

Born og kultur  
Abstract proposal  
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### Images of child – culturally constructed childhood

Childhood is both a cultural and an aesthetic phenomenon. Understanding of the issues of who is a child, what a child is like and what a child should or shouldn't do vary through time and place. However, at the same time we have restricted norms about these issues and the discussion of the right kind of childhood is accurate both in the media, research and every day life. Adults also often consider themselves as experts of childhood because of being a child in the past. Thus we may think childhood as a natural phenomenon instead of cultural and social one.

In my presentation I assume that childhood is constructed both visually and verbally in the narratives of popular culture and art. These representations are sometimes stereotypes and sometimes they may open space for widening more traditional or narrow understanding of childhood. I approach childhood as a performative practice which gets alive in everyday life and the encounters between adults and children also through media and art. I ask especially what kind of representations the ideal childhood gets in images, texts etc.

The issue of representing childhood is both cultural and aesthetic. What kind of images and ways of telling are popular in expressing childhood and what kind of ones are not used or are even a taboo? Also the issues of gender and race are important in asking these questions. For example, my presupposition is that the norms of gender-specific appearance and acting are alive in the cultural representations of childhood. In my presentation I focus on this gender issue as an example of a larger question of representing childhood.

The social meaning of the images and narratives of childhood can be seen both in the cultural products that are produced for adult or for children. My material in this presentation consists of several examples of popular culture and contemporary art. I interpret child actress Shirley Temple as an image of a perfect or ideal girl, Bratz-doll's website as a way of constructing today's girlhood and Finnish contemporary artist Kim Simonsson's sculptures, which use Japanese anime style for picturing childhood.

Instead of understanding childhood as natural or innocent, I interpret in my presentation the cultural ways of constructing and performing it. I take into account also the individual level and child's point of view by telling about children's own interpretations about this issue.