

Tommy Gustafsson, *Det var en gång: Historia för barn i svensk television under det långa 1970-talet*. Universus Academic Press, 2014. ISBN 978-91-87439-07-0

Malena Janson, *När bara den bästa TV:n var god nog åt barnen: Om sjuttioalets svenska barnprogram*. Karneval förlag, 2014. ISBN 978-91-87207-29-7

The field of Swedish television studies is small and the subject of children's television has traditionally not been prioritised, although scholars such as Margareta Rönnerberg (for example 2008, 2010) and Ingegerd Rydin (for example 2000) have made some efforts at chronicling and analysing Swedish children's programmes and their reception. In this light, the fact that no fewer than two monographs have recently been published on the topic is noteworthy, and even more so, that they both focus on the 1970s. Although both authors have a background in academia, the books differ significantly in terms of their focus, material, method and target audience. When considered in tandem, these books provide a comprehensive and complex, largely corresponding, account of what was a particularly dynamic period in the Swedish history of this television genre.

Tommy Gustafsson's *Det var en gång: Historia för barn i svensk television under det långa 1970-talet* [*Once upon a time: history for children in Swedish television during the long 1970s*] is an academic monograph primarily aimed at other Swedish scholars within the fields of television, film and history. His material consists of four programmes that aired on Swedish television in the 1970s, all produced with the intention of teaching children about history. Gustafsson combines close readings of the programmes with reception studies of press reviews and comparative analysis of contemporary history textbooks, which are used to unpack

the historiography, ideology and politics of the material. He argues that some of these programmes utilised accounts of historical uprisings against class and gender inequalities to encourage its young viewers to reflect on political issues of the present day; in other words, their historiographical approach was expressly Marxist and feminist. Conversely, others articulated more conventionally conservative perspectives on history which can be identified as encouraging an inherently nationalist, Eurocentric and patriarchal worldview. Gustafsson concludes that although individual programmes did articulate more progressive political views, the Swedish television landscape continued to be dominated by the same conservative and paternalistic values that had characterised the public service agenda of the post-war period – an insight that undermines the common assumption that Swedish television in general, and children’s television in particular, functioned as a powerful conduit of ‘left-wing propaganda’ during the 1970s.

In turn, Malena Janson’s *När bara den bästa TV:n var god nog åt barnen* [*When only the best television was good enough for the children*] is aimed at the general public and would probably be particularly appealing to readers who – like Janson herself – grew up in the 1970s. Her writing style is highly engaging and the book is beautifully designed, with plenty of stills and production photos. It skilfully interweaves insightful textual analysis with interesting anecdotes about the production and reception of a wide range of programmes. The academic impact of the book is, however, somewhat reduced by the fact that it only occasionally engages with other academic studies and lacks a consistent referencing system. But Janson still displays an extensive knowledge of the programmes of the era, which makes her arguments forceful and convincing. She proposes that the 1970s should be understood as something of a golden era for Swedish children’s television: a period when more

time, money and thought was put into the production and acquisition of programmes for children. This was due to a number of significant developments following the so-called 'channel-split' in 1969 (when Sveriges Radio started operating a second channel). For the first time, children's programming was allotted regular back-to-back time-slots on both TV1 and TV2, an editorial department solely focused on young viewers was established, and the producers made sure children were involved in the planning and production of the programmes.

Janson also asserts that the role of the children who appeared on television changed. Instead of only appearing as well-behaved and decorative sidekicks to adults, as was previously the case, children were now allowed to present themselves as well-rounded individuals in their own right, who owned their emotions and expressed their opinions. This is linked to a wider shift in the discourse on children in Swedish society in the 1970s: children were increasingly viewed as competent human beings who had the right to be given the same information as adults. As a result, children's television no longer aimed to protect and soothe its viewers, and instead tried to educate and activate them. The programmes became more complex and contemplative, and started addressing a number of subjects that had previously been off-bounds, such as sex, politics and war. Janson's account of the era is in general more positive than Gustafsson's, which is partly due to their different areas of interest: Janson's main concern is how the representation of the child (and childhood) changed in this era, while Gustafsson's academic focus on history writing brings up issues of class and race more prominently.

As both Janson and Gustafsson point out, the 1970s have acquired something of a mythical status in the history of Swedish children's television. Many of the programmes of this period were the topic of intense debate at the time of their release,

and they have continued to be remembered with strong emotions; people tend to either love or hate them. Both authors use the critical voices in this public discourse to motivate their detailed re-examinations of the meanings, politics and reception of this material. They set out to complicate a number of common accusations directed at 1970s children's programmes: that they circulated left-wing propaganda; that they dealt with 'inappropriate' topics in shockingly explicit ways; that all programmes were slow, dull and used a social realist style; and that animated shows were as good as banned (due to their association with Disney productions, which were considered pacifying and non-pedagogical). As a result these books serve to undermine a set of reductive binary oppositions that have often been used to make sense of Swedish television history in popular discourse: public service vs. commercial television, left wing vs. right wing values, and domestic vs. imported programmes. Taken together, these books show that Swedish public service television of the 1970s aired a wide range of children's programmes that expressed opposing views and values.

While neither author openly acknowledges it, their studies are indicative of the nostalgia for 1970s children's television that currently circulates in Sweden. I would think that for people with left-wing sympathies who are now parents themselves and oppose the strong neo-liberal and post-feminist tendencies in contemporary children's culture (on both public service television and the many commercial channels that now populate the Swedish television landscape), 1970s programming is remembered with fondness precisely because it expressed a solidarity with the poor and weak in society. The contemporary interest in 1970s children's television not only plays into a particular generation's nostalgia for their childhood and the more general fascination with all things 'retro', it is also inherently political and has the potential to make television historiography itself an activist practice. This potential is not fully realised

by either author. Janson and Gustafsson clearly have a particular appreciation for the more progressive programmes of this era, but both seem reluctant to express open support for the left-wing politics that informed some of the programmes they obviously admire – a sign that politics in children’s television remain a contested issue today.

Nevertheless, both books prove that the study of children’s television can provide valuable insights about a wide range of topics that go far beyond the genre itself, from historiography and didactics, to aesthetics and narration, and perhaps most importantly, the socio-historical construction of childhood.

Sofia Bull

University of Southampton

Sofia Bull is lecturer in film studies at University of Southampton, but her research is primarily focused on television. She is currently completing a monograph examining contemporary discourses on genetics, kinship and reproduction across a range of transnational television genres.

References

Rönnberg, Margareta. 2010. *Från Barnjournalen via Lilla Aktuellt – till Häxan Surtants Rapport? Om barn, tv-nyheter, politik och medborgarskap*. [From *Barnjournalen, by way of Lilla Aktuellt, to Häxan Surtants Rapport? About children, TV news, politics and citizenship*] Visby: Filmförlaget.

Rönnberg, Margareta. (ed.) 2008. *Blöjbarnsteve. Om hur barn under 3 år ser på TV och leker med fjärrtroll*. [Television for children in nappies: How children up to 3 years watch television and play with remote controls] Uppsala: Filmförlaget.

Rydin, Ingegerd. 2000. *Barnens röster. Program för barn i Sveriges radio och television 1925-1999*. [Children’s voices: Programmes for children in Swedish radio and television 1925-1999] Stockholm: Stiftelsen Etermedierna i Sverige