Modes of environmental imagination

The eco-movement and the representation of reality in Swedish children’s literature from 1968 to 1977

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Abstract
This article investigates how emerging environmental concerns became an important part in the history of Swedish children’s literature between 1968 and 1977. The politically and socially engaged children’s books published during this period are often considered to follow a strictly realistic norm. This article, however, highlights that the alleged realistic mode of representation is countered by a political writing that allows the supernormal and magical to permeate the plot. Following this, the books analysed here display a tension between different modes of non-realistic environmental writing and challenge the common view that political children’s books of the 1970s were limited to a realistic mode. The article concludes with a discussion of how imagination in environmental children’s literature can be interpreted as a political and emancipatory force, following the thinking of Herbert Marcuse, who was one of the chief philosophers for radicals around 1968.

Keywords:
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A new environmental discourse
Irrefutable evidence of rapid climate change has altered the way we perceive the relationship between humans and nature. The evidence now transcends social, economic and political spheres, highlighting a desperate need for robust visions of how best to tackle immanent and inescapable issues of acclimatisation and mitigation. In this context, the concept of the child has come to play a pivotal role, as children are seen both as inheritors of the past and as potentially offering hope for a sustainable future. Educating as well as learning from the child have also become two widespread but contradictory solutions when the environmental errors of adults are addressed. This article investigates how the child was not only the subject of emerging environmental concerns at the end of the 1960s, but also turned into an aesthetic focal point, revealing conflicting views on children and children’s literature. I will stress the importance of the years around 1968 in understanding these developments, this being a pivotal time for the transformation of the interrelated concepts of children, children’s literature, and environmentalism.
In the following, I will examine a range of politically and socially engaged environmental children’s books published in Sweden from 1968 to 1977. Many of the socially engaged books published during this period follow a strict realistic norm, but I will focus on the ones countering the realistic mode of representation by allowing the supernormal and magical to permeate the plot. In doing so, these books offer their readers critical or alternative visions of the environment and make the imagination a shaping force that energizes what Lawrence Buell terms different kinds of engagement with the world (Buell, 2001). This article thus seeks to contest the common view that the political children’s literature of the 1970s is to be understood only in relation to a realistic mode of writing. I will conclude the article with a discussion of how imagination in environmental children’s literature can be interpreted as a political and emancipatory force, following the thinking of Herbert Marcuse, who was one of the chief philosophers for radicals around 1968.

According to Herbert Marcuse, who had a strong influence on many of the young radicals of the New Left around ’68, it is through fantasy and imagination that we can envision a better world (Marcuse, 1964). The historical impact of Marcuse’s ideas of liberation through the work of imagination can be found in the ongoing debate about children’s literature in Sweden around 1970, and he is no doubt an important but seldom recognized inspiration for Swedish critics and scholars of the period (see for example Adolfsson, Eriksson & Holm, 1971). Imagination, according to Marcuse, is political, since it has the potential to liberate thinking and make alternative visions possible: «The simultaneously retrospective and expectant character of imagination is thus clearly stated: It looks not only back to an aboriginal golden past, but also forward to all still unrealized but realizable possibilities» (Marcuse, 1955, p. 301; cf. Marcuse, 1964, p. 253). Radical thinking and imagination can therefore be interpreted as standing apart because, rather than accepting the world as it is, they always keep in mind all the other ways the world could be (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2010).

Marcuse’s book One-Dimensional Man (1964) was published in Sweden in 1968 and attacked the capitalistic order and consumer society in ways that corresponded with the contemporary eco-movement, in which Marcuse also played a part during the 1970s. In light of this, it is important to notice that the eco-movement and the representation of reality in Swedish children’s literature between 1968 and 1976 not only deals with the release of toxic substances and the contamination of Swedish nature in a realistic, scientific and rational way. It also presents alternative and liberating visions via acts of environmental imagination that, at least according to Marcuse and the thinkers following his line of thought, have the potential to direct thought towards a potentially attainable future, that is, liberate the reader so they can imagine the situation from new angles and also take action.

Concern about the environment has, of course, been around for hundreds of years (Phillips, 2003). During the 1960s, however, attention was directed to the exploitation and pollution of natural resources, and a new way of speaking and writing about nature became crucial to establishing the environment as a category and making a new environmental discourse possible (Medina, 2013, p. 352). This can be seen in how children’s literature of the period expresses fears of a poisoned world and thus makes use of what has been called a toxic discourse, whose force derives partly from the apprehensions of an anxious industrializing culture, and partly from deeply rooted Western attitudes (Buell, 1995; 2001). Writers of children’s literature in Sweden responded almost instantaneously to contemporary political concerns, and many embraced a more
critical understanding of the relationships between society and nature.

During the period examined here, over 100 children’s books published in Sweden make use of a rhetoric that portrays pollution of the environment as an important theme and address the child reader with questions concerning the reassessment of existing dysfunctional ecological relationships (Johansson & Söderström, 1978). In this article, I will examine a handful of these books in order to display the tension between different modes of non-realistic political writing. Thus, the books analysed here have been selected because they demonstrate ways of engaging aesthetically in the environmental issues of the period, using contrasting or ambivalent modes of non-realistic environmental writing. Following the general typology of fantasy literature (Sullivan, 1996) these books can tentatively be said to use three different types of non-realism: 1) a heightened aesthetic mode of writing, accentuating imaginative forms and colours; 2) a low fantasy mode of writing, using imaginative elements such as trolls and invisible fairies in an otherwise realistic setting; and 3) a high fantasy mode of writing, confronting the reader with examples of possible futures or imaginative worlds that call for a change of readers’ attitudes and actions.

Representing reality: Modes and genres

Previous research on Swedish children’s literature and culture tends to describe the 1970s as a period that is radically different to the 1980s. The children’s literature of the 1970s is generally perceived as promoting a social realist norm that addresses children’s presumed need for information about the world around them, often pointing to the fact that the persisting social order is unjust (Jensen, 2017, p. 73, p. 123; Weinreich, 2015, p. 13; Kåreland, 2009, p. 63). The 1980s, on the other hand, is described as a period that embraces childhood fantasy and imagination, putting children's psychological needs and well-being to the fore. The contrast can also be described as the conflict between pedagogical convention on the one hand and aesthetic value on the other, which is present in the history of children’s literature at least since the age of romanticism (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2008). My examples in the following highlight that the environmental children’s literature of the 1970s was by no means limited to social realist modes of writing. Taken together, they prepare the way for change through the use of many different genres, media and modes, such as science fiction, fairy tale, allegory, fantasy, comic book, experimental picture-book, crime novel, idyll, adventure story, and so on. By using these different genres and modes of narrative imagination they offer critical or alternative visions of the world and enact the classic conflict between pedagogical convention and aesthetic value in a new way. They also offer to reformulate the relationships between humans and nature, as well as between adults and children, in a much more complex way than previously acknowledged in research.

The question of how children's literature depicts nature is decisive to any understanding of the use that authors make of the toxic discourse and, in particular, how they make this discourse relate to children and childhood (Goga, Guanio-Uluru, Hallås & Nyrnes, 2018; Kelen & Sundmark, 2013). According to Buell’s influential analysis of toxic environmental discourse, it asserts an interdependence between ecocentric and anthropocentric values. At the same time, it highlights how environmentalism must make concerns for human and social health more central and visible than has traditionally been the case, if it is to succeed or perhaps even survive. In children’s literature, this mission to effect change is often connected to the pursuit of a more contemporary and realistic representation of reality, thus altering the
boundaries of nature writing and environmental rhetoric in general. In the history of children's literature, realism (in the sense of verisimilitude, or a faithful, descriptive mirroring of an actual, shared experience) is in many ways linked to a dismissal of fantasy as frivolous and immoral by educators of all persuasions (Segel, 1980).

With a realistic and metonymic mode of writing, and by taking the theme or plot from events in actually existing settings, the author can address a situation that is familiar to the child and by extension – through the use of a toxic environmental discourse, for example – potentially prompt a profound change in readers' attitudes and actions. With an imaginative, metaphorical or allegorical mode of writing, however, using fantastic genres such as science fiction or fairy tale, the author can address the contemporary situation from a different angle, inviting the reader to entertain another kind of understanding (Lodge, 1977; Stephens, 1992; Carroll, 2011). Accordingly, imagination is usually conceived of as a mental space where we interpret and reflect on the world in new ways. The environmental imagination in children's literature can thus be fantastic, aesthetically radical, and political all at the same time. It can offer alternative visions of the world and be designed to provoke the fundamental questions that can in turn prompt change: «Why are things as they are?» And: «Why can't they be different?» (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2010; Reynolds, 2007). The 1970s is a particularly interesting period in this respect, as the long-running conflict between realism and fantastic imagination, between pedagogic instruction and aesthetic value, intensified and was transformed (Widhe, 2018; Källström, 2018). Mapping these conflicting attitudes is especially relevant to environmental nature writing for children, as this kind of writing provides a cultural space to which questions concerning the representation of reality are integral.

Radical imagination around 1968

Sophie Heywood (2018) has underlined the importance of 1968 in the field of children's book design and illustration in many western European countries, such as France, Italy and Germany. The earlier conventions in children's book illustrations, trapped in what was deemed to be an idealised realism, were in many ways overturned at the end of the 1960s. The counterculture of '68 can thus be characterised by an explosive creativity and the desire to reject the accepted conventions of what children's books should look like: «There was a new emphasis on artistic freedom and this experimentation brought with it an explosion of vivid and unusual colour palettes, outlandish shapes, distortions of perspective and dimensions, and outright abstraction» (Heywood, 2018, p. 12). In Sweden, however, the children's literature of the period is often described as hostile towards non-realistic representation. According to this narrative, Swedish children's literature around 1968 attacked the idealised realism and the exoticism of the 1950s and replaced it with a socio-realistic depiction of the child's reality in modern society (Furuland & Ørvig, 1990, p. 282).

The view that Swedish children's literature from the 1970s had condemned the fairy tale and the fantastical imagination as apolitical escapism was already established by the end of that decade. In 1977 the influential children's book writer and critic Gunila Ambjörnsson set out to challenge what she believed to be the dominant trend in children's literature at the time. In a spirited defence of childhood fantasy, she alluded ironically to German author Melchior Schedler's Schlachtet die blauen Elefanten! Bemerkungen über das Kinderstück (1973), in calling for the «Blue elephants» to re-enter children's literature.

Misunderstandings were legion in all areas. Many still understand social consciousness to
be the same as rigid, descriptive realism. Fantasy has been notable for its absence for too long – and there were actually people who opposed it to political awareness and regarded it as bourgeois escapism. (Ambjörnsson, 1977, p. 4 my translation)

Even if Ambjörnsson herself does not endorse the polarization between descriptive realism and political children’s literature on the one hand, and fantasy and bourgeois escapism on the other, she attributes it to the literature of the period. In a similar way, a few years later, the academic Ronny Ambjörnsson tries to summarize the harsh attitude towards fantasy and fairy tales of the preceding decade and declares that

Dragons and trolls had to leave while heroes of the class struggle and people from the suburbs marched in. Around 1970, realism was high fashion in children’s literature. During the ‘70s I read books for my children about how Elsa vacuums her house. There is, I dare say, not one part of the vacuum cleaner that my children do not understand. (Ambjörnsson, 1981, p. 4, my translation)

Following on from this, the existing narrative surrounding political children’s literature in the 1970s has mainly focused on the impact of the New Left and the call for socially engaged realism. This narrative has some merit to it since a realistic mode of writing that addressed contemporary political challenges, such as environmental pollution or the child’s situation in modern high-rise suburbs, was prominent during this period. At the same time, however, this understanding of the 1970s renders important aspects of the rising eco-movement through the representation of contemporary settings and realistic portrayals of the child’s everyday life. This is evident also in picture-books like Nu blommar det i Blomlunda (Now Flowercity is blooming, 1970), by Bobby Andström and Ingvar Björk, and Den gamla bilen (The old car, 1973), by Hans Peterson, and Monica and Göran Schultz. In accordance with the typology suggested above, however, these books are written in a more heightened aesthetical mode. Both books meet the demand for realistic stories set in a modern landscape, given that high-rise buildings were so prominent in the Swedish debate about children’s literature at the time. Closer examination nonetheless reveals an arrangement of colour and form that mediates a more aesthetically pronounced concern for what David Abram (1996) famously calls the more-than-human world.

Realistic and non-realistic representations
A Swedish children’s book from the early 1970s that meets the emphatic demand for descriptive realism and social analysis among critics is Dahlbergs demonstrerar (The Dahlbergs demonstrate, 1969) by Rolf Knutsson and Maud Reuterswärd. If one wants to point to the use of a rigid, descriptive realism that also implicitly dismisses fantasy as frivolous, this is a good example. There are no fantastic elements whatsoever in this book; instead, the Dahlberg family’s political protest is depicted in realistic everyday settings at home and at school. The story begins with the family in front of the TV set, watching a news report about the pollution of the environment. The book’s pedagogic mode largely overshadows its aesthetics as the reader systematically learns about different troubling aspects of contemporary environmental pollution, such as why ships illegally dump oil in the sea and the impact of this on wildlife and the natural world.

Following this, it is safe to say that the children’s literature of the period engaged explicitly with the rising eco-movement through the representation of contemporary settings and realistic portrayals of the child’s everyday life. This is evident also in picture-books like Nu blommar det i Blomlunda (Now Flowercity is blooming, 1970), by Bobby Andström and Ingvar Björk, and Den gamla bilen (The old car, 1973), by Hans Peterson, and Monica and Göran Schultz. In accordance with the typology suggested above, however, these books are written in a more heightened aesthetical mode. Both books meet the demand for realistic stories set in a modern landscape, given that high-rise buildings were so prominent in the Swedish debate about children’s literature at the time. Closer examination nonetheless reveals an arrangement of colour and form that mediates a more aesthetically pronounced concern for what David Abram (1996) famously calls the more-than-human world.
Figure 1.  
Artwork by Ingvar Björk in Bobby Andström’s *Nu Blommar det i Blomlunda*  
(Now Flowercity is blooming, 1970). Rendered with permission.

Figure 2.  
Artwork by Monica and Göran Schultz in Hans Peterson’s *Den gamla bilen*  
(The old car, 1973). Rendered with permission.
Both picturebooks contrast the modern suburb with an excess of colourful flowers and meadow in purple, green, orange and pink, and in this way they smoothly depart from a strict realistic mode of representation (Figures 1 and 2). As indicated already by the title, *Nu blommar det i Blomlunda* is best described as portraying modernity’s enclosure of nature, as the public housing programme implemented by the Swedish welfare state between 1965 and 1974 is rolled out and refined. The illustrator uses vivid colours to portray how the children grow flowers around the grey and monotonous high-rising buildings, together with the adults. This can be seen as a transformation of the urban-rural distinction that turns the deprived suburb into a pleasant and functional communal space with beautiful parks, green lawns, flowers and trees. *Den gamla bilen* uses an even more elaborated palette of colours, but instead of affirming the modern project and harmonizing the nature-civilization dichotomy, the book contrasts the polluted and toxic city with grand images of the beautiful Swedish countryside. At the end of the story, modern life, the modern city and the modern car turn out to be a threat to the healthy pastoral relationship between human and nature.

In the children’s books mentioned thus far, fantastical elements or bold experiments with form are not at all central to the imaginings of the urban landscapes and their hinterlands. In the following, however, I will examine a range of politically and socially engaged children’s books that more strongly counters the realistic mode of representation. These books use a realistic discourse fused with fictional imaginings to generate both positive visions and negative examples in order to recuperate the environment. In short, following the tradition from Marcuse, they can be said to use an aesthetics of emancipatory imagination to formulate ideas with the potential to influence cultural, economic and political practices (Bradford, Mallan, Stephens & McCallum, 2008). As mentioned previously, this mode of environmental imagination can be interpreted as metaphorical or allegorical rather than strictly metonymical and realistic in any positivistic sense. Two examples of such allegorical acts of environmental imagination are *Gröna rummet* (The green room, 1974), by Anna-Lena Wästberg and Fibben Hald, and *Plupp kommer till stan* (Plupp comes to town, 1977), by Inga Borg (Figures 3 and 4). In both books supernatral and mythical creatures reminiscent of trolls and invisible fairies in Nordic folklore and Sami myth play an important part in the otherwise mainly realistic narrative. In accordance with the typology suggested above, these books are written in a low fantasy mode of writing, using imaginative elements in an otherwise realistic setting. The function of these magical elements is clearly to entertain the young child with a stimulating or thrilling story, but also to present the nonhuman environment as something more than merely a framing device. The mythical creatures call for a change of attitude and invite the reader to adopt a different relationship to nature as they instil subjectivity into the more-than-human world.

The use of a low fantasy mode of environmental imagination in these two books requests the reader to consider the fact that human interest is not the only legitimate interest. As a consequence, these books set out to transform the way readers care for the physical world, which is tangibly depicted as something both enigmatic and durable. In accordance with the Nature and Culture Matrix developed by the NaChiLitCul group, the mode of representation thus moves from an anthropocentric horizon towards an eco-centric horizon that celebrates nature (Goga et al., 2018, p. 12). In *Gröna rummet* a girl meets the strange Mr Allander, who lives in a glade in an endangered forest near her house. Soon it becomes evident that Mr Allander is not an ordinary human, but rather a fairylike creature with extraordinary pow-
Figure 3.
Artwork by Fibben Hald in Anna-Lena Wästberg’s Gröna rummet (The green room, 1974). Rendered with permission.

Figure 4.
Artwork by Inga Borg in Inga Borg’s Plupp kommer till stan, (Plupp comes to town, 1977). Rendered with permission.
ers who has lived in the forest for all eternity and who eventually also helps the girl to save it. During the course of the story, Mr Allander merges with the forest around him and it is obvious, both in the narrative as well as in Fibben Hald’s sympathetic illustrations, that he distorts the distinction between nature and humans by being both at the same time. Thus, the narrative tries to prompt the child reader to think again and ask important questions about the world, at the same time as making human responsibility towards the environment a firm part of its ethical orientation. In this particular case, the forest where Allander lives is endangered because a new highway is under construction. The narrative draws upon an environmental rhetoric of pastoral eradication, also reminiscent in Plupp, that can be interpreted in the light of the actual expansion of the road network and the growing number of cars in Sweden during the 1960s. It was during these years that cars started to be considered a problem in terms of the personal safety and environmental issues they raised, making way for a pastoral aesthetics that is not escapist, but attuned to ecologically minded anxieties (James & Tew, 2009).

Planetary perspectives as semi exemplum

Finally, I want to discuss what I tentatively termed a high fantasy mode of environmental writing, confronting the reader with possible futures or imaginative worlds that call for a change of attitudes and actions. The picturebook Sagan om Lotta från Dösjöbro (The fairy tale of Lotta from Dösjöbro, 1969) by Max Lundgren and Fibben Hald is especially interesting in this context (Figure 5). In short, it tells the story of Lotta, the little girl who travels to God in order to save the planet. This is because God is about to re-
move the sun and give it to another planet, as the humans, according to God, don’t take care of Earth as they should and therefore do not deserve it at all. Lotta finally persuades God to continue to let the sun shine over the Earth, provided that Lotta herself does not turn into an adult, hence sanctifying the child as the Earth’s saviour.

The fairy tale about Lotta derives its imagery from a planetary experience of that more-than-human environment surrounding her and her planet. But this is done through the mode of an environmental imagination that excels in creating strange and bizarre images. The genre categorization fairy tale already signals that this story is, of course, not bound to a strictly realistic representation of reality. Instead the book uses a combination of fantastical elements and the depiction of a child’s everyday life to empower the target reader to engage with contemporary political issues. In the following, I will try to demonstrate how this fairy tale develops the metaphorical mode of environmental imagination in more depth, calling for a social and aesthetic transformation of the modern relationship between culture and nature, between humanity and Planet Earth, between adults and children. Kimberly Reynolds points to the fact that many children’s books can express meanings and concepts that reside at the edges of language by simultaneously operating across both visual and textual semiotic systems (Reynolds, 2007, p. 17). Similarly, Lundgren and Hald’s picturebook collaboration seems to push the metaphorical or fantastic representation of reality to a higher order, using different artistic techniques, such as collage and juxtaposition, to provide the target reader with a different approach to nature, presenting a new aesthetic vision that is designed to prepare the way for change.

Figure 6.
Artwork by Fibben Hald in Max Lundgren’s *Sagan om Lotta från Dösjöbro* (The fairy tale of Lotta from Dösjöbro, 1969). Rendered with permission.
The picturebook about Lotta depicts adults destroying the Earth and exposing innocent people, including children, to great suffering. The narrative incorporates a sequence of conflicting motifs. The local is contrasted with the global; the pre-modern pastoral landscape with the decay of modern society; the brave and innocent child with the spineless and depraved adult; the fantasy of fairy tales with harsh realism, and so on. When promoted by the publishing house in a Christmas advertising campaign in 1969, it was said to be a story about «what children can do to save the world» (Bonniers, 1969). In light of this, the book clearly coincided with contemporary perceptions of the child as having rights to political agency and voice.

Hald’s artwork, however, is everything but realistic and, as already mentioned, he uses a wide range of techniques, such as collage, ink drawings and watercolour, to depict both strange non-human creatures as well as pastoral idylls from the south of Sweden (Figure 6). This celebration of fantasy is also mirrored in the narration of the journey to God and in details that make fantasy and nonsense a vital part of the story, developing a credo that states the case for fantasy and radical imagination, as well as for the more-than-human:

There were creatures walking by, looking like little signs, you could carve them on a small coin. Over there were some moving twenty inches above the ground, as one big lump. There was a strange thing with its heart in front of me in a wheelbarrow. Here something looking like a horse trotted by, with its tail growing out of its ear and the hooves growing out of the forehead. (Lundgren & Hald, 1969, spread 4, my translation).

Figure 7.
Artwork by Fibben Hald in Max Lundgren’s Sagan om Lotta från Dösjöbro (The fairy tale of Lotta from Dösjöbro, 1969). Rendered with permission.
There is, of course, a striking consonance between this celebration of fantasy on the one hand, and the celebration of the child Lotta as Earth’s saviour on the other. But it is important to note that the use of fantastic and fairy-tale-like elements in *Sagan om Lotta från Dösjöbro* also has a political meaning. The specific mode of environmental imagination provides the reader with a liberating fantasy about Planet Earth that is both visual and textual, one that invites the reader to engage differently with the world (Figure 7). This engagement is further emphasized at the very end of the book: The back cover displays a letter to the UN suggesting that children both can and should engage in political issues, and make their voices heard.

From a narratological point of view it is instructive to view the non-realistic story elements in this kind of children’s literature within a narrative frame that establishes the story as a kind of *semi exemplum*. My use of the term semi exemplum does not designate a story developed in the manner of a classic exemplum, but rather a story using implicit or explicit exemplary gestures. Thus, through the fantastic mode of environmental imagination, the narrative can confront the reader with examples of possible futures or alternative worlds that demand a decision or call for a profound change of readers’ attitudes and actions. As Karl Heinz Stierle famously argued in one of his influential essays on exemplary narratives, the exemplum story, in accordance with its rhetorical aim, «is set in a pragmatic situation that is inconclusive and demands a decision» (Stierle, 1979, p. 398). Insofar as the given situation of the reader and the exemplum story are comparable, the exemplum can be interpreted as an anticipation of one’s own situation.

The semi exemplum structure can be detected as a framing device in much of the children’s literature during the period. Thanks to the fantastic mode of environmental imagination, this framing indicates that the world situation could be otherwise when it comes to pollution, misery and injustice. In other words, it provides the reader with an alternative vision, whether idyllic or disturbing, and at the same time inquires as to whether the situation is the same in the reader’s world. Hence, it also probes what the reader might be able to do about it. A helpful illustration of this technique is found in *Filurstjärnan* (*Dodger star*, 1969), by Inger Sandberg and Lasse Sandberg. This picturebook, designed as a comic magazine, tells the story of Barbro, a little girl who meets a little dodger from another far away planet. Barbro gets to observe through her kaleidoscope how the dodger and his fellow citizens have soiled and polluted their own planet (Figure 8). The book ends with a huge question mark and a question to the reader: Do we humans take better care of our planet than the dodgers seem to do? This explicit moral and political question requests the reader to interpret the story about the imaginary planet as an example or a cautionary tale inviting the reader to rethink his or her own situation.

**Concluding remarks**

As the fantastic elements in children’s literature are not confined to the boundaries of the real world, they are generally said to open up possibilities. Works of fantasy, it is often claimed, can provide a fresh perspective on the real world which involves a different way of apprehending existence that is no less true than realism (Le Guin, 1975; Adams, 2000; Gates, 2003). It is therefore important to emphasise that writing in a non-realistic genre automatically implies neither a more complex and demanding way of addressing the child reader, nor a more simplified or escapist one. Rather, the opposite can be true too: The fantastic provides an effective literary form that can convey complex ideas on a symbolic or metaphorical level that would otherwise be difficult to convey to young and inexperienced readers. As this article has ar-
Figure 8.
Artwork by Inger Sandberg and Lasse Sandberg in *Filurstjärnan* (Dodger star, 1969). Rendered with permission.
The three types of non-realism analysed in this article invite the reader to engage in different ways with the more-than-human world. To summarize: The heightened aesthetical mode of writing accentuates imaginative forms and colours and mediates a more aesthetically pronounced perception of nature, thus highlighting the value and importance of nature to humans. The low fantasy mode of writing uses imaginative elements such as trolls and invisible fairies in an otherwise realistic setting to instil subjectivity into the more-than-human world. The high fantasy mode of writing, finally, confronts the reader with semi examples of possible futures or imaginative worlds, requesting the reader to interpret the story as a cautionary tale and, in light of this, rethink his or her own situation and actions. On different levels these books clearly connect with the contemporary environmental discourse and call for a liberation of and change in readers’ attitudes and actions. Books such as Den gamla bilen, Plupp kommer till stan, Lotta from Dösjöbro and Filurstjärnan can thus be said to enact the classic conflict between pedagogical convention and imaginative aesthetics in a transformative and political way.

For Marcuse, revolutionary change in society must include a radical transformation of our relationship to nature, and this makes him stimulating for anyone who wants to think about and act upon the irrefutable evidence of rapid climate change. But as Tim Luke has pointed out, this by no means implies that everything in the approach to ecology taken by the theorist of counterrevolution and revolt has the same importance today as it did for many revolutionaries of the New Left around 1968 (Luke, 2004, p. 237). Nevertheless, continuing Marcuse’s line of thought in relation to the topic discussed here, it is important to acknowledge that the reading of children’s literature can still help us to reconfigure and emancipate our understanding of the more-than-human. In this sense, reading fictional texts can foster an aesthetic sensibility that results from the different modes of environmental imagination these texts employ. This can hopefully free us from conventional thinking and help us respond to the urgent need for a more sustainable relationship between humans and nature.

**Literature**


