

ECFA SEMINAR (26th April 2013 in Kristiansand) PARENTS, TEACHERS AND OTHER PROBLEMS

In contemporary children's films, aspiring a certain level of realism, you meet adult characters in every conceivable capacity: parents to whom you should prove your accountability, teachers that you should obey, coaches to motivate you, crooks stealing the treasure, industrialists polluting the environment... All these roles were delineated in the ECFA seminar 'Parents, Teachers and Other Problems', organised with the support of the Kristiansand International Children's Film Festival and 'Film & Kino' on 26th April 2013. This is a short resume of the seminar's presentations and discussions.

Preparation and moderation of the seminar: Franziska Kremser-Klinkertz.



Les 400 coups



*ECFA (European Children's Film Association) is an umbrella for all organisations and professionals with an interest in high quality films for children and young people: film makers, producers, promoters, distributors, exhibitors, TV-programmers, festival organizers and film educators.

Now that the world is becoming a "global village", children and young people have easier access to culture and those who use the cinematic media as vehicles for artistic communication and cultural transmission are more numerous than ever before. The aim of ECFA is to bring children in contact with the huge apparatus of cinema.

ECFA offers a communication panel promoting new ways of co-operation within Europe in the fields of production, festivals, distribution, exhibition and film education. ECFA wants to create a positive attitude towards European films for children - also in its economic and political aspects.

With approximately 80 members (companies and organisations) from 23 different countries, ECFA is convinced that European films for children and young people could find a profitable audience. Children and young people are not only the future of our society, but also an important part of the here and now, with enormous emotional, cultural and material needs.

Since its foundation in 1988 ECFA has organised various events promoting and stimulating the development of European films for children and young people. Amongst them is the annual seminar in Kristiansand, Norway.

*ECFA wishes to express its gratitude to the Kristiansand International Children's Film Festival, an annual event organised in 2013 for the 16th time under the guidance of festival director Danckert Monrad-Krohn. The festival programs to the highest standards for children and youth films from Europe and around the world. The festival also fosters special events such as a Work in Progress Session, workshops for children, teacher training and seminars.



Contact: festival@krskino.no, <http://barnefilmfestivaler>

*The ECFA Seminar is organised with support of the Norwegian organization 'Film & Kino'.



*This seminar will get a follow-up on October 17th in the Schlingel Festival in Chemnitz, Germany. The 18th edition of Schlingel runs from October 14 – 20th 2013.

With more than 100 films screened in competitive and non competitive sections (Children's Film, Junior Film & Youth Film Competition, Shorts & Animations, German Focus, Panorama and Homage) the festival expects over 12.000 visitors in its CineStar Cinema homebase.



Presenting an overview of current productions, Schlingel is the ultimate platform for international children's & youth films in Germany.



from left to right:

ECFA president Céline Ravenel, Bragi Thor Hinriksson, Franziska Kremser-Klinkertz, Nick Walker & Anders Lysne

WHAT MAKES A CHILDREN'S FILM?

Keynote speech by Nick Walker

Nick Walker previously worked for Film Education, a UK charity. In his speech he tried to define children's film as a genre, reporting on the reactions of the many young people he came in contact with through his work as director of the National School Film Week, attracting 540,000 students in 2012. When enumerating the different manifestations of grown-ups in films, Nick Walker sets borders to what exactly it is to be a children's film. The common age limit set on 'people under the age of about 12' for the occasion of the seminar is extended to 18.

Most of the time, children and students evaluate the quality of a film according to the degree that it feels emotionally satisfying. Children often see, reflected in the narrations, their problems, their secret aspirations, their difficulties in integrating and being accepted. Films can provide a source of awareness of the reality which surrounds them. They look to view characters they can relate to – either as versions of themselves or as characters they aspire to. Even if films take students out of their comfort zone, most of them agree that they know of peers who act in ways similar to those of the characters depicted in the films. They conclude that although the film's characters display behaviors that are exaggerated, many of their representations have some realism.

Four major themes dominate the story of children and cinema: exploitation, corruption, edification and diversion. Since the invention of the medium in the late 19th century, people have variously tried to make money out of children, to protect them from moral and physical harm, to inject uplift into their experience or to entertain them on their own terms.

The earliest films children starred in were live action films such as *BREAKFAST WITH BABY* (1895) by the Lumière Brothers. Early fantasy films by Georges Méliès were adaptations of fairy tales such as *CINDERELLA* and *LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD* in 1901 and 1903. Cecil Hepworth adapted *ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND* in 1903. Early images of the child as innocent can be found in D.W. Griffith's *THE ADVENTURES OF DOLLY* (1908). In the 1920s, Jackie Coogan acted alongside Charlie Chaplin in *THE KID* and became a child star with children and adults alike relating to the relationship of the kid and the tramp. Ever since such films as *THE WIZARD OF OZ* (1939) and *NATIONAL VELVET* (1944) have confirmed the powerful socioeconomic, cultural, and ideological presence of the child in film that young people can relate to.

Pantheon of unreliable adults

The role of adults in children's films is a complex arena of positivity via comforting parental advice but can also be a force of negativity and regret.

On the positive side of the scale adults act as children's mentors, for example Obi Wan in *STAR WARS*.

The mentor is an experienced and trusted advisor, who helps guide the hero, aiding him or her to obtain their objective. He has been through what the hero now is going through, but he is too old to go through it again. Our hero has more potential than the mentor ever did.



Obi Wan

But on the negative side of the scale, adults can be seen as corrupting agent – like the mother's boyfriend in Andrea Arnold's *FISH TANK*, the gritty portrait of an angry, isolated 15-year-old girl who is hurtling toward a lifetime of misery. And where is her mother? Right there at home, all the time. Lukas Moodysson's *LILYA 4-EVER* is another film that looks at children's sexual exploitation.

Nick Walker guides us along a pantheon full of unreliable adults: Miss Havisham in GREAT EXPECTATIONS, a spinster raising her daughter to be the tool of her revenge, training her beautiful ward to break men's hearts.

The Man in WHISTLE DOWN THE WIND, a false mentor who happens to be a wife murderer taking refuge on a remote farm. The film depicts the natural innocence of children without patronizing them and examines how children negotiate the tricky terrain of childhood conviction in the face of adult authority. The stepfather in PAN'S LABYRINTH, a sadistic captain of the Spanish fascist army in 1944, promising to consume the child by violence.

In the horror genre sometimes roles are reversed. Adults can themselves become victims of an evil child as in the Swedish LET THE RIGHT ONE IN, where young Oskar, an overlooked and bullied boy, finds revenge through Eli, another lonely soul who feeds on the blood of the inhabitants of a small town.



Great Expectations



Pan's Labyrinth

The release of THE EXORCIST struck fear into the hearts of audiences around the world, the most frightening factor being the lead role of a child, possessed by the devil. The role of the child as demonic figure in a horror film has become increasingly popular and one of the best reoccurring Hollywood conventions. Perhaps the most celebrated of all children as evil films is VILLAGE OF THE DAMNED. This film is delightfully disturbing, because it plays on two of man's hardwired instincts; to protect children, and to fear the unknown.

Village of the Damned



Disney mama's

The theme of absent adults is highlighted in Francois Truffaut's LES 400 COUPS, the touching story of a misunderstood adolescent. Young Antoine is left without attention and delves into a life of petty crime. His mother is a blond who likes tight sweaters and is distracted by poverty, and by an affair with a man from work. The stepfather is a nice enough sort, and treats the boy in a friendly fashion. Both parents are away from home a lot and neither one has the patience to pay close attention to Antoine.

Bambi



Curiously enough the conservative Disney Studios provide us with a broad spectrum of bad mothers: in PINOCCHIO, POCAHONTAS, CHICKEN LITTLE, ALADDIN, BEAUTY AND THE BEAST, THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME, FINDING NEMO and of course BAMBI mothers excel by their absence. Not even to mention the long procession of wicked stepmothers and evil witches. Statistically, that's a pretty high rate of absent mothers! Now, some say it's to create drama in the story. But the entire Disney catalog screams out that "women are no good!" The message seems to be that women will betray you, that only your dad or a prince or heroes are the ones you can count on.

Childhood representation: politically and culturally nuanced

Director Francois Truffaut in an interview on the subject of the correct methodology for representing children in the cinema, highlighted two errors which can be easily committed:

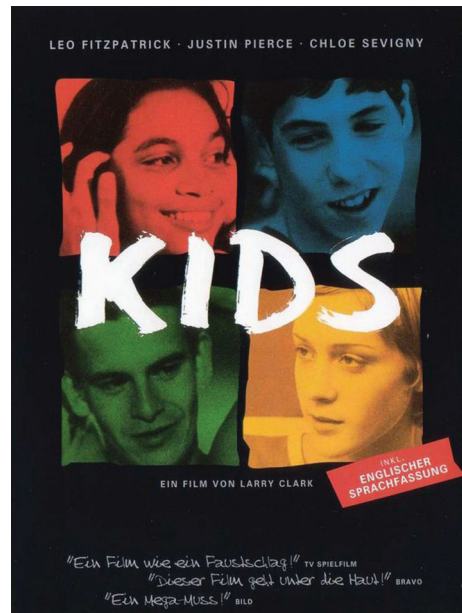
“the most common and serious error would be that of starting off from a dramatic idea, instead of from the real problems children have with the world. The other problem is that of not placing the child truly at the centre of the film, but to give it a supporting role to the adult star, or worse, to accompany the child with ponies, dogs, flying reindeer and red balloons!”

Looking at the world through children’s eyes allows us to empathize as after all we have all been children so we can relate to their position. In that way children have been utilized as figures through which to explore:

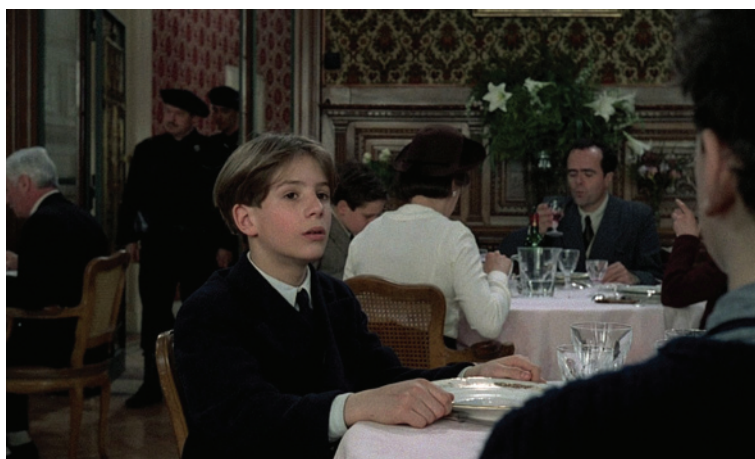
- The legacy of war. Roberto Rossellini’s ROMA CITTA APERTA, George Stevens’ THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK, Eric’s THE SPIRIT OF THE BEEHIVE, Louis Malle’s AU REVOIR LES ENFANTS and Guillermo del Toro’s THE DEVIL’S BACKBONE use the child – as point of view – to drive home the destruction of war. Cinema has forged a diverse, sometimes deeply painful, iconography of the child as victim of war.

- Street life. In Larry Clark’s KIDS (contemporary youth as unfeeling sociopaths), Hector Babenco’s PIXOTE (reflecting the violence of Latin American authoritarianism) and Mira Nair’s SALAAM BOMBAY (referring to India’s inability to escape from its colonial past), street life becomes an extension of the brutality of the state, a metaphor for the way in which the state expresses its authority.

It is clear that our notions of childhood are politically and culturally nuanced, and cannot be separated from wider social and cultural contexts. By examining children’s roles in film, certain thematic questions of nationhood, politics, gender and sexuality, social change and the way childhood and adolescence are used to envision the past, as well as the future, must be explored.



Salaam Bombay



Au revoir les enfants

THE ABSENCE OF ADULTS

Presentation by Franziska Kremser-Klinkertz

Franziska Kremser-Klinkertz is head programmer for children and youth at the Nordic Film Days in Lübeck. She stated that, surprisingly enough, maybe the most interesting role for adults in children's films is... the role of absentees.

Franziska Kremser-Klinkertz lined up the various manifestations of adults in children's films:

- *A slapstick figure*

the burglars in PIPPI LONGSTOCKING, all adults in RICKY RAPPER and the MY SISTERS' KIDS series

- *A secondary, supporting actor*

most adults in crime stories

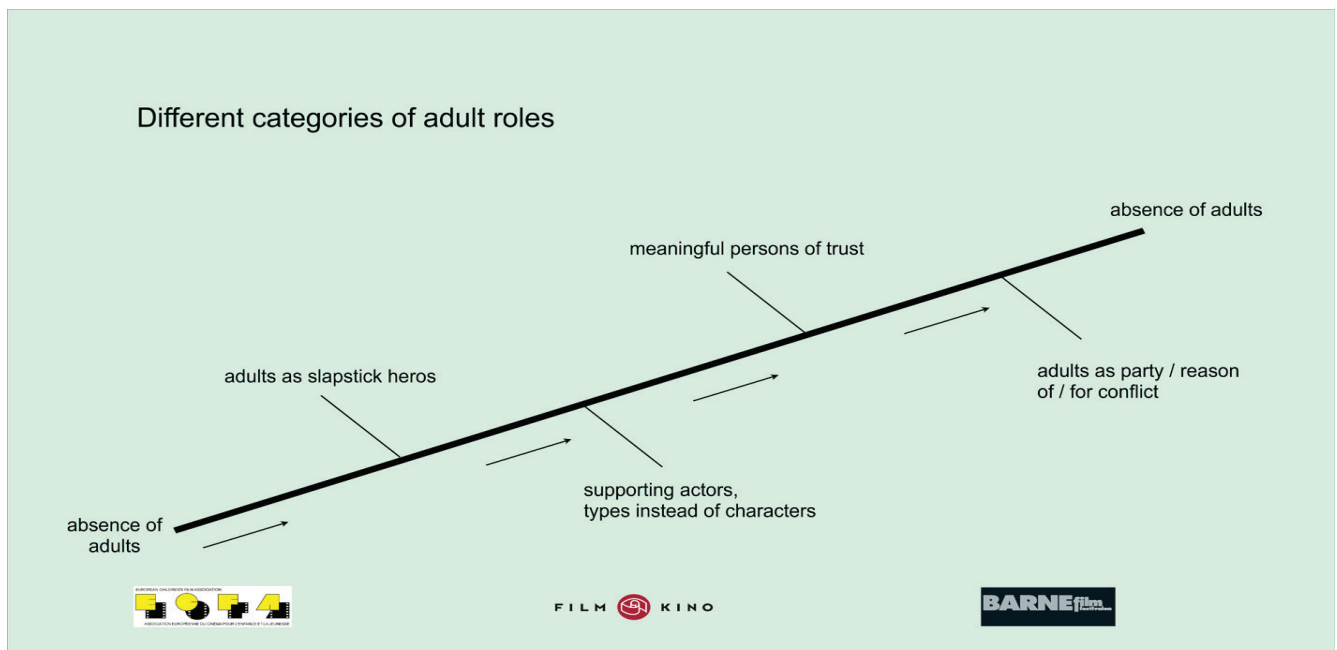
- *The cause of conflicts*

the teacher in FIDGETY BRAM, the father in THE GREAT BIRD RACE and THE ORHEIM COMPANY

- *A meaningful person of trust*

the young teacher in FIDGETY BRAM, the social worker in UPSIDE DOWN, the sausage man in LEAPS AND BOUNCE

- *The strikingly absent*



Absent adults allow a wide variety of options in story development. On one hand children in entertaining adventure films can handle pretty well without any adult around, while other movies painfully illustrate the disability of adults in reaching out to children and their problems.

An interesting difference is made between 'physical' and 'mental' absence.

- Physical absence (e.g. death, divorce, imprisoning) of parents can evoke all sorts of emotions: freedom, sorrow, anger, desire, nostalgia but also emancipation, as sometimes children have to take over the role of the absent adult.

- Mental absence of parents usually means that adults are unwilling or unable to take up their role, e.g. in LILYA 4-EVER.

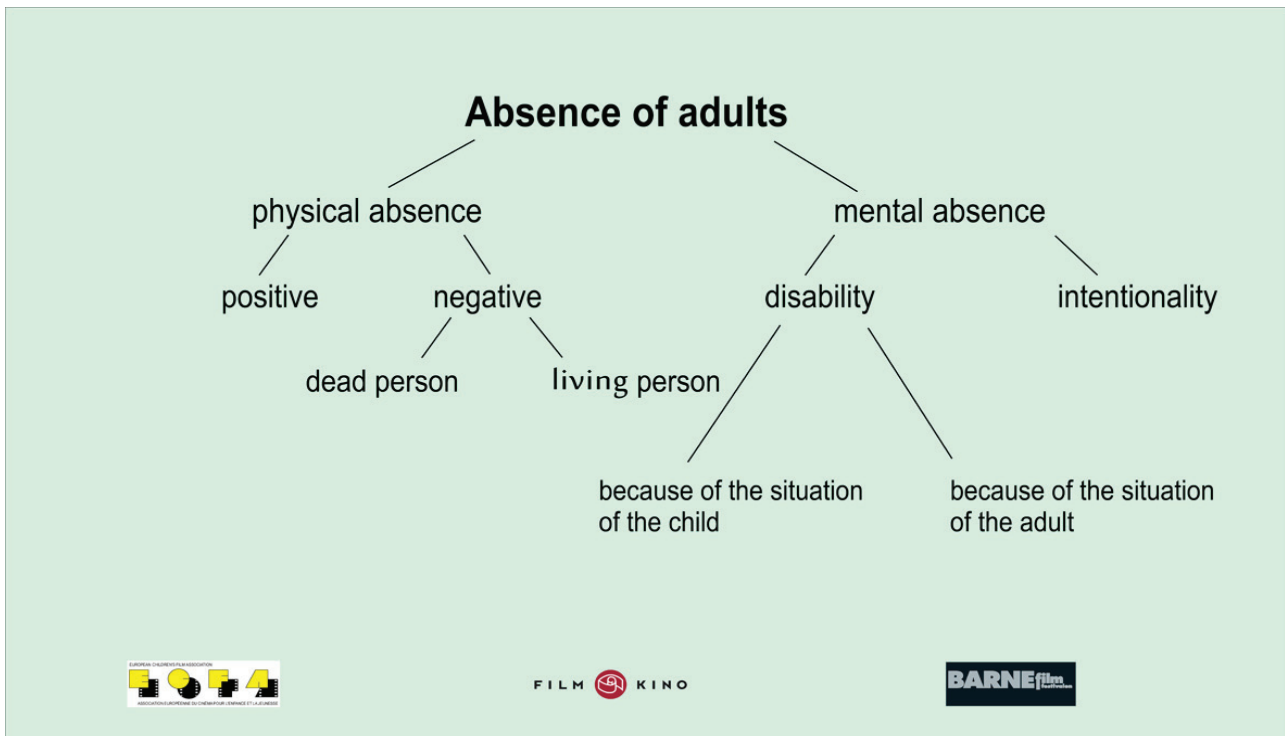


Lilya 4-ever

KAUWBOY delicately combines both forms of absence in one film: the physical absence of the dead mother and the mental absence of the grieving father who no longer dares to bond. In both cases the child is the victim.



Kauwboy



Conclusion about the absence of adults in children's films:

- It sets an occasion for many different (funny or serious) developments in a story.
- It can influence the behavior and problems of children in many different ways.
- Mental absence is closely connected to the weakness and invalidity of adults.



My sister's kids



Orheim company

THE JUVENILIZATION OF SCANDINAVIAN CINEMA

Presentation by Anders Lysne

Anders Lysne is a researcher at Oslo University, working with Scandinavian youth films, with a special interest in the Danish youth film (12+) production. He outlines how the tone and content of Scandinavian films for young people have evolved throughout the years.

The youth film genre started in the fifties under the impulse of a market survey carried out by the UIP film studios. The survey defined the average cinema audience as “young, white 19 year old male persons”. UIP starting to make films particularly for this target group marking the start of the ‘juvenilization of cinema’.

The Scandinavian countries resisted strongly against this market trend, which resulted in a production line of a different type of youth film, running parallel with the more commercial, market-oriented flock. This line continued throughout the years, culminating in the box office hit film FUCKING ÅMAL (1998). The success of Lukas Moodysson’s film set the tone for a fresh stream of youth films with a content defined by harsh, even brutal realism (e.g. WAR ZONE, RICH KIDS).

Today’s aesthetics

Today the popular cinema for young people is ready for a new type of aesthetic. For a generation growing up with ‘X-Factor’ and ‘Idols’, music, colour and lively movement are no longer cinema taboos. There’s a strong tendency towards hyper stylised films, tailor-made for the TWILIGHT generation.



Fucking Åmal

Realism is becoming more and more an adult criteria (as proven by the poor scores most of these films get in press reviews, based on their lack of realism), while for young people it is definitely no longer a priority.

Grown-ups are peripheral

In this new type of youth film, grown-ups become more and more peripheral characters. Nevertheless, the living room is still a widely established location where home conflicts are fought. With a sociological role reversal trend as an interesting backdrop: young people nowadays tend to grow up faster, while adults are trying hard to extend their youthful days, in an attempt to ‘stay young’.

Anders Lysne stated his conclusions with a clip from the Danish musical BORA BORA (by Hans Fabian Wullenweber) about a young girl running away from home. Her self-absorbed, distressed mother barely reacts. The presence of parents is hardly relevant for the course of the story. This is why many contemporary youth films fall back upon John Hughes’ recipe (as in THE BREAKFAST CLUB), focusing on an isolated group of teenagers and the dynamics within the group, while excluding all interferences from the outside world.



Twilight



Bora Bora



The breakfast club

THE SVEPPI MYSTERY

By Bragi Thor Hinriksson, director & producer

Bragi Thor Hinriksson, the director and producer of the Icelandic 'Sveppi' films, a phenomenon that is immensely popular in its home country but rejected by most of the outside world. In the Sveppi films and TV shows all child roles are played by adults, but *"the public should forget that they're adults."* It's hard not to notice that the guys racing on their tricycle or jumping up and down on the couch are in fact not 4 but 40 years old. But that's what Sveppi strives for, all through their 5 TV seasons and 3 feature films.

Hinriksson: *"After the banking crisis in Iceland, the atmosphere was very negative. Sveppi offers a counterbalance. We only show happy events and we keep the child in ourselves alive."* It's hard to explain the recipe for this success. *"We don't know why it works, but it does. Maybe because we dare to invest in simple joys instead of depressing themes?"*



Sveppi



JUST A DEAD DAD

Screening of THE TOUGH GUYS and discussion

Whoever would keep statistics of the amount of absent parents in children's films would come up with a startling high percentage. Do filmmakers expect their film to be rated 'more valuable' when set in a broken family? Especially when it comes to 'death parents' the figures in children's films outnumber every possible figure in reality.

But can directors and scriptwriters gratuitously drop a dead mum or dad in every children's film? Several questions coming from the floor proved that the audience no longer agrees with this unrealistic depiction, especially when it's not essential for the film's narration. The impact of such a tragic event is too drastic to write it into a story in an indifferent way.

Additional to the seminar was a screening of the premiering Norwegian children's film THE TOUGH GUYS, in the presence of director Christian Lo. THE TOUGH GUYS's main character Modulf has 'a dead dad'. Christian Lo admits: *"It's a manipulative technique to raise sympathy for your main character for it guarantees the audience's pity."*

Although perhaps the audience is on the verge of being overwhelmed with dead parents.



Christian Lo



The tough guys

THE TOUGH GUYS

Norwegian feature film by Christian Lo, 2013, 74'. A Filmbin production.

Eleven year old Modulf fancies himself as something of a superhero, saving the other children in school from being bullied by "allowing" the tough kids in school to bully him instead. So while he is being soaked in the toilets, the other pupils are protected.

Then one day Lise joins Modulf's class, creating havoc with Modulf's plan. Lise does not agree with Modulf's theories and her interfering suddenly lands her in the middle of a trouble storm forcing Modulf to re-examine his own situation and save Lise.



The tough guys