THE NoJSe REPORT 2026:

The Director's Think Tank – Art, Tradition and Innovation

Creative Europe MEDIA

In Collaboration With:

Foreword

The NoJSe Network brings together five leading children's film festivals from across the Nordic region: BUFF in Sweden, BFF in Norway, BUSTER in Denmark, Oulu International Children's and Youth Film Festival in Finland and RIFF in Iceland. Since 2017 the network has fostered a close collaboration to strengthen the festivals and broaden the reach of Nordic films for children and young audiences, while creating meaningful platforms for exchange within the Nordic children's media industry.

The NoJSe Network aims to:

- Help the Nordic European audiences to discover films for children and youth via streaming, festival screenings and film literacy initiatives.
- Help the film industry of the Nordic European Regions to debate the status and future of local children's media at designated NoJSe Network Industry events.
- Create knowledge-sharing between the festivals in the network and in the wider European children and youth film and media industry.

This report builds on the third NoJSe Think Tank (2025), which brought together a panel of directors to discuss the current state and future of children and youth films. The insights and discussions from the gathering shaped this report, highlighting creative processes, audience engagement and imaginative approaches in contemporary Nordic children's and youth film. We extend our gratitude to all Think Tank participants for generously sharing their expertise and contributions, especially our panelists:

Atchy Konesh – director, Norway
Christoffer Rizvanovic Stenbakken – director, Greenland
Jenny Jokela – director, Finland
Mathias Broe – director, Denmark
Tora Mkandawire Mårtens – director, Sweden

A special acknowledgment goes to Johanna Koljonen of The Nostradamus Project, Göteborg Film Festival, for her work condensing and contextualising the results 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 third in a collaboration between the NoJSe Network and Göteborg Film Festival's Nostradamus Project. It summarizes and reflects on discussions from a day-long Think Tank on children and youth films, organized in conjunction with the 2025 BUSTER Film Festival in Copenhagen by the NoJSe Network.

During the day, five directors presented case studies of their recent work. In conversations moderated by Christina Ramsø Thomsen, the Think Tank participants reflected on how filmmaking engages with the world – and on filmmaking creating other worlds.
In this report, you will find quotes from the panelists and other participants. The body of the text is based on the conversations in their entirety, contextualised through the ongoing analysis of industry transformation conducted within the Nostradamus project. As someone whose day-to-day work involves observing the industry on a very zoomed-out level, I found being privy to a conversation between directors enormously valuable. In strategic analysis, concerned with changing systems, we rarely even ask how the effects of those changes play out on the micro level of a specific artistic process.

This collaboration with BUSTER and the NoJSe Network will naturally also inform the 13th 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 12, it will be available for download at goteborgfilmfestival.se/nostradamus

Johanna Koljonen
Industry Analyst

PERSPECTIVE: Participation, Not Representation

Jordan (Norway, in development)

Atchy Konesh, director and writer:

My TV series project started from wanting to see young people playing sports rather than [engaging with] drugs and weapons. I used to play football – it was the only thing I knew! But sport in Norway is getting expensive, it's not for everybody anymore. Maybe we can do something about that [through] the series.

I believe if the young people don't feel heard, they will find a community in other places, where maybe they shouldn't. 12-13-year-olds used to be children, but that's not the norm anymore. Only last week, there were some hand grenade episodes in Oslo [involving kids that age] and one 13-year-old stabbing another. We have the potential, and a duty, to influence them toward better things.

It's a very soothing story: a 17-year-old falls in love with a girl and doesn't know if he should pursue his football dream that's already [coming true], or stay for the girl. We've seen the core before! But the change I'm trying to achieve is larger than the core story.
I prefer participation over representation: participation opens doors for the next generation of storytellers. Representation develops stigmas, when people who don't know your story portray you.

In my case, that process starts after writing, in the reading room when I already know what I want to tell: guys, this is the framework, are there some words or scenes you feel are off, or [where] we could reach a better point by trying something else? When I had the main character in for the table read he asked, how am I going to speak? Am I going to speak normal or am I going to speak "ghetto"? I said, the way you speak is already normal. Just because you put in a "bror" extra when you speak doesn't mean you're speaking "ghetto".

When he leaves the room, maybe he will not think about that table read, but he will know that the way he speaks is normal. That [gives] the participation a bigger purpose. Making films and telling stories is a privilege, a responsibility, and participation makes me more precise in what I want with my project and how I want to be perceived as a creator.

In the TV series *SKAM* [2015-2017], this character Sana's mother speaks Norwegian and her house looks like a regular Norwegian house. That's how we live, in Norway! But for the past 20 years they've always portrayed very foreign-looking [homes]. That's a political move.

Sana and I don't have the same culture, but [when the show came out] I had a discussion with this Norwegian guy. He told me, I didn't know you guys speak Norwegian at home with your parents. That's the point – that [show] generated questions about how we as an industry have portrayed people.

So when one of the boys asks if he is going to read this “ghetto” or regular, you just shut that down. Somebody else has put that label on you, move away from that label. We are not making this to tick some boxes. We are making a regular TV series. You happen to be brown. You happen to be Jordan. She happens to be Diana, he happens to be Raheem. *Jordan* is not a political series, but there are politics in it.

1: Can We Find Another Tone?

> **Christoffer Rizvanovic Stenbakken:** I think once you’ve seen *Squid Game*, it’s very hard to go back.

> **Mathias Broe:** If we’re talking about attention span – or if we’re talking about *Squid Game* – okay, we can’t produce that in Denmark. So what can we do instead?

> **Christoffer Rizvanovic Stenbakken:** In terms of not having the budget to build elevated worlds, that’s not static. Maybe the playing field is levelling.

Asked to map the challenges of Nordic children’s film and TV, the think tank participants responded with a clear-eyed overview. Although individual, shining counterexamples exist, difficulties are many and may appear unsurmountable.

Wide-appeal popular entertainment is dominated by global companies combining enormous marketing resources with direct influence on algorithmic recommendation. The streamers, aligned with major studios, increasingly prioritise reach over niche audiences. In the context of young audiences, in addition to kids’ TV and family films, this involves increased investment in strong non-scripted entertainment formats, which parents and children often watch together.

In the Nordic markets, local family films and versions of international formats have remained relatively strong performers. Their important advantage of being in the local language is however shrinking as localisation technology is developing. Local broadcasters and filmmakers are therefore at risk of losing one of the strongest gateways to engaging with national content.

Families are central to retaining or growing the local share of viewing, and ambitious investment in locally resonant and formally innovative co-viewing is of vital strategic importance. It is also a rational priority under economic pressures, as in our markets, children of any specific age are numerically few.

At the same time, threatened and actual cuts to both film and public service funding, and the high cost of production, make long-term thinking difficult and lowers the appetite for risk. In a changing market, what the safe choices are is not obvious. There is real concern that whenever a type of content fails, it may now not get re-imagined, but ceded to the international competition. For example, the theatrical struggles of locally produced youth films have led to fewer of them getting made, instead of efforts to identify and address specific causes.

> **Rasmus Ladefoged:** I'm ambivalent about social media. We don't want our younger kids to spend too much time unsupervised on digital platforms, but at the same time we'll have to take into account that it can be hard for any film to find its audience without utilizing these platforms.

As individuals and organisations, we are locked into platforms we have enormous qualms about. The enormous and largely negative consequences of having given a generation of children unfettered access to extractive social media platforms are only starting to become clear.

Their attention spans, only one of many causes for concern, is in particular focus in our industry, which tends to attribute the problems to a kaleidoscopic media environment. But this does not appear to be quite right; we should probably separate the effects of dopamine-manipulating algorithms from those of the availability of many kinds of content.

Children still grind computer games for hours, sit hypnotised in front of the TV when their attention is earned, and pour endless hours of focused engagement into fictions and worlds that fascinate them or that they share with their friends. It is true that their media consumption is fragmented across infinite hours of specialised storytelling for every social group, niche interest and subcultural community. But another way of saying this is that at least some of the needs of these viewers are satisfied very specifically in a way our storytelling does not, in formats we do not always understand, in communally oriented environments where experiences can be shared and processed together.

We adults are largely not present in our children's digital media environments. These blind spots especially affect the film industry, as we underestimate how visually complex kids' digital media diets are. They have their own visual grammars for pacing, symbolism, conceptual humour, and the logic of what kinds of images you can edit between. What to us appears incomprehensible (or frankly unbearable) is a language we have not been interested in learning – which seems spectacularly counterproductive. Kids who already know several visual languages should be open to other kinds of filmmaking too; besides, their online existences are full of untold stories.

If we genuinely believe that understanding audiences is important, and want to take young people seriously as participants in storytelling ecosystems, we should not also say this only applies to aspects of their lives playing out in the physical world.

Mathias Broe: With such a rich history of strong children's content, it's odd that we're losing ground now. We need to understand that tradition and build from it, but maybe also look somewhere else. You can't just copy what was great in the 70s and 80s. We had a great discussion about [humour based on] irony and sarcasm – maybe a new generation doesn't need that as much. Can we find another tone?

Pelle Møller: From my perspective, especially with kids content, I miss people going to extremes! It's too dull, too nice, because they're afraid of shitstorms. Kids are crazy, and they love crazy stuff, but it's not what I see in the content.

Nordic kids' content historically had two particular strengths. When children's culture was overly pedagogical, or trying to mould children into obedient angels, we embraced their playfulness, imagination, and anarchy. And when stories were set in cleaned-up fairytale worlds or the idealised suburbia of American TV, we excelled in realism: trusting kids to recognise themselves and their worlds in stories about real-world issues and messy adults in messy kitchens, often in urban working-class environments.

Both approaches were grounded in our respect for the child's perspective. With some outstanding exceptions, our kid's content does not reflect their crazy – their anarchic playfulness. It gets ample stimuli online instead, sometimes in quite destructive ways.

We also seem to have forgotten how to make realism appealing. Setting a story in for instance a school does not automatically make it resonate with someone who goes to school every day. Kids may also not find it particularly convincing; cultural stereotypes and narrative tropes abound whether we're portraying someone as a high-school student or as a second-generation immigrant.

Christoffer Rizvanovic Stenbakken: Part of the solution is to remember to tell stories that evolve, that move forward and have some tempo. I have been surprised by the tempo of [some very respected] children's films – very contemplative, very slow, sort of dwelling in the images. It doesn't really scream "young audience". It just doesn't. I think [as a child] I would have been bored by some of them.

Arthouse and festival-type children's and youth films are difficult to define as a category. They seem to also cover films that likely appeal more to a grownup audience, whether because of a nostalgic perspective or because of their slow pace. Mainstream children's films from markets outside the US could fare better in theory, but travel poorly. Making audiences aware of the titles requires heavy marketing and/or significant audience outreach, and local distributors just can't make the numbers work.
The narrow aesthetic range of globally dominant content does contribute to the difficulty. Expanding the visual repertoire of young audiences is important. Cultural interventions toward that goal will involve some element of making children "eat their vegetables" – which should always be balanced with taking a genuine artistic interest in their tastes.

Mathias Broe: The audience don't always know what they want! We need to make sure that we can offer them a perspective they don't know that they need.

Tora Mkandawire Mårtens: Being able to give them something that they don't know exists is a gift! As a child, you should be allowed to have your first impressions of what art is; I still remember [mine]. In Sweden, we have cinema for schools, but we should start earlier – maybe showing even very young kids, the three-year-olds, different visuals? [Once they are on platforms like] YouTube, it is a never-ending stream and they don't really have that choice.

Jenny Jokela: We [were discussing] a similar point: trust the vision and visionary. We need to take bigger chances with the look of the thing to give kids more variety and open-mindedness.

We know children are motivated by communal and participatory experiences – but local storytelling, regardless of its other qualities, typically happens on a single platform and rarely provides opportunities for shared engagement.

Young viewers value the shared experience of the cinema, and will make an event even out of content they have already seen. Like generations before them, they will endlessly rewatch familiar and beloved shows, both individually and together. Like everyone else, they are yearning to belong, to be seen, to be valued, to be needed, to be comforted, to feel safe.

This is probably why the think tank, in the end, did not seem to view any of the problems as impossible to solve. After all, the needs being addressed are at the very heart of what film is for. We can understand viewers as communities and collectives as well as individuals. We can find stories about worlds they have never imagined, but will believe because they are true. We can make films that are poetic and deliriously visual, or lean heavily on genre, and still alluring, accessible, and specific to our context. We can respect young audiences by taking their lives seriously, and by embracing their joy, and by painting their dreams.

Armine Anda: As auteurs we speak from subconscious to subconscious. The more we long to talk to the conscious [mind], the more we lose something very important that the kid also perceives – something [allowing] them to be in contact with their own imagination… their, let's say, higher self.

PERSPECTIVE: Finding the Greenlandic story

Anngeerdardardor, Greenland/Denmark, 2025

Christoffer Rizvanovic Stenbakken, director and writer:

Growing up, I was always looking for films or stories taking place in Greenland, and I remember a lot of them didn't feel very Greenlandic to me. The setting was right, and sometimes the language, but the stories felt like they came from a different place. A lot of films in Greenland are written [elsewhere]. Just purely from an artistic standpoint, that's a shame. You miss a lot of really great untold stories. With this project, I wanted to do the opposite. I live in Copenhagen now and have for a long time, so it was really important to me to go find the story rather than making it up.

Tasiilaq is the town with the worst reputation in all of the Danish commonwealth, but [my friends and I] had really nice childhoods there. I know the leaders of the school and the youth culture house, so we had a lot of access. We spent so much time with young people in writing workshops, acting, going wherever they allowed us to go: to work with them, sailing, dogsledding…

I had made a podcast there a year and a half earlier and remembered seeing this kid walking around town alone with a big white dog on a steel chain. I was really interested in him. For the film project, we talked to 80 or 100 kids, but he never showed up. We wrote in big letters on our whiteboard, FIND THE DOG KID. I speak the language somewhat and could draw a map of that town blindfolded for sure, so I knew where to look.

One day we saw him from the car. I ran out and told him we're doing a film project with the young people of the town. Do you want to talk to us? He said no, but I can play guitar for you. He sat on this broken car in the self-built-house area of town, playing guitar and telling his story. He had moved in from a settlement with his family and his dog. Now the dog was missing. I looked around and everybody was crying. Okay, there's something here.

In real life, the dog was shot by the dog shooter – off the leash they can be really dangerous animals. But you have to give a warning, and he didn't get one. He told us about hugging the body of the dead dog in the dog graveyard. His mother had told him that he smelled like a corpse. I knew immediately I didn't want it to end like that.

Talking to him and to the other guys was the starting point [for writing the fiction]. I really admire documentary filmmakers, but [personally] I hate not being in control of what's going on. And documentary is harder in small societies, especially with young people, because you're delivering somebody else's life on a plate, then usually go away. That person has to live with the image you made of them forever. I'd heard about a Danish documentary about some really tough subjects in that town, where those boys had a very hard time afterwards. I didn't want that responsibility.

It's such a very small place. You can't move to another school. If you don't speak Danish or English or even West Greenlandic, you're pretty much stuck. The other thing is that this place has a really, really bad reputation. People are very wary of anyone coming there and telling the world what a bad place [their home] is. It's notoriously tight-lipped, as a survival mechanism.

There was negotiation about what we'd be allowed to [include]. For example, in real life he goes to a special ed class, and we had a discussion about that. He said we can use it, on one condition: every time you show it, you tell everybody that I am liked. That he's not an outcast in town. So I have done that at every single screening I've been present at.

Another thing was the scene at the end where he's praying. As an evangelical Christian, he didn't want to pray unless it was real. We [decided], just pray for real, whatever you want. I'll film it, and afterwards you'll whisper the lines that I want in your prayer, and I can put that under the images. He was okay with that.

We all made a deal that I was allowed to film almost everything, and they would watch edits and could [veto]. I think that's a good way to work, even in fiction, if you're working in a loose format. They improvised everything. It was really different from what I'm used to – nerve-wracking, as a screenwriter, to shoot a handwritten page of just notes! But it was also really eye-opening, with so many gifts for me. [The credits] say the film is made in collaboration with the youth of Tasiilaq. Their courage and talent is the reason that it really feels like a film from Greenland.

The guys came with us to the Berlinale. They flew from Tasiilaq to Kulusuk to Iceland to Kastrup, got picked up by car and driven all night through northern Germany, and then just straight onto the red carpet. It was the first time they were outside Greenland. They were strangely comfortable with writing autographs.

2. Audience Work in Creative Development

Mathias Broe: For a children's film I'm making right now, I went out to a lot of primary schools to just draw with them and talk about emotions and different things related to the film. I realised there was nothing I could take away from that other than a lovely experience. It's my job to use my imagination. *Then* we can talk about whether we are communicating it in the right way. Is it too complex, or should it be more complex? That balance is more interesting to explore.

Christoffer Rizvanovic Stenbakken: Your script can get pneumonia if you open up too early! But if you're lucky enough to find a real-life character who somehow represents a central dilemma or part of your story, inviting them in very early in the process can be really useful.

Audience strategy, audience design, and audience research are genuinely useful tools in an audiovisual marketplace where buying attention is basically impossible for all but a handful of studios and streamers. When work breaks through, it's usually thanks to viewers and word of mouth earned by a combination of project relevance and respectful engagement. It is no wonder that deep audience engagement in a project's development stages has gradually become an industry expectation – and sometimes a funding requirement.
Crassly put, who one's audience will be determines how they can be reached and their attention monetised, and therefore ultimately what kinds of formats, platforms and budgets are feasible for a project. This means that audience engagement must start very early and will inform creative processes in all projects in some way, whether or not developing them will involve immersive research in, or active co-creation with, a specific community.
Nordic kids' and youth media today have a strong norm of working quite actively with kids and young people, which given the current relevance challenges and global competition is probably wise. At minimum, proactive audience work helps ensure that a project is relevant, timely, and connected to the real world. At best, listening, collaborating, or even co-creating with members of portrayed communities or audience age groups can become a creative catalyst.

Christoffer Rizvanovic Stenbakken: I find it much more valuable to just spend time with the people that you want to portray in their world, than to [invite them for] a formal conversation with plastic water cups and coffee.
It's very hard to just ask kids something and get an answer. You can probe [around a theme] and talk with them, but in my experience, really getting there takes a lot of time and effort.

Jenny Jokela: My strategy is to play with my nephew and niece, create fantasy games with them, and base animation ideas on that.

How the new norm of engaging the audience early in a project interacts with artistic processes in practice has not been much discussed. This makes the nuanced conversations at the think tank particularly valuable, not least for their honesty. In the session introduction, a half-joking rhetorical question was posed: what does it feel like to get notes from a twelve-year-old? Participants did not address it directly, but collectively provided an answer: not always great, nor necessarily always useful.

Mathias Broe: I visited [a talent development programme for children's content]. A lot of what these aspiring filmmakers were told was that they couldn't rely on their own artistic voice – they should only listen to what the target group wanted. We were training them to be anthropologists, not filmmakers. For me it's really important that we ask who the artist in front of us is. What do they want to tell? Where does it come from?

Christoffer Rizvanovic Stenbakken: Kids can't solve your script. At DR they sometimes have "junior editors", for instance 7th or 8th-graders who read a script and give notes. I really like working [with young people] like that, but sometimes it sort of takes over. Getting notes is always good. But more like a patient complaining [about symptoms] – not necessarily giving the diagnosis. I'm the director; I'm the adult; I'm the one who knows how to write and direct a film. I still have to be the one telling the story – its filter.

Atchy Konesh: Notes we get from the children and youth are just input… A good leader will take advice but has the final call. So you need to include [young people] – in a room where you know what you want to tell.

The panelists expressed extreme discomfort with audience input being allowed to dictate artistic decisions. At the same time, experiences of this were understood to at least in part also be a matter of perception. The same research, feedback, or testing situations could be experienced quite differently depending on one's role in a project (e.g. writer, director, or producer) or on what stage the work was in. Immersive or participatory research is not new to this industry, and one panelist's suggestion that audience work, including testing, should be thought of as an extended research period was well-received in the room.

Mathias Broe: It's great that we can do a [listening process] if we have time for it. Maybe it's not [always] the scriptwriter who should be in that room? Maybe it's the director. It's a matter of temperament, but also an interesting discussion as to who will own the imagination. Of who owns the direction.

Jenny Jokela: If you show kids half-finished animation, their reaction might not be accurate. And once it's animated, it's going to be very expensive and very time-consuming to change things… I've shown previous productions [to kids] to see their reactions, but for me a lot of this is just about just hanging out with kids and getting an idea of what they find funny. I have learned that a lot of the time it's the same things… It's about trusting your intuition and not underestimating the kids sense of humour.

The filmmakers generally agreed that they would happily immerse in communities representing settings or audiences, and do more and earlier testing. The difficulty is that although methods like these are often described as necessary for succeeding in the market, this has rarely translated to such work being funded on the required scale. Sometimes it's not feasible within the current technical process.

Tora Mkandawire Mårtens: You do worry, there are always doubts. I could try things on [my sons], but it would have been nice as a director to screen short scenes in a cinema for other kids much earlier. You could even do it in development – also for your own sake, to feel more confident as a director and find your way through the artistic process. It might even have been easier to convince decision-makers if I had, but everything is about whether you have [the resources] for that testing.

Mathias Broe: I usually work with a scriptwriter because I like that collaboration. That also means that there's less money for the director. That beginning phase, where the project takes shape, can take up to two years. As a director, you need to be very engaged in your idea and have a vision. Sometimes you sit in an office in front of your computer, write, get lunch. But sometimes you have to go out, and the equipment is really heavy, and you don't have a car, and you have to go to Greenland. It's also when a director has the lowest income; maybe in that phase you get DKK 60,000. Then how are you going to do all this groundwork? It's a very practical challenge – not so much about making a film. It's about meeting the world. It is hard work, and you don't get paid.

When the directors had been able to choose for themselves how a project might best be served by collaborating with children and young people, their experiences of engaging closely with them had generally been positive and directly impactful on the work. Descriptions of particularly meaningful interactions shared a quality of genuine artistic collaboration, typically with the young people who would appear on screen. Whether documentary subjects, young actors, or audience members taking a first step into professional practice, taking their lived expertise seriously provided valuable contributions.

> **Christoffer Rizvanovic Stenbakken:** Input can come in the most minuscule way. You really have to listen. It can even be just struggling with a line – and when you dig into that, you find out it's not the line, it's this whole part of the film that's wrong, [because] you made it wrong. Then you have to adjust.

If audience input processes are valuable and the directors found them meaningful, why did they at other times find them dumb or almost offensive? One part of the answer is that audience engagement in creative processes is not just one thing. Well-meaning institutions may recommend an approach that does not serve a specific need, and filmmakers inexperienced with these tools may not be using them optimally.

Learning from young people about their interests and lives, up to and including respectful co-creation, is a completely different activity from asking their opinion about a specific work. Learning where they consume media and what kinds of audiovisual languages they are therefore fluent in or may struggle with is still another. Doing any of these things may involve building relationships or communities, which will come in handy once the film or show is finished – but leveraging those relationships to support a release is again a whole other specialty. As is interacting with committed fans, should the work one day be lucky enough to have some. Each of these aspects of audience work may be relevant to the same project and happening on top of each other during development, perhaps even at the same time in the same room. But their purposes and methods, and the power dynamics between filmmakers and audience members within them, are not the same.

Another part of the answer – how crowded and complex audiovisual development is getting – will be discussed in chapter three. Input is only useful at the right time, and only if it does not drown out the artistic processes of individual auteurs or core creative teams.

PERSPECTIVE: Understanding How a Film is Experienced

Sauna (Denmark, 2025)

Mathias Broe, director:

Sauna is not a children's film. It's about Johan, who works in a gay sauna; he meets a trans man called William, and they fall in love. The ambition was to make a sort of reverse Romeo and Juliet love story inside the queer community, and to allow my friends and my community to see themselves on the big screen because we had no film like that.

We started out with a very political stance, and then realised during the process that we should just make a love story. I think that was actually why we got the funding – because we were banal [enough to say that] we want to do a love story that should be universal for everyone, just set in a very specific environment.

Sauna is the first Danish feature film with a trans person in a leading part. It was really important for us to portray it in the right way; my writer and I are not trans. We [engaged with] Swedish scholars investigating trans representation in cinema; listened to other trans people and had those kinds of [experiences represented] in our development room. We also had a script consultant – all of that's part of your development phase. If you make something for youth and children, you should have a child in the room too! But at some point you also have to say, now we close the door and now we do our job, and then we open it up again later.

We received DKK 100,000 for target audience research. We did the process with the consulting firm Will & Agency. I thought it was really exciting, maybe because I have often worked like that. I'll go out and meet a lot of people. I know how to take the notes, how to understand the [response] material, so it wasn't that emotional for me. I was more curious.

Audience perspectives on not a lot of material – just a few scenes from the script, a video from me – really gave a lot of answers to how we would sell and market the film. Not necessarily creatively, for writing it, but to understand how it was perceived. And when we got too deep into labyrinth paths of small details, seeing it from the outside was just a gift.

But I could also see that being in that room was really tough for my screenwriter, because he felt like they were deciding how he should write. That's a perspective I hadn't thought so much about; as a director you know you'll be working with 100 people and they're all going to have an opinion.

You have to filter and take in what you can – listen to these small gifts and make them grow. That's your job, so for me it was lovely, but for a scriptwriter it can be painful.

Our target audience was queer people, and we wanted to bridge to a bigger audience. So hearing from the wider audience how they perceived it was quite interesting

In the last part of the process, we screened the almost finished film to an audience. When we got the sheets back, some people had their biggest cinema experience ever, and some hated it. It was always like that – also when the film was released. [Across] different parts of Denmark, different age groups and genders – there were so many different reactions. We realised that's what this project is like. That's how people meet it, and maybe it's okay.

[What we learned] was more about: do they connect with the main character? Is there something they don't understand? What are they most engaged in? Do they believe the love story? These questions we could then discuss in the artistic room. We could maybe not solve it for everyone, but we could talk about why something had that [effect], and sharpen or soften it.

3. Protecting the artistic process

> **Alice de Champfleury:** I'm an animation director and the challenge is always keeping your baby close to you all the way, and staying open at the same time. You get put into all these boxes [like target audience] age very quickly. It is necessary, but the challenge is to not get blocked or limited… I hear all the time that we need strong stories, strong topics, we want art. But then, if it's for children, you still have to wrap it in, soften it.

Industrial and administrative processes such as public funding and mass-market distribution thrive on standardisation. Artistic processes, on the other hand, are more of a dance between absolute freedom and interesting limitations. This has always been the challenge of film art being made within the film industry: especially early development can look all kinds of ways that are not always comprehensible to the rest of the value chain.

In the old days, the details of what happened at the start did not matter very much, as long as productions kept more or less to its budget and schedule so that sales and distribution could predictably do their job. Each little working group shepherding a film idea could figure out a process that made sense for them.

Now continuing structural and technological transformations are reorganising the entire filmmaking value chain. Much of post-production is moving to pre-production or significantly compressed; many aspects of sales, distribution, and what used to be pre-production should now start at script or even in the idea stage. In other words, the development stage of all film projects is becoming longer, and filled with new tasks and novel collaborative dynamics.

On a practical level this means that more people are getting involved while the creative work is still in quite a sensitive stage. Different professional functions are likely to need information and decisions at conflicting times, and none of us know yet how to work in these new constellations. This will increase pressures to create standardised project pipelines – which can be very useful, unless they destructively box in the creative work.

The panelist directors were strikingly uncomfortable with any kind of obligatory requirements being forced upon their process. At one point, for instance, someone pondered aloud whether defining a specific target audience, such as an age group, for your project is truly necessary? The obvious answer is yes; if you do not know whom something is for, its audience may end up being nobody. In the context of kids and youth, the need to take audience specifics into account often also connects directly to formal elements, such as duration, and level-setting for humour and linguistic complexity.

In most industry contexts therefore, even asking whether target groups are necessary would involve a risk of immediately being dismissed as naive or self-indulgent. But in this room, where the artists could reflect uninterrupted on each other's specific experiences, a great deal of nuance was added to the common-sense, reflex answer.

> **Maria Møller Christoffersen:** Coming from arthouse films, I really wanted long takes and a more artistic approach in *Scooter Boys*. The director [agreed but] also really wanted to make [this documentary series engaging] for the boys and girls who were in it. He understood the environment and the characters very well; [the show is] research-based, going into a specific environment and portraying it authentically.
>
> It became a very positive experience – just really satisfying to explore, okay, what kind of music do they listen to? How do we tell this more straightforwardly, so viewers actually engage? How are they used to watching things?
>
> It was useful for me to learn that when we do a sync, they need to [always speak about the scene's topic] or the audience won't keep watching. Sitting in front of your computer, where you could watch YouTube instead, it needs [to engage] differently than going to the cinema with your parents and a bag of candy and knowing you're going to stay through the film.
>
> Artistically it didn't feel negative or like a compromise. Of course, we also did some things where they'd say, why the fuck does it look like this? This looks weird. And we answered, yeah – it's art!

Jenny Jokela: With test screenings for groups of kids, it's good to bear the social dynamics in mind. A lot of it comes down to age. We screened one show for very small kids, with their older siblings present. The older ones said, this is for babies, I like *Spider-Man*. When the older kids left, the smaller kids asked to see it again. When they were less aware of their surroundings and their own social place in the group, they responded to the softer things. But they knew that when they were with the cool ones, they [should] want more violence.

Mathias Broe: Discussing it like this dissolves the idea of the target group a little. I was always told about casting that children will look up to older children, and it makes sense to me. But I also want to question how every time you work with children and youth stuff, the first thing that comes up is, how old are they? What box can we put this in? Instead of trusting that everyone can see this, that it's okay, and figuring out how to distribute it, or how we should talk about it, or how we sell it so kids don't feel embarrassed to watch it in the cinema?

Having "target audience" as a mandatory field on an application form, is no guarantee that stakeholders are seriously considering what those numbers actually mean. Perhaps instead, we should ask in what ways the project will be shaped by who it's for – while always keeping in mind that sometimes finding out who may respond to a work is only possible through artistic development or audience testing. Focusing just on age reduces individuals to group averages and obscures the social dynamics of real-world viewing situations.

Yes, a specific target audience should be defined; no, it will not always happen in the same way. Yes, "age" is a shorthand for much valuable information. But once defined, the target audience can become a creative limitation, closing doors or leading to decision-making based on generalisations and prejudice rather than engagement with actual humans. And target audience is just one example; similar complexities apply to all well-meaning attempts at formalising organic processes. No wonder artists are frustrated!

Alice de Champfleury: You want your story to be universal, elevated, [resonating with the] subconscious… But especially in the beginning you have a lot of stuff that you cannot place in order yet. That's why you create – you go into a kind of jungle and have to find out. There must be space to not put it in a box in that [early] process, where all the seeds are taking form. To be able to find the form that will communicate in the end,, you need to be open [enough] to explore.

Every creative development process is inherently different, and the external environment they now interact with is new. It would be incredibly helpful if everyone involved were able to specifically verbalise what, from their perspective, each step of the process should achieve, prove, test, or explore. It would help the teams map out a landscape to then navigate together, in whichever way makes most sense for the project and artists involved.

Tora Mkandawire Mårtens: We should be more open about how we create movies. There's more than one way – why don't we talk about this more? We don't always have to [start from] a script with Act One, Act Two… There are more ways of presenting scripts than just verbally. Roy Andersson, for example, always painted his scenes, and his films had visual rules. More visual scripts than we [have now] would be inspiring for directors – at least for me! Maybe not for everyone, but I just know that we can create films in many different ways.

Alice de Champfleury: I write and I draw and I write and I draw and I write and I draw. In a story development process, I need both!

Documentary filmmaking and artistic animation, which have never fully conformed to a clean progression from development to pre-production to production, provide an interesting window into these opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, institutions and industry have been able somehow to handle these irregularities. On the other, that has often been achieved by forcing artists to compromise, submit to processes they find irrelevant, or position their project in an unnatural way to be heard.

Jenny Jokela: My other films have usually been self-produced, where I got artist's grants and could do anything, but for my short film we applied for funding from the Finnish Film Foundation. The production company applied three times because at first [it came across as] too weird. In my mind it's a very classical narrative. But if you don't have the skill to visualise it in your head, [you'll think] it doesn't make sense. It was really interesting to learn how to [pitch] it more [conceptually]. When I was telling them the story, I wouldn't say exactly what was happening, because I knew that would confuse the commissioners – most of their films aren't very arty at all. Instead I talked about the film through what each act meant, in broad strokes. It worked really well. I usually don't really write too much of a script, this time I had to. In animation, you often end up cutting dialogue [you have written] because you can show it visually and [don't need] both. I remember being a bit confused when I was already animating and my producer said "remember to update the script". I thought, I haven't looked at it for months, but okay! I'm used to approaching [the narrative] through pictures and drawing, changing the story as new solutions [emerge] from visual cues.

A recurring theme in the think tank was how text-based most processes are today – and how valuable visual approaches can be. Producing work that feels vivid and new, or of a kind that has not historically been possible in the Nordics, will require flexibility and bravery from our institutions.

Under pressure from synthetic video, new production pipelines, and global monopolies, the industry's transformations continue. Over time, the technical cost of production is expected to decrease, and the volume of both competent media content and abject slop continue to grow. In an environment like that, competing in the generic midstream will be very difficult, while specific aesthetics, surprising perspectives, and deeply human experiences will be more valuable than ever. In a world where the cost and complexity of production is less of a burden, the job of public funders could become to support development – to create circumstances where both audiences and artists can thrive.

Jenny Jokinen: With animation you usually show style frames at the same time as you show the first script, because it's so vital…

Kirstine Vinderskov: Animation projects do tend to become visual much earlier – of course, when that's your language! I'm very open to also doing visual development at an earlier stage for live-action as well. But as a small disclaimer: I sometimes also see mood boards that look like something from an advertising agency. That's not very useful. It doesn't come from the inside the artistic [process].

Mathias Broe: Have you ever seen early stage visual development where you thought, wow, this is really interesting?

Kirstine Vinderskov: Oh, yes! I have to anonymize the example, but I [supported] one project with no treatment, no synopsis – and no script, of course. But a very relatable, emotional, simple idea, and big, visual ambition. The idea was like three lines, and the visual was maybe eight pages… Not a mood board, but a vision, and a desire to investigate the visual side along with the writing.

PERSPECTIVE: Co-creating With Young Children

Aleque and Issay, Sweden, 2025

Tora Mkandawire Mårtens, director:

I made this film with my own children, following Aleque and Issay from when they were three. Filming a lot was exhausting for both me and the kids, so we had to spread it out over many years. There aren't many documentaries about three-year-olds – I call this a coming-of-age story from three to seven and a half.

When I create my films, I always imagine the visual part first and then write the script. With this film, I wanted to explore what a moment is. To capture moments we can remember from childhood, like the feeling in your mouth from a tooth missing, or when Issay suddenly understands how to ride a bike and almost drives into the camera.

Working with moments instead of a strong structure, it can be hard to persuade other people it will work. [Decision-makers have also questioned whether] five-year-olds can watch a feature documentary. Seeing the 92-minute version in cinemas with lots of kids gave me confidence: they laughed, and sometimes also cried. We also made a 46-minute version for younger children.

My youngest, Tiwa, was only a baby when we started, always watching her siblings, looking up to them. I felt she needed to be a natural part of the film, and we decided she should be the narrator. We worked with the narration and voiceover little by little from when she was five. Sometimes we could only work ten minutes before we had to stop and do something else.

It really was a collaboration. She would say to me, 'that doesn't sound right, I want to say it like this.' I learned that you can't just write a script; it has to come naturally. The twins were editing consultants. It was key for me not to release it until they were older, so they could have a distance to themselves at three, and also really laugh about special scenes. I wanted the film to be funny as well as touching. We tested scenes on Aleque and Issay – when they laughed, I knew other children would too.

They were eleven [when it came out] and could tell me what to show and not to show. There was a specific scene I liked where they were playing in a bubble bath. You only saw their faces above the bubbles, laughing and singing, so loving towards each other like twins can be. But Issay said [during editing] that he felt embarrassed that the audience could understand he was naked under the water. I hadn't realised [he might worry about that]; of course we took it out.

In the film, the adults became voices more than characters. I always wanted a low camera angle, and [the kids] had microphones under their clothes. When they were three years old, I didn't always understand what was happening in the moment. Once, for example, Issay was really angry and screaming. Watching [it back], I could hear their voices much better and understood he couldn't tie his shoe correctly. It really opened my eyes to the child's point of view – how difficult it is for small children to make us understand what they want or are upset about. That changed me.

I hope I will bring all these experiences into my next projects. As a director you live so closely with your film, and filming a lot you almost feel like a child yourself. It's a gift for me to try to be that child, to not forget to laugh, to be in the moment, show your emotions. It could also be useful for directing actors.

We had test screenings in cinemas for preschools and schools when the film was almost done, and it was really nice to realise it was working. Children really like watching other children in documentaries. They can [immerse] into a moment, it doesn't have to be an action story. Of course, like adults, all children are different and like different films. [We need] a wide range of films, so kids can reflect themselves in kids [their own age]. It's not only important, it is also entertaining for them.

I always wanted to make a film for both children and adults. Not necessarily to take away the same things from, but to watch together and talk about afterwards. An 85-year-old grandmother saw the feature version with a five-year old, and they loved it.

4. Making Space for Other Worlds

Kirstine Vinderskov: It's absolutely necessary that we rethink Danish films for kids and youth. Films that do well in cinemas have some sort of extra element, like a genre; very often it's a different visuality in the storytelling. Otherwise you can watch it on streaming, or just spend time in your own life!
As a commissioning editor for feature films, I do see many more projects that want to work with something like we are talking about… It doesn't have to be supernatural. It can be anything and everything. But it's not realism. It's… "realism plus".

Lise Saxtrup: There's this probably famous quote: good stories come from an ordinary person in an extraordinary world, or an extraordinary person in an ordinary world… Maybe this is not so much about vampires. The extraordinary world could be in reality. In a [subcultural fandom] world we haven't looked into… Or at the sauna. We sometimes forget it doesn't have to have a lot of action – it could also just be us, but on scooters.

Christoffer Rizvanovic Stenbakken: My project was highly naturalistic – [Tasiilaq's] world is strange in and of itself.

Filmmaking being so expensive now, it is hard to quite believe that tools like virtual production and AI-boosted VFX may soon bring about a great levelling of production costs. In our local industries it's long been agreed that Nordic kids' content and especially theatrical feature films are hurt by our inability to compete on production levels. In that light, the new possibilities awaken a cautious hope. What would we want to do if anything was possible? And would we, in practice, know how to tell those stories?

At the think tank, the elusive quality that might soon be unlocked was discussed as 'elevation'. This term is used both to describe a heightened cinematic visuality, and for the supernatural elements or on-screen world building of genre film. The film industry sometimes also applies both senses together, in combinations like 'elevated horror'.

Young audiences, especially teenagers, express a yearning for films that can bring them into worlds beyond that of their everyday life. The different meanings of elevation suggest complementary paths to fulfilling the need for films where other realities are possible and other possibilities permitted to be real. Whether through vivid depictions of unfamiliar places and social worlds; through stories and environments where hopes and dreams can come true; or through poetic stories that lift the heart and visuals that transport us.

Atchy Konesh: Elevated reality doesn't have to be supernatural. In the series I'm working on right now, there's a scene where something goes viral and comes back to the main character in a positive way when he gets support from the biggest football stars. The producers [worry] it's not realistic that Jude Bellingham would send him an Instagram message… No, maybe it [wouldn't happen] like that in reality, but it is possible. Why not? It can engage my audience with escapism and fascination. It gives my audience hope. And when we try to push these limits, it often stops at the other side of the table.

Christina Ramsø Thomsen: Genre films often deal with simply drawn hero figures. In the Nordics, we've always had a problem with those – with unambiguous heroes, or even role models… Have we perhaps preferred for everyone to be on the same level?

In the Nordics, genre filmmaking – whether horror or escapist romance – was historically dismissed as too American, meaning "commercial", and perhaps also "individualist". Whether rooted in sheer snobbery or rational concern about the impacts of US soft power, backing away from popular genres is hardly a practical response. If the fear was that exceptionalist stories about superheroes or supermodels might undermine traditional or collectivist values, how would an absence of Nordic content from popular genres possibly act as a counterweight? Perhaps the theory was that prestige filmmakers will ultimately prevail in

impact and reach, if they avoid genres or aesthetics so low as to be inherently corrupting. The counter-argument would be Ingmar Bergman, whose greatest hits were a full on ghost movie (*Fanny & Alexander*) a take on daytime soaps (*Scenes from a Marriage*).

Within the professional culture sector, the irrational prejudice against popular forms lives on – almost twenty years after Tomas Alfredson's *Let the Right One In*, a masterpiece of Swedish social realist aesthetics whose gut-wrenching story about child loneliness and vulnerability happens to centre a vampire.

> **Pelle Møller:** When you look to Asia, there is a tradition [of making horror movies]; in Denmark, there is a realism tradition. We saw a lot of kitchen-sink dramas in the 90s, so that's what we are looking to the past for, and that's what we've been seeing. You went to film school – did you get educated in genres, in horror?

> **Atchy Konesh:** No. At the Norwegian film school, we didn't have any projects in a Narnia or Harry Potter [style]… I don't think that's considered to be okay to do at those kinds of schools! When we tried to pitch a musical, everybody laughed! But we still made it – that's elevated reality too.

> **Mathias Broe:** [The industry] talks so much about technological development, and the schools here haven't caught up. There are no facilities. For directors to feel comfortable working with new technologies, they have to go abroad.

Our genre tradition may not be deep, but *Let the Right One In* quietly launched a Nordic horror renaissance. Our low-budget horror flicks are successful with global genre audiences and our elevated horror films compete at A festivals. In this decade, adventure entertainment like Roar Uthaug's *Troll* have reached streaming audiences in the hundreds of millions by appealing to families with older children as well as to horror and action fans.

This film wave often has a specifically Nordic flavour, whether supernatural folklore motifs, or setting gory slasher violence in realistically portrayed environments where social class is particularly visible (like municipal conferences and mini-cruises). This is not very different from how e.g. Guillermo del Toro's deployed resplendently monstrous fairytale imagery in his study of 1940s fascist Spain, *Pan's Labyrinth*.

A children's media example is the Rose d'Or and Prix Jeunesse-winning Norwegian TV drama *Zombie Lars* (2017-19), whose portrayal of xenophobia and the struggles of fitting in are only heightened by its 11-year-old protagonist being (un)dead. Occasionally shocking moments of body horror are fully in line with the Nordic tradition of meeting children at eye level. Honouring kids' fascination with existential issues like life, death, and belonging, does not preclude respecting their love of boundary-breaking, gross-out humour, and in this case ninjas and witches.

Christoffer Rizvanovic Stenbakken: If you go about creating a fantastical world, you should start a very boring place with rules. That really is the screenwriter in me speaking! I mean it in a very practical sense – everybody knows the rules of a vampire, but if you're starting from scratch and doing spelunking on Mars, you have a lot of explaining to do.

Mathias Broe: I think you can get to the rules in different ways? Our film is about this girl whose parents get divorced. This creature with magic abilities shows up and one of the tasks it gives her is stealing the parents' divorce papers – he will make a new house for her out of them, so she doesn't have to travel between the parents. We got the idea that when you go into the house, you forget everything that was bad. The function of that house for a child [is clear] – but how do we build it? What will it look like? Does it make sense that the divorce papers become the place where you can find good things? So many questions and logics that don't necessarily fit, but intuitively I can see it feels good. A pancake house [like in Hansen and Gretel] also doesn't make sense! In the development phase, allowing yourself to think in non-logical ways is actually extremely difficult. So how do we allow ourselves things that might not make sense and trust that at some point they will?

Jenny Jokinen: My films for adults especially are quite surreal. My experience is you just have to trust that intuition. If it's very clear in my mind what every part symbolises and why it's there, it does translate. If you as a viewer see a film that's a bit open-ended, you can usually feel that the maker knows what it is about. If you allow a certain openness, the viewer keeps thinking about it afterwards or maybe wants to see it again. There is an art to not over-explaining.

There is an almost total disconnect between the industry's understanding of prestige, its sense of itself, and the quality, specificity, and range of work that the Nordics have produced even with very limited resources. A new generation of filmmakers is willing to explore new and culturally specific ways of telling elevated stories of every kind. But many gatekeepers have no sense of the potential of these approaches, and our film schools don't train for or encourage it.

As the directors in the think tank make clear, elevated storytelling is not some desperate, instrumental attempt at making local storytelling relevant to children and teens. Genre provides a frame for negotiating the familiar and unfamiliar, psychological realism and aesthetic elevation; for making symbols tangible and dreams possible.

Mathias Broe: As filmmakers who grew up with the Dogme movement, there's something about budgets – even in terms of what we feel we are allowed to [ask for]. I came [up through] New Danish Screen, where our budget was DKK 8M! You can't really push that money very far.

As a director, I'm classically trained – not technically [knowledgeable like an] animation director. I feel comfortable with real-life humans because I know how to work with them. But for this children's film we're making now we need to build a big creature. I want it to feel very practical, like the animatronics in an 80s film. It costs a lot of money. I've never done it before and have to rely on other people's creativity to ensure we can get the result we want.
It's really scary – what if it goes wrong? You have to be sure you can take some chances to allow yourself to go there. Film commissioners too should know that right now we're moving into unfamiliar territory. Let's see what's happening and take those chances.

PERSPECTIVE: Showing the Invisible

Hoppsorna/Hupsulit (Finland, 2018-2022)

Dollhouse Elephant (Finland, 2025)

Jenny Jokela, director, animator and writer:

We did two seasons of what is essentially a music video show for kids: every one-minute episode is a new children's song. It's been promoted as art animation for kids, which wasn't my [intent], but I think my style of animation just reads like that. The show had three starting points. In Finland we have two official languages, Finnish and Swedish, and sometimes [relations are tense]. But kids learn [prejudice] from adults, not from each other. We made every episode in Finnish and Swedish, and when one episode finishes, it'll start again in the other language.

We also kept the characters gender neutral. The pink character is wearing a skirt, but won't be doing something typically feminine in every episode. It's inspired by playing with my niece and nephew. My nephew was maybe three, and he really adores his older sister. Because she was into *Frozen*, so was he. When she would dance around in her skirt he would put on a glitter skirt too, but still wear his Spider-Man cowl or carry a sword. The third goal was to encourage movement. In some episodes the characters are literally doing a dance that the kids will do while they watch it. Others encourage imaginative play.

My more adult stuff is subtler and more artistic. Even the method; I paint it by hand. It draws on anxieties and how to visualise them. There's still a level of playfulness, but it becomes more poetic. The older the audience, the less slapstick! But I actually use a similar sense of humour, just with different levels to it. My latest short film *Dollhouse Elephant* is about a group of neighbours who all see themselves as the main character and all have a negative effect on one another. If they could learn to communicate and care just a little bit, they could all be happy, but they probably won't.

For me, the big pull of animation has always been how it allows you to show the invisible so you can depict feelings and emotions. I really love that, and it's my go-to whether I work for kids or for an adult audience.

Hoppsorna/Hupsulit is directed and animated by Jenny Jokela. Dollhouse Elephant is directed by Jenny Jokela, animated by Jenny Jokela and Sanni Lehtinen, and written by Jenny Jokela and Ylva Perera.