

The meaning of cultural life: to qualify the moment!

Por Beth Juncker

El sentido de la vida cultural: La calidad del momento. El concepto del niño, la cultura infantil y las políticas culturales infantiles en los países nórdicos (Dinamarca).

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I will start in the centre of Nordic cultural policy and Nordic cultural communication in relation to children and young people: Children's culture, their playing communities. In order to give you a picture of the challenges both cultural policy and cultural communication are facing just now.

I run, because I looove biscuits!

A drawing of a small boy and this sentence written with clumsy childish letters on the Norwegian shuttlebusses a year ago. Did he run, because he, as a clever boy, had learned from the Norwegian anti-fatness campaigns? No - he runs, because the running itself expresses the joy, the very love of biscuits. Children's culture communicates through action. The way of running is a cultural expression.

When you eat sweet cold soup, you are turned into a butter cookie!

Said by a 5 years old boy. In children's culture, you can be what you eat. It is a culture, which constantly deals with transformations.

You can't play it, when it's really happening!

An answer from a 4 years old child, when his mother – tired and looking forward to an evening's rest and peace – proposed: Shouldn't the two of us play, that you are going to have a bath and go to sleep?

Children's culture deals with the aesthetic- symbolic dimension – fictions – every day. In this dimension everything can take place, but never for real.

If you don't like war, why don't you stop it?

A well known question from children. Naïve? Maybe! Nevertheless central for children's way of thinking and arguing. They never start activities, they don't like.

Four statements leading us to the very core of children's culture.

A culture, which carefully distinguish between social reality and cultural reality. Social reality just is. Cultural reality, you have to create and maintain yourself. Cultural reality is only present as a fourth dimension raising **while** you are running, jumping, swinging, singing, playing, listening, reading, talking, laughing. A way of life connected to the very moment, the now and here.

This fourth – aesthetic-symbolic – dimension is the Alfa and Omega of children's culture. It raises when you are playing, laughing together, when you are absorbed by a book, a performance, a film, a concert, involved in an exciting discussion. When you stop playing, reading, listening, discussing, it fades away.

This fourth dimension never raises by itself. You need a variety of cultural patterns, experiences and expressions – rhymes, rhythms, movements, figures, words, narrative patterns, metrical patterns, patterns of play – in other words - aesthetic tools - to create and maintain it. Where do we, where do children get them?

Confronted with babies, we communicate with our bodies. We transform the voice to an instrument: heeiiiij.

Are they troubled, we instinctively call for combinations of sound and movements: we sway, we sing, we rock, using all the body's creative and communicative possibilities.

Are they bored, we call for the small tricks, allowing us to fight boredom and create smiles, laughter, excitement, joy, play- and meaningful being together: hiding and coming, dropping and catching things, giving voices and movements to knives, teaspoons transforming them for a moment or two to cars, birds etc.

Small aesthetic tools, which allow us to transform the dull every day habits to new experiences, to open – for a minute or two - the attractive fourth dimension.

The following I am unable to translate – It is meaningful nonsense!

Punktum, punktum, komma, streg – sådan tegnes Nikolaj!

Ej-sikkelej-sikke-ladetus-killi-milli-maxi-kuksi-kaksi-esrom, pyt!

Do we really want to amuse babies in the Nordic countries, while changing nappies, we call for the traditional singing games, tickling the bottom, scratching the hair, while singing and rocking:

Kyllingelår, kyllingelår

Pille rejer, pille rejer

Pille kyllingelår

Salami

Salami

Pille rejer, pille rejer

Pille kyllingelår

Salami

Salami

Pille rejer

Pille kyllingelår

A creative combination of rhythm, voices, gestures, movements. It is very hard to get deep existential or moral wisdom from it. It is pure nonsense. But it works!

Doing so we suddenly realize that our bodies are invisible archives and libraries. We possess a store of cultural patterns and expressions, we often did not know, we had, but as we spontaneously call for, when babies are around. We use them to qualify the moment, to create intensity, challenging ways of being together.

Here we have the very basis of our cultural life – our cultural life and the children's.

Did we learn it from school? No. We learnt it from practice.

When grandfather told special stories, when grandmother was swaying and singing, when uncles and aunts exchanged jokes, when friends came by with new tricks. We have stored all of it in the body. We are all of us rooted in a popular, cultural tradition neither reading, studying nor thinking give access to.

Being only 6 months old the children start to respond, hiding themselves behind blankets, deliberately dropping things on the floor. They are on their way towards a register of cultural patterns and expressions, enabling them to express themselves, to communicate, to make fun – to raise the fourth dimension.

Cultural policy in the Nordic countries is committed to this register of cultural patterns and expressions. It is the most distinguished obligation to secure and guarantee that the register, children already possess, get the possibilities to be inspired, to grow, to be practiced. It is children's own way to the world, to knowledge, to expression, to communication, to identity – to the joy of life and quality in life.

A wide range of cultural patterns and expressions are the prerequisite for children's ability to contribute to playing activities, to create great social being together, to qualify the daily moments of

life. Later in life it is also the prerequisite for their ability to learn from school, to be taught – and enjoy being it.

In cultural politics and cultural communication in the Nordic countries the dynamic relations between this popular cultural tradition rooted in our bodies and practiced in daily life and the artistic experiments and developments are the crucial point.

“Art is not culture. Art is meant to ruin culture, to change it. While culture carries tradition, history, ideas and conceptions on, art is meant to challenge the conceptions, questioning traditions and interpretations of history.”

Meeting and dealing with art – in literature, music, theatre, films, dance, performances, paintings and installations, medias, computer plays – is the very heart of these dynamic relations, securing that our popular daily culture and its practice stays alive and is constantly transformed, developed, updated!

Meeting with art is another way experiencing the fourth dimension. Are we touched, surprised, hit by thrill, absorbed, the social reality fade away, the cultural reality, the fourth dimension in which we forget ourselves, raise – ad we just want to go on reading, go on seeing, go on listening. To us and to children art – literature, performances, music, films, pictures – is aesthetic tools giving access to all our feelings, opening the roads to aesthetic experience.

Artistic experiences and artistic expressions – genres, figures, combinations of forms – often surprise us, tease us, challenge us, give us inspiration. We can feel the experience, we can discuss it with friends, we steal expressions from them – take a figure, a tune, a gesture, a movement, a pattern – use it, discuss it, alone and together with others and thus renewing our own cultural practice and tradition.

Meeting and dealing with art is not a question of understandable messages, fine values or good role models for naughty kids. It is a question of expressive alphabets, sounds, rhythms, patterns of

movements, special ways of putting words together, forms, colors, surfaces, structures, you can grasp, turn, improvise, create with and communicate by.

You have to select literature with the highest aesthetic modern qualities, literature children can grow with. Communicating it, you have to be touched, hit, surprised, amazed yourself. Reading aloud you have to cry, to yell, to die from laughter together with the kids. To communicate art and culture is a question of infection, contagion. If you are not infected, engaged yourself – forget it! Find something else!

In the Nordic countries this expressive cultural communication is linked to, supported by an expressive cultural policy. A cultural policy, not disguised as a social policy. You don't meet art, you don't read or listen to wonderful literature in order to be more social, more democratic. A cultural policy not disguised as an educational policy. The meaning of being absorbed in literature is not to learn to read or to be a better reader. An expressive cultural policy is a policy respecting the meaning of the cultural dimensions in our lives.

A cultural policy with the crucial quality, that it can't be tested and measured. But it can be seen and heard. The effects of it are laughing, crying, enjoying, discussing, making fun, creating daily quality. A cultural policy contributing to a rich cultural life.

It is simple. We haven't got a long tradition for this simplicity. As a matter of fact developing a cultural policy and a cultural communication built on distinctions between the meaning of art and culture in children's educational life and the meaning of art and culture in children's cultural life is quite new. The necessity was first recognized and the efforts started during the last two decades of the 20th century.

Since the beginning of the 20th Century the Nordic countries had developed an educational tradition for literacy connected to cultural and artistic heritage, communicated and quality guaranteed by children's part of the public library system – children's librarians – and by the public elementary schools – the teachers. Starting out communicating literature for children – good books – going on

presenting classical theatre, classical music and little by little films too, in the beginning primarily documentary films. Always connected to classes and teaching.

During the century this educational cultural communication developed into a huge cultural communication system – kind of a special cultural world addressing children and young people within the cultural system addressing adults.

From the very beginning this cultural system was built on a notion regarding childhood as enlightenment time, teaching and learning time and regarding children as becomings. Children were wonderful, innocent, noisy small illiterate, primitive creatures without rational sense. They were seen as empty black boards for adults to write on. We had to teach them not to follow their desires, not to be so playful, to start mastering feelings and to think and behave rational.

The main purpose of the cultural communication system was therefore to civilize children, using art and culture educating their (bad) taste, their (wrong) values and their (playful noisy) manners. In other words art and cultural were regarded as instruments supporting social standards and educational goals.

The literature, the performances, the music, the films were selected to support these goals. Books, they could read and understand and from which they could fetch good values and good role models, performances introducing them to Classic Danish theatre and to adult standards, music allowing them to meet a classical concert tradition. The very meaning was not to be entertained, but to benefit, to be well behaved, better readers, better citizens! Children were met as becomings.

The cultural communication system was a literacy system fighting the market, entertainment and what was regarded as children's natural bad tastes. In order to be classified by this system the artists were forced to think, write, stage and play educationally. They had to accept and adapt to the educational systems teachings standards, to children's rational developmental abilities to read, to think, to reflect and to understand. The main code was: understanding. They had to be able to understand, in order to be able to learn. The consequence was fine, boring books, highly professional boring adult theatre, boring adult music, boring educational films.

From the late 1960s a major shift of paradigm started to take place in the Nordic countries questioning the educational cultural system and its instrumental standards.

To meet and experience from wonderful literature, exiting illustrations, touching performances, scary films do not depend on reading and writing skills or on abilities to understand.

Authors, illustrators, dramatists, musicians, film makers started to insist on children as an artistic challenge, children as beings. They did not want to write educational literature, to make educational theatre. As artists they wanted to make art! From the 1980ies we experienced quite a modern break through – new kind of illustrated books, new kind of novels, poems, short stories, new kind of films, new kind of theater performances.

All of them built on another notion of the child. Children were now no longer only regarded as primitive, empty blackboards for adults to write on - becomings. They were also regarded as human beings on own conditions and in own rights – children as beings. Children do not have a childhood, they have a life, they live it onwards, not backwards. Of course they are becomings, but in cultural communication we have to meet them as beings here and now. They have to be touched, not to be taught.

The modern Nordic artistic break through started out with this new conception of children, taking them as an artistic challenge, making literature, performances, film, pictures investigating life as it might look seen with their eyes, felt with their feelings, argued with their social and ethic standards. On these conditions the different art forms have created a richness of aesthetic experiences, addressing children with a rich range of artistic genres.

I the beginning children's communicators – teachers, librarians, pedagogues - were furious. This is betrayal! Yes, it is good literature, it is films and theater with high aesthetic qualities. But – it is not for children. It is too complex, too difficult, impossibility for them to understand!

Today – 30 years after these angry public discussions on behalf of children - the angry voices have ceased. Just now we are in train of developing a new cultural policy and a new cultural communication built on the new notion of the child.

As a matter of fact the notion of the child as being is not new, the challenges have been seen before. Looking back we have realized, that the Nordic countries have had two literary traditions addressing children and young people:

- A solid – and dominant - educational tradition concerned with themes, content, social and moral values and understandable messages. A tradition taking children and young people as **an educational challenge**.
- A delicate literary tradition dedicated to literary language, to literary form, searching the existential, social, cultural challenges of children's life seen from a child perspective. A tradition taking children and young people as **an artistic challenge**.

The educational tradition is rooted in the 16th century – rationalism - with the fights **against** tradition, superstition, religious mythologies, illiteracy and the fights **for** literacy, rational thinking and rational understandings. It is a proud enlightenment tradition connected to educational thinking, to school activities and formal teaching – to amuse in order to benefit. Literature as an instrument serving social, educational purposes.

The literary tradition is rooted in the 17th century – the romantic period – searching the subtle areas of play, of feelings, of existential needs, of aesthetic experiences left behind by rationalism. Researching nature, not in order to master it, but in order to find lessons for life. Researching popular traditions - storytelling, fairy tales, popular tales, myths – as a source of inspiration. During these investigations authors found 'the child' and started a literary journey of experiments – trying to see and tell with children's eyes, to investigate their perspectives on life. In Denmark Hans Christian Andersen is one of the first and internationally the most well-known name. Astrid Lindgren took inspiration here, so did Tove Jansson and many of their Nordic colleagues.

What we have witnessed is a general break through, a new acceptance of this delicate literary aesthetic tradition taking children serious as children.

What is quite new is the influence on the political level, the consequences for cultural policy and cultural communication. We have started not to confuse educational and cultural policy. That is a small miracle. Today we are building up a new tradition arguing for the meaning of aesthetics – of

cultural expressions and experiences - in daily life, arguing for the importance of competencies to create and maintain the fourth – aesthetic-symbolic – dimension, which gives room to all our feelings and values and from which we all fetch the bricks to identity building and identity development.

Today we know that

Experience from art and culture belong to our cultural life.

Knowledge about art and culture, abilities to analyze, to judge, to discuss with critical perspectives belong to our educational life.

Today we know, that

Our educational life consists of intellectual, instrumental cultures. Here we are being taught to read, write and reckon. We are developing the set of competencies, we need to have with us to be successful in a future working life. From we are entering this system until we leave it, everything we do have a distinct purpose, everything we learn, can be tested and measured – and we do test and measure these days! When we meet art in this system – pictures, paintings, performances, literature, movies – we are trained to go behind the experience, to analyze, to master a critical distance, to judge, we are working with knowledge of artistic periods, tendencies, artists, modes and genres. Everything contribute developing literacy – bildung - dannelse

Today we also know, that

Our cultural life consists of metacultures, autotelic cultures. And what's that? Let's take a quotation:

Metaculture can't be understood and described with other cultures as one's starting point. Metacultures are independent, autotelic cultural systems, which do not fetch meaning outside themselves. They maintain their own reality as equal to other kind of reality.

You can't measure cultural life with the standards from educational life.

Our cultural life does not serve neither the educational nor the working life. It serves us as human beings. The meaning is to enrich our personal lives with aesthetical experiences, to give us subjects, materials and tools to create exciting ways of being together in our spare time, to make it possible for us to party, play, dance, laugh, sing, cry, discuss together, to involve us and our feelings in experiences with the best and the worst – life, love, divorce, terror, death – without having to be divorced or to die, without risking our lives.

This is the crucial point in cultural life: everything takes place on aesthetic- symbolic conditions. That is why we can experience extreme happiness, extreme grief, extreme danger without dieing. The meaning is the richness of our feelings, the silent knowledge – the store - of our bodies, our ability to enrich the moments of spare time, of leisure.

Schools and educations serve our future, they are working with us as becomings

Art and culture serve our spare time, our leisure, the precious moments, they meet all of us as beings.

Do children have the right to spare time, to leisure, to a genuine cultural life?

Signing UN's Convention on Children's Rights the States Parties answered this question with a YES!

Article 31

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

The keywords are leisure, play, recreation, culture and art – and the keywords are linked together. Cultural life is leisure life, spare time life. Cultural policy and cultural communication support.

That is why the cultural political vision in all the Nordic countries just now are:

All children in the Nordic countries must meet art and culture

All cultural institutions must contribute

All art forms must be involved

Thank you!

1945 Astrid Lindgren's Pippi was published. 1945 she entered the Swedish elementary school. She had one single purpose. I quote her:

It is not fair, Pippi said (...) It is quite unfair. I won't put up with it!

With what? Tommy asked.

In four month it is Christmas and you will get Christmas Holidays. What do I get? (...) No Christmas Holidays. Not a tiny bit of Christmas Holidays. I can't go on like that. Tomorrow I'll start in school.

Pippi goes to school in order to get leisure time, spare time, holidays. She leaves soon again. Why?

Because in her life there is no distinction between educational time and spare time, no distinction between cultural life and school life. She has learnt everything, she knows from practice – even Lisbon!

She does not know the meaning of schools. From the very moment she enters the classroom she is working hard transforming it, lending the school activities meaning from the cultural, autotelic life, she masters so eminently, trying to make them meaningful, playful.. In vain. The teacher does not recognize her skills.

With Pippi's entrance two very different cultures meet - and fight. Pippi is rooted in an every-day popular spare time culture, focusing on the moment, the quality of life, of play, of experiences and activities in the present. Just now. We have to feel, to laugh, to play, to sing, to cry, to dance, to yell and to tell in order to be.

The teacher is rooted in an educational enlightenment culture focusing on the needs for the future.

We have to learn to read, write and reckon in order to survive on the labour market.

Children as beings meet children as becomings.

Pippi's autotelic culture meets the teachers instrumental.

They don't understand each other.

To Pippi the teacher's culture is absurd, meaningless. Why put questions, when you already know the answers?

To the teacher Pippi's behavior is naughtiness.

Astrid Lindgren wanted to tell us, that the meanings of education and the meanings of cultural life are never to be confused. If we do that, we have misunderstood something very important in life.

Astrid Lindgren knew that. She also knew, that if we don't respect, that life consists of times to education, to learn and to work and times to enjoy and experience we might ruin the very essential dynamic balance creating our possibilities of identity and literacy.

We all love Pippi. It took us 65 years to learn from her!

