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ABC for Father and Mother and Me : representations of children as consumers in the picturebook of the interwar period

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ABC for Father and Mother and Me. Representations of children as consumers in the picturebook of the interwar period

Summary

This article examines how the child consumer is represented in a selection of branded picturebooks at the beginning of the 20th century. By analyzing children's books published by a commercial chain of stores, the Cooperation Union, the article discusses how depictions of children as consumers are connected to the development of the emerging mass market and consumer society. The new ideas and marketing strategies expressed in these books also coincide with fundamental social changes in society, resulting from modernity and new technologies. Although the Cooperation books were designed for children and used familiar narrative techniques and motifs within children's literature, I will argue that the books had a twofold audience. They were not only aimed at children but also at their parents. Representations of children as consumers in the studied material suggest that consumption is strongly connected to ideas of modernity and to representations of the modern child, but also that consumption is described as an inseparable part of the modern, urban experience.

Key words: modernity, consumerism, child consumer, advertising, picturebooks, children's literature

Słowa kluczowe: współczesność, konsumpcjonizm, dziecko jako konsument, reklama, książki obrazkowe, literatura dla dzieci

During the 1920s a range of Swedish companies started to publish picturebooks for children with embedded marketing, incorporating their products in the narratives. Product placement was implemented by including different commodities in the illustrations and by explicitly naming the brands in the text. There are several examples of companies publishing branded books or pamphlets with stories for children, for instance, the Swedish candy manufacturer Mazetti, the soap company Barnängen or the pharmaceutical company Ferrosan, which used Astrid Lindgren's popular character Pippi Longstocking to promote their fish oil supplements.¹ In this article, I will discuss publications by a specific chain of stores, the Cooperation Union, which was founded in Sweden in 1899 and was at the

¹ See for example: Bo Beskow, *Sagan om den snälla Björnen*, Barnängen (1921), *Stinas märkliga födelsedagsresa*, Mazetti (1928), Astrid Lindgren, Ingrid Vang Nyman, *Pippi Långstrump delar ut solkolor*, Ferrosan (undated, most likely 1949).

forefront of the Swedish retail trade by the middle of the 20th century. In the beginning of the 1920s they started to publish branded children's books featuring two children, Per and Lisa. The books were free of charge, printed in very large editions – up to 250 000 copies – and were usually written and illustrated by established authors and illustrators.

For several decades the Cooperation Union was a powerful and influential actor in the Swedish political landscape. It had a vast influence on marketing, architecture, design and consumer policies and became an important participant in the development of the Swedish welfare state (Mattsson 2012:65). Because of this children's books produced by the network offer interesting research material when discussing early representations of children as consumers. I have identified approximately 30 titles published by the Cooperation ranging from the early 1920s to the late 1950s. On the basis of a number of selected early examples from the interwar period, I am going to discuss the recurring motifs, narrative techniques and visual aesthetics used in the series of books published by the Cooperation. I have chosen a selection that includes both realistic stories, where children act as independent consumers in modern society, and fantastic ones, where the commodities or their trademarks are anthropomorphized and interact with the child characters.

The primary aim of the article is to examine how the child consumer is described and how the depictions are connected to the rapid development of the mass market and consumer society during the interwar period. In order to do this, I am going to consider the complex interaction between the commercial, the ideological and the artistic approaches expressed in the material. A secondary purpose is to discuss the marketing strategies used in the material and to raise questions concerning the implied audience of the publications. Although the series of books can be seen as an example of a larger trend in advertising, where children are now considered and approached as consumers, the books also coincide with extensive social and economical changes, resulting from modernity and new technologies. The books thus offer intriguing, early representations of children as both consumers and as members of a welfare society.

Children's literature as an advertising platform

How, then, is the developing idea of the child consumer, which emerges strongly during the 1920s, expressed in children's books by the Cooperation Union? The stories combine traditional rhymes, fairy tales and adventure stories with advertising slogans and embedded marketing. Most of the early titles in the series were written and illustrated by the painter and illustrator Marie Walle, but later, several other authors and artists contributed to the books as well. "Per and Lisa"-books were free of charge and printed in large editions, and were clearly aimed at a very wide audience and because of this the illustration style in the books is quite conventional. The two main characters, Per and Lisa, appear in the books over a time span of about forty years, and can be seen as representations of the collective child, but also, of the future welfare state consumer. Per and Lisa are sent grocery shopping, they visit toy stores, write wish lists and look at goods displayed in shop

windows. New environments, technologies and inventions are thus presented, like department stores with their elevators and escalators or the lively urban city with its traffic, store signs and window displays.

While the welfare project and the prevailing ideas about children and childhood are fundamental for the development of children's literature, the aim of the following analysis is to study representations of children in predominantly commercial material in order to discuss how ideas of modernity, welfare ideology and early consumerism are connected. The introduction of the first "Per and Lisa"-books coincides with new marketing strategies and platforms aimed at children. Previous researchers like Viviane Zelizer (1985) or Daniel Thomas Cook (2004) have shown that a general commercialization of children's daily life took place during the first four decades of the 20th century. In Sweden, by the 1920s and 1930s, advertisements frequently included representations of children as competent consumers who make decisions about their purchases and act in the commodity society (Berggren Torell & Brembeck 2001: 76–77). The appearance of commercialism took place during an era in which extensive welfare state programmes and the so-called "people's home idea" were being designed and implemented on a wide scale. The family as a unit and especially the child became central to the project and were considered the most important elements in the modern welfare state. Large resources were invested in raising the standards of housing, childcare and schools, children's culture, literature and music. This kind of public consumption can be seen as part of collective child consumption, since public spending on welfare reforms was intended to reach the general population (Sandin 2012: 68). The state also supported consumption to meet children's needs, for example through a special child-allowance (Sandin 2012:65).

The children in the "Per and Lisa"-series can be characterized as competent and independent and they are depicted as part of an urban environment. While the boys are portrayed as active and sturdy, the girls are often represented as caring and cautious. Traditional gender roles are evident in *Per and Lisa playing father and mother* (*Per och Lisa leka far och mor*, 1928), a story about two children who are playing house. While Lisa cooks, cleans and takes care of her dolls, Per is depicted carrying heavy products, lighting the fire and poisoning insects with pesticide. All items used in the story, whether scouring powder or insect repellent, are mentioned with their brand names. The conventional gender roles in the stories reflect their time, but they also indicate the broad market audience of the books, including all classes.

The book series also raise a number of questions. First of all, it is noteworthy that most of the commodities presented in the books are not aimed at children. The choice of merchandise – convenience goods like food items, cleaning products, shoes and even insurance – raises questions about the actual audience. The selection of items included in the "Per and Lisa"-books reflect the brands produced and sold by the Cooperation Union franchise, focusing mostly on convenience goods, and appear repeatedly in the books. The repetition of certain brands throughout the series of books thus leads to a sense of recognition and familiarity for the reader/consumer, an effective method from a marketing

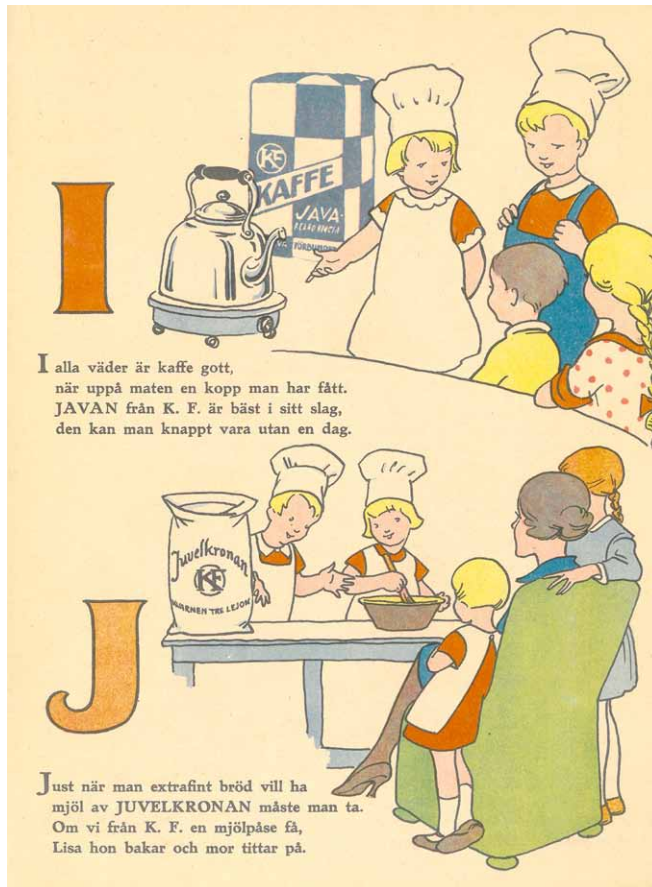


Fig. 1. © Marie Walle, *Per and Lisa teach financial housekeeping* (1929)

perspective. It is plausible that the Cooperation books were developed as a form of long term marketing and were used to familiarize children with Cooperation products in order to establish a credibility and brand familiarity through repetition.

The way the children are depicted in the books suggests that children as consumers are an important component of the emerging commercial, consumer culture. The general idea of educating individuals to become “modern” citizens, better functioning, healthier and happier members of society, was wide-ranging in the interwar and postwar era. These kinds of ambitions, meanwhile, were expressed in various program declarations, studies, evening classes and guidebooks – but also in different kinds of commercial materials (Druker 2014). However, while the “Per and Lisa”-books were clearly created for children, they were most likely not their only target audience. As the title implies in *Per and Lisa teach financial housekeeping* (*Per och Lisa undervisa i ekonomisk hushållning*, 1929), the main characters in the story demonstrate new products to other children – but

also to their parents. The children are depicted as well-informed and pioneering individuals who repeatedly instruct others about state-of-the-art products by pointing out convincing indicators like novelty, quality, health and nutrition.

Some of the texts also explicitly suggest that children should tell their parents about the products, as Marie Walle's *ABC for Father and Mother and Me* (*ABC för far och mor och mig*, 1923), an alphabet book that presents different products and trademarks in an alphabetical order. Therefore, I argue that that the Cooperation books had a twofold audience and that the books were not just aimed at children but also at their parents. By the 1920s and 1930s, advertisers had begun to see women as the main purchasing agents for their families, responsible for administrating the household economy and acquiring most of the household's food, clothing and appliances. In fact, several scholars have emphasized that women and mothers serve as keys to consumer life, both presently and historically (Cook 1995, Scanlon 2000). Considering the large amount of cooking and cleaning products included in the "Per and Lisa"-books, the secondary target group is most likely mothers, the books functioning as a way to persuade them to select certain products for the well-being and happiness of their families.

Consumption and urbanity

A trip to the grocery store provides the basis for the story in *Traffic book for Per and Lisa and all Swedish children* (*Trafikbok för Per och Lisa och alla svenska barn*, 1926) by Marie Walle. The story is particularly interesting in its depiction of the children and their modern surroundings and could be described as a primer on fast-paced urban living. The main characters are sent grocery shopping on their own and through this undertaking, the children are taught about the rules and dangers of traffic while different commodities are included in the story. The book presents a fascinating description of rapidly changing urban living in the mid 1920s, illustrating automobiles and motorcycles as well as horse-drawn vehicles on the streets. The children are assigned the position of self-sufficient consumers in this story, but the consumer role is also connected to competent behaviour in traffic and in the urban environment in general.

The general appeal of new technologies, with speed and movement, is expressed throughout the story, but also window displays and their commodities are described carefully. It is noteworthy that the depiction of the city in the illustrations is quite fragmentary, lacking any panoramic images, instead focusing on store signs, shop windows and the flow of the crowded, traffic-filled streets. Technological development plays a central role in many of the literary depictions of modern society during this time, a development that also raised concerns. At the beginning of the 20th century, several critics and philosophers described a sense of increased estrangement and instrumentalization in relation to the human environment, the urban environment often being described as machine-like and the individual as detached from their surroundings (Simmel 1903, Benjamin 1927–1940). An appeal to – but also apprehension – is often expressed in relation to the store-bought commodity and the machine.



Fig. 2. ©Marie Walle, *Traffic book for Per and Lisa and all Swedish children* (1926)

In the commercial material for children discussed in this article, this sense of detachment or distance is very seldom expressed. Instead, the books communicate a general fascination with new technologies and machines, modern transportation, and even the violent or dramatic sides of technology. For instance, in *Traffic book for Per and Lisa* the reader gets to witness several car accidents or dangerous traffic violations, scenes that are used on two occasions to promote the insurance company *Cooperation (Samarbete)*.

These hazardous incidents are, however, described in an ambiguous way. While the text is continuously confident and optimistic, the illustrations express an awareness of the dangers of traffic and the urban environment. In the images, the children are depicted in dangerous situations several times and illustrated as particularly small against the lively city streets with grown-up pedestrians, lorries and motorcycles. A scene that expresses this twofold communication is when the reader is shown Per and Lisa sharing a box of “Läkerol Bon-Bons” on the sidewalk. While the text is focused on describing the product in question, a dramatic car accident is simultaneously taking place in the background. Although the text comments on the accident by reminding the reader of the importance of traffic insurance, the main characters take no notice of the incident. The dangers of traffic, meanwhile, are presented on the back cover of the book. It shows a chaotic image of a busy intersection in a city, with automobiles, bikers and horse-drawn carriages, carefully illustrating several examples of violations of traffic rules. The mistakes – 33 in total – are carefully indicated with red lines, arrows and numbers and are explained in a list beneath the image.

The final image in the story, where Per and Lisa return home and Per delivers the *Cooperative Consumer Magazine* to his father, is significant as well. The father is sitting by a large window that is facing a lively street with pedestrians, automobiles and horse-drawn vehicles. The boundaries between the interior and the exterior space, the private and the public experience – earlier so clearly separated when it comes to children (but also women) – seems to be dissolving in this illustration and the flow of the traffic is depicted as a natural part of the family’s living environment. It is an image that shows how technology is changing domesticity and how the borders of domestic space are gradually being redrawn. Thus, *Traffic book for Per and Lisa*, designed to entertain but also to market and educate, familiarizes the young reader with new urban, commercial spaces and with human achievement in terms of new technologies and machines.

Technical innovations – conveying the modern experience

The fascination for new technology is also apparent in *Per and Lisa’s journey with Lampe the radio vacuum tube* (*Per och Lisas luftfärd med Lampe Rör*, 1933) by Nils Jerring and Aina Stenberg-MasOlle. In the cover image we see the children travelling with a spaceship (the reader later finds out that it is constructed of radio tubes). Beneath them, we see the cloud covered earth and the factory where radio tubes are manufactured. The story is initiated by the two children listening to the radio. However, they are a little too careless with the knobs when tuning the radio, which causes a very irritated radio tube to climb out of the radio. He screams at the children until he almost loses his voice. The children then offer him throat pastilles, he calms down and he begins a journey with the children. The plot is simple and straightforward with short, rhyming advertising jingles included in the text.

In addition to the pure advertising slogans incorporated in the text, the author Nils Jerring, a well-known film director and actor, uses expressions and stylistic devices that relate to the tube radio’s technical vocabulary. Words like vacuum tubes, regenerative circuits and feedback amplifiers are used in the text. But Jerring also uses genre expressions from contemporary sports journalism, which highlights the fascination with rapid transportation and technical innovations in the story (Hallberg 1996: 50).

Even in Ann Margret Dahlquist’s *Olle’s journey to Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway* (*Olles resa till Danmark, Finland, Island, Norge*, 1937) the radio becomes central to the story. This episodic story tells of Olle, who is travelling around the Nordic countries to see his “Nordic friends and relatives”. The journey itself is an interesting expression of the precarious political situation just two years before the outbreak of the Second World War. Olle’s expedition is however organized around a variety of commodities. In scene after scene the main character picks out carefully named and illustrated products like coffee, light bulbs, bicycles and canoes from his impressively well-equipped backpack.

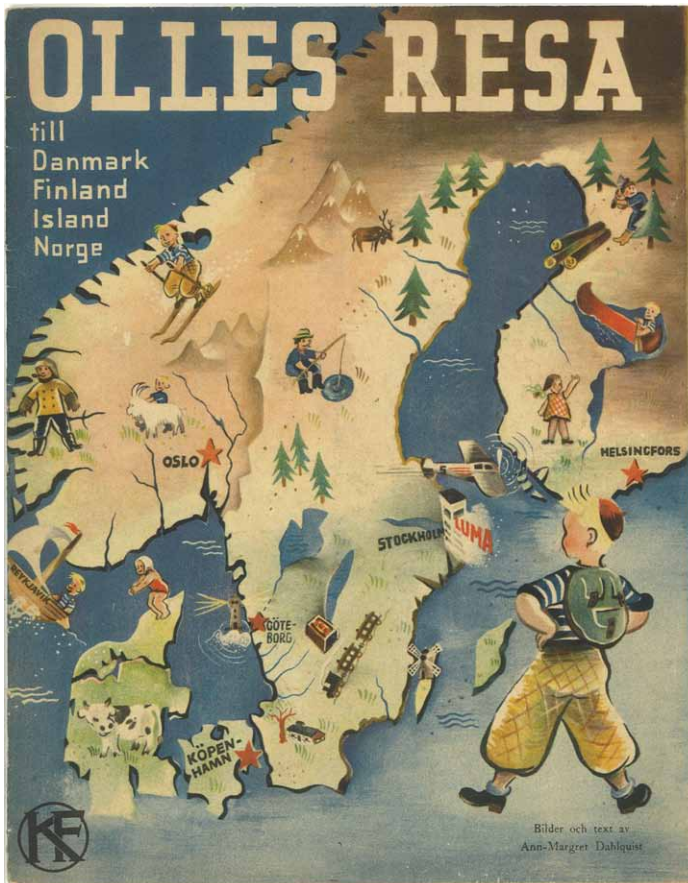


Fig. 3. © Ann Margret Dahlquist, *Olle's journey to Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway* (1937)

Here, photographic reproductions of the products are included in the otherwise traditional illustrations, creating collages that seem to vacillate between popular culture, product catalogues and documentary ambitions. Using photographs of the products is, of course, a way to ensure that the products and brands are easily recognizable. A similar kind of concept can be found in department store catalogues and mail order catalogues, which quite early on included photographic illustrations of their products. The choice of the photographic image or use of photographic collage also signals novelty and modernity. And although the examples of collage in these branded books seem far from modernist collages, the photographic image is used to express innovation and modernity, to convey “a modern experience” that is closely connected to the consumer experience and identity.

One of the commodities promoted in *Olle's journey* is a radio, the “EIAHobby II” in a wooden cabinet. After his return home, Olle's father buys a radio from the Cooperation by mail order, and Olle gets to listen to news and music from all his new Nordic friends.

During the 1930s the radio reached its peak in popularity with general audiences, including children, and became the central piece of furniture in many homes. In advertising the radio was often illustrated surrounded by the entire family. In the illustration in *Olle's journey*, it is however only Olle who is sitting by the radio. Above him, we see portraits of his new friends from different countries on a smaller scale. In a manner similar to that of the final scene in *Traffic book for Per and Lisa*, the image expresses changes resulting from new technology, a changed sense of space, domesticity and place. Through the radio, Olle can now listen to the latest news, radio plays and music, not only broadcast in his own country but from other countries as well. In the years prior to and after the Second World War, a desire for solidarity and world peace was articulated in different ways in children's literature, and ideas of internationalism and communication across borders are expressed even here.

Anthropomorphized commodities

As the examples above demonstrate, the question of medium but also materiality is fundamental when analyzing this specific type of children's book. Since media like the radio, different transportation and communication systems, and window displays are constantly present in the stories, one might also ask: in what way do other media function as aesthetic technologies in the stories?

While the main characters in most of these books, *Per and Lisa*, are depicted as uncomplicated and conventional throughout the entire series, it is their engagement with the commodities – and in many cases the commodities themselves – that appears essential to the genre. The reader is introduced to a range of anthropomorphic consumer articles like talking shoes, singing coffee pots and smiling shoe polish jars. The animated objects – a frequent motif in the material under consideration – bring the advertising concept beyond product placement. Instead the items are included as characters. Trademarks used for marketing different brands are included in the stories as well. A yellow bear, a trademark for Helios cleaning products, is included in several stories (usually cleaning something) and the “Pix-boy”, a figure marketing Pix-pastilles, is likewise included as a character in some stories.²

The place of materiality and material culture within modernist aesthetics has been discussed extensively in previous research. The emphasis on the material world and the commodities as well as the anthropomorphic items in these branded books have several counterparts in children's literature, for example numerous living toys. But there is also an increased interest in machines, mechanical toys and animated objects in children's literature at the beginning of the 20th century. Nathalie op de Beeck has noted that “independent-minded machines became a trendy topic in children's literature in the late 1920s and 1930s” (op de Beeck 2004: 79). The idea of the sentient machine is popular in different media during this time and is also present through many animated or mechanical toys. Susan Stewart

² See, for example, Marie Walle's *Per och Lisa undervisa i ekonomisk hushållning* (1929), where both trademarks are included as characters.



Fig. 4. © Atelier E.O. *Per and Lisa's Christmas Citchen* (1935)

proposes that “once the toy becomes animated, it initiates another world, the world of the daydream. The beginning of narrative time here is not an extension of the time of everyday life; it is the beginning of an entirely new temporal world, a fantasy world parallel to (and hence never intersecting) the world of everyday reality” (Stewart 1993: 57).

The idea of the animated object and the daydream points to an interesting connection between children’s literature and other media. Products like chocolate, baking powder or bon-bons, that are frequently included in the picturebooks by the Cooperation Union are also included in contemporary animated advertisements. These short black-and-white 35 mm advertising films were shown in movie theatres during the 1920s and 1930s and were aimed at both children and adults. Through its advertising agency Svea, the Cooperation Union developed marketing techniques that combined advertising, design, art, film and different informational campaigns (Mattsson 2012:70). The short film can thus be seen as a way to expand the concept of advertising repetition used in the Cooperation children’s

books. Instead of simply repeatedly introducing the same commodities in the picturebooks, the same items and brands also appear in the film advertisements.

In a manner similar to that in the commercial picturebooks, objects in the short films obtain a voice and an independent agency. To an even greater extent, they demonstrate a fascination with and a celebration of the machine-like items and movements. In short advertising films like the silent films “Living chocolate pralines” by the candy manufacturer Cloetta (1925) or a film advertising scouring powder by Barnängen (1930), and films with optical sound and music like Öhman Bread Factory’s “Crispbread parade” (1933) or Marabou’s “Pastille dance” (1938), just to mention a few examples, the items are depicted as extremely lively.³ They are communicating, singing, dancing and whirling, even falling in love. While most of the films depict animated, anthropomorphized commodities, the early silent film “Living chocolate pralines” from 1925 actually depicts a group of actors, dressed as chocolate pralines and shown climbing out of a huge candy box. Thus, the binary of the human and the machine as well as humanization of commodities and machines are frequently explored even in the advertising films.

Interest in the modernist fetishization of things, already introduced in avant-garde cinema and photography, is apparent in both these short advertising films and the branded picturebooks. At the same time, the implied audience of these advertising films is not explicit, and the motifs, music and narrative techniques, as well as the rapid advertising slogans used in the arrangements, show influences from different visual media. Furthermore, in several of these films, the music, and the visual and graphic features, with rotating images, repetitive movements, quick cuts and dramatic graphic forms, resemble the experimental Dadaist and Surrealist cinema.

How, then, should we evaluate the aesthetic experiments taking place in these commercial picturebooks and advertising shorts? At the beginning of the previous century both the magazine and advertising industries were quick to borrow visual mannerisms from modernist art movements such as Art Nouveau or Art Deco, and later, from avant-garde movements such as Surrealism. This kind of superficial stylistic innovation or stylistic imitation within marketing and graphic design could be described as market-driven trends. However, the mixed-media, collage-like aesthetics used in both images and text in some of the commercial books both introduce new motifs and broaden the expression and the narrative techniques used in children’s literature during this time. As Nathalie op de Beeck writes in her study of the American picturebook of the interwar period, “The picture book developed at a time when avant-garde art movements, sociopolitical climates, and changing technologies called for shifts in perceptions” (op de Beeck 2010: xvi). The Swedish material demonstrates, both motif-wise and through its aesthetics, a confidence in urban consumer society and its new technologies and media, and not least, a strong opti-

³ The short advertising films “Cloetta utställning i Karlstad” (1925), “Barnängen Tomtens skurpulver – Kökskonseljen” (1930), “Öhmans Spisbrödfabrik – Knäckebrödsparaden” (1933) and “Marabou pastilldansen” (1938) are available at the Film Archive of the Swedish Film Institute and National Library of Sweden, <http://www.filmarkivet.se/sv/> (1.02.2016).

mism concerning the child's engagement with this modern society. Aesthetically, both the Cooperation books and the advertising short films show an interesting and dynamic meeting between commercial entertainment and artistic innovation, and between oppositional and marginalized strands of art and culture.

The mass media images in the series of children's books by the Cooperation Union are an early example of media cross-over with their blend of motifs, aesthetics and artistic styles. The marketing strategies used are clearly aimed towards both children and their parents which calls attention to connections between children's literature and other visual media, and between art and commercialism. When analyzing the aesthetics used in these branded books, the question of media becomes crucial, and other media forms like the shop window or the department store catalogue, as well as the commercial advertising short in movie theatres, become relevant.

Conclusion

In this article I have studied a selection of branded picturebooks for children that demonstrate some of the comprehensive socioeconomic and commercial changes taking place in the interwar period in Sweden. The books by the Cooperation Union can be seen as part of emerging advertising techniques, promotional campaigns and commercial platforms at the beginning of the 20th century, targeting children and adolescents. The books aimed at creating brand awareness, brand preference and loyalty among future consumers – children. However, as the title of one of the books *ABC for Father and Mother and Me* suggests, another goal of the books was advertising and marketing aimed at the entire family, and specifically at the housewife or mother as a consumer. The title *ABC for Father and Mother and me* also emphasizes that children and their parents should be guided and educated in consumption. The Cooperation book series could thus be described as primers on proper consumer choices and behavior.

Apart from their commercial objectives these books also depict commercialization and modern infrastructures and can be seen as ways of addressing urban children's increasing alienation from the means of production that enable their modern lifestyles. The abundance of friendly, dancing and singing anthropomorphic commodities in the studied material points at a shift in children's lives at the beginning of the 20th century. The fundamental changes taking place in society means that machines and commercially manufactured goods became an increasingly important part of the urban child's everyday environment. Thus, personifying the machines and commodities that transform the urban landscape can be seen as a way of establishing positive relationships between children and the changes shaped by such commodities and devices. Furthermore, the representations of commodities and consumerism in the studied children's books are predominantly positive and optimistic. Taking part in consumer information and advertisements is seen as part of preparing children for their future life in a consumer society. This is significant, considering that children and consumption in the presentday, modern context are often associated with value con-

flicts and critical overtones (Cook 2004). In fact, today, Sweden applies strict controls concerning advertising targeted at children. For example, in 1991 the Government instituted a ban on television and radio advertising aimed at children under the age of 12 and public opinion in Sweden concerning advertising for children can be described as concerned.⁴

Representations of children as consumers in the interwar period suggest that consumption is strongly connected to progressive and optimistic ideas of modernity and to representations of the modern child. The child consumer emerges here as a competent and educated consumer who creates his/her identity through consumption and in interaction with different commodities. Consumption in general is described as an essential part of the modern, urban experience. When discussing the role of the child in inter-war society in Scandinavia, the idea that children's books, and specifically picturebooks, bear ideological traces of the culture that produces them is possibly self-evident. However, discussing the specific genre of branded picturebooks in the context of children's literature, the advertising industry and new media forms, can lead to a wider and more complex interpretation of the role of children in early 20th century consumer and welfare society.

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⁴ "Lag (1991:2027) om kabelsändningar till allmänheten", <https://www.riksdagen.se/en/>.

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