The concept Children’s Culture refers to two different types of cultural manifestation. 1. The cultural products made for children mainly by adults in different classical and medias, such as children’s literature, toys, TV and computergames. 2. Children’s oral culture and play culture produced and performed by children and transmitted within the frames of a special type of social network. This culture includes aesthetic expressions such as games, tales, songs and a variety of other activities which play an important role in children’s lives and development. The paper describes these two types of child culture and their interplay and has its focus in outlining the field and establishing a framework for the understanding of play culture, children’s lore and other symbolic aesthetic forms of expression.
Child Culture - Play Culture

Flemming Mouritsen*

Preface

Child culture is a concept with more than one meaning. It is used in special senses, for example of the various cultural products that are made for children, and in a wider sense of the life contexts in which children are involved. At least two different concepts of culture and several different types of cultural expression are involved in the use of the term, so it is worth delimiting the concept and characterizing various types of child culture.

Child culture - culture?

The concept of culture itself is difficult to delimit or define. The word “culture” is used in all sorts of contexts and often assumes the character of a kind of magic password that can open all doors. It has become an “in” word. And in the process its meaning is dissipated, so it is worth demarcating what we are talking about.

By and large the concept of culture is used in two different ways. It is used to describe what is peculiarly human in relation to nature. In this case culture means the human ac-

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tivities, productions, forms of expression, behaviour and social institutions generated by the “cultivation” of a raw material, a “natural” basis. In this sense culture means the processed, what has been given form, what is embedded in a distinct formation that is characteristic of a particular time, a particular group, a particular society. Culture is understood as a supraindividual entity produced and reproduced by a given group. Children, for example, grow into and take over a given culture through a so-called enculturation process (unlike socialization, which is the way society is internalized by the individual). We speak of Danish culture, local culture, subculture, corporate culture, institutional culture etc.

When we speak of child culture here, however, the focus is not so much on this wide concept of culture, for the concept of child culture has arisen within the framework of a narrower concept – another general use of the culture concept which refers to the context embracing artistic genres and artistic expression, where “culture” as it were expresses itself about itself in symbolic form.

In this article the use of the concept of culture is limited to artistic and other symbolic aesthetic products and forms of expression, and their context. It is the concept of context that implicates the wider concept of culture, understood as the cultural framework in terms of which the specific child-cultural forms of expression are described and understood.

Children’s lives as such, and the life of children with adults, their activities and networks, are all child culture in the sense of the broad concept of culture, and anything can be regarded, described and interpreted as cultural expression. When we talk about child culture studies in this connection, we do so in a particular culture-oriented perspective unlike the sociological, biological, medical, psychological or educational perspective – to mention some of the most prominent approaches applied hitherto to children and children’s lives.

It is such a culture-analytical perspective that the sections of this book apply to child culture in the narrow sense of the concept, concentrating on a particular part of child culture.
the aesthetic, symbolic forms of expression in child culture, or, to use another term, their play culture.

This type of child culture is the main theme here, but a more detailed definition of child culture and its main types may be appropriate, among other reasons to determine and characterize play culture – in the following also called children’s culture – in relation to the other types of child culture.

The field of child culture

The concept of child culture and research on child culture have undergone a process corresponding to the process to which the concept of culture and childhood have been subjected in recent decades, as definitions, demarcations and points of view have changed. The field of study is very diverse, even if we limit ourselves to the field outlined above – artistic and other symbolic aesthetic forms of expression.

We can distinguish three main types of child culture:

1. The culture produced for children by adults – not only classic media like children’s literature, drama, music and more recent media like film, TV, video, computer games, but also phenomena like toys, sweets, advertisements.

These types of cultural products fall unto at least two subtypes: the formatively oriented production of “quality” culture for children, which may be of a mainly educational persuasion, or may involve artistic self-understanding.

Its counterpart (or perhaps its Siamese twin) is the market-oriented production of child culture. Although the boundaries are fluid, the categorization can have a practical function, since the opposition still plays a central role in the perception of child culture and in debate about it. Both these types are historical or current elements in the construction of child culture as an “institution” in society and what we normally think of when child culture is mentioned.
2. Culture with children, where adults and children together make use of various cultural technologies and media. This type of cultural productivity is vital and has a long tradition behind it in this country. It similarly falls into two types with fluid boundaries. At one end of the spectrum are the specialized leisure activities - all those children can “go to” (like sport and music schools). At the other end of the spectrum there are informal projects in which children and the young organize themselves or work with adults (e.g. the so-called “try-for-yourself” projects or writing workshops and the use of media workshops).

In the last twenty years or so, such projects have been common both in institutions and in more informal contexts. Their function is to open up expressive media to children and to establish space for them as cultural actors. The perspective is to mediate in the relationship between the adults’ child culture and the children’s informal culture, which is the third type below.

3. Children’s culture. By this is meant the expressions of culture that children produce in their own networks; that is, what with an overall term one could call their play culture. It consists of a raft of expressive forms and genres, games, tales, songs, rhymes and jingles, riddles, jokes and whatever else falls within classic children’s folklore; but it also includes sporadic aesthetically organized forms of expression associated with the moment, such as rhythmic sounds, joshing, teasing, walks and sounds. Children’s ways of adopting various media and “places”, too, belong to this category (for example writing, video, computers; just as the ways in which they internalize these media as tools for their own expression or organize their reception of them as a special forum for their relations and expression are related to play activities. It could be a matter of “playing computer games”, “watching video”, “playing Barbie”, “drawing”, “writing” etc. The children produce or transform such situations into special arenas.
Siamese twins. Formative culture and the media industry

Before we discuss play culture, culture for children must be characterized to obtain certain outlines of the relationship between the two different types, the formatively oriented and the market-oriented.

In its origins child culture is part of what has here been called the educational project with children, although the child culture concept is of a far later date. Childhood in the modern sense was established in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It has been called a modern construct, and it has been shown that childhood is not simply a natural category but has been given a special form in society, marking a crucial historic watershed. The circumstances of life, especially for children in bourgeois environments, changed decisively in the course of the 1600s and 1700s, a time when many other modern phenomena also have their origins.

Child culture is as old as childhood, just as it is contemporary with pedagogics as a discipline. It is a result of the whole great project of education and institutionalization that the bourgeoisie constructed to ensure that children grew up as useful and well-regulated adults. Child culture was engineered, produced and developed as a parallel to school education and in a kind of division of labour with it. Whereas the school primarily dealt with the more instrumental side of child education, child culture was oriented towards leisure and the family with a view to the psychological and moral imprinting of the children. The cultural products were therefore mainly moralizing and edifying, and children’s literature was the central medium. Children’s literature was produced and regarded as an instrument for the cultivation of children, which is also its basic function today, although this is now crossed with a number of other intentions and orientations – for example artistic ones. Sometimes child culture products thus became a medium for opposition and for a critical attitude to the educational project.
After World War II, though, there was a crucial shift in the point of view, especially in the parts of child culture oriented towards reform pedagogy and the arts; a change from the adult educator’s point of view to the child’s. The Swedish Pippi Longstocking was one of the early examples of this and one of the most striking. Indeed the book caused a furore when it appeared, but established a direction which is now the mainstream.

On the one hand child culture is a formative institution and is maintained as such, like schools, by the public sector. On the other hand much of it was market-oriented from the outset. Today this market or mass culture is on the offensive and is expanding rapidly. This opposition and these conflicting interests - education, “the good”, quality and art against economics, turnover and entertainment - still arouse vehement debate; today about subjects like children and TV, video and other cultural junk food. The two types of child culture are yoked together like Siamese twins, although passionate battles have raged between them over time with the “good guy” and the “bad guy” in their opposite corners.

The pattern of these debates is as old as child culture itself, and the new debates are very much repetitions of the earlier ones. Before and around 1800 it was the oral folk culture, tales and games that were regarded as poisonous to the upbringing and the values people wanted to give the children. The problem was that the children would rather go down to the kitchen or out in the stables to hear the juicy and tragic tall tales and songs of the servants rather than stick respectfully to the moralistic set pieces that were then the dominant type of children’s literature.

Later the bogeymen were pulp literature and films. In the 1950s the triumph of the comic books and the American culture industry triggered off what was probably the most vehement debate over child culture ever seen. Great passions were aroused, and there were no limits to what the garish comic books could drive the children to, especially the boys.
Today video, computer games and “splatter” products generate similar debates, although in a more subdued form. The attitude is the same – that unbridled market forces undermine the ideal imprinting of children. The media are outside the control of the institutions and educators, and communicate dubious values. But the battles are waged within the adults’ sphere of child culture, and express a basic dichotomy and conflict of interests in modern society, and it is the children who are the object of the projects and the theme of the adults’ conflicting interests.

In both these cultural products, there is thus a distinction between producers and consumers, and an intermediate phase has been inserted, consisting of huge technical and financial apparatuses and institutions. Today there is every indication that multinational culture industries are taking over production. Even in a small country like Denmark the turnover is enormous. As an example, the toy market is worth some 1.5 billion kroner a year, and a few large multinational firms are responsible for the bulk of the turnover. About 300,000 Barbie dolls are sold a year in Denmark (with about a million children aged 0-18, half of them girls, and about a third of these at the Barbie-relevant age). These products have a huge distribution. The TV, video and computer industries have even bigger turnovers, and the share of advertising that is oriented towards children probably corresponds to the percentage of children in the population, i.e. about a couple of billion kroner a year. Children and childhood are extremely “interesting” to the culture industries and not only to them, and in this field there is a huge, determined body of research, product development and marketing.

At the same time the modern media industry goes behind the back of the classic education system and its institutions and communicates directly with the children. The cultivation of children through the culture of education and writing is therefore felt to be threatened – cf. all the talk of the new illiteracy.
Media, institutions and play culture

It has been claimed that the media live like parasites, sucking nourishment from the shortcomings of modern children's lives. Where play goes out or friends and "meeting-places" disappear, entertainment comes in. Active involvement and self-expression are replaced by passive consumption.

A dimension which is often overlooked in the debate, however, is that children are not simply victims of influence and exploitation. Children make use of these products, they relate actively to them. The children use the media as raw material in their play culture, and this gives it new dimensions, media and situations. Play culture and its spaces are in turn the crucial conditions for children's reformulation of the cultural products.

The mediation of play culture bypasses the projects and institutions of the adults, and is channelled through informal networks among the children themselves and from one generation of children to the next, from older to younger children, sometimes with adults as intermediaries. It could be argued that the media and the conditions of modern life weaken certain aspects of this mediation; on the other hand it can also be demonstrated that other aspects are strengthened.

The conditions for children's culture are not unimportant. It is after all adult society that creates the framework for the children. But the debate often goes off the rails and attacks the wrong targets. Modern life does not only offer tribulations. For example the kindergartens, when all is said and done, have perhaps a more important cultural function as a meeting place for the children (and for the children and adults), i.e. as a forum for play culture, than as a mediator of "pedagogy".

The informal forms of play culture (and everyday life) are the basis for what children acquire in the educational system, including school, just as we can say that these structures and institutions have a basic function for play culture.

Play culture and the media are inextricable from one another from the child culture point of view. The media are today a
necessary basis for the children’s play culture. They are a source of raw material, forms and modes which children take over and transform for their own use in games and stories, and they form a common frame of reference for the children, just as child culture is a necessary basis for the media. This does not mean that we should just uncritically allow the modern media and products to flood over the children and ourselves. On the contrary, there is a need to develop a more radical critical position and qualitatively-oriented products.

Behind the view of the media and institutions as a threat to play and the childlike qualities of children lies a view of play as something almost entirely positive. It has not always been so; in fact it has taken a century to make this a truism.

The understanding of games and their significance has been greatly conditioned by developmental thinking. At first, i.e. in the eighteenth century, they were regarded as poisonous to the intentions of child education, and were more or less a forbidden activity for nice children.

One of the classic child culture media, the toy, played an important role in the transition to an integration of the games in the educational project. Toys and the like existed not only for the children’s sake or to stimulate their play. They functioned rather as a tool for disciplining and controlling the wilder games. The beautiful doll’s houses that can be seen in museums were not only for the self-expression of the girls or for their own sakes. The elaborate and frail tableaux were not at the free disposal of the children, but were involved in complex gift-giving and reward/punishment rituals. The precision-demanding, quiet games they demanded were an antidote to the activities in the wild, physical forms of play, and were part of the disciplined gender education of the girls, their behaviour, physical and verbal expression. Similarly, other types of games and toys were developed as instruments of the educational intentions, and thus the useful and the enjoyable gradually learned to walk hand in hand.

This harmony was broken by the market-oriented production of various forms of entertaining and experience-oriented
toys. The first strong manifestations of the child culture industry of later times appeared on the scene in the nineteenth century and from then on took over the role of "the enemy".

In the nineteenth century a number of game types were given new functions as tools that could also be used educationally. The strategy changed from prohibitions and rejection to the taming of both "wild" games and fictions and "wild" children. Nowadays both games and tales are regarded as positive in principle. Imagination, spontaneity and initiative are regarded as central qualities of children and human beings in general. This was a change that began in the 1800s with Romanticism. At the same time the view was established that play is something that is particularly appropriate to childhood. The attitude appears to have made a U-turn, but this is among other reasons because these forms of expression and competencies were developed in an instrumental direction and specialized as tools for the pedagogical - or for the commercial - project.

Play was increasingly seen as a distinctive and necessary childlike form of activity, and today the games are often viewed as indispensable phases in cognitive development, as transitional stages on the path of development, as precursors of thinking, as children's ways of learning, and as tools that can stimulate various aspects of the development of personality cognitively, linguistically, motorically, socially etc. Certain games also belong to certain ages and phases of development. Today we associate play directly with children. They belong together like adults and work. Play is considered a particularly childlike form of activity, and this view is a historical and cultural phenomenon. We do not need to go very far back in history (or out into the world) before things look different. The oral culture of the peasantry about 150 years ago was a kind of play culture with a wide spectrum of different physically and orally transmitted forms of expression (tales, dances, songs, feasts, games etc.). The Danish word for play, *leg*, originally meant such aesthetic forms of expression, and
there is evidence that the life-project of adults too had play as its end.

Just as we can talk about phases of development in certain specialized directions, we can talk about a phasing-out process with regard to children’s competencies. The phasing-out of play is a factor in what we understand as children’s “development”. This does not mean that adults do not or cannot play. They can and do – more than we are normally aware. But it means that the way the concept of adulthood is constructed in our culture does not involve play as a project, as meaning-bearing in adult life. Other values take priority. Here adulthood is contrasted with childhood, when play is seen as a primary medium and project for the children.

Play culture. Typological outline

While child culture is channelled through formal structures, apparatuses and institutions in the form of products, specialized and specifically oriented activities and learning processes, play culture is channelled through informal social networks, through traditional transmission from child to child (and in some cases from adult to child). It is fundamentally dependent on the children’s participation and activity and is predicated on their acquisition of skills in terms of expressive forms, aesthetic techniques, forms of organization, mises-en-scène and performance.

This culture does not exist in a fixed form, i.e. as a product, but comes into existence through the children’s production in situations. It is situation-dependent, whereas culture for children is in principle situation-independent in its production, if not in its reception.

For play to be initiated, the children must already have a preparedness acquired from tradition in the form of skills; a know-how which forms an available store of expressions, genres, aesthetic and organizational techniques. The basic condition of play is the existence of a supra-individual cultural
space which is acquired by the individuals, and which can function as a store which is available to the current users.

Play is thus not simply something children know. Many of these expressive forms and especially their staging may require years of daily practice. This is true for example of the artistic clapping songs that flourish in the girls’ singing culture in the 6-10 age group.

The exercises do not take the form of specialized training of the type we know from sport or the learning processes of school, where the practice, the use of the skill, is separate from the training of the technical skills. Play is something one practices by playing, by taking part. One becomes a storyteller by telling stories etc. What one knows at a certain level is usable in its own right.

From the point of view of the children, it is matter of getting “good at it”. There is status in being a good player or an accomplished spitter. What you are good at may be something that from the educational point of view does not seem to matter. Good at elastic-skipping? Good at talking like Donald Duck? Good at joshing? But it does matter to the children.

It is a condition of such a culture that it is based on simple formulae. This applies to all orally transmitted culture, for example to the folk tale. The matrix of a folk tale may for example begin “There was once a poor man who had three sons...” We know already how this tale will go in its broad outline. Another example is the Faroese chain dances to ballad music. The basic formula is one step to the right, two steps to the left. That is all. The steps are repeated and repeated for hours and days. More or less anyone can join in the dance and participate without previous skills. All the same, the Faroese say that it takes thirty years of constant practice to learn it properly, and this is probably not wholly untrue if you have to make the dance swing as the lead dancer.

What the good dancers “know” is not just the steps and the songs, but how to make them swing and at the same time how to organize the dance as it progresses. You have to be so
good that you can improve. This is the second main principle of children’s play: the ability to improvise, and improvisation, capturing the moment, takes practice. It is not just divine inspiration but practiced spontaneity.

We often perceive these forms of expression as not authentically childlike, perhaps even as noise or chaos. But if we look closer, the sounds and physical and social movements of children are almost always organized and formed – for example rhythmically. Children formalize their relations, their situations and their surroundings, and play culture and its aesthetic techniques are the basis and tools for this. They may take the form of large-scale expression with overall organization like games, role-playing games, stories and songs, or they may be expressed in sporadic actions like sounds, rhythms, walks and impressions. Play culture is a medium which enables children to “cultivate” themselves and their surroundings; they create form and patterns, they form material (language, body, motions, one another) aesthetically. Simple forms are the necessary basis for a complex and artistic performance.

The cultural geographies of play

There are age-dependent differences in play culture. There are differences between what older and younger children do and know. There are age-determined phases of development which impose certain constraints, also over and above those imposed by the social and pedagogical categorization of children in age-related groups. The play repertoire of small children and their ways of playing are different from those of older children. It is therefore important to consider this – also when studying children’s forms of cultural expression. The fact that from a cultural point of view we must be critical of the form that age-related thinking has taken in the educational psychology tradition and practice does not mean that it is
not a central dimension in the study and understanding of children’s culture.

There is also a gender aspect in play culture. If we adopt this perspective we can talk about different gender cultures. Girls and boys have different play traditions and activities – as well as a common pool. The gender-specific is a crucial dimension in the organization of the games, in the types of play and in the ways of playing. Looking at the games from this point of view we find many indications that the children use the games and other things to create gender identities. The girls often have clear pictures of how the boys play and do not play, how the girls do and do not play. The boys, similarly, have their own pictures. If one delves deeper and analyses the games at the micro-level, one will find indications of such differences in the organization down to the smallest details and aesthetic forms.

It is the same with the differences in the children’s social or geographical backgrounds. Here too there are differences in tradition and expression which are significant. They do not play roles in the same way in different environments. The children of middle-class suburbia do not play quite the same games in quite the same way as the children from the housing projects.

There will be geographical differences: for a provincial child it will be clear that they play differently in the capital. It is not certain that a Swede would see this; on the other hand he would immediately see the differences between Danish and Swedish children. On the larger scale this would apply to different cultures, for example northern and southern Europe. Games are not just games, children are not just children, they are also part of a cultural context.

This does not prevent us talking about play culture as such, across these differences – just as we can talk about children as children. Games in different culture have some basic features in common. Play culture is at once completely local and extremely global. Children play everywhere; it is a characteristic human form of expression; and they play differently.
everywhere. It is striking with games and other manifestations of play how much they seem to resemble one another everywhere, but at the same time this is a deceptive surface phenomenon. The same games, the same rhythms etc. are spread over vast areas and in different cultural contexts. The "NA-na-NA-na-NA-na" mocking rhythm is for example at least spread through the whole Indo-European linguistic area. It was once believed that it was probably more or less hereditary-species-characteristic. But the theory is untenable; this too is culturally formatted.

Nevertheless, this oral communication network is extremely wide and efficient. Games and forms of expression are transmitted over long distances, and it happens relatively quickly. Sometimes one gets the impression that a new wave of a particular type of joke (for example the "All the children..." jokes that were current all over the country a few years ago) or a scatological version of a Eurovision song, are spread simultaneously all over the country. It appears to pop up in the mouths of children all over the country at once.

Some of the waves of jokes and riddles of recent years have proved to originate in the USA. This is also true of the artistic clapping songs which have been a central part of the girls' singing culture since the 1950s. They too originally came from across the Atlantic. It has been possible to follow their diffusion from country to country. The "All the children..." jokes emigrated from Denmark to Norway and Sweden, and later to Finland, and had different culmination periods. Where they came from is still uncertain. Perhaps they were invented here.

This fast, often almost global diffusion, is not dependent on the modern traffic and communications channels. But often these provide a common background, while the actual form spreads, bypassing the media, in an oral cycle which is surprisingly efficient and wide-ranging. As for phenomena like graffiti, break dance, hip-hop and the like, there is often a reciprocal effect, where even the most modern medium, the Internet, is used. Through the medium of play culture even
the three-year-old in the local kindergarten is in contact with the wide world.

At the same time the three-year-old’s actual play is entirely local and tied to the situation and the local tradition. At this level one would be able to map a local play culture which in some respects would differ from that of the neighbouring kindergarten.

Boys play shooting games throughout much of the world. One of the most important ingredients in these games is the shooting sound. It is probably global as such – as a rhythmic aesthetic phenomenon which, with the competent shot imitators, can resemble artistry, often accompanied by ingenious ways of falling dead and death rattle sounds. But the shot sounds, the timing and the rhythm are different. In most environments there is an available store of different sounds. This is one aspect. Another is that these sounds are different from those used in other environments. I would venture to claim that on the basis of a survey one could make a kind of shot dialect map of Denmark, just as one can make one of the dialects of the language and thus distinguish between characteristic regional and subregional forms of expression, all the way down to the sounds of the institution or the neighbourhood. Perhaps fully global or semiglobal basic forms could be distinguished as a common basis for the characteristic local variants which produce special meanings.

Besides these dimensions – age-related, gender-related and social – the historical dimension is also important as a parameter. Here we have a complex relationship like the one I have tried to outline for the others, with an example from cultural geography. On the one hand we find games that are played today and which can be traced as far back as source material exists. A few rhymes have ancestors way back in Catholic times. One sees games in ancient Egyptian papyruses and murals which correspond to those of today. Many games and forms of play have a quite venerable age, and there has been speculation that some actually belong to the primal material of the species and are as old as it. Play itself, and playing in
the way people play, probably are. Whether particular games and modes of expression have so ancient an origin is rather more doubtful. On the one hand we have games as a universal form of expression. On the other hand one can claim that play is historically determined and in modern times particularly associated with children and childhood.

In Breughel’s famous picture of children playing we can see a catalogue of recognizable games. The games that are played today were also played then. This spectrum of play was at least still intact in the 50s, and is known today. But does this mean that play culture was the same thing over at least a five-century period through great political and social upheavals of society? It does and it doesn’t. The games do not necessarily have the same meanings and functions and modes of execution as they had then.

The history has not been researched, and the source material is scanty – play material has always been at the periphery of what has interested serious people. The history has not been written, and will be difficult to write. Recent history can however be gathered together. Some material has been recorded from recent times, and memories of how things were done are still available. From these emerges a picture of a few rather critical shifts in play culture between the fifties and today; as is the case with life conditions on the whole and the great cultural upheavals that have taken place in the period.

This is one of the fields where even hardened researchers on children can fall into a profound sense of nostalgia. A mythological picture of the golden age of play in the fifties appears like moist contact lenses in front of their eyes. The period stands as something special in the history of play culture: the local communities were intact and dynamic, the family pattern had taken on its ideal character (in the imagination). Mothers stayed at home. The children had on the broad scale been emancipated from work, there was a great space for activity around them. Even nature was close around them, far into the cities. The institutions had not laid claim to them and the disposal of their time. The media had not stolen them.
And last but not least, there were flocks of children, large
flocks, there have never been bigger generations than those
of the war years. All that.

It is not so strange that people who were children then can
see hardly anything but decline when considering the wretched
conditions today for children and their play. Even those
who were outsiders and were bullied and who talk about a
blighted childhood and deprecate the much-touted idea of a
self-organizing children’s world, can fall into romantic nostal-
ggia about the broken-down childhood life and play of today.
For they simply aren’t there, the games, and where are the
flocks of children? They are not there either. They are in some
institution or other, or they go to something or other, or they
are with their parents out in the shopping temple or on holi-
day, or they sit staring in their rooms or watching video or
doing their homework because they have to manage in the
rat race, or...or... And where are the children’s places – the
sanctuaries? They are covered with cement and supervised
by adult everywhere. It certainly doesn’t look good for the ga-
mes and for children’s culture. Or does it?

If you look through the spectacles of anything else but the
age of steam radio, and try not to look at what is not there
and the games that have disappeared out of the repertoirē,
and look at the places where the children actually are, then
you will see that they still play, and that playing activities are
in full swing or in quiet concentration everywhere children
are together; but as a rule in different forms and in other pla-
ces than in the good old days.

To take one of the mythological places of play – the childhood
brook: what has happened to it? If the stream is still there
you rarely see children there. If you drag some of them out
there so they can experience a little authentic child life, then
they don’t have to be very old before they get bored and ask
when they can get away to the burger bar you have used to
lure them out there. Even the smallest ones may have pro-
blems. They have no idea what to do with the place. Although
the care-worker efforts you resort to may interest them for
the moment, this does not mean that the brook is a place they will seek out for themselves and can do something with - anyway, isn’t it too dangerous for them to be there for by themselves? Even as an adult that has grown up with streams, you have now grown out of that sort of thing. You may think there was more quality to it then, but when you get down to it, it turns out you are really only half-hearted about it.

The children may no longer have the store of competency and know-how they need to use the brook as a place for being together and playing. What we often overlook is that a basis of transmitted traditions is involved, even in such apparently banal activities. On the other hand you might go into a shopping mall and see the children there doing the same things with the escalator that we did with the stream. The play is still there, somewhere else, in other terms, with other modes of expression. Just as we cultivated and used the stream and integrated it in our bodies, children today cultivate and form the places of modern life. Something is the same, something else has been removed, and something else again has been added. Most has been transformed so it fits modern life and its circumstances.

They no longer play so much outside, they play more in indoor spaces. The large flocks are rarely seen, they gather more in smaller groups. Less happens outside, but all the more within the framework of the institution, which they are better able to make use of as an arena. They may not have as large a register of classic stories, on the other hand a number of new storytelling forms have been taken for example from the media and used; for example the media-like “report” form is a key genre in the boys’ culture. And this is the way it is over a broad front. Play culture is transformed in many of its features. Whether it is poorer or richer is a different question, although it is very much a question that typifies general debate, while not very many people have actually looked into the way things really are.
They don’t understand we’re just playing!

Although the field of study, children’s culture, can more or less be demarcated, the angle of approach has not therefore been characterized. The same phenomenon, for example the war games of boys, can be recorded, analysed and interpreted from different points of view. The understanding of the same game may turn out very differently depending on the angle. The same phenomenon has or is given different meanings depending on the interpretative frame. And this can have great consequences not only for our understanding but also for any practice that might arise from the interpretation.

The poor war game, for example, will almost inevitably mean something else in a psychological interpretation than in a “literary” one, not to mention what a medical or pedagogical analysis could make it mean. The various approaches will emphasize different things, and this would already affect the process of recording and what the recorder “sees”. The educationalist’s “gaze” would for example see and shape a different “text” from the neurologist’s. In the same way there is a difference between the gazes with which a parent and a professional in the child care business perceive. There will be different preconceptions determined by the point of departure in theories, objectives, professional capacities, roles etc. used by the “understander” in question. These preconceptions may be necessary tools or prejudices which obscure and distort the view of what is happening; often there will be both - pure reality does not unveil itself to us. An example may show the difference between two different approaches to the same phenomenon.

For the umpteenth time the adults in the institution had been after the big boys. The boys had again been involved in an outburst of noise and row and war games. The noise of that kind of thing is unbearable if you are not part of it. This time the adults had not been content to try to quieten down the noise with moralizing remarks about other people having to be there too. It had become too much for the adults, to the
extent that they started asking why the boys absolutely had to fight and be noisy; whether it was always necessary to play war and violence; whether that sort of playing was not a bad thing; whether there wasn’t enough violence already on television and in the world. And why they couldn’t play something else? And so on. It was more or less in the air that there actually might be something wrong with the boys themselves. Or that there easily could be if they went on that way.

An adult from the outside became curious and asked the boys some questions when the conflict was over and they were gradually gathering to begin all over again. He asked what they thought about what the adults had said, whether it had made any impression on them, whether they thought there was any truth in it. One of the boys answered rather indulgently - the way you answer people who don’t know any better when it comes to the obvious: “But they don’t understand we’re just playing!”

In this rather banal episode two radically different points of view clash. The statements of the children and the adults reflect the same event, but interpret it differently, and react to it even more differently. They do not see and hear the same. It is not only the interpretation that is different. The sensing of it is too. Where the adults see “war”, a problem, noise or chaos, the children see “play”, i.e. almost the opposite. They see through different lenses. The adult gaze - the pedagogical lens - reads one thing. The child’s gaze - the lens of play - gives it another sense. They are not only talking at cross purposes, they have crossed sights and crossed courses of action.

Clashes of this type between children and adults are very common, and also occur in situations which are not about war and games. It might just as well have been about them seeing something bad on television, or wasting their time tripping each other up or sitting playing computer games or looking at Barbie catalogues or pestering the adults for sweets
or a particular breakfast cereal they had seen in TV commercials - or so many other things. What children do or prefer is often rather dubious in “adult” terms. Sometimes we think it is reasonably good, but rarely good enough. And surely they cannot always excuse themselves by saying they are just playing?

Behind these reactions lies an ingrained pattern which has to do with basic views of children and childhood, and with the role of the adults in that game. Since modern childhood was shaped, an attitude to children that is in the broad sense educational has been a kind of “cultural law” in our relations with them.

Children and their activities have been perceived through a lens, a filter for preconceptions, whether we are aware of it or not. Putting it simplistically we could say that we see what we can see, what we want to see, what we fear, what we wish to see. We see through a special lens consisting of modes of understanding, theories, concepts, senses and prejudices. We understand things in terms of a special context. In Gregory Bateson’s words we can say that we read the situations in a special “frame” which determines their interpretation. Whereas the children’s frame in the above example is “This is play”, the adult’s is for example “This is learning”.

The children, inevitably, have directly and indirectly resisted and reacted to our role as agents of the pedagogical project. This is not only embedded in our reactions to and our understanding of children. It has also settled into us as a special “tuning” of our senses. What we hear, see or smell and perhaps even more so what we do not sense, is formed by this.

This way of seeing is a basic feature of our culture and an aspect of the great pedagogical project in which we have involved our children in recent years, and which has certainly not slowed down in the most recent period. It has more or less developed like traffic vehicles - from horse-drawn coaches on gravel roads past thatched village schools, through the railway network of the centralized schools, to the motorway systems and local clover-leaf crossings of the institutions. The pedago-
gical infrastructure is not only an external phenomenon embedded in institutions of different kinds; it is equally an internal mental one.

In recent years these modes of understanding have been more clearly seen for what they are: period-determined ways of seeing. What has hitherto been a matter of course is now less so. Basic perceptions are faced with new departures, and this is also expressed in the fact that key concepts like “childhood” and “development” are not what they once were. This is certainly a result of the radical changes in society and in everyday life which are in progress, and which also involve the children, their life and our organization of childhood. These new departures are visible in a range of different factors.

Some people talk of a paradigm shift in various contexts. Something of the sort is noticeable in connection with childhood and its circumstances. Basic concepts and forms of understanding become visible as constructs and by being reflected as such lose their aura of inevitability – in fact, of being basic. In this atmosphere of upheaval a concept of culture gains urgency as the key to the development of new modes of understanding alongside the traditional ones of pedagogics, sociology and developmental psychology. The point of view of cultural analysis could give us another lens so we can see things we would not otherwise see. It would enable us to reflect on and interpret them in another way, and it can make visible and study the ways of seeing that we use and often unwittingly take for granted. They are in themselves a part of culture and cultural history. The view of children and childhood and the ways in which they are understood and organized are basic factors in a society. And the same is true of child culture and the cultural expression of children.

The pedagogical lens or the concept of development

One of the crucial filters for our sensing and understanding is a view of children as people who lack something. They must
be educated and developed before they can become “real” people. This is a way of understanding them which is as old as, or is perhaps the very core of, the construction of modern childhood. Children are not “real” people, and they must be developed into real people.

With its breakthrough in Romanticism and roots going back to Rousseau, an apparently diametrically opposite view has also had an impact. Children are close to being the only beings who are really human. Along with the “noble savage” they have not been blunted and dulled by the machinery of education and civilization. The child is the original human being incarnate, the authentic. These views are therefore as closely related as the front and back of a coin and are constantly found together like Siamese twins. Our culture has a dual image of the child which has the character of a mythological figure. It corresponds to the double image of the savage: the noble savage and the Devil’s brood – and it resembles the whore-madonna complex for the female gender; for the sake of balance it can be added that there is also a similar dualism in the view of men, although it is less visible – for example as the good hunter and the wolf.

The image of the divine child is however mostly for Sunday use in theory and in nostalgic notions, while the myth of the demonic child is effective, but rarely visible and almost taboo in the present day except in the horror genre. A pragmatic compromise in the form of the “incomplete” child, representing the utilitarian thinking of Rationalism, appears to be the common one for practical use in everyday life.

The understanding of childhood, the view of children, is very much an “adult” projection; we often unconsciously see them as what we are not. As what we fear and what we miss. As we have seen, the view of children corresponds in many ways to the view of “the savage”, the so-called primitive. It is no accident that the concept of “development” is used as a central metaphor in both areas. The understanding of what the education of children is corresponds in some versions to the view of the cultivation of wild nature or, to use another
traditional metaphor, to writing on a tabula rasa, not to men-
tion the filling of empty vessels. The child is represented in a
generalized version as a blank object, on which something
has to be written, or as an empty vessel which has to be fil-
led, or a wild nature that has to be tamed.

Such views lie as an implicit basis under the powerful ideo-
logies, pedagogical and psychological theories that have in
many ways determined the view of the children and the organi-
zation of institutions, schools, daily life - and child culture.
In our century developmental psychology in particular has
been of crucial importance. The very concept of development
is a central one. At the same time it implicitly defines children,
childhood and the activities of children (for example their ga-
mes) as something that only has meaning insofar as it leads
to adulthood. We have divided children and childhood and
activities into developmental phases and set up “the adult”
as a yardstick. The division of children by age has for example
had a powerful impact on present-day institutions, which we
organize on the age principle. What children know and do
beyond what is defined within this framework - for example
their games - is considered either as inhibiting or furthering
their development and can be defined as an instrument of
that development.

Children’s education had been radically functionalized,
specialized and rationalized (like an industrial form of pro-
duction) in this century with developmental thinking as the
basis. Children are regarded as “raw material” for the future
and for their adulthood. Through education and its institu-
tions the necessary product development takes place with
the child as material. It is a symptom of this that we often
use industrial metaphors about pedagogy and childhood.

Much theory has developed about socialization. Much re-
search has been done on children (especially on special and
functional developmental aspects and cognitive aspects). Much sociological research has been done on children and
childhood, and we create institutions on that basis. But at
the same time we do not know very much about the daily life
of children with adults and with one another, about what they do, what they say and especially about what it means and how. This is a landscape that has hardly been mapped. What children do, what they know, their social and cultural networks and competencies have only been sporadically studied in the cultural context we seek to establish in this book.

Pedagogy has been based in theory and practice on what children are to become, before anyone has taken an interest in knowledge of what children and children’s lives are. What has not been developed, and what we thus need as a basis, is a cultural description and understanding of children, their lives, their participation in the life of society and their expression of this. Many tendencies in various branches of research on children are now moving in that direction, and this will mean a reformulation of the concepts of childhood, pedagogy and “development”.

The “childhood baggage” of the adults

This change is also being expressed at other levels; for example the roles of parent or professional educator, of adult and child, are no longer as well defined. The roles are no longer unequivocally defined, but have been relativized in several ways.

In the first place the classic authority of the adult in relation to the child is no longer an unshakable principle. It still exists, but in practice is associated with certain relationships or certain situations where the adult has greater knowledge, experience, strength or other competencies. It becomes less fundamental and more situational. Adults are not what they used to be. They are involved in “adulthood”. While the concept of childhood has several hundred years behind it, adulthood is a new concept which has only been used in recent years. This is probably a symptom of the way the adults have been subjected to relativization. It is not just something given as the obvious goal of everything, which needs no special designa-
tion. One element of this modern adulthood is the infantilization of the adult; more and more traditionally childlike characteristics are sneaking into the role of the adult - the adult too is doomed to "development" in modern times. The adult is not simply the person who sees; the adult is seen, the adult is reflected. Adulthood becomes visible like childhood, youth and old age. And as a concept it is used in everyday language. Adulthood is a judgement.

Nor is childhood what it used to be. We can lament this or think things have gone too far; at all events it is a theme that has forced its way in recent years into various accounts and debates. One example is the discussions that were generated by Niels Postman's book, The Disappearance of Childhood. One of the themes of the book is that classic childhood is being undermined amidst the problems of modern times, one element of which is the "adultification" of children.

As one aspect of this shift, the child's own competencies, ideas and intentions play a greater role in relation to the adults. The relationship is developing from one of authority with fixed principles to one of negotiation with changing terms from situation to situation. The result is more uncertainty, bordering on powerlessness and confusion - but also greater openness and a tendency to respect children's special competencies. In the transitional process the adult experiences a problem of legitimacy. The adult becomes a problem, not least for himself. It is not only the child and its education that appears as a problem or project. Parenthood becomes a project. This is another expression of the relativization of the adult role and of the self-reflection of it that is a characteristic feature of the period.

Secondly, the role of the professional educator loses its clarity, as do education and the learning programme in general. Formerly, there could be different views and school formations. They could differ passionately about the proper type and method of teaching, but they had a fixed reference, a learning/teaching system, an educational ideology, an institution - if nothing else, a tradition of practice. In the pedagogi-
cal field, after the struggle of the seventies among different ideologies and “schools of thought” (“Which pedagogical school do you belong to?”) a kind of vacuum developed in the view of what to do with children and institutions. This generated on the one hand perplexity and confusion, and on the other openness, a searching attitude and curiosity, for example as regards looking at what children do and know, and how they express themselves about all this.

Thirdly, as we have seen, the role of the child and the way childhood is organized is in transition. The children have made their appearance as actors on the stage in a different sense than before. A concept like “the child’s perspective” is developing into a key concept, not only in research, but also in pedagogical, political, social and cultural contexts, where there is a trend towards involving children as participants, not only as objects of stimulation, education or control.

Fourthly, these tendencies are being expressed in research on children and child culture, and in the role of the researcher. The researcher’s position as an outside objective describer and interpreter of various child-related phenomena is being relativized, like the classic division between the researcher and the object of research; a problem that becomes more urgent for cultural research than for quantitative data gathering or interpretation. A movement away from thesis-governed or theory-governed studies towards more open theory-developing studies of the life situation, relations and forms of expression of children is visible in many disciplines, including sociology and psychology. In these cases the researcher is not simply faced with a child as object, but as in recent anthropological studies is placed in a relationship and reflected in it. The researcher becomes involved in a participatory relationship with his project and his object. And vice versa.

There are a couple of other issues which relate to the researcher’s – and the adult’s – involvement in his object in the field of research on children.

Everyone has a childhood in his or her baggage, with the memories, the knowledge, the attitudes, the sensory and cog-
nitive mind-sets this involves. This means that one is an outsider (one is no longer a child), and one cannot become a child again - at most "like" a child again. The door is closed, but one can look in through all the windows or be overwhelmed by memories - paradisiac as well as demonic; for some one aspect is dominant, for some the other (there is a dualistic complex here which also has an effect on research on children). Some long for childhood, some are stuck in it, some seek to be rid of it. Whatever the case may be, one does not escape the fact that one has had a childhood. One is at once outside and a party to the object, which means that one both sees through filters and has the opportunity for in-sight.

In addition, many people have or have had their own children. Parenthood creates its own filters and experience. Others have also had professional dealings with children, with the attitudes that gives them. All these points of view and positions may be present together and be interwoven, and often one does not know whom one represents at any given time, while on the other hand they are a prerequisite of being able to "see" anything at all.

The relativization of roles, perceptions and practices is a recurrent feature in the modern picture of the relationship between children and adults. It becomes a new, essential adult competency just to be able to relativize oneself and thus to reflect one's own role and perception as well as the children and the situation. This also means a relativization of the perspective applied. For example, it becomes possible to transcend the pedagogical perspective and to open up that of the children. The pedagogical "gaze" or "frame" becomes one among many possible ones.

These changes in basic conditions and ways of seeing, and the problem of maintaining stable definitions are the background of the above-mentioned new departures, including those in research and professional areas, and they also leave their mark on child culture, its media, texts and history. An example of this can be taken from children's literature, where we can observe a striking shift in this century from books
which take the point of view of the "educator" to texts which take the point of view of the child. In recent years children's own texts have appeared on the market. Whether or not this makes it more of a "children's perspective" is another matter. However, it shows that there is movement in the perspectives.

Play, story and fiction as point of view

It is characteristic that the understanding of play and thus the development of theories of play have played a central role in the shift in points of view and has paved the way for the identification of a different perspective than the prevalent one on children and their lives, and for a different research approach. Play, the study of its specific manifestations and its analysis, have come into focus, and the attempt to understand it has meant going beyond the developmental psychology approaches to and theories of play. The rooting of these in individual development has proved inadequate in the attempt to understand the phenomenon of play and its meanings. They reduce play to a special childlike, individual competency associated with particular stages of development. If on the other hand we turn the perspective around and look at what play actually is, at how and what it means, we gain a different understanding. In a way this is a shift from a utilitarian view of the matter ("What use is it?") to the view that play is something in its own right. In this sense it is more a matter of applying the perspective of play than the child's perspective. Play is something in its own right with the consequences this has for understanding. It is something different from "the useful", what is oriented towards reality. It is something different from a tool of education, more than a vehicle of development. That it then has many useful side-effects, for example in the form of competencies, is another matter.
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