

## 'You Cannot Own an Animal!'

### Animals, Agency and Activism in Håkan Alexandersson's and Carl Johan De Geer's Television Series for Children

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#### Abstract

This article studies the human-animal relations in three fiction series aimed at children and broadcasted on Swedish public service television 1973–1983: *Tårtan*, *Doktor Krall* and *Privatdetektiven Kant*. The interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approach combines theoretical concepts and methods from cinema studies and childhood studies, focusing on the power relations between humans and non-human animals. The analysis reveals a certain ambivalence throughout all the series: On the one hand, the non-human animals have a strong agency, human exceptionalism is openly challenged, Haraway's attitude of 'greeting significant others' is held up as ideal, and animal rights activism is encouraged. On the other hand, the series also display speciesist traits such as objectification of non-human animals, disnification, naive anthropomorphism, and a production process exposing non-human animals for severe stress. The article points out that the depictions of human-animal relations in the studied television series differ from the vast majority of stories for children, especially by not depicting children at all, and thereby questioning the supposed historically strong link between children and non-human animals. Concludingly, the article discusses the inherent potential of children's television to influence the young audience, in this case by extension contributing to a less anthropocentric society where humans treat non-human animals with respect. We might even talk of children's television as a *natureculturetechnology* (cf. Haraway).

#### Keywords

Children's Television, Child-Animal Relations, Animals in Television, Anthropomorphism, Disnification; Animal as Spectacle, Natureculturetechnology

#### INTRODUCTION

As a child, I dreamed of becoming a veterinarian, so I could care for, help and be constantly surrounded by animals. One of my sources of inspiration was the popular children's programme *Doktor Krall*, which featured an animal doctor who took such incredible care of his furry patients; who built them miniature deserts, spoke to them politely and dried them with tiny terry cloth towels. My plans for the future changed over time, but *Doktor Krall* is still a source of inspiration.

#### Purpose and Points of Departure

Ever since the early 2000's, social-scientific and cultural studies perspectives on animals in film and television have been of great scholarly interest (DeMello 2021, p. 399). In the groundbreaking book *Animals in Film* (2002, p. 17–83), Burt argues that many early technological innovations within the film industry were actually developed in response to the desire to capture wild animals on camera. Furthermore, the author (p. 84–163) shows how moving images have been key for the fast growth of animal rights organisations during the 20th century. Other film scholars have focused their attention

towards animals' functions in horror films, the narrative perspectives in documentaries on wild animals, and animals performing in movies (DeMello 2021, p. 400–405).

Surprisingly though, research on moving images for children from human-animal studies perspectives is still very limited (even though there are some interesting exceptions); a remarkable lack since films and television for children are crowded by wild animals, beasts, pets, anthropomorphic animals, companion species and shapeshifters. It is also surprising given the fact that film and television for children generally is a fast-growing research field that has been enriched with a range of international monographies and edited collections over the past years (cf. Bazalgette 2022; Brown 2017, 2021, 2022; Hermansson & Zepernick 2019; Nebe 2023; Åberg 2023; Hupaniittu, Kovanen & Mulari 2024; Janson 2024a; Novrup Redvall 2024). Furthermore, the lack of research in this area appears as curious considering that a substantial interest has been directed towards human-animal-relations in the adjacent research area of children's literature (cf. Blount 1975; Cosslett 2006; Lassén-Seger 2006; McHugh 2011; Jaques 2015; Elick

2015; Feuerstein & Nolte-Odhiambo 2017a; Hübben 2017a).

The intention of this article is thus to fill a tiny bit of this vast research gap by examining the interspecies relationships in three children's television series depicting non-human animals in important roles: *Tårtan*, *Doktor Krall* and *Privatdetektiven Kant*, first broadcast on Swedish public service television between 1973 and 1983. Theoretically, the study is interdisciplinary, synthesising points of departure and concepts from cinema studies, children's culture studies and human-animal studies to understand the mutable connections between children's television and the central ideas of interspecies relations held by society. The central theoretical concepts will be introduced subsequently. The primary research material consists of the three television series, here studied by a textual close reading based on cinema studies that focuses on form and content. In addition, some extra-textual aspects – such as origin stories, creative processes, and impacts – will be touched upon when relevant. Due to its particularly strong focus on human-animal relations, one of the television series, *Doktor Krall*, will be studied more closely than the others, while *Privatdetektiven Kant*, where this theme is considerably less prominent, will only be treated occasionally.

The main aim is thus to examine how relations between human and non-human animals are portrayed in the television series and, by extension to discuss how these depictions can be understood based on ideas about power dynamics between humans and non-human animals. Central research questions for the study are: What ideas about power structures between human and non-human animals are conveyed? How is the capacity for action of human and non-human animals respectively portrayed? In what ways can these depictions be connected to the special conditions of children's television as mode of expression? Concludingly, the article will also touch on children's television's specific properties by discussing the medium's opportunities to challenge anthropocentric ideas about human and non-human animals. The study therefore contributes to increased knowledge about how children's programmes produce and reproduce narratives about child-animal relations, as well as to a deeper understanding of the medium's potential to change attitudes towards power relationships between humans and non-human animals.

### **Child-Animal Relations in Children's Culture and Alexandersson's and De Geer's Children's Programmes**

There is a strong culturally constructed connection between children and non-human animals in Western culture, dating back to Aristotle (in Berger 2017, p. 113) who stated that a human child hardly differs psychologically from a non-human animal. This notion was later consolidated by leading thinkers such as Rousseau, Freud and Bataille, arguing that children and animals are creatures close to nature (Lassén-Seger 2008, p. 113; Berger 2017, p. 112; Flegel 2017, p. xv).

When cultural phenomena specifically created for children emerged on a broad front in 19th century Europe, animals were recurring motifs in literature, toys and interior design (Berger 2017, p. 116). During the same era, pet culture extended in the middle-classes, tying children and animals even more closely together as an emotional center of the nuclear family (Flegel 2017, p. xiv; Hübben 2017b, p. 141).

As several researchers have demonstrated, adult-produced children's culture is an important part of children's socialisation process (Mouritsen 2002, p. 16; Helander 2011, p. 4; Lorentzon 2018, p. 21–22), and being permeated by depictions of non-human animals it also constitutes a critical arena for the study of human-animal relationships (Pettersson 2017, p. 108; Jaques 2015, p. 6; Cole & Stewart 2016, p. 6; Hübben 2017b, p. 138). The most common way of depicting and interpreting animals in fictional stories are as metaphors for humans, human behaviour or emotions, and Burt (2002, p. 11) even argues that non-human animals can carry a 'semantic overload' by always being seen as signifiers. Even in children's culture, non-human animals are often given a symbolic meaning (Lassén-Seger 2008, p. 115; Höing 2019, p. 65; DeMello 2021, p. 394; Pettersson 2024, p. 49).

Within the growing research field of human-animal relations in children's literature, numerous studies also demonstrate how non-human animals function as entertainment as well as education for young readers, not seldom providing 'lessons on friendship, morality, kindness, bravery, or perseverance' (DeMello 2021, p. 397). In addition, various researchers have stressed the inevitable cultural politics of power permeating these stories; most notably adults' power over children, but no less intriguing humans' power over non-human animals (Feuerstein & Nolte-Odhiambo 2017b, p. 1–3). In some children's stories, the non-human animals furthermore become catalysts for the child protagonist's development, that is, the child grows through contact with them (Höing 2019, p. 77; Lassén-Seger 2008, p. 120–122). In others, children and non-human animals instead join forces to become stronger together and fight a battle against (adult) oppression, whereby two equal agents meet and strengthen each other in a cross-species sociality that produces synergistic effects (Lassén-Seger 2008, p. 123–126; Höing 2019, p. 80; Jaques, 2017, p. 111). Depictions of non-human animals that are neither metaphors for human behaviour or emotion, nor in one way or another dependent on a human character are very rare, but they do occur and have been subjects of study (cf. Kunz Lesuma 2017, p. 126).

Even though there are affinities among all cultural expressions for children, moving images for children also have specific traits that clearly distinguish them from children's literature (cf. Janson 2007, *passim*; Pettersson 2013, *passim*). It is therefore essential to consider what intermediality researchers term media specificity (Bruhn 2021, p. 22), that is, to take into account the range of possibilities and restrictions that is unique for television

as a form of communication. These will therefore be addressed throughout the article.

The children's programmes investigated here were created by Håkan Alexandersson and Carl Johan De Geer and have quite a unique position within the history of Swedish television and children's culture likewise. *Tårtan* ('The Cake'), *Doktor Krall* and *Privatdetektiven Kant* ('Private Detective Kant') were widely watched when first broadcast on Swedish public service television and have been re-run multiple times. The series are shot in black and white and are characterised by a very peculiar aesthetics, called 'kitchen sink surrealism' by one film critic (Bergdahl in Nyqvist 1997, p. 9).<sup>1</sup> The series are permeated with references to popular culture as well as philosophy and art history, there is a constant presence of a subtle craziness, and large parts of the dialogue seem to be improvised.

*Tårtan* (1973) tells the story of three grown-up brothers who leave their life at sea and instead take over a bakery in Stockholm. The series was nothing less than a scandalous success when first broadcast, both celebrated and hated by audiences and the media, and the creators were only granted permission by the editorial team to make another series on the condition that it would be more 'child-friendly' (Janson 2014, p. 178). The directors consequently agreed to 'do something with animals' because it seemed suitable for children (De Geer 2013), and the next series, *Doktor Krall* (1974) consists of 27 short episodes about the everyday events of the veterinarian, his assistant Rolf and all the non-human animals that seek treatment. *Privatdetektiven Kant* (1983), finally, is a parodic detective story in 13 parts about a private investigator who shifts from investigating criminal cases to psychological cases.

### Key Theoretical Concepts

For the sake of clarity, the analysis is divided into *speciesist* and *anti-speciesist* traits of the series. Speciesism is the cultural belief that human and non-human animals (as well as various non-human animal species) have different values according to a hierarchical order that varies across cultures and contexts (cf. George & Schatz 2016, p. xv; Hübber 2017b, p. 147, DeMello 2021, p. 28). Speciesism, somewhat simplified, leads people not only to treat non-human animals worse, but also to treat non-human species differently; eating some but not others, and keeping some as pets but not others. The speciesist belief that humans are more valuable than other animal species is known as *human exceptionalism* (cf. Haraway 2008, p. 11; Kidd 2017, p. xix). Anti-speciesism, on the other hand, is used here as a concept to categorise tendencies in the examined series that in

various ways either indirectly contradict or directly challenge speciesist beliefs.

### ANALYSIS OF ANTI-SPECIESIST TRAITS

Since anti-speciesist traits dominate in the series here studied, these will be analysed first, under the subheadings 'The agency of human and non-human animals', 'Interspecies communication involving responsive listening' and 'Different forms of animal rights activism'.

#### The Agency of Human and Non-Human Animals

In the series, all non-human animals are portrayed as characters with some degree of agency, and they are also treated with great respect and strong empathy by the human protagonists. They thus differ from the majority of animal stories for children, where the non-human animal merely becomes a symbolic or concrete tool for humans either within or beyond the fiction. Agency is understood here to be a capacity for action that is interrelational and therefore flexible; that is, one that is generated in contact with something or someone else (cf. Burt 2002, p. 31; Haraway 2016, p. 103; Höing 2019, p. 67).

The extent to which non-human animals appear, the degree to which they contribute to the stories, and the nature of their agency however varies both between and within the series. In *Doktor Krall*, gerbils, rabbits, a horse, toads and a dog play important roles. The non-human animals and their recovery in the series act as a narrative hub around which the micro-narratives in the series revolve and develop in different directions. Interestingly, De Geer has testified that the individual non-human animals had a significant impact already in the screenwriting stage, as the filmmakers often found themselves having to shape the stories around their behaviour. A day of filming could start with the question 'What animals do we have today?', and then be followed by '... and what can we do with this?' (De Geer 2013). Thus, the non-human animals were transformed from child-friendly props into main characters with a strong influence on production.

In particular, the two gerbils, Hans and Greta, are central to the series and appear in many episodes; sometimes as protagonists, sometimes on the periphery. Their prominence is evident right from the short introduction to each episode, where we first see a framed portrait of the human protagonist Krall, followed by one of Hans and one of Greta. The gerbils move freely around the apartment and, in the terms of Haraway (2016, *passim*), are treated and behave as 'companion species'; friends and family members with a bond to humans that

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<sup>1</sup> Translations from Swedish are made by the author unless otherwise stated.

define them as much as humans are defined by the bond to them. Thus, Krall's and Rolf's identities are formed in their encounter with the gerbils – and vice versa – which means that two of Haraway's (2016, *passim*) main points are illustrated in the series: firstly, that the boundary between what is considered nature and culture in a Western tradition is dissolved into a confluence of *natureculture*, and secondly, that what or who counts as someone or something with agency is challenged.

The same happens in the other series. In *Tårtan*, the escaped monkey Saba becomes a natural friend and companion in the bakery, where the brothers not only allow her to take part in the day-to-day work, but also to design recipes and cakes. When she falls asleep on the baking table, they go out of their way not to disturb her, and when she expresses a desire to leave the bakery to move in with an old friend, they immediately respect her wishes.

In *Privatdetektiven Kant*, the young girl Vera develops a close friendship with two rats in the prison where she is locked up. This form of 'cross-species sociality' (Haraway 2016, p. 96) also transform the previously tough young girl into one who is kind-hearted and generous. The rats, for their part, learn to trust humans and clearly enjoy her company. The human and the non-human animals thus develop a sociality of communication and interdependence in which their respective agency is largely determined by the other, which is at the core of Haraway's key concept cross-species sociality.

### **Interspecies Communication Involving Responsive Listening**

The three series are also characterised by the respect and empathy with which the non-human animals are treated by humans. They are consistently portrayed as equal to humans, beings with 'intelligence and selfhood that deserves mutual respect and trust rather than domination' (Haraway 2008 cited in Kunz Lesuma 2017, p. 135). The humans both empathetically and politely ask about their needs and address them as different but equal species; as 'significant others' in Haraway's (2016, *passim*) words. The baking brothers, for example, go to great lengths to understand what Saba the monkey wants. The horse that visits the veterinary clinic in *Doktor Krall* is asked to 'please use the large animal entrance'. During the prison escape in *Privatdetektiven Kant*, the rats are invited to leave the cell first to keep them from getting lost or hurt.

The attitude towards the non-human animals in the series is thus permeated by an attitude that is one of Haraway's (2008, p. 27) key concepts – respect, or *respecere* – which is Latin for 'to see again'. According to Haraway, respect between animal species means looking closely, and as a human being trying to understand each individual and being ready to become anew in each encounter with a non-human animal. The humans in the television series studied here are largely engaged in what Haraway (2008, p. 27) calls 'greeting significant others', which is not about some kind of animal instinct or human superpower, but about a responsive 'tripping' to each

other. Of the human characters in the television series, it is Krall in particular who engages in a tripping with the non-human animals around him, clearly illustrated in the very first meeting with Hans, when Krall and Rolf want to learn the name of the gerbil. Rolf methodically reads out one name at a time in the almanac while Krall observes the gerbil. When Rolf reaches 'Hans', the gerbil reacts by moving its head and they realise that it is his name. Thus, the non-human animal is not given a name by the human; he already has one that the human figures out by interpreting the gerbil's (body) language. This signals that the two species are much more equal than in a traditional human-pet relationship, where the human owns the non-human animal. According to Fudge (2008, p. 15), it is precisely the human-assigned name that distinguishes pets from other non-human animals, and the fact that Hans himself communicates his name therefore underscores the notion that he is not a human-owned pet. The series also shows that Krall's sensitivity and respect for his non-human patients is his greatest strength as a practising veterinarian and scientist. He even trusts non-human animals more than humans, and after Rolf betrays Krall's trust, he states that 'from now on, I will only trust animals – never humans again!'. This is one of several examples from the series of how anthropocentric notions of human exceptionalism (cf. Haraway 2008, p. 11; Kidd 2017, p. xix) are challenged.

In the television series, different species of non-human animals are also portrayed as equal, which is far from self-evident in our culture, where speciesist notions perfunctorily divide non-human animals into categories such as food, pests, game, pets, companion animals, farm animals and wild animals (Cole & Stewart 2014, *passim*). In both philosophical literature and fiction, wild animals are often accorded higher value than domesticated ones (Haraway 2008, p. 29). In line with this, Jaques (2017, p. 110) shows that Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995–2000) to a certain extent depicts a hierarchy among non-human animals, where pets generally have a lower status than wild ones, and dogs in particular as associated with subservience.

In *Tårtan*, on the other hand, the pigeons and mice that live at the bakery are treated with almost the same care as the escaped monkey Saba. They are regarded as having a right to live there, and the brothers do not understand why the health inspector regards them as pests. In *Doktor Krall*, both wild and domesticated and large and small non-human animals come to the veterinary clinic for treatment, and toads with colds and dogs with allergies are treated with the same sensitive respect and care.

### **Different Forms of Animal Rights Activism**

Burt (2002, p. 85–163) shows how, throughout history, film and television have greatly increased public interest in animal rights issues. Moving images have a proven power to influence people, and documentary or fictional scenes of animals being killed, tortured, exploited or 'just' shown have led to many instances of animal welfare

advocacy by animal rights organisations such as the American Humane Association (AHA).

Alexandersson's and De Geer's children's programmes approach animal rights issues in many different, sometimes contradictory, ways. Among other things, they bluntly criticise the exploitation of non-human animals for food, entertainment and testing. The criticism is expressed verbally and often translated into action. In *Privatdetektiven Kant*, the abovementioned rats are saved from the 'great rat extermination' and kept hidden in Vera's bed. The rats are thus not seen as vermin, but as creatures with the same right to live as she and other animal species do, and this status becomes even more evident when the rats eventually become her natural companion species. Similarly – but less successfully – the brothers in *Tårtan* try to protect the pigeons and mice in the pantry from the health inspector's view of them as unsanitary nuisances. Better still is the rescue of Saba the monkey, who has escaped from a circus where she did not enjoy performing tricks and being paraded in front of people. The brothers keep her hidden at the bakery, where she is treated as their equal, and when two zookeepers pick her up and force her into an animal transport vehicle, she is freed by the brothers in dramatic fashion. The fact that she does not belong to any human being, and has the right to self-determination, is further emphasised when she moves out of the bakery to live with an old dear friend.

However, it is *Doktor Krall* that offers the most examples of animal rights activism: advocating a vegan diet, criticising the fur industry, questioning people's ownership of non-human animals, and rejecting the use of test animals in the pharmaceutical industry. When the veterinary assistant Rolf mixes honey in his tea, he is scolded by Krall, who sticks to a plant-based diet: 'Eat the bees' food? You should be ashamed!'. When a man visits the veterinary clinic with a dog on a leash and on top of that, dressed in a wolf coat, Krall is even more upset, both because the man is wearing animal skins and because he thinks he can own a living creature. 'You cannot own an animal!' exclaims Krall, freeing the dog both from the man and from the angora sweater it had been wearing and proved allergic to. The series also includes a scene that indirectly and humorously criticises the pharmaceutical industry's use of animals in the laboratory. When Krall has developed a new medicine for gerbils, he tests it on himself before giving it to Hans and Greta, 'so that nothing bad happens'.

Thus, according to the moral philosophy of animal rights represented by the series, humans have no right to put themselves above other animal species and exploit them for their own benefit, whether for entertainment, food, clothing or medical treatments. At the same time, however, there are other aspects of and around the series that send other, much more anthropocentric signals and which do not sit well with the animal rights activist elements.

## ANALYSIS OF SPECIESIST TRAITS

The depictions of non-human animals in these children's programmes are thus ambivalent, or contradictory, as evidenced by the speciesist traits in the series. These traits tend to overlap, but for the sake of clarity, they will be discussed under the subheadings 'Demeaning anthropomorphism and disnification', 'Non-human animals as spectacle' and 'Exploitation of non-human animal actors'.

### Demeaning Anthropomorphism and Disnification

In parallel with the sensitive and empathetic treatment of non-human animals by Krall, the baker brothers and Vera, the television series also contain elements that run counter to Haraway's (2008, p. 27) concept of 'greeting significant others'. For instance, there are several examples of anthropomorphism, that is, human behaviour and personality traits being projected onto non-human animals (cf. Cole & Stewart 2014, p. 91; Hockenhull 2016, p. 51; Berger 2017, p. 113; DeMello 2021, p. 12): Saba the monkey is interested in cake design, the gerbils Hans and Greta sleep in small beds in a doll's house and have a stove where they can roast nuts, and the toad with a cold is dried with a towel after his warm foot bath. Thus, non-human animals are often interpreted in terms of human references and are expected to behave, think and feel like humans. A further example, which is explicitly about interspecies communication and where Krall does not engage in responsive 'tripping' (Haraway 2008, p. 27) is when a rabbit diagnoses itself. During the examination, the rabbit gets hold of a paper bag and repeatedly bites it to make Krall understand that he is suffering from the mumps – termed 'påssjuka' in Swedish, which literally means 'bag-disease'. The non-human animal thus uses human language, as well as a clever physical representation of the term for its condition, to communicate with Krall.

The convention of humanising non-human animals in this way has long existed in cinema (DeMello 2021, p. 399). Hockenhull (2016, p. 51) argues that anthropomorphic depictions and interpretations demean the non-human animal, as its behaviour is then judged by a human standard that it can never live up to. In addition, anthropomorphising makes the natural behaviour of the non-human animal invisible, reducing our understanding of it and increasing our distance from it. Hockenhull (2016, p. 57) furthermore argues that anthropomorphising leads to human alienation from the non-human animal. According to this argument, viewers' empathy and respect for monkeys, gerbils, and rabbits would be hindered by the fact that they behave and communicate like humans in *Tårtan* and *Doktor Krall*.

Anthropomorphic depictions of non-human animals are also close to what Baker (2001, p. 175) terms 'disnification', which refers to our culture's widespread tendency to trivialise non-human animals and nature. This term should not be confused with Disneyfication, which refers to Disney's stated animation aesthetic of

simplifying and beautifying non-human animals – such as Bambi, which was designed based on people's perception of baby deer rather than the real thing (Höing & Husemann 2016, p. 102). Although both people and environments in Alexandersson's and De Geer's television aesthetics are rather messy, dirty and chaotic, the depiction of the non-human animals in particular has characteristics of disnification, since their heir natural behaviours are toned down, trivialised, and made fun of.

### Non-Human Animals as Spectacle

But the animals in the comics are not merely funny – they also evoke fascination and wonder, not least when they appear to communicate with humans, urinate in a carafe to facilitate the collection of urine samples, or lay nestled in doll house beds. The animals in the series thus have a definite air of *spectacle* – from the Latin 'spectere', meaning to exclaim 'wow' or 'ooh' at. In other words, they are objects for the human eye to look at and contemplate for pleasure (cf. Lebeau 2008, p. 7–10; Janson 2019, p. 39–42). In this way, they relate to the problematic human tradition of perceiving animals as fundamentally different, exotic creatures; a tendency that has been reinforced by zoological gardens, circuses, photography and cinema (Berger 2017, *passim*).

But the portrayal of non-human animals as spectacle is also linked to another tradition according to which the child is made into a kind of spectacle for the viewer when the action suddenly stops and the camera invites the viewer to revel in images of cute children (Janson 2019, p. 55). In Alexandersson and De Geer's series, there are many similar sequences that lack the narrative function of moving the story forward, and in which the non-human animals instead function as a kind of 'eye candy' for the audience. In *Doktor Krall* in particular, the action occasionally stops to show nice, cute, fascinating animals, as in a long close-up of a bunch of toads sitting in a row and singing a song, or an extended sequence in which Hans and Greta are scurrying around among cups, saucers and flowerpots on window sills, or a long shot of a large number of rabbits scampering seemingly aimlessly around the veterinary clinic.

There are thus interesting parallels between how children and non-human animals are portrayed by moving images such as film and television; similarities that link them together *not* because they naturally belong together in the way that has been claimed historically, but because they are both made objects of the human gaze. In this view, cute, funny children and non-human animals in films are a seemingly well-intentioned expression of a trivialised aesthetic in a culture steeped in disnification.

### Exploitation of Non-Human Animals as Actors

Hockenhull (2016) further explores the human fascination with looking at animals by closely analysing how the behaviour of non-human animals is portrayed in order to make the viewer read intentions that do not exist. In *War Horse* (2011), for example, a boy and a horse appear to be playing with each other, whereas in reality, the horse has learned to perform certain

movements in order to receive a reward from a trainer. There is no actual communication between the boy and the horse at all – they are not even in the same frame, except for a few moments in the film, and Hockenhull (2016, p. 51) argues that this kind of 'manipulation of bodily interaction', similarly to disnification, encourages anthropomorphic readings at the expense of the natural language of the non-human animal.

There are several examples of this kind of manipulation of non-human animal behaviour and intentions in the television series studied here. It can even be said to be one of the basic premises of *Doktor Krall*, since the creation process relied heavily on the characteristics and abilities of the actors, i.e. the non-human animals in front of the camera. These characteristics and abilities were then reinterpreted, or manipulated, to fit into an anthropocentric narrative framework. Here, a rabbit gnawing on a paper bag does not mean that it needs to grind its ever-growing teeth, but that it is trying to tell the veterinarian that it has the mumps. This can be seen as a harmless joke, but Hockenhull (2016, p. 56) argues that even when the animals are treated well during filming, the very act of exploiting unwitting non-human animals is immoral.

How the rabbits, rats, pigeons and other non-human animals in the series were treated during the filming processes is not the focus of this study, but it is nonetheless worth mentioning that De Geer has testified about the difficulties of directing the gerbils in *Doktor Krall*, clearly showing the 'manipulation of bodily interaction':

You had to hold the gerbils by the tail just outside the frame so they wouldn't run away. One scene was meant to show a gerbil waking up peacefully in the morning (...). In reality, the gerbil became so panicked that it arched upwards so much that it caused the whole bed to rise. (Nyqvist 1997, p. 37)

Furthermore, the fact that a television series that portrays the importance of empathy, respect and sensitivity towards non-human animals actually subjected the non-human animals to severe psychological stress during filming is paradoxical, to put it mildly. It is also reminiscent of the circumstances surrounding *The Hobbit*, which Schatz (2016, *passim*) describes as deeply problematic. While portraying relationships between human and non-human animals as equal, the film was actually shot under conditions that were far from ethical from an animal rights perspective and even led to the death of several animals (*ibid.*, p. 4).

More details on how Alexandersson and De Geer's series were filmed would be needed to give an accurate picture, but according to Schatz, animal acting is almost always associated with exploitation – even if the film's message is anti-speciesist.

## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that the studied television series exhibit ambivalent, sometimes paradoxical, depictions of relationships between human and non-human animals. Several of the non-human animals have strong agency. The humans are also respectful, humble and sensitive to monkeys, rabbits and toads, and treat them as equals. Moreover, a number of anthropocentric and speciesist phenomena in our culture are criticised, such as using animals as entertainment and test objects. At the same time, though, there are a number of traits of diminishing anthropomorphising and disnification in the way non-human animals are presented to the human gaze.

The ambivalence of the series can be said to be embodied in the figure of Krall, who, on the one hand, is humble and insightful and values non-human animals more highly than humans, and, on the other hand, is an obvious authority as a Western man and scientist to whom everyone – humans and non-human animals – turns for help.

The ambivalence is further emphasised by the fact that the series, just like *Tårtan* and *Privatdetektiven Kant*, consistently pokes fun at all forms of authority, whether they be veterinarians, psychoanalysts or health inspectors. The humorous depictions of Krall and his ilk are hence linked to the carnivalesque children's culture tradition in which the child audience is invited to laugh at power, and which has a detronising effect on the person we are laughing at (cf. Öhrn 2011, p. 23; Øksnes 2018, p. 134–136). Humour thus to some extent removes Krall from his exalted position of authority.

### Adults who are Connected to Nature

As noted, Alexandersson's and De Geer's television series differ from most children's stories in several respects, not least by refraining from depicting any human children, and the absence of fictional characters with children's bodies affects the notions of relationships between human and non-human animals in critical ways.

Firstly, this absence questions our culture's almost naturalised connection between children and animals; the idea that children and animals are close to nature through their primitiveness (Lassén-Seger 2008, p. 113; Berger 2017, p. 112; Flegel 2017, p. xv). Here, it is adults who form friendships with non-human animals and understand their needs, showing that they are not only close to nature, but a natural part of it. Children, adults and non-human animals alike are entangled in 'natureculture', to use Haraway's (2008, p. 62) famous term.

Secondly, the adult characters appear as role models who respect and act responsibly towards the non-human animals. Unlike in the stories analysed by Höing (2019), children and non-human animals do not have to join forces to fight a battle against the adult world, because here there are plenty of adults who take up the fight against authoritarianism and oppressive factions. In doing so, they use their agency – generated in relation to the agency of rats, rabbits and pigeons – to set an

example to the young audience, thereby doing their 'generational duty' (cf. Raundalen & Schultz 2007, *passim*). And when the adult characters in the programmes act as links between nature and culture, between the non-human and the human, the child character is simultaneously freed from the responsibility as a liminal, transcendent being that is so often casually imposed upon her/him.

### Children's Television's Potential to Bring about Change

In our society, both children and non-human animals are marginalised categories that are in one way or another dependent on adults (Feuerstein & Nolte-Odhiambo 2017b, p. 3). They are sometimes celebrated as interesting, delightful, funny, cute and valuable – but they are very rarely recognised as having real power. Much of children's culture reflects this reality by depicting children and non-human animals in simplistic, belittling and alienating ways – often through disnification. Other, rarer, expressions of children's culture present alternatives to reality by depicting how the world *could have been* if power relationships between children and adults, and between human and non-human animals, were different. Despite a certain degree of ambivalence, *Tårtan*, *Doktor Krall* and *Privatdetektiven Kant* are examples of such children's culture. The norm-breaking nature of these series also raises questions about the subversive power of the television as a medium, such as whether a fictional children's programme can bring about change in reality.

As technologies, film and television have an undeniable potential to change attitudes towards non-human animals (Burt 2002, p. 85–88, DeMello 2021, p. 403). George & Schatz (2016, p. xiv) note that visual media today mostly teaches speciesism and human exceptionalism but also argue that we can change the media industry by raising awareness, spreading knowledge and taking action against injustices. Their activist research aims not 'only' at studying society as it is, but also at imagining how it could be:

Rather than imagining exclusionary and violent futures, our investigation into the non/human aims to craft a competing vision of what our world could be when we leave categories of 'the human' and 'the animal' behind. (George & Schatz 2016, p. xxii)

In a similar manner, Cole & Stewart (2014, p. 6, *italics in original*) argue for the importance of considering the 'interlinked roles of *practices* and *representations*' in the socialisation process, stressing that children encounter 'dominant representations of other animals' through inter alia mass media, toys and games, but that these can be challenged. Moreover, Burt (2002, p. 85–164), as mentioned, has shown numerous examples of how audience reactions to everything from major Hollywood productions to nature documentaries and art films have

led to campaigns, legislative changes and the formation of organisations promoting better animal welfare.

Naturally, children's culture has an impact on its audience. In fact, many believe children are more impressionable than adults, and in particular moving images' suggestive power over young audiences has often been portrayed as something negative, even dangerous (Janson 2007, p. 27–32; Janson 2024b, p. 5). But for over 100 years, another, quite different discourse has also been heard in parallel with this media panic. As early as 1908, the pedagogue Gottfrid Björkman took his pupils to the cinemas in Stockholm, claiming that film contributed positively to children's knowledge and development (ibid., p. 5). From this pioneer we can draw a straight, if somewhat choppy, line to von Schantz' (2024) research, that explores pedagogical models for using film as a means to strengthen children's sense of participation in society, now and in the future. von Schantz builds the concept of 'civic imagination' (Jenkins et. al. 2020) to describe how the film medium can facilitate the spectator 'not only expressing one's point of view and understanding others but also imagining new (...) worlds', and by extension also 'imagining oneself as part of that change' (von Schantz 2024, p. 270).

A child's personal encounter with film can thus lead to political awakening. But this awakening must be met with respect and curiosity by the adult world so that the child's imagined new world, as well as the child's imagined role in the work of change, can live on and perhaps even become reality. Strongly inspired by the television series *Doktor Krall*, as a child I dreamed of becoming a veterinarian in order to help animals. Today, I think of film and television as a potential *natureculturetechnology*; a technology in which the relationships between human and non-human animals, between children and adults and between nature and culture, can be made flexible and equal. Where humans treat other species with respect rather than viewing them as spectacles – where *respecere* trumps *spectere*.

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