making something naturalistic – that's a different aesthetic conversation! But if it had felt at all like a construction, it would have failed. That meant a lot of specificity. If it's generic, it's trash.

Erik Lundqvist: *[Our work has] always leaned on an arena where the physical action could mirror the inner conflicts. It's a very effective way of visualizing the drama, and making something visually appealing is very important to us. The emotion doesn't need to be subtle, you can be blunt in a way that you can't in adult film. You can paint with clear colors.*

Making Forever, we talked a lot about authenticity in the [context] of football, [for in-stance letting] the girls be very expressive in their language. But in Eagles, our way of be-ing authentic to our vision of a more American-style drama was for the storytelling to be a bit elevated. You shouldn't say that because something's not in the real world, it's not authentic. But if we're not authentic in the emotions, the whole story will always fall.

Alli Haapasalo: *It's a fine line sometimes. The story needs to be well structured, and if you break down [our script] it still falls into the dramatic arc and everything. But there was tremendous pressure to make it more traditional in the sense [of plot stakes and tropes]. I'm really proud and happy that we resisted, because the specificity came from rejecting that.*

When one imagines a failed film for young audiences, it typically suffers either from being entirely generic and disconnected from the world, or from the opposite challenge of having confused the need for authenticity with aesthetic naturalism and a focus on real-world trauma. If film and series for children and youth are often dismissed entirely unseen, this is the kind of thing one imagines it to be: either generic slop, or dour and depressing problem pictures.

To be fair such work does get made, and a cursory glance at stills or a trailer might not be enough to sort the wheat from the chaff (especially given the budgetary restraints on both the production and marketing of children's media). Children are also often assumed to have bad taste, which makes it even likelier for a stylised aesthetic to be dismissed as fake, garish, or dumb, when a similar image in another context might be read as a skilled homage to Wes Anderson or Jean-Pierre Jeunet. Similarly, a very intense scene viewed out of context might feel like "too much" instead of an appropriate representation of how young protagonists experience the world. Assuming unreflectingly that aesthetic choices are not intentional or appropriate is an easy way to dismiss or overlook filmmakers with young audiences.

Gunnbjörg Gunnarsdottir: *Victoria Must Go is a crazy story [about something that] would likely never happen. Every single thing in every single frame I had a say in, every detail of every costume, every colour; I used to work as a photographer and am very frame-minded. I filmed it in my hometown, exclusively chose only the most colorful, pretty buildings, and wanted blue sky and sun – my producer hated me a little, but we did it! I made so many rules. Nothing black was allowed in the movie. There's not a single car in it. Everyone only wears pastel clothing and looks perfect all the time. I didn't move the cameras, and had so many marks, stereotypes and tropes. In that sense, it's very inauthentic, but I think the emotions are still authentic.*

Alli Haapasalo: *It's authentic to the genre and style you're working with.*

Sara Gunnarsdóttir: *Sometimes it's easier to talk about very difficult subjects when you make a world that is very specific, not just what's outside the window.*

Gunnbjörg Gunnarsdottir: *Having a very holistic view also makes the cinema experience more fun [for children as well as adults]. I think we all like when things are pretty and well thought out. Sometimes I feel like it's a bad thing to mention Wes Anderson, as though I somehow want to try to be like him, but he makes amazing things! I'm definitely moving towards a more stylistic vision.*

Sanne Juncker Pedersen: *A lot of projects for children and youth are often very focused on the theme. It seems that the starting point is, we have read several re-*

ports about this thing, and conclude that this is how the world is, how all audiences feel, and it needs to be reflected in the film. But in a cinema context, in a storytelling context, audiences do not necessarily go to the cinema or press play because of a theme, and authenticity can also co-exist with the feeling of being a little bit elevated, being inspiring and also maybe being entertaining.

Alli Haapasalo: *Last year I saw a film about two siblings who lose a chicken, and my kid liked it and everything, but that's very far from the reality of many kids. It would be [an interesting challenge] to create a story about some children's issue that touches everybody... let's say, a terrible bully; there's been violent bullying in Finland in the past few years. Stories shape thinking, so how do you make a relevant film that's not reinforcing the problem? It's something really interesting to marinate and try to solve.*

Think tank participants were very aware of the importance of involving the target demographics in guaranteeing authenticity. Proactive audience surveys and anthropological audience work was discussed, and we see across the industry that exploratory and iterative writing methods similar to devising stage plays are gaining popularity in particular when projects involving young protagonists are developed.

A vitally important asset in all this are the young performers themselves, who can be empowered to strengthen a project's authenticity in ways both big and small, if filmmakers are willing to listen.

Alli Haapasalo: *I invite actors to take ownership of their characters. Never come in and just be nice, do your lines and do what I say! They bring in all of their thoughts and ideas and notes on, for example, a character's storyline. It is a big benefit to me too. For example, people in my generation mix a lot of English in their Finnish, and the screenwriters had put a lot of English lines in the script. Younger people don't do that as much anymore, and one of them asked me, can I just translate these into Finnish? Of course you can! That kind of specific detail.*

Rikke Tambo: *[For our TV show], we also had a workshop with the cast to make sure the dialogue made sense, that we weren't pushing anything onto these young actors. We actually found out that one of them really wanted to switch characters, because [another role] resonated better with them and their experiences! It made a lot of sense to us to do that.*

And producing another doc series for a young audience, the music they liked wasn't the music we thought they would listen to, so we asked them to contribute to a playlist. Later a lot of [reviewers] commented on the music, but it genuinely wasn't us trying to bring anything into this young universe. It was what they contributed.

Estefanía Daza: *Especially regarding children's films, authenticity is not looking down. And why are we looking down on a genre if we don't look down on the people that genre is about or for?*

Alli Haapasalo: *The gaze we have on them needs to be eye-level. We can't look down, of course, on younger characters, but we also shouldn't be too fascinated by them. That's not present tense. This film could not have any veil of nostalgia. It really needed to feel like you're there.*

Nostalgia plays a fascinating role in this context, as it can permeate tone, visuals, or the filmmakers' perspective on characters and situations. On one hand nostalgia provides a permission structure for filmmakers to portray (and for older audiences to engage with) the strong emotions of youth. But if nostalgia is allowed to dominate, the work risks becoming too filtered to speak to young viewers, or even irrelevant to the contemporary moment.

Nostalgia may motivate and empower us grownups to revisit a state where emotions, possibilities and futures were still unfiltered by the perspective of life experience, and nostalgia for the culture our own childhoods might productively inspire new works to be passed on. If the adult perspective dominates, the films will become bogged down with our sorrows and fears, which may be why problem pictures are so difficult to get tonally right.

From the perspective of young viewers, every story is still unfolding, and what may seem like confusion and lack of perspective also allows a great deal of hope and dreams to exist even in very dire situations. If we permit it, film can offer both for filmmakers and their young collaborators, as well as for audiences of all ages, authentic experiences of joy to share.

Elevated cinematic languages enable focus, selectivity, and aspiration. Not every aspect of reality needs to be present in every story for it to ring true, and young people do have the same right as everyone to stories that ring completely true, even though horrible things don't always happen, and dreams are worth pursuing.

Sanne Juncker Pedersen: *When Netflix or other streamers are so open to content for young adults [about teenage girls], it's because they are the most frequent streamers. But also because they often have cross-over potential, and people like me – I'm in my late 40s – we are also watching. There's a lot of women in this age group who didn't grow up with this kind of content and are still working backwards with that emotional perspective. But it's also because exactly the coming-of-age life stage is something audiences can recognize emotionally throughout their lives. When we talk to audiences about grief, being an outsider or different big life changes, the foundation for their perception, their navigation of their emotions, comes from the universal coming-of-age experience.*

Rikke Tambo: *With the directors I work with, the projects always come from a personal idea that it's very important for me to tap into and support. But we've wanted to make sure that the themes were not just important, but relevant to the audience we were talking to. We always make a big deal about engaging the actors, or doing research before. Nostalgia can be good in the sense that it comes from something important in you, but I just don't want to make a film about how it was to be young 15-20 years ago.*

Erik Lundqvist: *For me nostalgia is not so much about the exact story. It's about telling the emotional stories, and those are more timeless. If you achieve the emotional*

payoff in a film, it will transcend that. Trying to create something we thought was good 30 years ago is a trap, of course – you have to have respect for the new generation, for new ways of telling stories. But I have always loved the nostalgia of the youth films and series we grew up with, mainly American. You can see in much of what we do a more American narrative approach. It creates dreams – they want to create dreams for the young.

Sanne Juncker Pedersen: *What we see [in our audience studies] is that younger audiences from 8 or 9 years are to a great extent looking for characters they can aspire to or get inspiration from, maybe characters that are even braver than themselves. I saw your film, and imagine the girls are probably more brave than the average female teenager?*

Alli Haapasalo: *We cleaned up all sexual harassment and all of that danger, shaming, violence, everything like that out of the film on purpose. For a long time I was of the opinion that it's not realistic not to include it, but in the end, I was wrong and the writers were right. Because we can aspire to a world, we can aspire to an on-screen representation where girls can do that. It can be inspirational, but it's unfortunately not authentic... In studies, all female teenagers in Finland report experiences of sexual harassment.*

Estefanía Daza: *It presents authenticity more like a possibility of something than a reality.*

Aka Hansen: *In my opinion it's not entertainment when we see women hurting in film, like sexual or mental abuse, or violence. And a lot of the entertainment world is that, and normalizes it too. I also made a short film about it. It was a queer short film, and a happy one, because I rarely see happy queer stories. It's always the struggles or non-acceptance, and they exist, I know, but it's also part of reality that it can also be happy to be gay. I didn't view it as necessarily unauthentic when [your film] was not about violence or danger, it just warmed my heart, really.*

Alli Haapasalo: *I heard from a lot of people that they kept waiting for something bad to happen... in this film, nothing bad does. Obviously, shit happens between the girls, they fight and cheat and there's all sorts of drama between them, but nobody does anything bad to them. Because we're so coded into thinking that the punishment will come, someone said, "I thought, maybe a car accident or something in the third act..." It has led to very interesting conversations about the bias we all have. I love calling it a radical film for its positivity.*

Questions for discussion

- Where do conversations about the art and craft of filmmaking for young audiences take place in your country? Where are such conversations needed?

- How much is contemporary filmmaking for young people driven by curiosity and interest in the reality of the young viewers today, and what role is played by nostalgia and other adult perspectives in projects and production decisions?

- Kids or teens are often assumed to have bad taste. When we don't enjoy a work, but they do, how do we learn what aspects of it feel authentic, rewarding, or appealing to them, and why?

- What are great examples of films that reflect our difficult reality but still hold space for hope and wonder? How do we tell aspirational stories, escapist stories, and stories of positive change without feeling forced or unauthentic?