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**“Mankind is not vicious, mankind is stupid”:
Imprinting ecological sympathies in children
in *Samson and Sally***

Abstract: “Mankind is not vicious, mankind is stupid. Someday man will realize what he’s doing. By killing everything in the sea he is killing himself. When the sea is dead, mankind will die, too” (Hastrup, *Samson and Sally*, 55.30–55.45). These words, spoken by the old whale Moby Dick in the Danish animated film *Samson and Sally* from 1984, echo the ecological lament found in Bent Haller’s source novel, *Kaskelotternes sang* [*The Song of the Sperm Whales*, my translation]. In the novel, Moby Dick contrasts humanity’s inclination to “destroy and kill and be lonely” with the whales’ choice to “live well and happy together, play and sing” (Haller, 97, my translation). Both the film and the novel convey a powerful ecocritical message, subverting the anthropocentric perspective of Moby Dick and fostering sympathy for the hunted whales. In their depiction of multiple human-made and systemic threats towards “everything in the sea”, the two media products effectively pre-empt the idea of a global ecological emergency, warning against the mass extinction of species and the loss of vital ecosystems.

In this essay, I will examine how the film and the novel represent this looming ecological emergency and construct an eco-centric worldview through two interrelated strands. First, I will demonstrate how these different media products guide audience sympathies towards non-human subjects, which can be argued to be a key aspect in learning to recognize, acknowledge and act upon ecological emergencies. Second, I will investigate the role of intermedial references. In addition to references to the classic novel *Moby Dick, or, the Whale* (Melville), the film even alludes to Noah’s Ark, the sinking of the Titanic, and the dumping of radioactive waste. These kinds of references work to underscore humanity’s vulnerability and their impact on, and responsibility towards, the natural environment, highlighting the relevance of an intermedial framework in understanding the communication and mediation of ecological issues.

Keywords: transmediation, animation, children, ecocriticism, ecological emergency.

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Introduction

“Mankind is not vicious, mankind is stupid. Someday man will realize what he’s doing. By killing everything in the sea he is killing himself. When the sea is dead, mankind will die too” (Hastrup, *Samson and Sally*, 55.30–55.45).¹ These words, spoken by the old whale Moby Dick in the Danish animated film *Samson and Sally*, echo the ecological lament of Bent Haller’s source novel, *Kaskelotternes sang* [*The Song of the Sperm Whales*, my translation]. In the novel, Moby Dick contrasts humanity’s tendency to “ødelægge og dræbe og være ensomme” [destroy and kill and be lonely] with whales’ choice to “leve godt og lykkeligt sammen, lege og synge” [live well and happily together, play and sing] (Haller 97).²

The concept of an ecological emergency is relatively recent. According to Bruhn and Salmose (53, note 40), it can be traced to the Darebin Council in Australia, which declared a climate emergency in 2016. Since then, other governments and organisations, such as the City of Westminster and Culture Declares, have followed suit—often distinguishing between climate emergency (climate change) and ecological emergency (biodiversity loss and species extinction). Yet, awareness of humanity’s environmental impact is not new. In Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick, or, the Whale* (1851), the narrator comments on the near-extinction of American buffaloes (514–516), concluding that the same cannot happen to whales, as the whale is “immortal in his species” (516)—a statement we now know to be false. The sperm whale is currently listed as vulnerable by the IUCN (Taylor et al.).

In *The Song of the Sperm Whales* and *Samson and Sally*, the mortality of sperm whales—both individual and collective—is central. Both works deliver a strong ecocritical message, subverting the anthropocentric perspective of *Moby Dick* and inviting sympathy for the hunted whales. In depicting systemic, human-made threats to “everything in the sea,” they anticipate the notion of global ecological emergency and warn of impending mass extinction. Notably, both the novel and the film are aimed at children. The Danish Public Libraries recommend the novel from age 10; the Danish Media Council recommends the film from age 7. Together, they form an interesting case for examining how two different media types represent ecological crisis and construct an eco-centric worldview aimed at children.

This article explores how these media products guide audience sympathies toward non-human subjects—a key aspect in learning to recognize, acknowledge, and act upon ecological emergencies. It also examines how intermedial references emphasise the global scale of the crisis and its implications for humanity. First, however, I outline a theoretical framework for

1 This quote is taken from the official American dubbing of the film. All other quotes from the film are my own translations from Danish.

2 This, and all the following translations from *The Song of the Sperm Whales* and *Samson and Sally* are my own translations.

understanding transspecies empathy, sympathy, and anthropomorphism in literature and film, drawing on cognitive film theory, ecocriticism, and animation studies.

Transspecies Empathy and Sympathy in Literature and Film

The ability to evoke empathy and sympathy toward non-human animals is a powerful tool in promoting nature-positive values—crucial in a world facing an escalating ecological emergency. Literature has long been valued for its potential to elicit empathy by presenting foreign perspectives and revealing characters' inner lives. This capacity, however, is not exclusive to literature, but different media engage audiences empathetically in varied ways.

Martha Nussbaum argues that all “narrative art has the power to make us see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist’s interest—with involvement and sympathetic understanding” (Nussbaum 147). Though she mainly discusses human characters, her notion of “narrative imagination”—where readers gain empathy by imagining themselves in a foreign perspective—is relevant to non-human ones too. Even a simple nursery rhyme like *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, she argues, invites children to imagine an inner world for the star, just as they would for a human-like character. This is perhaps especially pertinent with animated non-human characters, who due to anthropomorphising, contain both human and non-human characteristics, thus offering a bridge across species boundaries and creating an entry point for identification.

Narrative imagination can also lead to compassion, understood as “the recognition that another person, in some ways similar to oneself, has suffered some significant pain or misfortune in a way for which that person is not, or not fully, to blame” (Nussbaum 149). Compassion requires not only the capacity to evaluate the seriousness of the misfortune but also an understanding of the affected person’s experience, the ability to empathize, and the recognition that such misfortune could happen to oneself (Nussbaum 149). Compassion thus entails a higher level of reflection and moral evaluation on injustice and on the falsity of culturally constructed hierarchies between self and other, whether those hierarchies are based on race, gender, or species. In environmental storytelling, compassion—a component of sympathy³—may be even more powerful than empathy in motivating response—but it builds on empathetic engagement.

Drawing on psychological theories, Alexa Weik von Mossner outlines two types of empathy: cognitive empathy, which allows for rational understanding of another’s experience, and affective empathy, which enables more visceral, emotional engagement (von

3 Following von Mossner, I understand sympathy as “feelings of interest, compassion, and care” (von Mossner 25).

Mossner 80). Both often operate together and can support deeper character engagement. While audiences may briefly consider many characters' motives, sustained empathy usually requires prolonged exposure and *alignment* to that character. In literature alignment results from internal focalization, which reveals a character's thoughts, sensations and perspective (von Mossner 83). In film, alignment emerges through close following of a character's actions or via cues to that character's inner world. As I have argued elsewhere, the inner world of film characters is multimodally constructed, i.e., through various expressive modes, including facial expressions, body language, voice, and music (Jensen 78–82). When watching films, we instinctively interpret characters' facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures, just as we do in real-life interactions. However, unlike in real-life encounters, film music and other stylistic means also plays a role in guiding interpretations of characters' inner states (Jensen 93–95).

Von Mossner draws on cognitive theories of embodied simulation, suggesting affective responses arise from automatic cognitive and bodily mirroring of characters' sensations, expressions and movements via mirror neurons (von Mossner 3, 24). As emotions have a bodily expression, this simulation leads us to understand and potentially imitate the emotions of the character as well. While I will not go into detail of embodied simulation, which, as von Mossner acknowledges, is both influential and contested (see von Mossner 200, note 11), this theory presents a promising explanation of alignment and empathy, and it compares well with Nussbaum's concept of narrative imagination, though differing in its more involuntary, physical mechanism.

While von Mossner's biology-based approach risks universalism, she also emphasizes that a reader, or viewer's, responses rely on the projection of "emotional memories" into the reading or viewing experience, allowing for subjective and socio-cultural variability (von Mossner 24). Moreover, with her inclusion of cognitive empathy, von Mossner acknowledges that audiences may understand a character's situation without *feeling* like the character, which is an important distinction.

Ultimately, the ability to cognitively identify with and imagine—and perhaps even bodily simulate—another character's situation and, particularly for animal characters, their *umwelt*, "a given animal's perceptual life-world" (Sagan 2), is central to the reading or viewing experience and a crucial part of what makes environmental narratives compelling and effective.

Transvergent Thinking and Anthropomorphism

Aligning, empathizing, and sympathizing with non-human animal characters in human narratives inevitably raises questions about anthropomorphism—how much the represented non-human is imbued with human traits. To address this, I want to introduce the idea of *transvergent thinking*, a concept Pietari Kääpä defines as suggesting "a sense of constant

transformation, where cultures, identities and societies are never stable, but always in flux” (Kääpä 21). Drawing from Marcos Novak, Kääpä explains that transvergence represents something “alien” that cannot be fully captured by existing paradigms of representation and critique. Within ecocritical media, this mode of thinking becomes a way to rethink relationality and challenge constructed dichotomies like “human” and “nature.”

Transvergent thinking differs from convergent thinking, which tends to subordinate the human to nature, and divergent thinking, which separates them. While Kääpä emphasizes the ambiguity and incompleteness inherent in transvergent thinking, an important aspect of this perspective when dealing with non-human characters and agency in animated film—following directly from Novak’s definition—is the inability to fully and truly represent non-human animals using human language and media. Even with biological insights into how different species perceive the world, we can only construct what von Mossner, drawing on ethology, calls *critical anthropomorphism*: a scientifically informed, self-reflexive attempt at portraying non-human animals (von Mossner 113). We can never truly know how animals think or feel in their own perceptual worlds. All media representations—even nature documentaries—are shaped by human cultural frameworks: from framing and editing to music and voiceovers (see Bissonnette 131; Collins). No matter how sincere the intentions might be, the animal perspective will always be something ‘alien’ and incomplete, and to various degrees anthropomorphized in human media representations.

In animated films for children, anthropomorphising is often overt. Non-human characters frequently serve as allegories for human traits, which risks erasing or flattening the animal perspective. From an ecocritical standpoint, this tendency can be problematic. However, animation scholar Paul Wells proposes an alternative view. He argues that animated characters are inherently ambiguous phenomena, capable of carrying multiple representational positions at once (Wells 3). In this sense, animated non-human animals are “dynamic and fluid” (Wells 23), and can be made to represent both human and nonhuman animal, even at the same time, or neither. With this ambiguity inherent to the form itself, animation might be particularly suited to prompt transvergent thinking in regard to ecocritical representations.

Wells further argues that due to its free form, artificiality, and its relation to an illustrative tradition, animation can be read as a consciously artistic expression with political meaning, and that:

It is possible to view animation as an approach that inevitably facilitates a representational difference, and that intrinsically interrogates orthodox positions, embedded ideology, and epistemological certainty *per se*. Knowledge of and about apparently specific creatures or objects or even human figures is challenged and potentially redefined (...) The animated bestiary embodies the openness of debate and not the fixedness of conclusion. (Wells 5)

Because animation does not mimic a pre-existing reality, it invites symbolic and metaphorical interpretations that challenge our assumptions—including those about nonhumans. Animation can be at the same time innocent and subversive, as when dire oceanic and ecological emergency is represented by the fear and hunger of cute teenage whales, who, with their exaggerated big eyes and bodies that at times move more like that of a human than of a whale, are far from being non-anthropomorphic, but still manage to represent the whale perspective and condition.

Anthropomorphising runs through both *Samson and Sally* and the literary source *The Song of the Sperm Whales*, not least in the way the behaviours and emotions of these animals are described. In both the novel and the film, the whale protagonists speak in human language and voices. They joke, make fun of other animals and brag self-confidently; they feel shame and envy, and perhaps most importantly, the whales have their own mythological stories about Moby Dick and, in the novel, even about The Great Whale who created the world—portraying both human emotions, motivations, and human-like mythologies. But both the novel and the film put a spin on these human-like characteristics to make them more credible in a whale-centred narrative, as I will discuss below. Even the fact that both in the novel and the film, the whale group (called a pod) is led by an adult male whale (a bull) can be considered anthropomorphist—just like the filmic ending with Samson and Sally seemingly raising their calf together—as female whales (cows) and their calves form pods on their own, with only occasional visits by bulls (Calkins 45) (although bulls can form smaller groups with other bulls (Roth)).

Still, both the film and novel engage in a kind of narrative balancing act. The anthropomorphic traits facilitate audience alignment and emotional investment, while still providing agency and centrality to the whale's condition. While von Mossner argues that anthropomorphism is not strictly necessary for *transspecies empathy*, and that excessive anthropomorphism can risk undermining authentic non-human experience (von Mossner 106, 130), she also concedes that even overtly anthropomorphized characters—like Bambi—can potentially foster sympathy that extends to real animals and environments (von Mossner 130–131).

Following the argument for transvergent thinking, and the suggestion that animated characters can be both nonhuman and human at the same time, I prefer to see the idea of ecocentric narratives and anthropocentric narratives not as binary terms—two terms I have borrowed from Kääpä, who in turn has them from Timo Räikkönen (Kääpä 5)—but as oppositional poles on a continuum. As argued by David Herman, referenced by von Mossner, there is a “continuity” (von Mossner 112) between the experience of being human and the experience of being non-human (see also Calkins 33–34; von Mossner 210–211, note 6)—a continuity founded on both similarities and differences. Humans are animals, and we share biological similarities with other animals, particularly with our closest relatives. Furthermore, recognizing that non-human animals, including those who are very different

to ourselves, have a subjective consciousness—which is by now the dominant paradigm in scientific studies of animals (von Mossner 109–110)—there are likely to be continuities between human consciousness and the consciousness of animals more remote from us in the family tree, even if those consciousnesses might be harder for us to imagine and understand. At the end of the day, we are all evolutionarily developed animals who need food and water, and who will have strategies to attempt to survive when confronted with external threats. Animated non-human animals are thus both human and non-human at the same time, and the recognition of this blurring and blending of boundaries enables animation audiences to simulate and reflect on this partial ‘otherness’ of a partial eco-centric perspective.

Analysing the Eco-Centric Perspective in *The Song of the Sperm Whales* and *Samson and Sally*

The Song of the Sperm Whales and *Samson and Sally* are related media products conveyed through two different media types: an illustrated children’s book and an animated film, and as described above, they therefore have different possibilities for representation.

In the analysis that follows, I focus on how the book and film use different, yet related, strategies—afforded by their respective media—to depict an ecological emergency in ocean ecosystems and guide audience empathy and sympathy.

The Song of the Sperm Whales

Bent Haller’s *The Song of the Sperm Whales* (1981) is an illustrated children’s novel about a sperm whale named Tangøje—Seaweed Eye—named by his mother after the seaweed surrounding her during his birth.

At first, Seaweed Eye enjoys a relatively happy ‘childhood’ despite threats from killer whales, whalers, and frequent references to food scarcity. He is close to his mother, learns to dive and forage, and befriends Gylte,⁴ a female calf. The two behave like unruly teenagers, pushing the limits of independence. During a migration south, Seaweed Eye’s mother is killed by whalers, and Seaweed Eye and Gylte become separated from the pod. The two young whales continue the migrating south in search of it. Along the way, they are lured by sharks into a seaweed forest beneath an oil spill. Gylte dies as a result.

⁴ The Danish word ‘gylte’ is the name for a range of species of wrasse fish. These fish, even the ones living in Danish waters, are often quite small and pretty with different colours and black or coloured markings. The Danish word ‘gylt’ is also used for a young sow, and, according to the Danish dictionary, the gylte is so named because its snout resembles a pig’s snout. Due to the difficulty in translating this name, I will stick with the Danish name for the rest of the article.

Seaweed Eye continues alone, searching for "Old Dick," a mythological figure who represents hope amid ecological and human-caused threats such as pollution, whaling, and food shortages. However, when Seaweed Eye finally finds Moby Dick, the encounter is disillusioning—the whale cannot provide salvation or answers. Seaweed Eye resumes his journey south, encountering dead fish, polluted waters, sunken ships, and barrels being dumped into the ocean. He nearly dies after swimming through poisoned waters but is rescued by a pod of dolphins who guide him to a wise dolphin named Crab.

Seaweed Eye asks Crab, "Hvorfor er menneskene så grusomme?" [Why are the humans so cruel?] Crab replies, "Jeg tror ikke, de er grusomme, jeg tror, de DUMME (...) Engang må de finde ud af, at hvis de dræber alt i havet, dræber de også alt i sig selv" [I don't think they are cruel, I think they are STUPID. At some point they will have to learn that if they kill everything in the ocean, they will also kill everything in themselves] (Haller 121–122).⁵

Following Crab's advice, Seaweed Eye swims toward the southern icebergs to find his pod. He encounters more whalers and more death, and he seems ultimately to be on the brink of starvation and collapse. The novel ends openly, with Seaweed Eye hearing the song of the sperm whales.

Samson and Sally

The animated film largely follows the storyline of the novel, but also introduces some differences. Gylte is named Sally, and Seaweed Eye is named Samson. In the film, Sally is an orphan, implied to have lost her mother to whalers, and is adopted by Samson's mother. Samson and Sally become close and eventually sweethearts.

Unlike in the novel, Samson and Sally do not migrate together. After the death of Samson's mother, Sally sets off alone to find the pod, while Samson begins his search for Moby Dick. By the film's end, Samson reunites with the pod after meeting Moby Dick, and the story closes with him and Sally raising a calf together.

Strategies to Create an Eco-Centric Worldview and Align Sympathies

Creating a Whale-Centric Perspective

As discussed above, *umwelt*, originally coined by Jakob von Uexküll, refers to "a given animal's perceptual life-world" (Sagan 2). Since nonhumans do not perceive the world in the same way humans do, it presents a challenge for narratives that aim to communicate a nonhuman perspective. However, even though the whales in *The Song of the Sperm Whales* possess many anthropomorphic traits, the book also manages to emphasize the perceptual world of the whales. This creates a (partial) eco-centric perspective, foregrounding the (imagined) perceptions and experiences of the whales.

5 This quote, which also opens this paper, is in the film given to the character of Moby Dick.

Sound is used throughout the novel to convey this whale perspective. The whales navigate and hunt through sound, remain alert to dangerous noises, call out to one another, and sing. Even silence is emphasized as meaningful: for Seaweed Eye, it can signal both loneliness and peacefulness. The very title, *The Song of the Sperm Whales*, highlights the significance of whale singing. As noted above, whale song is the final sign at the end of the novel that suggests Seaweed Eye may have found his pod. The novel ends:

Havet blev blankt, og uden den mindste krusning. Stille, stille, så stille at han kunne høre nogle lyde som han næsten havde glemte. Langt, langt borte ... billeder fra det sted hvor han gemte sine kæreste erindringer brød frem i klare farver. Takkede isbjerger og legende unger i et gyldent hav, tryghed, varme. Var det også bare en drøm? Nej ... han var helt vågen. Han løftede med besvær hovedet og turde næsten ikke tro at det var sandt. At det var kaskelotternes sang han hørte...

[The sea became clear and without the slightest ripple. Quiet, quiet, so quiet that he could hear some sounds that he had almost forgotten. Far, far away... images from the place where he hid his dearest memories burst forth in bright colours. Jagged icebergs and young whales playing in a golden sea, safety, warmth. Was that just a dream too? No... he was fully awake. He lifted his head with difficulty and could hardly believe it was true. That it was the song of the sperm whales he heard...] (Haller 137–138, ellipses in original).

According to Jennifer Calkins, “The reception of sound waves, audition, and echolocation appears essential for social behavior and foraging in sperm whales” (Calkins 42), confirming the importance of sound to whale perception. However, it should be noted that sperm whales do not actually sing—they communicate using clicking sounds. Whale singing is generally associated with humpback whales (Johnson). Therefore, the novel’s emphasis on “song” does not accurately reflect the perceptual world of the sperm whale. Nonetheless, for many readers, the idea of “whale song” evokes a generalised and emotionally resonant image of whales. Similarly, the novel includes rich visual descriptions—such as the “bright colours” mentioned above—which may not align with how sperm whales actually experience the world. Calkins notes that sperm whales have reduced vision, colour perception, and sense of smell compared to other mammals (Calkins 41–42). These descriptions may therefore be more symbolic or evocative for the human reader than accurate representations of whale perception. However, they still serve to illustrate what a whale might perceive or pay attention to, and thereby help the reader simulate perceptions relevant to a whale perspective.

Whale song is also a recurring symbol of social connection. For instance, Seaweed Eye’s mother sings to him, making him feel safe, as if “intet ondt kunne nå ham” [nothing evil could reach him] (Haller 18). Furthermore, when the pod sings about Moby Dick, Seaweed

Eye listens to “de skønne lyde, der omslattede noget varmt i ham” [the wonderful sounds, that enveloped something warm in him] (Haller 23).

Sound is similarly portrayed as vital for survival, as the young whales are taught that “enhver mystisk lyd betød fare, og at de ALTID SKULLE LYTTE” [any mysterious sound meant danger, and that they SHOULD ALWAYS LISTEN] (Haller 60). In the scene where Seaweed Eye and Gylte swim off to play and search for food on their own—encountering both killer whales and, eventually, the whaling ships that lead to Seaweed Eye’s mother’s death—they rely on sound to navigate and detect danger. For example, when they first hear the killer whales:

’Hør,’ hviskede Gylte. Lyden var ikke længere mystisk, kun skræmmende. De hørte nogle karakteristiske plask, taktfast og højt, og de rykkede tættere sammen. Der var ikke noget at tage fejl af. Det var spækhuggere.

[‘Listen,’ whispered Gylte. The sound was no longer mysterious, only frightening. They heard a distinctive splash, rhythmic and loud, and they moved closer together. There was no mistaking it. It was killer whales.] (Haller 59)

By using imperatives like “listen!” the reader is invited to imagine these sensations. According to the theory of embodied cognition discussed earlier, such descriptions allow readers to create mental simulations—not only of the sounds but also of how the whales might feel in that situation: alert, frightened, and seeking comfort in each other’s presence.

Sound plays a similar, but perhaps less emphasised, role in the film adaptation, and the audiovisual medium allows the audience to hear the whale sounds directly. In the title sequence, the first sounds heard are whale song—likely humpback whale sounds. The whale song has a shrill, metallic timbre and strong reverberation (which sounds electronically enhanced) and is combined with a low synth drone (often used in film to signal suspense), creating an eerie atmosphere (Hastrup, *Samson og Sally* [*Samson and Sally*], 00:00–00:45)). As in the novel, whale song reappears at the film’s end to signal that Samson have found the other whales. After he tells a seagull that he doesn’t think he will ever find Sally again, the whale sounds return—this time sounding more natural. The accompanying music is softer and less eerie, though still tinged with melancholy. This evokes a bittersweet atmosphere as Samson grins, turns upright in the water, and splashes with his fins—anthropomorphic body language that clearly signals joy. The contrast between Samson’s relief and the somber tone of the music suggests that, while he is reunited with Sally and has a family, the sadness, fear, and loss from earlier events linger (Hastrup, *Samson og Sally* [*Samson and Sally*], 58:06–58:50). While the novel has an open ending—Seaweed Eye hears the whales, but we don’t know if he recovers—the film thus provides a more definitively happy ending. This shift may reflect an effort to soften the darker aspects of the story, especially given the intensity of the film’s portrayal of danger and death, which could be frightening for children and even adults.

In the film, sound as a warning or for locating food seems less emphasized than in the novel, perhaps due to the presence of music, however, it is still present. For example, in one scene, Samson and Sally are exploring alone when a muffled, roaring sound is heard—suggesting danger. After a moment, Sally says, “listen!”, and Samson responds that he thinks it is killer whales. Sally corrects him: “nej, det er et jerndyr” [no, it is an iron animal]. When they surface, the sound changes to reflect their new perception as they see a ship (Hastrup, *Samson og Sally* [*Samson and Sally*], 26:03–26:15).

This example also illustrates how both the novel and film reimagine language to create a kind of “whale dialect,” reflecting how whales might name the world differently than humans. The term “iron animal” for “ship” is the clearest example and is repeated throughout. In the film, the meaning is visually obvious. In the novel, which uses a third-person narrator, focalisation shifts between internal and external perspectives to balance the whale dialect with more familiar human language. Most of the novel is focalised through Seaweed Eye, offering insight into his worldview and emotions—thus aligning readers with him. However, focalisation occasionally shifts to other characters, such as Seaweed Eye’s mother during her death scene (Haller 64) or Gylte when she afterwards tries to comfort Seaweed Eye (Haller 68). These shifts help express multiple whale perspectives. At the same time, the narration interweaves whale and human language—for example, when Seaweed Eye meets the dolphin Crab, who lives inside a big “iron whale.” Though Seaweed Eye is afraid at first, Crab reassures him it’s dead. Once they enter, the narration switches to calling it a “submarine” (Haller 122–123), bridging the gap between the whale’s and the reader’s understanding.

Ecological Emergency and Basic Trust

In both the novel and the film, *Seaweed Eye/Samson* loses his mother when a whaler spots him, and the mother intervenes, shielding him with her body and taking a grenade meant for him. In the novel, Samson emits a sobbing sound and dives as he hears the whaling ship, after which the narration details how he holds his breath underwater and listens to the movements of the ship and the pod. When the grenade hits the mother, the focalization briefly shifts to her perspective to convey the moment of impact. This description of the mother’s death is brief—likely to suit a child audience. More affective is the subsequent return to Seaweed Eye’s perspective, where he is sick with grief and longing for his mother over several pages, “Han græd kun og var håbløst ensom. Han havde kaldt og kaldt. Men hun kom ikke. Han havde mistet kontakten” [He only cried and was hopelessly lonely. He had called and called. But she didn’t come. He had lost contact] (Haller 66). After the mother’s death, Gylte and Seaweed Eye flee and are separated from the pod. Gylte becomes Seaweed Eye’s only companion—and, to some extent, a replacement for his mother, as he “trykkede sig ind til hende på samme måde som han havde trykket sig ind til sin mor” [pressed himself to her in the same way he had pressed himself to his mother] (Haller 70–71).

In the film, shortly after his mother's death, Samson chooses to embark on a solitary quest to find Moby Dick rather than search for his pod. While the film downplays Samson's grief, it intensifies the fear and sorrow during the encounter with the whaler. The emotional impact comes through facial expression, voice, and music. When the whaler spots him, Samson's terrified expression—wide eyes and open mouth—is anthropomorphic. He cries out "Help!" just as the harpoon fires with a loud explosion and he dives. The audience not only sees and hears this but can also viscerally imagine what it feels like to be hunted and hear an explosion going off. The soundtrack accelerates into dark, fast-paced rhythms as Samson flees, emphasizing his fear. His mother covers him with her body, and after another explosion, the water turns red. Realizing she is gone, Samson screams, his body shaking, voice shrill and reverberating. The music shifts to long, slow synth notes as Sally drags him away and tells him not to be sad (Hastrup, *Samson og Sally* [*Samson and Sally*], 36:40–38:38).

Both the novel and the film thus evoke strong emotions through Seaweed Eye/Samson's experience, inviting the audience to imagine being hunted and losing a parent. This links to a recurring theme in children's media: *basic trust* (Erikson)—the belief that one is safe and protected. This trust often hinges on the presence of family and home. As Kirsten Drotner notes, many animated films, such as Disney's, emphasize a return to familial safety through a home-away-home structure (Drotner 76–77). Similarly, both *The Song of the Sperm Whales* and *Samson and Sally* explore the absence of the family or pod, and the constant threat from humans, portrayed as destroyers of the sea.

This theme of basic trust operates on both an individual and a collective level. Seaweed Eye/Samson repeatedly encounters signs of ecological devastation during his journey from North to South: hungry animals (sharks, squids, other whales) and poisoned environments filled with dead fish, rotten sharks (in the novel), or skeletons (in the film). In the novel, after the mother's death, Gylte dies after sharks, driven by hunger, lure the two young whales into a seaweed forest underneath an oil spill. The novel describes Seaweed Eye's experiences of the sticky oil clinging to his body and pulling him down, inviting audiences to mentally simulate this feeling, as well as his mourning for Gylte. He tries to protect her corpse from the sharks, but every time he surfaces for air, they consume more of her (Haller 78–82). This moment is especially powerful due to the emotional bond established between Seaweed Eye and Gylte at this point.

In the film, this oil scene precedes the mother's death, and Gylte does not die. Samson and Sally narrowly escape a whaler, aided by a seagull, before the pod reaches a vast oil slick. Unable to turn back, they must dive beneath it. As mammals, whales need to surface for air, making this dive perilous. The whale leader instructs them to dive. The screen darkens while the whales are under the oil, and gloomy electronic music underscores the danger. One female whale, running out of air, tries to surface. Despite warnings and attempts to hold her back, she rises, suffocates in the oil, and sinks as melancholic synth music plays

(Hastrup, *Samson og Sally* [*Samson and Sally*], 29.55–32.14). Though the main character is Samson, this scene is deeply affecting. Many children know what it feels like to hold their breath underwater, and while most will not have experienced suffocation, they understand the panic of not having air.

These scenes portray the whales' struggle as part of a larger, global ecological emergency. Readers and viewers are aligned with Seaweed Eye/Samson and experience the threat and loss of basic trust alongside him. While Samson survives and returns home, the melancholic music at the end of the film and the slightly unresolved ending of the novel suggest that safety is not fully restored. The scenes of the mother's death and the oil spill show how close this threat comes, encouraging viewers to not only cognitively and affectively empathize with Samson but also to feel compassion for other cetaceans subjected to similar dangers. Even if most children have not lost a parent, they can imagine the trauma of such a loss.

The theme of basic trust thus bridges the human and non-human perspectives. Sperm whales, particularly young and female whales, live in social pods and do not thrive in isolation. The loss of a caregiver—whether whale or human—can be existential. Although sperm whales exhibit alloparenting (where other females care for the young), both Seaweed Eye and Samson lose their entire pod, and with it, any potential caretakers. Children may not relate to searching for squid at ocean depths, but they understand hunger, grief, and loneliness. By focusing on these universal needs—food, safety, companionship—the novel and film create meaningful cognitive and affective empathetic alignment and sympathy between human readers and non-human characters.

Moby Dick and Ecocritical Philosophy

The transmedial lineage of *Samson and Sally* and *The Song of the Sperm Whales* spans several layers in which themes, values, and social norms are “inherited” and transformed across generations. As previously discussed, *Samson and Sally* is based on *The Song of the Sperm Whales*, which in turn draws from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick, or, The Whale*. In fact, Moby Dick himself appears as a character in both the novel and the film. Melville's novel is itself rich in intermedial and intertextual references, including an adaptation of the biblical story of Jonah and the Whale, told through a sermon (48–56). The novel also draws from Melville's personal experience aboard a whaling ship and from historical whaling accounts, particularly the story of George Pollard, captain of the Essex—a ship sunk by a sperm whale—and of Mocha Dick, a white sperm whale reputed to be deadly to whalers (NOAA).

Moby Dick is narrated and focalized through the human character of Ishmael, who joins the whaling voyage of the *Pequod*. The ship's captain, Ahab, seeks revenge on the white whale Moby Dick, who took his leg on a previous voyage. The novel ends with the whale sinking the *Pequod*, killing all but Ishmael. While the novel is largely told from the perspective of the

whalers, it also expresses ambivalence toward whaling and, as several scholars have noted, anticipates key ecocritical insights—such as acknowledging the whale as a sentient being and questioning the human-nonhuman binary (Buell 205–214; Calkins; Schultz).

This is exemplified in a passage that explores the whale's sensory experience:

While in most other animals that I can think of, the eyes are so planted as imperceptibly to blend their visual power [...] the peculiar position of the whale's eyes [...] must wholly separate the impressions which each independent organ imparts [...] Man may, in effect, be said to look out on the world from a sentry-box with two joined sashes for his window. But with the whale, these two sashes are separately inserted, marking two distinct windows, but sadly impairing the view. (Melville 367–368)

Whales are also ambiguously framed as mysterious, awe-inspiring, and monstrous. Ishmael's early reaction to Moby Dick—"with greedy ears I learned the history of that murderous monster" (Melville 199)—evokes both horror and fascination. Later in the novel, the brutal killing of another whale is depicted in pitiful terms: "From the points which the whale's eyes had once occupied, now protruded blind bulbs, horribly pitiable to see. But pity there was none" (Melville 399). As Lawrence Buell notes, "most of the sympathy is reserved for sailors working under hazardous conditions, and humanitarian side-glances at their quarries are sparing, but they are also more pronounced" (208).

While *Moby Dick* thus anticipates later developments in animal studies and ecocriticism, the novel is more about the whalers' perspective than about the whale perspective, and its anthropocentric framing and focalisation limits the whales' agency by confining the narrative to human language and perception. This critique applies in part to *The Song of the Sperm Whales* as well, but the shift in focalization—from the human Ishmael to the sperm whale Seaweed Eye—enables stronger alignment with the whale, a more ecocentric stance, and a moral structure in favour of the whales. Where *Moby Dick* often casts whales as monsters, *The Song of the Sperm Whales* and *Samson and Sally* reframe Moby Dick as a heroic, mythological figure who only kills in self-defense. In the film, Samson's mother recounts his legend:⁶

Engang, for længe, længe siden, levede der en stor, hvid hval, som hed Moby Dick. Og Moby Dick var den største hval, der nogensinde havde levet. Menneskene forsøgte at dræbe ham, og det til trods for, at han ofte knuste deres skibe, når han skulle forsvare sit liv. Alligevel, menneskene lod ham ikke i fred. Ja der var en, der var så dum, at selv om han tidligere havde mistet to skibe, så ville han endnu engang

6 The novel tells a similar story with the same core meaning.

forsøge og dræbe Moby Dick. (...) Moby Dick forsvandt i havet, og ingen har siden set ham, men sagnet siger, at engang vil den store hvide hval Moby Dick komme og frelse os alle sammen.

[Once upon a time, long, long ago, there lived a great white whale called Moby Dick. And Moby Dick was the biggest whale that had ever lived. Humans tried to kill him, despite the fact that he often destroyed their ships in defence of his life. Still, the humans would not leave him alone. Yes, there was one who was so stupid that even though he had previously lost two ships, he would once again try to kill Moby Dick. (...) Moby Dick disappeared into the sea and no one has seen him since, but the legend says that one day, the great white whale Moby Dick will come and save us all]. (Hastrup, *Samson Og Sally* [*Samson and Sally*], 8.36–11.54)

By casting Moby Dick as a mythical saviour, *The Song of the Sperm Whales* and *Samson and Sally* subverts, or perhaps reinterprets, the classic tale of *Moby Dick* (as also pointed out by Bandyopadhyay). Through the reference to this classic novel, the character of Moby Dick comes to represent both the long history of environmental exploitation and a counternarrative of justice and retribution. In *Samson and Sally*, he even functions as a bearer of the film's ecocritical message, as already shown in the opening of this essay, when he says: "De [menneskene] er ikke onde, de er dumme. Engang vil de finde ud af, at hvis de dræber alt i havet, så dræber de også sig selv" [They [humans] are not evil, they are stupid. Someday they will realize that if they kill everything in the ocean, they will also kill themselves.] (Hastrup, *Samson og Sally* [*Samson and Sally*], 55:30–55:46).⁷

In the novel, this role of making the ecocritical message verbally explicit is shared among several characters—Moby Dick, the dolphin Crab, and Seaweed Eye's mother who teaches the young whales about sustainable values: "Dræb aldrig mere, end I kan spise", sagde hun, 'der skal være nok til alle, TIL ALLE TIDER'" ['Never kill more than you can eat,' she said, 'there should be enough for everyone, ALWAYS.'] (Haller 49).

This line about sustainability from the mother is absent in the film, but the animation adds another dimension to the ecological message. In addition to Moby Dick remarking on the change of times—suggesting everything were better in the old days—and his reflection that combat with humans was once more equitable before the rise of modern technology, the film employs a more subtle yet powerful visual strategy to communicate the gravity of the environmental crisis (Hastrup, 1984, 51:35–56.25). Moby Dick resides in what is referred to as "the human city," a sunken metropolis. When Samson first arrives at this city,

7 This is a direct transcription and translation from the original Danish version of the film. As stated in footnote 1, the similar sounding quote opening this paper is from the American dubbing of the film from 1991.

the colour palette is dominated by soft white and blue. The background is populated with statues, open spaces, and buildings suggestive of an antique city, and Moby Dick himself lives in an old temple. However, during Moby Dick and Samson's conversation, the viewer is presented with images of a very different city. As Moby Dick recalls his power to destroy ships with a single swipe of his tail, the scene shifts: the 'camera' pans left to reveal that the temple is situated within a much darker, green-tinted cityscape, combining elements of both ancient ruins and modern urban structures. When Moby Dick and Samson later ascend to the surface to breathe, the cityscape revealed is clearly a modern one—with skyscrapers and an old car overgrown with algae. As Samson continues his journey, he again swims over this modern submerged city, now visibly marked with an Esso sign, metal bridges, and most notably, the Statue of Liberty. This identifies the city as New York.

The scene thus leverages the affordances of animation to situate Samson and Moby Dick in a layered temporal space, where ancient and modern eras overlap. Moby Dick, as an ancient being, becomes the temporal bridge between these epochs. The presence of the Statue of Liberty, a symbol closely associated with New York and, more broadly, with Western culture (in addition to its many other connotations), further enhances the film's ecological warning. Through its decay (the torch has seemingly broken off) and submersion, the statue symbolizes a future in which human civilization has succumbed to its own environmental recklessness.

In this way, the Statue of Liberty—like Moby Dick—functions, in Irina Rajewsky's terms, as an *intermedial reference* (52), or in Lars Elleström's terms, as a combination of *media representation* and *transmediation* (81). An intermedial reference can be understood as a form of intertextuality in which "the given media-product thematizes, evokes, or imitates elements or structures of another, conventionally distinct medium" (Rajewsky 53). Unlike Rajewsky, I even include references to real-life events in my classification of intermedial references, as knowledge of such events is also shaped by prior mediations. The image of the damaged Statue of Liberty functions as a representation of a different artform (a media representation of sculpture), which carries with it associations related both to the form (sculpture is durable) and content (the symbolic meaning of the Statue of Liberty is transmediated, i.e. re-represented in a new medium). Its inclusion reinforces the film's ecocritical message by evoking a sense of urgency and a dire prediction of where humanity is headed if current practices continue.

In the following section, I will explore how other intermedial references in the film reinforce this sense of ecological emergency.

Intermedial References and Globality

While the multiple threats the whales face and their migratory nature (both the novel and the film depict migration, though in different ways) suggest the global scope of the ecological crisis, this sense of planetary emergency is further reinforced through intermedial references, particularly in the film.

In the film, this global aspect—and the broader significance of the crisis for both marine life and humanity—is emphasized through a densely intermedial scene that has no direct counterpart in the novel. This scene (Hastrup, *Samson og Sally* [*Samson and Sally*], 20.09–24.14) seems to compress the discovery of various objects that Seaweed Eye encounter in the book into a single, richly layered musical number. In it, Samson and Sally meet two walruses who, when asked to identify themselves, begin to scat and dance to an upbeat jazz tune. They swim through a watery graveyard of crashed ships and sunken warplanes, interacting with iconic vessels from human history.

The walruses pass by Noah's Ark—releasing all-white animals—encounter a pirate skeleton, and witness a slave ship where a skeletal overseer whips skeletal slaves. They then come across the Titanic (clearly labelled), where they pick up abandoned instruments once played by the ship's musicians—whose dedication during the sinking is a well-known historical anecdote. When one walrus opens a can of sardines, three anthropomorphised sardines with long eyelashes and lipstick perform a song in close-harmony style, singing, “If you really need me, please go on and eat me. Jumping in your stomach makes me really fun. Surely you'll be missing me when I am gone” (22.31–22.41). They then dive cheerfully into the walrus's mouth. Notably, this sardine song is in English—even in the Danish-language version of the film. The number continues with the walruses drumming on a cannon while crabs in military helmets march across unexploded bombs and barrels labelled “radio-active.” A final explosion launches the walruses unharmed to the surface, where their carefree scating resumes. However, when they eat a fish tainted by radioactive leakage from a broken barrel, they start losing their teeth and develop yellow sores—while dead fish leap from the water around them.

On the surface, this sequence might easily be interpreted by children as entertaining and fantastical. But beneath this light-hearted surface lies a dense web of intermedial references—to the Bible (Noah's Ark), historical atrocities (slavery), modern maritime disasters (Titanic), and War (radioactive waste, military detritus). These references suggest themes of divine retribution and apocalypse and the repeated self-destructive tendencies of human civilization and technology. The sardines' refrain—“Surely you'll be missing me when I am gone”—may be sung by a canned fish, but it could be extrapolated to all ocean life, and by extension, the planet.

This sequence presents a powerful indictment of human hubris, technological overreach, and disregard for nonhuman life, which is depicted as having led to the ecological emergency in the film. The film implies that such behavior not only threatens marine ecosystems,

but could ultimately lead to humanity's own undoing—a theme also voiced in the novel, where Crab the dolphin warns that humans may destroy everything in the sea, and with it, themselves.

Conclusion

It is important to underscore that both the novel *The Song of the Sperm Whale* and the animated film *Samson and Sally* are media products intended primarily for children. Children and adults, however, belong to different interpretive communities (Fish), and their meaning-making processes can diverge significantly. Furthermore, empathetic engagement with fictional characters is not limited to cognitive simulation of their expressions and sensations; it also involves the projection of the audience's own subjective experiences onto the narrative. This introduces a wide interpretive variability which will differ depending on age, cultural background, and prior knowledge.

The analysis presented here is therefore based on a model recipient. While the films' multimodal guiding (through visuals, music, facial expression, and body language) of alignment and empathy is likely accessible even to young audiences, other aspects, particularly the intermedial, are more likely to resonate differently depending on the interpretive community. Children might recognise and enjoy the playful renditions of Noah's Ark or the Titanic without necessarily grasping their deeper symbolic implications. The biblical, historical, and cultural references embedded in these scenes can be humorous or entertaining at surface level, yet their critical potential—as commentaries on ecological collapse, human pride, and historical violence—may only emerge through guided discussions.

Martha Nussbaum has argued for the importance of narrative art in cultivating democratic citizenship and compassion in children. Literature—and by extension, narrative media—can render the invisible visible, expanding children's awareness of others' inner lives and vulnerabilities. In the same vein, both the novel and the film make the ecological emergency not only visible but emotionally relatable by giving voice and agency to sperm whales and other marine species. Of course, neither *The Song of the Sperm Whale* nor *Samson and Sally* offers an authentic insight into the sensory and cognitive world of sperm whales. Sperm whales do not sing, nor do they navigate the world in the culturally inflected ways the stories depict. Thus, the two media products do not foster *true* transspecies empathy in the strictest sense. However, they do evoke compassion and a sense of ethical urgency by linking environmental degradation to themes of basic trust, loss, and vulnerability—particularly through the figure of Seaweed Eye/Samson. The depiction of hunger, illness, maternal separation, and existential threat renders the character's suffering relatable and invites viewers to sympathise not just with him, but with real-world whales and other threatened species.

Despite the anthropomorphising of these animals—and the simplification this entails—the narratives succeed in inviting empathy across species boundaries, and through classroom engagement, *The Song of the Sperm Whale* and *Samson and Sally* may be used to encourage transvergent, critical thinking about the ecological emergency, in age appropriate ways.

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