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"Will We be Tested on This?": Schoolgirls, Neoliberalism and the Comic Grotesque in Swedish Contemporary Youth Theatre

By Anna Lundberg

Abstract

This article is based on an ethnographic participation study of the production of a play called All about the ADHD and A+ Children of Noisy Village (Ännu mer om *alla vi ADHD- och MVG-barn i Bullerbyn*) staged at one of Sweden's most prominent playhouses for children's and youth theatre: ung scen/öst. Within the familiar setting of the classroom, the play takes on the challenging task of questioning and scrutinizing the complex and tangled situation of contemporary neoliberal ideas and practices, their connections to capitalism and their impact on everyday school-life. This in front of an audience consisting mainly of individuals who were not even born at the time when the political map was radically re-drawn in Berlin in 1989, and who have grown up during a period when neoliberal governance has gained increasing influence in Swedish culture and society. The play mediates its dense, political content and its descriptions of teenagers' everyday lives through a large portion of good old-fashioned entertainment, with music, singing and bizarre, laughter-provoking situations.

The main research question to be answered in the article is: In what ways are the abstract contemporary economic-political manifestations of power and governance expressed in this good-humored play for youth, and how can this be read from a feminist perspective? Hence, the article circles around three nodes that intersect in various ways: theatre, economic-political issues and feminist perspectives. The theoretical framework of the article is primarily based on a merger between, on the one hand, feminist social science and, on the other, feminist cultural analysis.

Keywords: Theatre, children and youth, neoliberalism, feminist cultural analysis, education.

Introduction

> Picture this in your head: A solitary master's desk, preferably massive and dignified. Neat rows of pupils' desks and chairs facing it. To the left, and always to the left, at least if you take the pupils' perspective, a set of windows, letting in the light. This is probably one of the most predictable settings in the world, familiar to many of us, regardless of age or nationality. Most of us have been there, we have seen it depicted in films, in theatre plays and in art and, for the vast majority, it is a place permeated with distinct emotions and memories. Over the last century, this setting has been the epitome of a classroom.[1]

The classroom is also the place from which this article takes its starting-point. In spring 2011, I performed an ethnographic participation study of the production of a play called *All about the ADHD and A+ Children of Noisy Village* (*Ännu mer om alla vi ADHD- och MVG-barn i Bullerbyn*) staged at one of Sweden's most prominent playhouses for children's and youth theatre: ung scen/öst.[2] Over the last decade, ung scen/öst has gained both nationwide and international recognition for its innovative and challenging projects. The theatre is known for its bold performances and avant-garde scenic expressions, but also for its habit of radically addressing social and cultural issues in need of attentive treatment and careful analysis, issues to do with gender, sexuality, structures of power and knowledge, violence, racism, age, new media etc.

Using the emblematic setting of the classroom as its scenic point of departure, the play *All about the ADHD and A+ Children of Noisy Village* circles around the everyday life of a contemporary junior high school, its nitty-gritty details, its disciplinary techniques, its life-defining moments and grand catastrophes. Ergo, a play about school, set in a classroom, performed in front of an audience dominated by teenagers. Not a very bold or original idea, you might think. Quite mainstream, you might assume. And so did I. That is, until the first time I actually read the play and discovered that it took one of the most outspoken political standpoints I had encountered in stage art for years. The play is in fact so flamboyantly left-wing that Karl Marx himself gets to appear on stage, conveying messages about alienation and labor market inequalities. This hyperbolic political gesture is in fact characteristic of the whole play: Alongside various aspects of teenagers' everyday lives, lessons and leisure time, love-sick phone calls, fights with parents and teachers, issues like means of production, the increasingly important financial aspect of education, class gaps etc., are addressed. In particular, the play engages with the neoliberal ideas that – according to the play – govern the contemporary Swedish school system.[3] Hence, within the familiar setting of the classroom, this play takes on the challenging task of questioning and scrutinizing the complex and tangled situation of contemporary neoliberal ideas and practices, their connections to capitalism and their impact on everyday school-life. This in front of an audience consisting mainly of individuals who were not even born at the time when the political map was radically re-drawn in Berlin in 1989, and who have grown

up during a period when neoliberal governance has gained increasing influence in Swedish culture and society.

Taking all of this into account, one would expect this to be quite a heavy, if not to say depressing, piece of stage art, the kind of performance that makes a young audience despair and/or fall asleep. However, on the contrary, the play mediates its dense, political content and its descriptions of teenagers' everyday lives through a large portion of good old-fashioned entertainment, with music, singing and bizarre, laughter-provoking situations. The play is absurd, very funny, sometimes a farce with people dashing in and out of doors. Lacking a proper plot, the play rather builds up to a patchwork of scenes in which the aesthetic language is dominated by hyperbolic comic expressions and an interest in the material, fleshy aspect of life, in ridiculing authority and flirting with utopian ideas. In doing so, it alludes to the comic grotesque culture described by, amongst others, Mikhail Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1968). Consequently, most aspects and manifestations in the play are blown out of proportion. Everything becomes absurd, grotesquely exaggerated and laughter-provoking. It is through this aesthetic choice that I interpret the play, the performance and its enormous, larger-than-life version of left-wing politics.

Big economic-political issues, laughter-provoking entertainment and everyday adolescence, all presented to a teenage audience. To me, encountering this crossover between genres entirely different from each other, the staging appeared to be a contemporary adaption of the theatrical estrangement seen in the Swedish Brecht-influenced children's theatre that flourished during the 1970s (Helander 1998), but also with relevance to contemporary feminist critical thinking (cf. Bryld and Lykke 2000). This is what I want to write about in this article.

Academic Writing and the Aesthetics of Stage Art

In recent years, Swedish feminist research/writing on politics has – in line with broader contemporary discussions – increasingly engaged critically with intersections between neoliberal economic-political discourse, culture and society (Fraser 2009; Larner 2000; Powers 2009; Brown 2003; Rönnblom 2011; Lundberg 2012; Wottle & Blomberg 2011). According to Wendy Larner, the term "neoliberalism" denotes "new forms of political-economic governance premised on the extension of market relationships" (Larner 2000: 5). Neoliberal governmentality implies, amongst other things, a focus on competition, a high degree of individualism, freedom of choice, control and money-focus (Larner 2000; Mouffe 2005; Rose 1999; Rönnblom 2011). I understand the stage work of ung scen/öst and the ongoing feminist critical writing on this subject as expressions of the same strand of political concern for contemporary power relations, but mediated through different genres. This article is to be read as a contribution to this body of discussion, bringing together feminist academic analysis and creative/scenic work on the sub-

ject. The main research question to be answered here is: In what ways are the abstract contemporary economic-political manifestations of power and governance expressed in this good-humored play for youth, and how can this be read from a feminist perspective? Hence, the article circles around three nodes that intersect in various ways: theatre, economic-political issues and feminist perspectives.

The analysis carried out in this article will not account for the play or the performance as a whole. Rather, the text is organized around three of the play's characters, named Apocalypse Lisa, A+ Kerstin and Ordinary Lena, and the ways in which they appear in the text and on stage. Hence, the analysis is based on both the script and the performance. Aged 14, the girls all work hard in order to handle the political situation they inhabit, but in three different ways. As their names indicate, and in line with the performances' general hyperbolic aesthetic, the characters are shaped in an excessively stereotypical fashion: we have here the rebel, the crammer and the plain girl. These are familiar figures, recognizable because they have been repeated again and again in the contemporary cultural imaginary of Western society (Dawson 1994). In the sharp contours of these girls, the abstract workings of overarching economic-political structures become tangible; they become open to scrutiny and description. Through the characters, it becomes possible to read the way in which these structures have an influence on everyday life, in minute detail. It becomes possible to unveil neoliberal governmentality as a contemporary, naturalized condition, or as Victor Sklovskij, the Russian literary scholar, would have put it, as an automatized part of everyday life, so taken for granted that it has become difficult to grasp or distinguish (1990).

Writing an academic text about stage art that, on the one hand, is comical, chaotic and grotesque, and, on the other hand, deals with crucial contemporary issues, is challenging. In any attempt to do justice to the playful language of ung scen/öst and its important political implications, the style of traditional academic writing becomes insufficient. Furthermore, writing about teenage girls and their everyday situations from the perspective of an adult woman (me, aged 43) also demands careful self-reflexivity and methodological curiosity (Söderberg & Frih 2010). As I have argued elsewhere, this kind of analytical work requires an interplay between a style of writing that "tunes in" to the material, in this case a comic, hyperbolic, political play for youth, and one that gives room for reflexive analytical distance (Lundberg 2008). In line with this, the article will alternate between longer descriptive sections, and an analytical style of writing. Altogether, I am inspired by Nira Yuval Davis' concept of rooting and shifting, a method that underscores the political importance of shifting positions but at the same time being well versed regarding one's own current position (Yuval-Davis 1997). Hence, I will shift between thick descriptions based on the play's hyperbolic language and the academic tradition to which I belong. I will also shift between my own position as a middle-aged academic feminist scholar and the positions of the three girls.

Since I have a background in broad feminist cultural studies, this text is designed somewhat differently from a feminist performance analysis, and it also uses theoretical points of departure that are somewhat different from the ones frequently used in feminist performance studies. The theoretical framework of this article is primarily based on a merger between, on the one hand, feminist social science and, on the other, feminist cultural analysis. It is my strong belief that these two academic fields, despite their long history of connection and cooperation, still need to be further interlinked. It is also my belief that complex, abstract economic-political structures and intersections of politics, culture, gender and sexuality are often best mediated and accessed through art. Hence, my aim is to persuade you as a reader to see through the eyes of Lisa, Kerstin and Lena, since they give voice to perspectives of great importance concerning our time.

Having said all this, it is high time for me to let the curtain rise and begin focusing on the girls, starting with the most impatient one.

Apocalypse Lisa: "Don't Disturb Me, I'm Hanging with Marx"

Lisa does not care much for school. If anything, she recognizes it as an institution with rules and regulations that beg to be transgressed. She despises the other girls, the teachers and her parents. She is also a passionate and highly attentive reader of the work of Karl Marx. Riotous and angry, radical and uncompromising, she moves through the play contesting the contemporary neoliberal world and all the ills she thinks it stands for: a fixation on money, possessions and status, greed and egotism, narrow-minded thinking and conduct in every possible domain. Her view of life is dark, and so is her grungy appearance and make-up. In scene after scene, she comes down like a ton of bricks on all the claustrophobic bourgeois ideals constructed by the generations preceding her: structures of heteronormativity, middle-class respectability and neat steadiness. In a telling scene, the teacher gives Lisa an assignment to collect facts and give an account of "children's situation in the historical past". She fulfills the task by preparing what she calls "a Marxist lehrstück", a morality play on the ills of capitalism, with giant banknotes and coins walking around with their human owners on a tight leash.[4] In yet another scene, Lisa sets up a meeting with a boy in her class who clearly adores her. They are supposed to rehearse Lisa's "Marxist lehrstück". At first, the feelings of infatuation seem to be mutual, but after a hesitant kiss, Lisa flinches, backing away from the boy, hissing that "love is a capitalist, patriarchal, compulsory-heterosexual construction", leaving the love-sick classmate in confusion and agony (Boonstra & Axelsson 2011: 71-72). Lisa's parents are worried by their daughter's peculiar and unromantic behavior, they try to educate her on the delicate script of teenage boy meets girl = love. But Lisa frankly declares that they need not bother, since she is probably not heterosexual, but instead maybe asexual, and

possibly in love with the middle-aged female school headteacher, Kristina (Boonstra & Axelsson 2011: 73).

Overall, Lisa is appalled by what she sees when looking at the contemporary societal order surrounding her. This order and its expectations of a 14-year-old girl's gender performance seems to be suffocating Lisa, and she fights furiously in order to fend off the anticipated apocalypse.

Shifting Marx

It is as though everything that Lisa says and does is mediated through a bullhorn; blown out of proportion and in your face, conveyed in the play through a sometimes surrealistic, dreamlike expression. This is, for example, what happens in the scene where Karl Marx is paying a visit in young Lisa's bedroom. Lisa is idling around, secretly smoking and reading aloud from *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* when the old philosopher suddenly climbs in through the window, dressed in a tight black body stocking, and with the better part of his face hidden behind the famous gigantic beard. With a strong German accent, Marx greets his young disciple:

> Karl Marx: Hello Lisa. I am so pleased to see that you are reading my book. I thought no one did these days. Especially not teenage girls.
>
> Lisa [astonished at the sight of her idol]: Karl Marx?! The real Karl Marx?! The founder of communism, and the author of my book!
>
> Karl Marx [With his hand elegantly placed on his hip]: Yes, that's me. [Leaning over Lisa's shoulder, peering at the book she is holding] Oh, this section I think is excellent… "External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification…" (Axelsson & Boonstra 2011: 19)

Apocalypse Lisa and Karl Marx soon prove to be kindred spirits and the scene continues in responsive and joyful collaboration as Lisa and her bearded favorite start a discussion on the topic of capitalism past and present. Thus far, the play keeps to a reasonably familiar picture of Marx: the beard, the sharp brain, enemy of all forms of capitalism. But there is also something incongruous, increasingly physical and slightly voluptuous about the way in which Marx is walking around onstage. Matching the tight body stocking with a black bowler hat and soft black moccasins, performing grand dramatic gestures, high knee-lifts and rolling eyes, he alludes to Liza Minnelli's character Sally Bowles in *Cabaret*, or maybe to a queer Pierrot from *commedia de'llarte*, only with an exceedingly large beard. This bodily, materialistic representation of the old socialist is reinforced as the scene continues. For discussing alienation and capitalism with a teenaged girl is far from all Karl Marx gets to do onstage in this play. He is also, dressed in his obscure body stocking, given the opportunity to have sexual intercourse with Lisa's efficient, careerist mother in front of a perplexed Lisa. This of course happens for purely pedagogical reasons, when the mother suddenly dashes into the scene, in-

terrupting the political conference. She is filled with an urge to (once again) enlighten her daughter on the topic of (hetero)sexuality. Lisa is after all a young girl, and so the liberated mother must do her duty and inform Lisa about the graphic details of sexual practice. Lisa is reluctant; she clearly prefers to continue her argument on the workings of capitalism:

> The mother [dashing through the door, exclaiming in excitement]: You are a girl!
>
> Lisa [dogged]: The hell I am. Don't disturb me; I'm hanging with Marx (Boonstra & Axelsson 2011: 23).

But the mother does not give up so easily. She enters the room, immediately making lewd eye contact with Marx, who happens to be the only male figure available. In order to initiate her daughter into the secrets of erotica, the mother starts to give a detailed account of the fundamental features of straight sex. Her presentation is richly illustrated by indecent gestures, demonstrations of lingerie, sex toys and suitable body-language. After a long sequence of hip-wiggling and butt-centered choreography (during which the teenage audience squirms with embarrassment and laughter), the mother finally turns her full attention to Marx, straddling him with great determination. In contrast to Lisa, the old revolutionary seems more than eager, although somewhat perplexed, to assist the mother in her important mission of setting Lisa's mind straight. He does not seem to mind at all switching from political discussion to a more physical kind of work, kindly volunteering as the mother mounts him. Lisa does everything she can to put an end to her mother's activities, and the scene ends with Lisa escaping the awkward situation, shouting angrily at her mother: "None of this has helped me!" (Boonstra & Axelsson 2011: 25). Karl Marx seems somewhat intimidated by the turmoil and backpedals out through the window, back to the tranquility of political *thinking*, away from the actions of unruly teenagers and their lecherous, hard-working mothers.

I have inserted this longer description since I think the scene showing Karl Marx's debut as side-kick sex educator is typical of *All about the ADHD and A+ Children of Noisy Village* and its take on economic-political issues. It is absurd, grotesque, overblown and very funny, juxtaposing earnest discussion and recitals from political writing with burlesque body language. In a manner characteristic of the comic culture described by Bakhtin, the scenic language is rooted in grotesque material realism and its intrusive, hyperbolic attention to bodily details. The scene is saturated with comic incongruity (Knuuttila 1996), when Karl Marx and his cultural and political analogies intersect with the emblematic situation of a parent giving the "birds and bees lecture". What can be read into this clash between politics and sex education?

In my reading, the unorthodox portrait of Karl Marx must be understood against the backdrop of the way in which Lisa is handling the expectations placed upon her when it comes to performing young femininity in a neoliberal world. In

the contemporary cultural imaginary, teenage girls are not usually associated with devoted reading of critical work on capitalism. In popular culture, they are, still, more commonly associated with longings for heterosexual love and romance. Lisa refuses the expectations laid upon her and consequently the scene works as a twisted parody of a motif repeated in contemporary fiction: the romantic young girl's fantasy, where the handsome juvenile hero of her dreams climbs in through the window, into the girl's room, in order to make physical contact of sorts. In Lisa's case however, it is an old bearded man who shows up, talking about base and superstructure, wearing soft moccasins. Undoubtedly, physical contact is staged in the dreamlike scene, but the erotic agent in this scene is not the young girl herself, but instead her experienced and executive, hard-working mother. Given these circumstances, the scene diverges, to put it mildly, from normative ideas of how to conduct a young girl's femininity (cf. Österholm 2010). In this surrealistic and contradictory scene, the fundamental conditions of Lisa's life collide with her desire for the analytical tools offered by Marxism. Hence, the scene gives expression to the structures oppressing Lisa, as well as her furious fight to avoid them. And, as a consequence, both heterosexuality and traditional representations of political manifestations are displayed and altered at the same time. The scene may be interpreted in a wide range of ways: As a young, non-heterosexual woman, Lisa may be understood as vulnerable and powerless: even the private space of her own bedroom can be invaded by one of the "old, dead, white men", and the overpowering performance of heterosexuality. Interpreted in this way, Lisa seems to lack agency completely. However, this is after all Lisa's space, her girls-room and, the way I see it, the scene is intimately interwoven with her ridiculing attitude when facing the power-structures that are invading her. In my reading, Lisa is the mind behind the grotesque scene. Herein lies Lisa's agency.

Like a cicerone, Lisa personifies the hyperbolic political stance of the play, but it is also in relation to her that the established portrayal of left-wing politics is distorted into something quite unrecognizable. Lisa does not allow a traditional version of political thinking, attached to the heterosexual male subject and at the same time strangely detached from his embodied materiality, to stand unchallenged (cf. Backman 2003). In a comic grotesque feminist display of contemporary power structures, Lisa rearranges the traditional associations of the political field, replacing them with a situation where the Marxist doctrines are cross-fertilized with materiality in lewdness, soft moccasins and sexually active mothers. In pushing the heterosexual script away from herself, letting her careerist mother take the leading role, she aptly points out the intersections between sex, gender, body and labor (cf. Powers 2009). Let me explain how.

The scene harks back to the question of what Marxist theory has to offer a young girl in the 21st century. Lisa is drawn to the traditional Marxist ideals, trying to adapt them to the expectations laid upon her as a bearer of young femininity, and to the pressing demands of the contemporary labor market, personified by

her careerist mother. This is a labor market that expects her to express professional character traits, such as being flexible, adaptable, efficient, constantly networking, selling herself, becoming a walking CV available around the clock, using all her assets (be it her body or her mind). As Nina Powers aptly notes: "At this point in economic time, those character traits are remarkably feminine" (Powers 2009: 22). She continues: "From the boardroom to the strip-club, one must capitalize on one's assets at every moment, demonstrating that one is indeed a good worker, a motivated employee, and that nothing prevents your full immersion in the glorious world of work" (Powers 2009: 24). No wonder Lisa, with her Marxist-oriented mind, foresees an imminent apocalypse.

All in all, the comic grotesque aesthetic of the scene forces old Marxist ideas to encounter contemporary working conditions that have everything to do with body, feminization, sexuality, family and mothering. It underscores the feminist interpretation that the fields of resources and cultural representations, redistribution and recognition intersect and must be taken into account simultaneously. According to Kathleen Rowe, the genres of laughter have a substantial effect on the way in which gender and sexuality are expressed (cf. Rowe 1995). Having experienced Lisa's bedroom-narrative about Marx, it is impossible for me to view him, or his economic-political ideas, in quite the same way as before. In order to be useful in Lisa's world, his ideas must be cross-fertilized with the complex living conditions of contemporary teenage girls. They must be plucked down from their overarching, abstract position and rubbed against the fleshy materialism that makes up Lisa's world. Claiming this, Lisa stages an effective feminist gesture that stays in my mind.

Lisa and the Political

To conclude the matter of Apocalypse Lisa and her feminist, comic, hyperbolic and uncompromising version of socialism and neoliberalism: what did I learn from it? I would like to argue that Lisa performs a hyperbolic version of what Chantal Mouffe describes as being of vital importance to the politics of vibrant democracy. Mouffe's critique of the contemporary "post-political" take on economic-political issues is significant. She defines "the political" as constituted by an antagonistic dimension. She claims that the conflictual, agonistic aspect of politics and the acknowledgement of conflicts of interest between various actors, groups and hegemonies are ineradicable and necessary in order to attain democratic order. The public sphere needs to be envisaged as a sphere of contestation, where different political hegemonies are confronted. In addition to this, she accuses the contemporary Western post-political systems of reducing politics to a set of technical moves of consensus and rationality, where antagonism is smoothed over and no differentiated alternatives are made clear to the citizens. The effects of the exclusion of individuals and groups, and the effects of power

struggles, are thereby covered up. According to Mouffe, democracy is not about consensus; it is not about finding the "right" solution. Democracy is a battlefield where different standpoints and agendas come up against each other, and as a battlefield it must be acknowledged, or else we might end up putting democracy itself at risk (Mouffe 2005, 2007). To acknowledge this is to acknowledge the political.

With Mouffe's definition as a benchmark, Lisa draws on the necessity of agonism when battling capitalism, this through her bullhorn manners that nicely match Mouffe's academic rhetoric. With no interest whatsoever in the idea of consensus or deliberation, Lisa takes Mouffe at her word and blows the idea of the agonistic out of all proportion, at the same time giving it a comic, hyperbolic twist, a twist that makes all the difference in the world. Hence, Lisa represents the antidote to the neoliberal system with its focus on rationality, calculation, management and market economic values. In line with the aesthetics of the comic grotesque, Lisa blurts it all out, without saving anything for later. Through her, contemporary conflicts become clear, and the lack of proper choices described by Mouffe seems claustrophobic to her. In the act of fighting the system that is imposed upon her, refusing the institutions of respectable femininity, heterosexuality, and capitalism (institutions that she is desperately seeking to overthrow) she is drawing on a long feminist tradition of confrontation and resistance (Davies 2000; Eduards 2002). In Lisa's position, I see a reminder of the feminist need to never give up on opposing, on attacking, on undermining the grossly inadequate global power hierarchies (cf. Sassen 1994). However, and as we shall see, confrontation is not the only feminist strategy at hand.

"Is this Song a Test?" A+ Kerstin and the Promise of Monsters

Throughout the various scenes of the play, A+ Kerstin seems to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown: When she raises her hand in class, delivering the right answer; when encountering her dopey music teacher, Johnny Thunder, who shockingly enough doesn't even have a proper teacher's training; when she is fighting to receive top grades (A+), and last but not least when she realizes that, in the school subject of music, the dopey not-even-a-proper-teacher Johnny Thunder will bestow upon her the second highest mark: A. The world is falling apart, since according to Kerstin A+ is the only acceptable result: it equals freedom of choice, and freedom of choice equals success. Everything apart from A+ means failure, and failure equals perdition in a world where competition is the basic rule.

As previously mentioned, the term neoliberalism denotes organizational practices, norms and speech inspired by the market economy and the economic rationality of private business, but now increasingly implemented in the public sector, such as education, research, care-giving and the field of culture and the fine arts (cf. Slaughter 1997; Rose 1999; Larner 2000; Mouffe 2005; Fraser 2009;

Rönnblom 2011a). In accordance with these practices, it has become increasingly important to be able to measure and account for outcomes and results according to given standards and criteria. Neoliberalism denotes competition, individual responsibility, freedom of choice, efficiency (financial and otherwise), accountability (financial and otherwise), management, rationality, results and outcome orientation. Accordingly, education becomes something that is put on the market, something that needs management, that is outcome oriented and needs to be accounted for and measured according to certain standards. Economic rationality has become one of the major driving forces behind every activity. Rose describes the way in which activities in the public sector, such as education, have to an increasingly large extent come under the influence of neoliberal governmentality and new public management: "obliged to organize their activities as if they were little businesses. Their activities were recorded in a new vocabulary of incomes, allocations, costs, savings, even profits" (Rose 1999: 155).

Neoliberal values have influenced the contemporary Swedish educational system in a similar way. Evaluation of results measured against a given standard has become the core issue in Swedish school politics. The Minister of Education has stated: "The new government is determined to change Swedish policy on education /---/. Learning targets and knowledge requirements will be clearly stated, with limited scope for interpretation. National tests will evaluate target achievement" (Björklund 2006, my translation). Another example of the influence of market economic thinking is the current government's new strategy for education, where entrepreneurship and the creation of new businesses are promoted as significant themes throughout the entire Swedish educational system (Skolverket 2012). This is in line with Mouffe's description of the way in which the welfare state has been "modernized" by the spread of management techniques promoting the key entrepreneurial values of efficiency, choice and selectivity (Mouffe 2005).

This is the order mirrored in *All about the ADHD and A+ Children of Noisy Village*. Time and again, the characters return to a discussion of the rules, expressions and expectations of neoliberal discourse and its effects on everyday life at school. The headteacher emphasizes the great importance of developing the school's trademark, since the school needs to attract students in order to establish a stable economy. She worries about the students who will fail to achieve the learning aims, not because she thinks knowledge is important to the students, but for financial reasons (Boonstra & Axelsson 2011: 30). Failing students equals a bad reputation, and a bad reputation equals less money, and less money equals a school with low standards. Aims, outcomes, national standards, competition, financial aspects, grades, targets, results, tests, evaluations, measuring, individual development plans: The words denoting control and measurable results fly through the play like nervous wasps. Education becomes a technicality, rather than a place where people might gain the opportunity to grow by learning important things. The system rests to a large extent on surveillance, rather than being

based on trust in the professional work carried out by teachers (cf. Rönnblom 2011).

Against the backdrop of such a system, school subjects that are not easily measured according to a coherent standard are problematic. This becomes obvious when A+ Kerstin has an animated debate over her grades with the dopey music teacher, Johnny Thunder. Kerstin works hard. She is competitive, strategic, goal-oriented, playing the game to win; she is everything the neoliberal school system wants her to be. Consequently, the question she keeps coming back to is: Will we be tested on this? She cannot understand why Johnny Thunder won't give her the anticipated A+. She has after all fulfilled all the criteria stated in order to get the desired grade. He, on the other hand, claims that it is impossible for Kerstin to receive A+ in the subject of music: He may be wishy-washy and totally useless in mathematics and other school subjects, but she on the other hand sings out of tune, and she is always out of step when playing an instrument. In short, says the teacher: Kerstin is not musical, at all:

> Kerstin [agitated, referring to the stated aims and criteria]: But I have performed singing and playing on an instrument, in a way that works in a group as well as solo! I have used music as a personal tool for expression in my own creative work, and I have taken aesthetic aspects into consideration! I have given examples of the various expressions and purposes of music, this from a historical as well as from a global perspective, relating them to each other!
>
> Johnny Thunder: [wearily, almost spluttering, placing his rubber-boot-clad feet on the teacher's desk]: Yeah, but Kerstin, this is not what it's all about. You do have an A, that's not bad eh, goddammit? Me, I think it sucks, this business with grading. Music is supposed to be fun, not a bloody competition! If you ask me, I would mark all the kids with A+, but that would drive the headteacher mad. I have to give grades according to certain criteria and crappy aims, but hey, that's not my decision!
>
> Kerstin [harshly]: But as the teacher your obligation is to tell me why I don't meet the criteria. You are obliged to tell me what I need to do in order to get A+. I think I meet the criteria stated for A+.
>
> Johnny Thunder [annoyingly inert]: Look here. You are dead competent, ambitious, fun to work with and all that. But when it comes to certain things, you simply have them in you, or you don't (Boonstra & Axelsson 2011: 33-34).

The teacher gets the final word; he leaves Kerstin as he joins the other, more musically talented students. Together they jam happily to the old rock song *Sweet Jane*, a song that, according to the teacher, is "dead simple", but at the same time "bloody brilliant". Kerstin is excluded from the joyful circuit of musical talent. Accompanied by Sweet Jane, she sits in the dark, bursting into tears over the injustice of the situation, over the fact that she cannot master the ambiguous world of music, where things can be "dead simple" and "bloody brilliant" at the same time.

Judith Butler talks in *Bodies that Matter* about "discursive limits" in order to pinpoint that which is possible or not possible to articulate within the frames of a certain discourse (Butler 1994). Johnny Thunder has most certainly reached the

limits of what it is possible to address within the realm of a school system where measurable results make up the bottom line. Music is supposed to be fun, he claims, but when he comes up against the criteria of grading, he gets lost, murmuring about "certain things" that one is either a bearer of, or not. The teacher leaves the student desperate and offended. Kerstin is holding on to the opinion that, according to the stated criteria, she has earned the top grade. Music is supposed to be fun, according to the teacher, but in the realm of contemporary school, fun needs to be measurable. Against the backdrop of the system applied, Kerstin is right: Since she has fulfilled all the criteria, she should be entitled to A+. The system is on her side. But this is music, and it is the dopey teacher who has the power to judge Kerstin's musical achievement. The situation goes askew when he exerts power, according to his own opaque logic. The "criteria" suddenly become irrelevant. The student is left on her own to handle the incongruities of the system that rules her world and determines her future.

"One becomes what one produces" says Apocalypse Lisa, inspired by her favorite socialist philosopher. The question is: What does one become when production is adjusted to the neoliberal model of education mirrored in the play? Wendy Brown claims that the influence of neoliberal technologies of governmentality spans from "… the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practice of empire" (2003 p. 7). In Brown's opinion, neoliberal thinking saturates all institutions and all social values. It has an effect on what we see as valuable, important and real. Neoliberal ideas have become a distinct part of cultural imaginaries, affecting everything, from the political agenda to the way in which identity-formation comes about (Dawson 1994). It has, as stated above, become a normalized part of everyday life, so taken for granted that it is difficult to recognize (cf. Sklovskij 1992; Bryld & Lykke 2000). To develop a trademark has become a perfectly self-explanatory aspect of human behavior. No one is to ask: "My trademark? I didn't know I was in possession of such a device" (cf. Lundberg 2012).

The discourse of neoliberal governmentality is seductive in the sense that it gives the impression that everything is under control. There is something reassuring in these systems of stringent rationality, check-ups, auditing and measuring. We can relax, the system is water-tight, equal and sensible. This is the system the teenage girl and crammer A+ Kerstin relies on. As long as she keeps to the system, fulfilling the requirements, she will gain access to the individual freedom of choice that comes with good evaluations, good grades and eventually a stable income based on hard work. But her safety and happiness also depend on the laws of competition and on her beating her classmates. Her success depends on others' failure. As the music teacher aptly states, the headteacher would not be happy with him if he were to give all the students A+. The neoliberal system does not work if there are no winners and losers, and A+ Kerstin is very well aware of this. Kerstin doesn't come across as a particularly pleasant person. Rather, she appears to be more than a little bit out of the box in her desperate effort to get A+ in every

school subject. Nevertheless, I tend to appreciate this neurotic, stiff-necked character quite a lot. Every ambitious schoolgirl can identify with her cramming, her anxious questions about results, just as every rebel can identify with Lisa's scornful attitude. Also, from a feminist perspective, Kerstin turns out to be interesting. I read her as a personification of the system being criticized in the play, but in a hyperbolic way and without any moderation. Her hysterical individualism, her fixation on measurable results, her endless nagging about grades and criteria, her grotesque ruthlessness and lack of empathy turn her into a monstrous representative of neoliberal identity. Those who have read Donna Haraway know that monsters are creatures to which it is worth paying attention. Haraway promotes monsters as promising signs of a different world, but at the same time as representations of the world for which we are all responsible (Haraway 1992). Kerstin engenders the contemporary neoliberal rules and regulations to the point of bursting. Catastrophe is waiting around the corner as Kerstin moves like a bulldozer in her pursuit of top grades, and I observe her actions with nervous anticipation: What will happen when she has pushed the neoliberal system to its limits? What will happen if all the citizens inhabiting neoliberal society master its rules as well as Kerstin has? Now that's a scary scenario to dwell upon. Meanwhile, monstrous Kerstin survives by balancing between mastery of the game and nervous breakdown.

Ordinary Lena: Invisibility as Feminist Strategy

Apolcalypse Lisa and A+ Kerstin both give voice to the often-articulated feminist desire for agency, impact and action; the desire to accomplish things, to make oneself heard. Ellen Mortensen ascribes the attraction of dynamics, activity, affirmation and progress a central position in contemporary feminist theory. Also, she points out critically that such focus on activity and action overlaps with hegemonic masculinity, which in a similar way is primarily constructed through decisiveness and the power of action (Mortensen 2002).

In spite of the fact that Lisa and Kerstin take up a lot more space and time than the third character, Ordinary Lena, it is Lena who might be the one to challenge contemporary neoliberal hegemony in the most radical way. Ordinary Lena does not get to say much. In fact, throughout the play, she has no lines at all. She is present in numerous scenes, she sometimes murmurs something inaudible, slips away, sliding down behind her desk to duck attention, to avoid getting looked at, avoid being forced to speak. Her girl stereotype echoes all the plain, nameless girls you have seen in the endless procession of high school films, often depicted as an insignificant member of the crowd against which the female leading character stands out. She also alludes to the invisible schoolgirl described by, among others, Anneli Nielsen (2010). Nielsen describes the schoolgirl's silence and invisibility as problematic from a feminist perspective. However, the quiet persona

of Ordinary Lena suggests alternative interpretations. Lena does not get to say one single word throughout the play, but this does not mean that her voice is unheard. When no one else is around, she sings to the audience and, through the lyrics, she opens up alternative readings of what it means to be one of the crowd, in the middle, unnoticed and unrecognized. The subject not recognized as extraordinary or distinguished in any way; not rebellious and extroverted like Lisa, nor a gifted student like Kerstin. Ordinary Lena is quiet, but in the lyrics she points out the way in which silence is often mistaken as being equivalent to weakness and insecurity. She describes the position she holds: anonymous, precarious, not singled out, not acknowledged. Against the background of Althusser's theory of the subject's need for interpellation in order to survive or even exist, Lena's position is truly an interesting take. The position she has chosen may be insecure, vague and anonymous, but it may also be a sign of strength and self-containment, a position where interpellation becomes less significant to the ontology of being a girl.

Silence is a cultural sign that is notably difficult to interpret; it often hides its meaning. A neoliberal societal structure builds to a large extent on situations where the citizens agree to recognize the various forms of interpellation and hailing; they need to agree to the conditions of individualism, competition, of developing a trademark, of being measured according to given standards based on competitive terms. In order for the system to work, institutions, as well as individuals, need to perform something measurable, something for the system to grasp, otherwise the interpellation will fail: "Look at me revolting against you!", says Apocalypse Lisa; "Look at my study progress!", says A+ Kerstin. But Ordinary Lena is silent. Something is lacking, a comprehensible persona to address, interpellate, relate to. In contrast to A+ Kerstin, she refuses to compete according to the standards laid down by the educational system, and nor does she, like Apocalypse Lisa, devote time and energy to attacking, and thereby simultaneously reinforcing, the significance of a system that she finds to be repulsive. This lack of interest and ducking of interpellation has an interesting impact on the paradigms that govern much of contemporary living. If you don't care about competing, then there will be no competitors, and hence no competition. If you don't pay attention to an oppressive discourse, because it has nothing to offer you, then eventually that discourse will fade away. Peggy Phelan talks of the unmarked, the immateriality that shows itself through disappearance: "I am speaking here of an active vanishing, a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility" (1993: 19). This in a realm where sight is a fundamental aspect of subjectivity.

Paradoxically, the invisibility that Lena enacts enables her to choose her own path, outside the range of the external eye. This implies a different type of liberty from the freedom of choice that A+ Kerstin yearns for when chasing top grades. In contrast to contemporary feminism and its weakness for potential, agency and action, Ellen Mortensen highlights the silent, unarticulated and poetic aspects of language as an opening to freedom, to thinking differently. Rather than attempting

to control, estimate and measure, poetic language leaves space, makes a way out (Mortensen 2002).

In a wide range of ways, poetic language appears to be the very opposite of neoliberal discourse. Questions addressing the implications of passivity, of leaving out, are provocative, also from a feminist perspective: "[W]ho has time and patience in the age of technology to pursue such unproductive and seemingly redundant questions? Hurry we must, to complete our various projects. We are summoned to the beat of the machine, no longer able to hear the beating pulse of our own bodies" (Mortensen 2002: 118).

Ordinary Lena does not care. She turns her back on interpellation, walking away. By simply *not* responding when the disciplinary demand for articulate subject-status is laid upon her, she refuses to validate the current discourse. Against the background of Althusser's and Butler's writing, she thereby enacts the impossible, the act that is denied every existing subject (Butler 1997). Lena is turning her back, pottering with something other than identity-politics, something hidden. What is it? I am curious; there is something alluring and powerful in Lena's position, and I take it with me into my feminist thinking and activity. Consequently, Lena turns into an enigma, something not quite comprehensible. Her silence becomes a sign of a subject-status resting on different terms, not yet acknowledged, not yet articulated (cf. Irigaray 1985).

Theatrical Rage

When analyzing intersections in teenagers' subject-formation at school, the Danish scholar Dorthe Staunæs uses the concept *in sync*. Some of the teenage subjects are in sync with the established hegemonic order at school, and some are not, depending on aspects such as class, ethnicity, gender etc. (Staunæs 2003). Sara Ahmed highlights something similar in writing about the *comfort* of white bodies in a white world:

> To be orientated, or to be at home in the world, is also to feel a certain comfort: we might only notice comfort as an affect when we lose it, when we become uncomfortable. The word "comfort" suggests well-being and satisfaction, but it can also suggest an ease and easiness. /---/ To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting the surfaces of bodies disappear from view. (Ahmed 2007: 158)

To be comfortable in Ahmed's sense seems to be very pleasant. However, in my reading, none of the three characters in *All about the ADHD and A+ Children of Noisy Village* are anywhere near a comfortable position in the neoliberal system implemented at school, nor in sync with it. On the contrary, they are all fighting hard in order to survive. In this sense, the play captures a Zeitgeist, an experienced sense of discomfort related to contemporary neoliberal governmentality. To articulate this experience of a system that is at the same time both normalized and

uncomfortable is complicated. The play engages with and challenges the situation at hand, using hyperbolic expressions in order to achieve maximum Verfremdung-effect[5] and draw attention to the clarified and naturalized order of contemporary economic-political organization. Judith Butler uses the concept of "theatrical rage" to describe political anger expressed in dramatic forms in response to public inattention on the issue of AIDS. She takes her point of departure in hyperbolic aesthetic expressions and asserts that the theatrical format is often inseparable from the political rage and frustration. She also distinguishes theatrical rage as an important forum for political activism (Butler 1993).

In my reading, the girls in *All about the ADHD and A+ Children of Noisy Village* stage a similar intersection between theatrical and political rage and weariness over a system that strongly reduces the content of citizenship. In her famous article from 2009 in *New Left Review*, Nancy Fraser poses the uncomfortable question of whether contemporary feminism, with its focus on identity and individual rights, and its lack of interest in global redistribution, has been following the dominant neoliberal structures of our time (Fraser 2009). Apocalypse Lisa, A+ Kerstin, and Ordinary Lena ask similar questions; however, raised from three very different positions, deeply rooted in the everyday-life conditions they have to adapt to. Apocalypse Lisa chose the path of revolting against the rules displayed for her, A+ Kerstin survives through mastery of those very same rules, while Ordinary Lena simply could not be bothered; she turned her back on them. These practical ways of handling the situation seem to me to be strategies not in sync with the system, nor with each other, but rather they are expressions of radical difference.

To me, the characters each display a particular take on the political situation they inhabit. They also point in different directions when it comes to feminist thinking. But first and foremost they collectively lead me to the conclusion that feminist theory, politics and pragmatism can best survive the current neoliberal discourse through pluralism and radical difference. Sylvia Walby writes that feminism today is as vibrant as ever, despite assertive declarations of its death. She also writes that the intensification of the neoliberal context is one of the most important challenges for contemporary feminism (Walby 2011). However, in a situation where the neoliberal frameworks have become self-evident, it might be difficult to envision alternatives. Even so, Lena, Lisa and Kerstin, and their staged clashes between hyperbolic comic expressions and current economic-political discourse demonstrate that various feminist strategies are at hand: you can always a) revolt, b) become a monster, or c) turn your back. Let's get started, shall we?

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Notes

1 This description is based on a presentation by stage designer Åsa Berglund Cowburn at the collating, where she described her work and the way in which she thought about the classroom as such.

2 This article is based on an action-oriented research project financed by the Swedish Arts Council during the spring of 2011, located in ung scen/öst. The play is written by Malin Axelsson and Andreas Boonstra and directed by Andreas Boonstra. The actors participating are: Pamela Cortés Bruna, Björn Elgerd, Sandra Hulth, Erik Stern, Sandra Stojiljkovic, and Andreas Strindér. The position I take in relation to the creative process that generated the staging of *All about the ADHD and A+ Children of Noisy Village* is one of a critical friend, where "critical" vouches for the researcher's reflexivity, transparency and independence, and the concept "friend" reflects a situation where the researcher is committed to the project and its ongoing process in a generative and responsive way (Spicer & Neil 2008).

3 The title of the play underscores a black sense of irony through its allusion to Astrid Lindgren's famous children's books written in the 1940s and 1950s about the happy, wholesome children of Noisy Village. The difference between the utopian, sunny situation described by Lindgren and the harsh, neoliberal reality of contemporary youth could not have been made more explicit.

4 A lehrstück is a dramatic format devised by playwright and theatre director Berthold Brecht, emphasizing the possibilities of learning through acting, playing roles, adopting positions. The purpose was to avoid the dividing line between actors and audience.

5 Verfremdung-effect is a technique developed by (amongst others) Berthold Brecht. The purpose is to "make things strange" to the theatre audience, to stop the audience from becoming immersed in the fictional reality of the stage, or becoming overly empathetic with the characters.

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