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The Right Kind of Curiosity

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Abstract: In this reflection, the author examines Tenfjord and Oxaal's popular Norwegian children's novel *Jens krysser himmelrommet* (*Jens Crosses Space*), published in 1954, as an exceptional case among typical juvenile novels of the time, in that it portrayed in moral terms both the practice of science and the attitudes and attributes of scientists. He argues that in the early (and politically charged) days of the space race, this novel was unusual in offering young readers moral and intellectual models that aimed to encourage them to move beyond a simplistic enjoyment of science fiction for children to the rigors of mature scientific exploration.

Introduction

In the middle of the 1950s, humanity was knocking on the door to the heavens. During the preparation for the International Geophysical Year 1957–1958, both the US and the Soviet Union announced that they had the intention of launching artificial satellites (Smith 120). Although military implications were discussed, the conquest of space was filled with utopian and cosmopolitan visions. The crossing of space, as Arthur C. Clarke wrote in 1951, may "do much to turn men's minds outwards and away from their present tribal squabbles. In this sense the rocket, far from being one of the destroyers of civilization, may provide the safety-valve that is needed to preserve it" (194).

There were also scientists who believed that the science-fiction genre could promote interest in space exploration, while others were more skeptical. In Scandinavia, science-fiction literature from the US as well as comics like Buck Rodgers and Flash Gordon were translated into the Nordic languages. In the 1940s and 1950s, the pedagogic debate on children's books was comparatively quiet, with the exception of the year 1954, when comics were fiercely debated (Mählqvist 12–13). One of the interventions in this debate was made by the Norwegian writers Jo Tenfjord and Gunnar Oxaal, who in 1954 published the novel *Jens krysser himmelrommet* (*Jens Crosses Space*); the novel was translated into Swedish in 1955. Tenfjord was one of the

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most acclaimed authors of children's books in Norway, and Oxaal was one of the founding fathers of *The Norwegian Interplanetary Society* (*Norsk Interplanetarisk Selskap*), later renamed *The Norwegian Astronautic Association* (*Norsk Astronautisk Forening*). Oxaal had also co-written *Reisen til månen blir alvor* (*The Journey to Moon Becomes Reality*, 1952) with Erik Bergaust (Bergaust 6).

In the novel *Jens Crosses Space*, a science-fictional narrative is used for contesting and debating science-fiction imaginations, especially in comics. In this article, I analyse the novel; however, I go beyond situating it in the pedagogic debate in Scandinavia in 1954.[1] There was much more at stake. As a culture historian I read the ideas in the novel as proposed answers and solutions to contemporary questions. As Alan Megill puts it, "The history of ideas attempts to situate ideas into one or another historical context and to interpret those ideas in the light of that contextualization, without reducing the ideas in question to mere epiphenomena of something more fundamental" (184). The novel is therefore more than just part of the historical context: it constitutes it (cf. Ekström 263–64).

In *Jens Crosses Space*, Tenfjord and Oxaal are debating and contesting notions of space travel expressed in science-fiction comic books; at the same time the novel is also connected to traditional ideas of the frontier and the idea of progress (cf. McCurdy). They use the classic generic form of edification novels, extrapolated to a future of space travelling, to make statements about society, culture, technology, and science. But the narrative is not simply a tale of a young boy's *rite de passage* to manhood: it also co-produces notions, imaginaries, and visions of society, culture, technology, and science, and of the expectations of youth living in the 1950s (cf. Jasanoff). The edification novel (Bildungsroman) is concerned with the main protagonist and his (it is most often a he) intellectual and spiritual development toward insight, control, and maturity (Hallberg 27). In science-fiction narratives it is not unusual that writers use the patterns from edification novels to portray a young boy's progress to adulthood through different difficulties and challenges that must be overcome; examples include Robert Heinlein's juveniles written in the 1940s and 1950s (Mulcahy 33–34).

The right kind of curiosity

In the novel *Jens Crosses Space*, the 12-year-old boy Jens is taken on a journey into space. Jens's father is captain on the ship *M/S Lyckoland* and the boy is used to a life at sea. In the beginning of the novel they are travelling to Mombasa in Kenya as the first stop on a long journey. In Mombasa, Erik Gårder, a friend of Jens's father, arrives and picks up a mysterious box from the ship's cargo. Gårder is a famous scientist with a chair in aviation technology. For Jens this is exciting: "He collected comic books with air battles and Martians. Now, talk about exciting things!" (8).[2]

In Mombasa Gårder invites Jens, his father, and the ship's first navigation officer Storstrand on a journey to Lake Victoria, where the professor is preparing secret experiments funded by several rich research foundations. Already in the beginning of the novel, Jens's boyish impatience and childish fantasies are

[1] Parts of this article, but with a slightly different angle, have been published in each of the three Godhe entries listed in the works cited.

[2] Original quote: "Han samlet på tegneseriehefter med luftkamper og marsboere. Snakk om spennende saker!"

emphasised. When Gårder asks the boy if he is interested in the moon, Jens answers that he has "a very nice comic book here about a war on the moon between humans and Martians". The professor, smiling at Jens, asks him how the humans could travel to the moon. Jens answers that they use spacecrafts and "they are battling in the desert" (19).[3]

Gårder tells them that he has built an experimental laboratory southwest of one of the waterfalls at the outlet of Lake Victoria: "The technology penetrates right into the heart of Africa, barely one hundred years after the regions were explored by people from the homeland of technological culture, Europe" (20).[4] In the novel, technology, culture, and nature are consolidated (cf. Marx). But it is understood that nature submits to culture, that is, technological development. Thus, the spacecraft in the story becomes a symbol for progress.

The take-off to the moon is moved up, since the secret project has been exposed by mass media. Jens and his dog, in exploring the ship through a door inadvertently left open, are trapped on board and take off with the expedition.

After discussing the matter with Jens's father, Gårder decides to continue the journey. Jens's education starts, and his childish fantasies that have been nourished by comic books are met with scientific arguments. One example is how Jens learns about meteors: "In one of his comic books there were some cruel Martians who disappeared in heavy flames from such a disaster". Gårder tells him that meteors for most part are not spectacular, and that many of them "are just like small grains of sand" (57).[5]

The journey to the moon and the expedition to its surface contain several didactic episodes. The text contains a number of apologias for scientific endeavor and the narrative becomes more or less an illustration of how far astronautics and rocket science have developed in these times (cf. Godhe, *Morgondagens*). The heroes in the novel are the silent and humble scientists expanding the frontiers of human knowledge: "Every man [on board] was prepared to sacrifice their own life in case they had to, and they were willing to do so because they thought the sacrifice was worth it, for providing humanity with more experiences" (58).[6]

The Swedish geologist Pettersson teaches Jens the importance of curiosity for scientific progress. If no-one had been curious, humanity would still be living in tents, making fire with sticks. "And the adults are also curious," Jens tells his dog, "but they think twice. It was completely wrong with that door here on board. Tom, shall we try to be curious in a more – adult way?" (65)[7] This is a matter of disciplining oneself to refrain from childish or infantile curiosity.

And Jens is successful in disciplining himself. When he looks at Earth from the rocket he understands "how small a human is" in a cosmological perspective. After resisting the temptation of walking on the moon shortly after the landing, he is rewarded for being patient: he is allowed to take a walk on the moon. "He was not just

[3] Original quotes: "har en veldig fin tegneserie her om krig på månen mellom mennesker og marsboere"; "kjemper de ørkenslag".
[4] Original quote: "Teknikken trenger like inn til hjertet av i Afrika, bare snaue hundre år etter at disse traktene første gang ble utforsket av mennesker fra den tekniske kulturens hjemland, Europa".
[5] Original quotes: "I et tegneseriehefte han hadde var det noen grusomme marsboere som forsvant i veldige flammer fra sånne katastrofer"; "er bare som små sandkorn".
[6] Original quote: "Hver enkelt av mennene var forberedt på å måtte ofre livet, og de var villig til det, fordi de syntes forsøket på å skafe menneskeheten utvidete erfaringer var et slikt offer verd".
[7] Original quotes: "Og de voksne er også nysgjerrige"; "de tenker seg visst mer om. Det var galt det med den døra her ombord. Tom, skal vi försøke å bli nysgjerrig på en mer – voksen måte?"

an annoying Peter-Curious anymore; he had behaved in a way that didn't disturb the expedition!" (72, 90–91).[8]

After a lecture on asteroid pieces, Jens decides to be a scientist and "penetrate reality's enormous adventure!" He wants to know about the cause of every phenomenon, and to feel the joy of being an explorer. This little piece of an asteroid is even more thrilling than the Martians he had hoped to meet on the moon. The stone is now in "the hands of a scientist, who gladly had risked his life to get it.... But the scientist must not work for his own recognition, the research in itself must be his pleasure" (88–89).[9]

While Jens is walking on the moon, he is seized by the remnants of the childish boy within him. Turning towards the space rocket, he picks up a big stone and throws it away, eager to show Gårder and Pettersson how far he can throw it. Too late he discovers that the stone will hit the rocket. A firm and stern Gårder tells Jens not to do that it again. The boy is so disappointed with himself, despite the professor's appeal to let it go, that he sees his dreams of becoming a scientist dissolve.

The scientific journey to the moon is depicted with almost no drama. But this is also part of the story's didactic structure. As Gårder says to first navigator Storstrand: "Science and technology progress slowly"; in the same way, the novel's narrative progresses slowly, and the real drama of science takes place in quiet laboratories, "in libraries and workplaces". At the same time, Gårder emphasises the tragic nature of science, since "the result of the hard work is often: nothing new" (97–98).[10] However, one adventurous episode remains: a didactic episode that lets Jens regain his self-respect.

On the journey home Jens is sad and tries to distract himself with comic books, but he realises that science-fiction comics have little to do with reality. Pirates in space and Martians "were nothing for a real moon traveler!" Jens tears apart his comic books and he notices that the pieces are moving upwards in a spiral toward the wall. After a while he goes to bed but "something in the back of his mind was struggling to get its way out of the darkness, into the light, forward, away from something dangerous" (100–01).[11] Jens pushes the alarm button. The spacecraft is leaking, and after a dramatic episode they manage to find the leak, after Jens has shown them the spot on the wall to which the pieces from his comic books have been drawn.

Gårder now praises the boy for rescuing the whole expedition. And at the same time Jens gets his last lecture on what it means to be a scientist. It is not enough to be curious. It must be "the right kind of curiosity", the capability of being amazed. Gårder says, "If you hadn't continued to tear paper pieces to see if they were drawn to the same place, we would not have found the hole" (104–05).[12] Jens regains his confidence, and once again he decides to be a scientist. This is a key scenario in the novel: when Jens

[8] Original quotes: "hvor lite et menneske var"; "Han var ikke bare en brysom nysgjerrig-Per lenger, han hadde da oppført seg slik at han ikke ble till bry for ekspedisjonen!"
[9] Original quotes: "trenge inn i virkelighetens veldige eventyr!"; "i neven på en vitenskapsmann som gladelig hadde vågd livet for å få tak.... Men vitenskapsmannen må ikke arbeide for ytre anerkjennelse, hans glede må ligge i forskningen selv".
[10] Original quotes: "Vitenskap og teknikk går langsomt fram"; "på bibliotek og arbeidsplasser"; "ofte blir resultatet av de tunge strabaser: intet nytt".
[11] Original quotes: "var ikke noe for en virkelig månefarer!"; "noe bak i bevisstheten hans kjempet for å komme ut av mørket, opp i lyset, fram, vekk fra noe farlig".
[12] Original quotes: "den rette sorten nysgjerrighet"; "Hade du ikke fortsatt med å rive opp papirbiter for å se om alle drev samma steds hen, hadde vi neppe funnet hullet".

is tearing apart the link to his youth – the comic books – he is also establishing a link to the adult life and to science – to reality's enormous adventure.

The Ethos of Science

The detonation of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 raised the question of the scientist's responsibility (see Rip and Boeker), and some scientists feared that research would be restricted (Godhe, *Morgondagens* 55–56). It is within this context that Gårder gives a speech when the expedition is back on earth again. The speech, directed to other scientists, to journalists, and to the kin of the crewmen on the rocket, manifests the ethos of science. The professor pays tribute to those scientists whose achievements preceded the moon expedition, and to the anonymous scientists working silently in their laboratories.

Gårder says that scientists must resist prestige, hubris, and profit that may divert them from the path to knowledge. Science has too often been used as a scapegoat, but with increased knowledge there are more opportunities for humankind, which can be used for both good and evil. But there are also many who want to go back to the past: "They also forget the terrible circumstances people were living in, while science yet had not succeeded in fighting plagues and hunger. The knowledge of our times provides us with tremendous possibilities, but with them comes responsibility. The knowledge of our times demands mature people" (115).[13]

Jens and his generation must learn how to evaluate and think, since radio, television, and comic books have also made it possible for many people to stop thinking and become passive and idle. The mind must grow accustomed to endeavour, says Gårder "Build yourself model planes and see for yourself. Do not settle for what other people say. If you get used to doing that, you will never be a real asset for the world. Bring your friends along with you. Boys of your age have a great gift – the capacity to be surprised" (116).[14]

The journey ends with Jens internalising Gårder's words about *the right kind of curiosity*. He has interpreted his newly achieved experience, and found that comic books cannot compare with it. The science-fictional story by Tenfjord and Oxaal was a revision of comics like Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon, and their view was not far from the view of popular culture that existed in pedagogical circles. Here is one example from the pedagogical debate in Sweden during the 1950s, claiming that children were getting preoccupied, worried, and distressed by popular culture: "the motion pictures, often on a very low artistic level, the constantly operating radio broadcasts, the idiotic and unrealistic comic books about 'supermen' and other mystic monsters are relentlessly shaping the children growing up, maybe more than the parents, the teachers and school" (Olsson 39–40).[15]

[13] Original quote: "De glemmer også hvilke kår de store masser av mennesker levde under mens vitenskapen ennå ikke klarte å sette noe inn i kampen mot pest og hungersnød. Vår tids viten gir oss veldige muligheter, men den fører ansvar med seg. Vår tids viten krever voksne mennesker".

[14] Original quote: "Bygg deg modellfly og se selv. Nøy deg ikke med andres påstander. Venner du deg til det, vil du aldri bli till virkelig nytte i verden. Få kameratena med deg. Gutter i din alder har en stor gave – evnen till undring".

[15] Original quote: "den ofta på ett mycket lågt konstnärligt plan stående filmen, den evigt pådragna radion, idiotiska och verklighetsfrämmande serier om 'stålmän'" och andra mystiska monstra formar obarmhärtigt det uppväxande släktet i kanske högre grad än föräldrar, lärare och skola".

Jens Crosses Space was an attempt to write a moral tale in the form of a science-fictional story about a young boy learning to be responsible, which could serve as a counter-weight to comic books. At the same time the authors depended on science fiction to capture the children's interest. In popular-science books about space in the 1950s, the tension between utility and enjoyment was always was present (Godhe, *Morgondagens* 193–95).

Recapturing the Modern Project and Mapping out a Male Terrain

During the 1950s, the works of many Anglo-Saxon science fiction writers and many popular-science books about rocketry and space research were translated into the Scandinavian languages. At the same time, the Scandinavian space literature that was appearing discussed many of the same questions (Godhe, *Morgondagens* 89–121). The American tradition of *the frontier* was often appropriated into a Scandinavian context. Where science fiction usually depicted space as an adventure for bold young men, the popular books about space also emphasised that the bold young men must work hard and be willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of humanity. In this sense, *Jens Crosses Space* is more affiliated with popular science than science-fiction stories.

Space exploration would recapture the belief in progress, and humanity would be joined together in a common vision – despite the nuclear threat and the Cold War. In popular space literature during the 1950s it was young men who were depicted as the heirs of the drive to explore space. As the Swedish author Albert Wemmerlöv wrote in 1953, "It should be healthy, strong, mentally and physically well-trained boys who get the honor of becoming the first astronauts in the world – drivers of spacecrafts – boys who in the best sense of the word do earn the title 'supermen of space'!" (88).[16] Space became a metaphor for future utopias, a symbol for a technological and scientific leap bringing a remarkable cultural progress for humankind.

The writings of Arthur C. Clarke express this even more directly. He claimed that the colonisation of space would bring cultural development. Different cultures may be developed on different planets, but they would have one thing in common: "they will all be based on a very advanced technology" (Clarke 185). This broadening of humankind's horizons may very well be an outburst of creativity comparable with the Renaissance. This may result in humanity leaving its old standards, increase its tolerance and consequently decrease the risk of international conflicts. In fact, space exploration is impossible without international cooperation.

Clarke was not the only one tying utopian future prospects to space exploration during the 1950s. Many popular-science writers were hoping it would provide a way out of the international tensions of the Cold War (Godhe, *Morgondagens* 98–114). The story of Jens's adventures on the moon shows how Clarke and many other popular-science writers conceptualised space exploration. Youth (read: boys and young men) should recapture space exploration and the belief in progress. The popular-science books were mapping out a male terrain that excluded women. Virtues like a passion for seeking out the truth, creative imagination, hard work, and sacrifice were emphasised, and the ability to cooperate was the final virtue tying the others together.

[16] Original quote: "Det ska vara friska, starka, psykiskt och fysiskt vältränade pojkar, som får äran av att bli världens första astronauter – förare av rymdskepp – pojkar som i ordets bästa bemärkelse gör skäl för namnet 'rymdens stålmän!"

When Jens conquers the ability to exercise the right kind of curiosity, he also incarnates these virtues (Godhe, *Morgondagens* 114–20 et passim).

Using the patterns from the edification novel (Bildungsroman), *Jens Crosses Space* describes a world where technology and science penetrate into human existence and ordinary life in a profound and dramatic way. In this sense, Jens represents an adult's conception of the engineers and scientists of tomorrow.

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