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Nilsson, Gabriella

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Detesting Influencers

Print Media Perspectives on the Phantasmagoria of Influencer Life Worlds

By Gabriella Nilsson

Influencer life worlds arouse strong feelings in Swedish print media. Journalists and columnists describe how they are "disgusted" (*Göteborgs-Posten* 6/7 2019) by the idea itself, how they want to "swallow cyanide" (*Dagens Nyheter* 16/2 2018) when they hear about the phenomenon, and how they would rather "shoot [themselves], immediately" (*Dagens Nyheter* 6/10 2018) if someone were to call them influencers.[1] It seems unproblematic to publicly detest those "young girls who sell their souls for some free samples" (*Aftonbladet* 23/2 2018); those "poor but beautiful looking youngsters with diagnoses" who are suddenly "stinking rich because they sold out their lives" and who are now "imitating power" (*Aftonbladet* 11/2 2019). "Sure, it's not nice to laugh at people making fools of themselves, but sometimes it's hard to resist – especially if they don't get it" (*Västerbottens-Kuriren* 22/2 2019).

It is argued that girls have become "hypervisible" in contemporary popular culture (Handyside & Taylor-Jones 2016; Formark et al. 2017). The ethnologist Ann-Charlotte Palmgren, in her work on Swedish bloggers in the early 2000s, describes how already in the late 1990s "the girl figure entered the public space with a bang, and questioned cultural expectations of what a girl is, should be, or could be" (Palmgren 2019:130). The ethnologist Magdalena Petersson McIntyre describes how media representations of bloggers during the first half of the 2010s evolved from moral panic-like condemnations of young women's superficiality to celebrations of their entrepreneurial spirit (Petersson McIntyre 2019; cf. Palmgren 2019). However, even though many influencers today run listed companies with multi-million turnover, it still seems common for print media to detest them. "If there is anything that can be ironized over in 2019, it is influencers" (*Resumé* 22/2 2019). Why is this? This article analyses *the detesting of influencers* in Swedish print media during the period from 2016 to 2020. How does it take shape and how can it be understood?

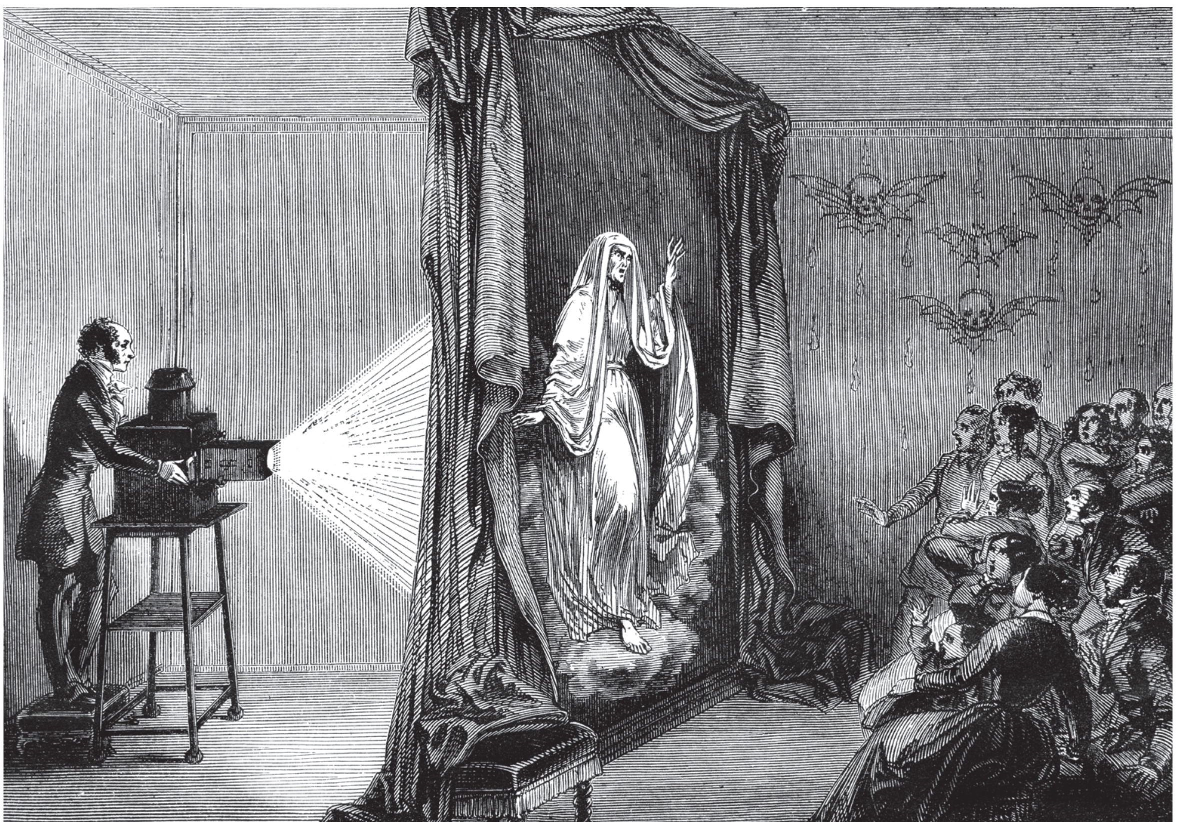
The work as influencer can be described in terms of visibility labour, or emotional labour, and is defined by a wide range of practices, platforms and social relations that includes monetization of private life upon which advertorials for products and services are premised (Marwick 2014). The phenomenon in the last decade that more young women in particular have chosen to transform their private lives into more or less lucrative digital businesses, what I like to refer to as *influencer life worlds*,[2] has received increasing attention in the Swedish media (Petersson McIntyre 2019; Palmgren 2019). There has been a gradual increase in the number of texts that mention influencers or deal with the phenomenon in detail, from the year 2015 with only 150 hits in the media database *Retriever Research*, to a formal explosion of texts in 2019, with 10,830 hits. Narrowed down to print media texts published in the largest and mid-sized Swedish newspapers only, 6,330 texts were published during the period 2016–2020. These were all coded manually using the program NVivo. The texts consist of everything from portraits and gossip to articles that treat the pros and cons of influencer marketing as a business model. A relatively large number of texts discuss the very existence of the phenomenon, such as how influencers negatively affect the climate, youth mental health, politics, fashion, feminism, cultural life or the

labour market, to name just a few themes. Approximately 250 of these texts, mainly chronicles and editorials, are explicitly critical, if not hateful, in nature. This article is based on an analysis of these 250 print media texts.

The denomination print media is selected to encompass vague notions such as "traditional media" or "old media", even though all the newspapers analysed here exist in digital form as well as in print. The 250 texts have been closely read with particular respect to answering the purpose how the detesting of influencers takes shape. The texts quoted in this article are the ones that treat the phenomenon most generally, as the selection is above all made to highlight the strong emotions that influencer life worlds arouse. The word "detesting" is employed as an analytical concept to mean not only a feeling but an action; an explicit practice performed by journalists and columnists in the form of their writing. This is not to say that all journalists hate influencers, or even that all the selected texts are hateful, but that the texts, and thus their writers, partake in legitimizing a hateful discourse.

Phantasmagoria, the Magic Lantern and the Ghost

In this section I will sketch a theoretical framework out of three components: the phantasmagoria, the magic lantern and the



A terrifying influencer of the 19th century? Illustration by Moreau from 1849 depicting a laterna magica.

ghost. Visually, I imagine this framework looking something like the picture in the figure.

Thus theoretically, this article examines the hypotheses that what print media writers – journalists and columnists – *see* when they observe, or rather, envisage, influencer life worlds, is this image. I will argue that what they *depict* when they write about influencers, is something horrific.

A phantasmagoria can be defined as a shifting series of illusions or deceptive appearances; a bizarre scene that constantly changes; a dreamlike state where real and imagined elements are blurred together. Phantasmagoria, writes Magnus Florin in his review of the Swedish release of Walter Benjamin's unfinished work *The Arcade Project*, is "a word of suggestion that points to the amusement theatre's illusions: light images are projected in smoke, ghosts appear and fade away, the audience screams" (Florin 2016, translation by the author; Benjamin 2015). In many ways these definitions stand out as the very essence of influencer life worlds – worlds where the boundaries between real and unreal, public and private, presence and absence, are dissolved and rendered insignificant (Petersson McIntyre 2019) – all as part of a game of rapidly changing illusions, for example such "imitations of power" referred to above, evoked with optical means on digital platforms such as Instagram and YouTube.

Walter Benjamin used the image of the phantasmagoria to understand the Arcades of glass and iron, functional but at the same time imaginary, that took shape in early nineteenth-century Paris; spectacular rooms for the mix of capital and desire, which cut across the city blocks without an outside, as at the theatre or in the dream (Benjamin 2015; Florin 2016). The Arcades, in Benjamin's view in turn a metaphor for the changing ideologies of modernity, allowed for other values and hierarchies to be illuminated and experienced, which had a seductive appeal to the masses (Cohen 1993; Ristilammi 2003; MacLure 2006). As Florin expresses it, "they offered an uncertain terrain of rites of passage and threshold experiences, a nasty mix of promises and doom" (Florin 2016, translation by the author). Is it possible that this is how the digital platforms housing influencer life worlds appear from the outside, from the "real world"? Are Instagram and YouTube experienced as the phantasmagoric Arcades of the twenty-first century? In a similar way to the Flaneur, one of Benjamin's modern characters, is the image of the Influencer evoked as a similar archetype of the present?

As will be shown in this article, in many ways, these questions seem possible to answer in the affirmative. The Influencer commonly figures as a symbol of uncertainty and change, surprisingly often mentioned in the same sentence as other current cultural themes, such as "climate crisis" and "fake news". Thus, the narrative of doom and decay that is conjured up in the print media texts about influencers and influencer life worlds – and which makes writers want to "swallow cyanide" – is in line with the loud-voiced criticism of "post-modern" society. In fact, the chronicles and editorials can be seen as effective stagings of the "strange new landscape" of post-modernity that Frederic Jameson anticipated already in the early 1990s (1991:xxi).

In this article, however, I wish to elaborate the phantasmagoria ever further, and particularly make theoretical use of the illuminating function of the magic lantern.

For obviously, the phantasmagoria is not only a metaphor for destabilized societies, whether in the nineteenth century or in the twenty-first. In its concrete form, it is a horror theatre that uses magic lanterns to project frightening images, such as skeletons and ghosts, onto walls or smoke, using rear projection to keep the lantern out of sight (Ristilammi 2003). With this definition of the phantasmagoria, the analytical question is not only what values are threatened or demolished in "the strange new landscape" of influencer life worlds, but what the magic lantern that is Instagram and YouTube illuminates; what skeletons and ghosts (see MacLure 2006). In the theoretical framework sketched here, influencers will be viewed as ghosts, projected on smoke by a magic lantern. But if the influencer is a ghost, what, then, does a ghost represent?

The sociologist Avery F. Gordon, in her book *Ghostly Matters,* argues that the ghost is a social figure with real presence, repressed by policy, custom or the grim pursuit of progress, that demands its due (Gordon 2008). Forasmuch as referring to the living and breathing that takes place hidden from view – people, places, histories, knowledge, memories, ways of life, ideas – the ghosts appear when the trouble they represent is no longer being blocked from view; a notification that what has been suppressed or concealed is very much alive and present. Haunting is thus the situation when those who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, perhaps even smiling in a scandalously unsettling way (Gordon 2008). More concretely, according to Gordon, haunting refers to a socio-political-psychological state where *something from before*, prompts a *something-to-be-done*; a state that evokes feelings that this *something* must be done differently than before. Gordon suggests that, methodologically, we learn to talk to ghosts, rather than banish them, for once in our view – once illuminated by the magic lantern, to put Gordon's thoughts in the context of the phantasmagoria – the haunting will go on, until something is done (Gordon 2008). "The ghost demands your attention. The present wavers. Something will happen. What will happen of course, is not given in advance, but something must be done" (Gordon 2008:23).

Influencers as ghosts, illuminated by the magic lantern of Instagram and YouTube, smiling scandalously unsettling, thus remind us of the living and breathing that has taken place hidden from view – such as the group of "poor but beautiful looking youngsters with diagnoses", referred to above. These lives, these ghostly presences, have shown up with no intention of leaving, and they have become "stinking rich". In this article, the journalists' and columnists' reactions to this haunting, in the form of critical, or, rather, hateful, print media texts – their public detesting of influencers – will be analysed. Inevitably, this analysis calls for a conceptualization of power. Indicated by the quotation above, such conceptualization would need to include the intersection of gender, age, class and functionality. Intersectionality is a theoretical concept with which it becomes possible to describe how different categorizations or systems of power intersect and have consequences for how individuals are understood and granted spaces of action in different contexts. Intersectionality is thus a contextual concept that assumes that the meanings and relationship of different categories in a power relationship must be an-

chored in temporally and spatially situated social processes (de los Reyes & Mulinari 2005:125). For the purpose of analytical depth, but also for empirical reasons, which will become apparent later on, this article will focus mostly on the intersection between age and gender. I will argue that the ghost is a girl; a living and breathing that is almost always described as being of the wrong age, the wrong gender; doing the wrong thing in the wrong way and in the wrong place (Skelston 2000; Frih & Söderberg 2010). Girls, in a similar way to Gordon's ghosts, often need to claim their rights to be in a certain place, to actively demand their due, which often puts them in conflict with existing power structures (Mitchell & Rentschler 2016; Palmgren 2018, Nilsson 2019). Whereas boys utilizing their digital media and technology skills to build multi-million companies, as did Facebook's founder Mark Zuckerberg, are rarely accused of making the wrong priorities in life, this is often the case with girls/influencers. Their (ghostly) practice of taking "selfies", as described by Magdalena Petersson McIntyre, can be interpreted as their colonization of the visual space and aggressively taking power over representations of the female body and of "femininity" (Petersson McIntyre 2019) – as haunting.

Girls and Ghosts

In the spring of 2015, the vlogger Lisa "Misslisibell" Jonsson was appointed Super Communicator of the Year by the business magazine *Resumé*. "Welcome to today's condition", the appointment was commented on, "the business world is run by 13-year-olds […] whose posts are mainly about horses and make-up" (*Filter* 20/1 2016.). This "condition" was then further elaborated: "Welcome to a world where YouTube is bigger than television and where a 14-year-old can charge tens of thousands of SEK for posing with a bottle of Festis on Instagram" (*Filter* 20/1 2016.). The tone in these quotations exposes an astonishment that is recognizable in many other similar texts. They quite literally illustrate a "strange new landscape" where the traditional hierarchies are turned upside down (Jamison 1991), a landscape where young girls are paid tens of thousands of SEK and where horses, make-up and soft drinks are what matters. YouTube and Instagram are where this bizarre phantasmagoria happens. Notwithstanding the astonishment, it is clear that this is perceived to be wrong.

> There is information that the Wahlgren child [referring to Bianca Ingrosso, an influencer in her twenties from a family known in Sweden from show business] earned SEK 17 million last year from "influencing". It is most certainly innocent young people who are exposed to this incomprehensible pandemic. Where the money comes from is also incomprehensible. Can there really be an economy this incomprehensible? In that case, it must be of a parasitic nature (*Värmlands Folkblad* 11/9 2019).

What all these descriptions indicate is that what seems particularly provocative is the connection between money and a specific age-gender intersection. Or, rather, the "condition" that it is a different age-gender intersection than normally, that has access to money and now "runs the world" – this while smiling about it in a scandalously unsettling way. The critical views of influencers and influencer life worlds, the "parasitic nature" of the profession, expressed in the print media texts, sometimes disguised

as astonishment, can thus be seen as reactions to, or perhaps resistance against, the "incomprehensible" fact that 13-year-old "horse girls" and other female "children" are now haunting the business world demanding their due.

After this introduction to the influencer as girl/ghost, I will continue to exemplify, in short quotations from the texts, how this resistance takes the form of a systematic downgrading of what an influencer does. Descriptions of the work influencers do are almost always pervaded with ignorance, belittling and sarcasm. This is also true for texts which are basically positive about the phenomenon. Journalists seem to lack the ability, or will, to comprehend what components make up the work as influencer and where the money comes from. What influencers do, according to the print media texts, is "talk about themselves and their lives close to the camera" (*Borås Tidning* 25/11 2016); "tell what they eat for breakfast"; "pick up goods from packages" (*Barometern* 23/3 2019); "pose with slanted head and puffy mouth in dripping lip gloss" (*Svenska Dagbladet* 18/11 2017); "snap shots of themselves and their coffee lattes" (*Hudiksvalls Tidning* 13/5 2019); "broadcast their childbirth" (*Aftonbladet* 9/10 2020); "pretend to eat pasta and take 'self-empowering' butt selfies" (*Dagens ETC* 27/12 2019) and "enjoy silk lingerie and make-up" (*Expressen* 21/1 2019). The general judgement can be summarized in the word nonsense: "What on earth is she doing? Get to the point so we can all leave the screen and do something meaningful!" (*Barometern* 23/3 2019).

The view of influencer life worlds as incomprehensible and exotic is in line with how the internet has been described ever since it began to be broadly used in the mid-1990s, when a distinction was made between the "digital natives" and "the digital tourists" (Prensky 2001; Dunkels 2018). Still today, adults who wish to enter certain digital platforms are said to need to learn "a new language and a new culture" in order to fully understand what it is they are looking at (*Ungdomsstyrelsen* 2014:9). Thus, a generational perspective is built into the whole idea of digital life (Zimic 2017), which is indicated, for example, in the quotation above, in how "leaving the screen" is described to be what adults covet. In some texts, the exoticization of the internet is exaggerated, as a way to further ridicule the phenomenon of influencing.

> I am thinking about changing professions and becoming an influencer. An influencer can make millions, I read in the tabloid. I would gladly do that. And it does not seem to be that difficult either. The trick is to get *a blog, you know, one of those pages on the Internet*, and there make yourself popular by telling about yourself and your life (*Nerikes Allehanda* 31/3 2019, italics by the author).

Thus, in many of the texts, the generational aspect is what stands out the most, not least because of the superior, chuckling tone that permeates many of them. The "meaningful" off-screen reality in the quotation above is defined from the perspective of the adult (Heikkinen 2017). In this respect, the texts can be situated within a long tradition of degrading views, and moral panics, about "today's youth" (Frykman 1988; Natlan 2007). Ann-Charlotte Palmgren argues that it is reasonable to assume that the discourse on influencers is different today than in the early 2000s; that the media view has less of a moral panic today, when the work is more clearly linked to earning money (Palmgren

2019:131). The analysis conducted here indicates instead that it is the making of money that is the problem. Formulations such as influencers making money from having a break can be linked to widespread notions of young people as lazy, spoiled, irresponsible and immoral. “Do they call that a job!? Is breakfast, lunch, clothes showing, nail fixing and afternoon coffee a job? Isn’t that what you call a break? So they work with having a break all day – and are all stressed out about it?” (*Västerbottens-Kuriren* 23/9 2017). The influencers’ presumed lack of moral standards when it comes to work functions as a warning example and a demarcation symbol of the distinction between the (productive) adult and the (non-productive) young persons.

When the famous Swedish artist Ernst Billgren, in the reality TV show *Äkta Billgrens* [True Billgrens], tries to explain what it is that his daughter, the well-known blogger and influencer Elsa Billgren, does for a living, it is literally the voice of the sceptical parent we hear: “She photographs her breakfast, as a job” (*SVT* 23/1 2020). Recurring during the series, alternately upset and impressed, father Billgren reflects on what negative consequences it may have, presumably for morality, at such a young age as Elsa, to be able to afford to buy an apartment at a fancy address in Stockholm, something he himself was not able to do as a young artist. He is reassured as Elsa actually earned the money herself, but his reflections still reveal the norms around how it is imagined that young people’s lives should be. Only after some years of hard work and struggling should the life of the young transform into the stable and comfortable life of the adult. The privileges of adult life must be earned. Johansson and Krekula argue that accepting age as a power relation makes it apparent the way that we organize age on a societal level and the way that we do age on the individual level creates and consolidates age hierarchies and unequal conditions for different age groups to be involved in society autonomously (Johansson & Krekula 2017). An explanation why such strong emotions arise when the phenomenon of influencers is discussed, is the view that influencers have made too much money too fast and too soon in life, this despite the fact that many of the most successful Swedish influencers today, such as Elsa Billgren as well as the above-mentioned Lisa ‘Misslisibell’ Jonsson and Bianca Ingrosso, have worked hard and dedicated for many years, often since their early teens (Jonsson 2018). This exemplifies how legitimate it is, still, to describe the Other in a negative, stereotypical way, when the Other is a child or young person (Johansson & Krekula 2018).

Thus, the print media texts analysed here are examples of how age categorizations work as expressions of power. As a matter of fact, an age-signifier is sometimes used as the preamble to a critical remark. “I will do my best not to sound grumpy, but…” (*Dala-Demokraten* 27/10 2019); “At the risk of looking old, tired and bumpy, I think that…” (*Sundsvalls Tidning* 9/12 2019). Though at first these signifiers seem like excuses, in reality they are made from the firm conviction of a superior position (see Heikkinen 2017). That age, and, obviously, gender, function as a system to organize power, where adults/journalists are made superior to girls, is further evident from the fact that it is presented as something positive *not to know* what an influencer is, and *not to understand* what influencers do. “I

myself hardly knew the word influencer" (*Sundsvalls Tidning* 7/12 2019); "In fact, I did not have a whisper that an influencer […] is now a professional title […]. I am very pleased to be able to avoid this" (*Västerbottens-Kuriren* 21/1 2020). Here, paradoxically, not knowing or understanding become ways of doing superior age (Johansson & Krekula 2017; Laz 1998).

In this section I have exemplified how the critical print media texts about influencers and influencer life worlds can be seen as resistance against money, success and public exposure being connected with the "wrong" age-gender intersection; against the relation between high fees, multimillion turnover and girls. As part of this resistance I have shown how superior age is done as a means to counter this development; a way of refusing to accept the bizarre images lit by the magic lantern in the phantasmagoria.

The Mediocre, the Superficial, the Feminine

So far I have shown how resistance takes the form of a systematic downgrading of what an influencer does. In the following, I will analyse how descriptions of what influencers are, and the things they care for, function in the same fashion. Influencers are described with words and concepts that carry strong negative connotations. Among other things, an influencer is "superficial", "eating-disordered", "filler-sprayed", "mediocre", "vain", "anxious", "constrained", "flirtatious", "attention-seeking", "housewifely", "stupid", "immature", "frivolous" and "unscrupulous". These words and denominations have a clear connection to stereotypical notions of women and femininity (Hirdman 2001; Jarlbro 2006; Ambjörnsson 2011). Thus, the covariance between what is considered to be "typically female" characteristics, and the print media characterization of influencers, often appears total (see Petersson McIntyre 2019; Palmgren 2019).

The negative properties are often presented as symptoms of a contemporary disease or drug use. "Influencers' popularity must be the ultimate proof of a decaying society. If religion is opium for the people, influencers are an overdose" (*Dala-Demokraten* 27/10 2019). Quoted in the previous section, influencing was compared to a "pandemic" of a "parasitic nature", and several texts take the opportunity to humorously compare the word *influencer* with the word *influenza*. "The word influencer is related to the wretched and regularly widespread ailment formerly called the Russian cold or the Spanish flu" (*Aftonbladet* 7/10 2016). "Can you get vaccinated against influencers?" (*Göteborgs-Posten* 8/2 2019); "On with the face mask, forward with the disinfector – it's flu season. And a particularly vulnerable group is teenage girls with an immune system that is not yet equipped for this aggressive virus" (*Svenska Dagbladet* 18/11 2017). From this perspective, femininity by definition becomes interchangeable with an ailment that should be countered; an aggressive virus that young girls in particular should be protected from. As a matter of fact, the most explicitly expressed danger that influencers are considered to pose is the harm they do to other girls in the form of a spread of negatively coded femininity (see Palmgren 2019). "The superficiality of it, I think, pushes boundaries, normalizes in a way that is extremely harmful, and moves us women back to the 1950s" (*Aftonbladet* 10/6 2018).

This negative femininity is further manifested in the assumed dullness and worthlessness of the objects that influencers, according to the journalists and columnists, care for the most. The examples given of what products influencers promote seem selected to reinforce the image of influencers as stupid, superficial and ridiculous. They market "detox tea" (*Lag & Avtal* 26/1 2017); "horses and makeup" (*Filter* 20/1 2016); "perfectly organized berries, styled avocado sandwiches" (*ShapeUp* 20/6 2017); "lip gloss, port-swigging face mask or tight jeans" (*Svenska Dagbladet* 18/11 2017); "duvet cover set" (*Eskilstuna-Kuriren* 28/4 2018), "a kind of magical beauty pill" (*Aftonbladet* 3/2 2019), "everything from butt implants to pickled vegetables" (*Ystads Allehanda* 21/1 2020); "juices (to lose weight, but above all to purify the blood, be cleansed from within, get better skin, find harmony, detoxify and yes, you know)" (*Expressen* 21/1 2019); "creams and garments and handbags and a thousand other strange things" (*Aftonbladet* 7/10 2016). In the previous section I showed how the age of influencers, and a generational aspect, stand out as a central parameter to understand the detesting carried out in the print media texts – the view that influencers had experienced success and earned large amounts of money too early in their lives. Here it becomes clear that, additionally, the reactions cannot be understood outside of a gendered context. The ghost is undoubtedly female.

The long tradition of belittling women and their achievements in order to undermine progress in terms of gender equality, and to exclude them from the public eye, is well studied (Puwar 2004; Jarlbro 2006; Wahl et al. 2008; Hammarlin 2019). The print media texts about influencers analysed here clearly draw on this tradition. "Why do we care so much about what influencers think? They have seldom done anything to deserve that attention" (*Folkbladet Västerbotten* 19/10 2019). "Influencer. When did a truly wise person put this title on their business card?" (*Dagens Samhälle* 15/8 2019). "The mediocrity is stunning" (*Dagens Nyheter* 1/8 2019. The denial of legitimacy for influencers to claim space – the view that they have "seldom done anything to deserve that attention" – and the suppression of their right to live and breathe in the public eye (Gordon 2008), is motivated by the pure ridiculousness of the "creams and garments and handbags and a thousand other strange things" that they choose to include, and grant value to, in their public lives. An explanation for the strong, and seemingly exaggerated, resistance against the existence of influencer life worlds is thus that women and girls make themselves visible, take place and take charge, not only of the phantasmagoria of the digital world, but also penetrate traditionally male arenas, such as the business world, the stock market and the industry, and get "stinking rich" doing so. Or as Magdalena Petersson McIntyre describes it, that they are "questioning the boundary-drawing practices that place production, masculinity, the public sphere, and disembodiment on one side of what counts as a 'legitimate economic practice,' whilst issues of reproduction, femininity, the private sphere, and the body, on the side of consumption" (Petersson McIntyre 2019:56). That influencers are deemed to be "imitating power" when acting on these arenas, and when showing off their wealth by wearing expensive watches, driving expensive cars and inhabiting fashionable ad-

dresses, reveals how illegitimate and wrong their presence there is still considered to be; that they are "intruders" (Palmgren 2019; see Puwar 2004). Or, differently put, that they are haunting these male arenas without any intention of leaving (Gordon 2008).

What makes the concept of the ghost, in the sense that Gordon uses it, particularly striking in this analysis is that the use of the title *influencer* defies any tendencies of "tall poppy syndrome". Not only do these influencers/girls/ghosts demand their due, they do so while smiling in a scandalously unsettling way (see Gordon 2008). To many, it seems to be this self-proclaimed importance that comes with the title that provokes people the most. Just who do they think they are? "I have a hard time coming to terms with the idea that an 'influencer' […] could recommend me a wine after my sixty years of practice" (*Aftonbladet* 21/10 2018). "They call themselves influencers, but influencers of what? What do you want to say and give? That's the worst I know. I cannot respect that. If you have a platform, then find what you want to say. Don't just be someone to influence" (*Damernas Värld* 5/3 2019). I will get back to this presumed hierarchy of meaningful topics to "influence" about below.

Whores and Imposters

It is rare, I would say, that women and girls are talked of in a critical fashion without refereeing to their (lack of) morals (Frykman 1993; Nilsson 2019; Hammarlin 2019). Above I have touched upon influencers' presumed lack of work morality; that they "make money from having a break". In this section I wish return to this theme in further elaborating the views in the critical print media texts about what an influencer is. It will be shown how a negative image of the phantasmagoria is evoked, and how the influencer is situated on this bizarre and immoral scene, for example, by the denominations and parables used in the texts.

A common way of belittling the work as influencer is to compare the profession to other negatively charged professions, such as peddlers, mongers, beggars and prostitutes. "They are called influencers. Peddlers, that is. The mongers of our times. Only a bit more up-to-date. A bit more famous and hip, like" (*Aftonbladet* 7/10 2016). They are "the rats of marketing" (*Dagens ETC* 14/4 2019). Employing parables like these, the texts draw on a long, and still existing, tradition of negatively describing those Others who dare to publicly take up space, in both sexist and racist ways (Egardh 1962, Svensson 1993, Lennartsson 2002, Nilsson 2013, Mulinari 2018). Even more apt, alongside the flaneur, characters like these were the ones inhabiting, or constituting, the phantasmagoria of Walter Benjamin's Arcades (Benjamin 2015).

The most common denomination, however, is to liken influencers to walking advertising pillars. "Influencers, they are called, today's advertising pillars" (*Norrköpings Tidningar* 6/9 2017); "In the past, we called such people 'advertising pillars', an invective that is probably long gone. Anyway, they were the ones who sold themselves to anything. Completely without reservation, and always without blinking" (*Dagens Nyhete*r 6/10 2018). Instead of the shady public movements of deviating characters such as mongers, beggars and prostitutes, the connotations evoked by the "walking advertising pil-

lar" are a bit more ludicrous. The concept carries images of people standing outside stores with billboards – promoting 2 for 1 – on their chest and back. However, the walking advertising pillar, too, still represents a suggestive performance where desire and commerce are blurred together (Florin 2016).

The Swedish ethnologist Emma Eleonorasdotter, in her thesis on women using drugs, shows that for women, the epithet "whore" is sticky (Eleonorasdotter 2021). In many contexts, when women are described in a negative fashion, it is not a long way to call them whores (Frykman 1993; Ekström 2002; Gilmore 2017). This is also true in the analysis of print media texts about influencers. "Being offered a free trip and being expected to write on social media how nice it is at this destination. There is nothing wrong with that, but isn't the word 'whore' more accurate than influencer?" (*Hänt Extra* 12/3 2019). The activities of whores and influencers seem interchangeable: "There is no authenticity, just an exchange of money" (*Svenska Dagbladet* 18/11 2017). The concept of whore makes visible what is considered to be the problem with influencers: that they "sell themselves"; that they "can be bought". "What separates influencers from lousy commercial journalism is that you can actually buy them straight off" (*Västerbottens-Kuriren* 23/9 2017). "It is important to be terribly vigilant when scrolling through your flow. Anyone who was not for sale yesterday may be today" (*Sydsvenska*n 8/7 2018). "Bought influencers make a living by advertising various brands. When they tell about it, it is called collaboration. Of course it sounds much nicer than saying 'I sold my smile to a corporation'" (*Folkbladet Västerbotten* 19/10 2019). "OH-MY-GOD how they annoy me. Selling a product is one thing. It is another thing to sell your soul" (*Västerbottens-Kurire*n 23/9 2017).

Thus, it is not necessarily the activities per se, but the possibility of earning money from them, that seems to provoke and haunt; more specifically that assumed feminine and/or girly activities and preferences can generate economic value. Or perhaps even more so, that women and girls themselves can profit from this value. As a counter-means, falsehood is emphasized to be the very essence of the profession, and consequently, the being, of the influencer. "Influencer: a profession where authenticity is always curated, and thus never genuine" (*Sydsvenska*n 22/1 2020). As a matter of fact, it seems the falsehood – the selling of the smile and the soul – is what legitimizes the print media critique. The moral wrongdoing in "selling your soul", implicitly to the Devil, is a classic narrative that indicates that the person who did this has herself to blame for any negative consequences that might follow. Thus, by performing the "curated" profession of influencing – by selling their souls if not to the Devil, then to a "corporation" – seemingly, in the eyes of the journalists, the influencers themselves have turned false.

From attributing influencers the property of being false, it is not a long way to deem them fraudulent deceivers and imposters (see McRae 2017). "It is important to build your fraud slowly. Creating trust takes time" (*Aftonblade*t 23/2 2018); "Hidden marketing in various forms from unscrupulous, bribed influencers" (*PC för Alla* 3/6 2019). Although I will not elaborate on the topic of "hidden marketing" in this paper, this

is one of the major categories among print media texts about influencers. These are not least texts about the growing number of convictions against influencers who did not properly label their posts as advertisement. However, the term imposter is not only attributed to those accused of illegal marketing, but is used as a description of the work of influencers more generally. "Influencers, a complete mess of opinions and advertising where it is impossible to tell which is which. A nightmare for the evaluation of information" (*Aftonblade*t 4/8 2019); "It's selfies and self-deception in a fine hotchpotch" (*Svenska Dagbladet* 18/11 2017); "A kind of fake friends" (*Göteborgs-Poste*n 15/09 2019); "A mix between scam and grandiosity" (*Aftonbladet* 3/2 2019); "It's just theatre" (*Svenska Dagbladet* 13/4 2019). In many ways, these descriptions, and in particular the use of words like deception, grandiosity, theatre and nightmare, seem to be in line with what constitutes the sham world of the phantasmagoria. This is further accentuated in texts that associate influencers and influencer life worlds with the more general "strange new landscape" characterized by, for example, "fake news". "We know that truth is not always the main guiding light in a time of fake news, misinformation, bought opinions and news, influencers who mix life and brand" (*Dagens ETC* 15/1 2020).

Influencer is often used as an epithet to describe "our time" in a negative sense. Influencing is perceived as a contemporary phenomenon, and since we detest the strange new landscape of the present, we detest influencers. Depending on political stance, the influencers are made to represent either the post-modern or the neo-liberal society. Either way, the strange new landscape is a phantasmagoria. The concept of the phantasmagoria is particularly apt since influencer life worlds are seen as scam worlds. "The world of influencers is a giant unregulated advertising or propaganda machine where the most skilled become billionaires" (*Norra Skåne* 7/8 2019); "It is not reality" (*Göteborgs-Posten* 28/1 2018); "Their lives appear as augmented reality on the verge of fiction […] The whole affair gives me a sense of post-apocalypse and nihilism" (*Göteborgs-Posten* 3/12 2017); "The phenomenon is further proof that the development backwards is approaching the knowledge darkness of functional illiteracy" (*Lag & Avtal* 26/1 2017); "What on earth kind of meta-world is it? I find it pretty disgusting" (*Kvällsposten* 15/1 2020); "I fear that the kind of democracy and conversation culture I lived with is being ploughed away" (*Upsala Nya Tidning* 22/10 2017).

In this scam world, people are no longer people. "Social media creates fluid boundaries between advertising and people" (*Aftonbladet* 23/2 2018); "When the 'true selves' of these influencers are constantly shaped by who pays for what, they no longer appear as human beings" (*Göteborgs-Posten* 3/12 2017); "They do not want to differentiate between themselves as human beings and themselves as products" (*Göteborgs-Posten* 3/12 2017). In fact, this is how influencers are often described, even in research, as cyborgs (Petersson McIntyre 2019).

In this section I have portrayed how influencers are seen when lit by the magic lantern – how the images of whores and imposters in female shape are projected on smoke – and thus to stipulate how horrifying this haunting, in the form of girls/ghosts demanding their due, must look in the eyes of the journalists and columnists. In the next section I will introduce the

Ghost Buster – a countermeasure inserted in the print media texts.

Greta – the Ghost Buster

Another theme in the detesting of influencers is to describe them as hypocrites and turncoats. “One week the influencer sells one thing, the other week they go to the competitor and sell something completely different” (*Svenska Dagbladet* 18/11 2017). The view of influencers as hypocrites is not least common regarding burning issues such as the climate crisis. “Like when so-called influencers write something obviously insignificant about caring about the climate the day after they post pictures from their flight to the other side of the globe” (*Upsala Nya Tidning* 22/7 2019); “The same influencers who not so long ago boasted of being globalists and metropolitans, at the expense of the climate, are now sitting with their new smartphones and boasting of having cancelled a trip to Thailand” (*Piteå-Tidningen* 11/5 2019). A concept used to describe these turncoats is the “bought influencer”. Hereby a distinction is made between hypocritical, fraudulent (and plain stupid) influencers, and those genuine and steadfast influencers who believe in, and fight for, a “real” cause. “There are, of course, many different types of influencers. Some of them are opinion leaders, artists, performers or writers. People who make their money elsewhere. Bought influencers, on the other hand, make a living by advertising various brands” (*Folkbladet Västerbotten* 19/10 2019). “Is it not the case that she who, with a hard-nosed smile, continues to assert the superiority of the lavish lifestyle not only appears offensive but also outright stupid?” (*Göteborgs-Posten* 6/7 2019).

Starting in 2018, in particular the global environment activist Greta Thunberg, “the 16-year-old girl with superpowers” (*Aftonbladet* 3/10 2019), is made to represent the genuine and steadfast category of influencers while the vast majority of others end up in the “bought” category. Explicit comparisons between Greta Thunberg and other influencers are not uncommon.

> Greta is for real and she wants something important. Suddenly the old definition of influencer becomes something dusty and passé. The very idea of urging your followers to constantly buy new clothes and new makeup to “express their true personality” is basically a real scam. While Greta is being herself and uses her very special personality to create opinion and move mountains, the old kind of influencers urge their followers to change sofa cushions to “show who you are” (*Göteborgs-Posten* 6/7 2019).

This quotation exposes the core of what seems to be considered wrong with digital media in general and influencer life worlds in particular. The quotation reclaims a clear distinction between *what* is deemed valuable – “changing sofa cushions” or “moving mountains” – and between *who* is deemed valuable – the personality “expressed” with clothes and make up or a person who is “real”; who is “being herself”. The comparisons also highlight the strong degree of being *either or* – either sexy or genuine, superficial or smart, bad influence or a role model (Palmgren 2019).

> [Greta] really is a straight, stubborn and thoroughly reflected Pippi Longstocking. With a liberating sense of humour when she dismisses her worst detractors, who unfortunately are to a very large extent older men like me. The traditional patriarchy. Those who think that young Swedish girls should be sexy, as they were before (*Aftonbladet* 3/10 2019).

I would argue that distinctions and comparisons of this sort function as countermeasures; as resistance against haunting in the form of images projected by the magic lantern. The use of Greta Thunberg can be seen as an attempt to clean and purify the room, the space (see Ristilammi 2003). And to purify space, can in turn be seen as a way to fight off the ghosts. By directing the spotlight on Greta Thunberg, the girls/ghosts with “hard-nosed smiles” end up in the background. The “real world” is lit up at the expense of the illusions of the phantasmagoria. Greta Thunberg is a “blessing” in comparison to “superficial influencers” (*Aftonbladet* 3/10 2019). This can be analysed as a way of taking back the defining power over who may be seen and who may not – over what living and breathing should take place hidden from view (Gordon 2008). If a girl is to be in the public eye, in the eyes of the adult world, at least let it be the right kind of girl, with the right kind of message. The childlike and unpretentious appearance of Greta Thunberg is often highlighted (*Expressen* 27/1 2019). Where she sits in all modesty with her handwritten poster she is everything a superficial influencer is not; and she most definitely is not for sale. “We should be able to agree that Greta Thunberg’s environmental struggle is more important than Bianca Ingrosso’s search for even more sponsorship from unscrupulous ‘lifestyle companies’” (*Ljusnan* 18/2 2019). “I am aware of the importance of entertainment, but one can certainly wonder if some celebrities and reality TV contestants would not do more good as assistant nurses than as influencers” (*Sundsvalls Tidning* 9/12 2019).

The use of Greta Thunberg as a means to criticize the actions, behaviours and preferences of other girls of the same age, describing her as a “blessing”, makes it visible that aside from the age-gender intersection, parameters such as class are at play. The girl that Greta Thunberg is made to represent is considered to be everything but the poor, beautiful girl who imitates power. Greta Thunberg *has* power in terms of class, more specifically, in terms of middle-class morality, something the “poor girls selling their soul for some free samples” and who would “do more good as assistant nurses” do not (see Skeggs, 1999). Moreover, the use of the word “blessing” to denominate Greta Thunberg is particularly striking in a context where other girls are deemed “whores” who have “sold their souls”. Thus, the distinction made between Greta Thunberg and other influencers quite literally draws on the perhaps most commonly used way of defining and regulating femininity in term of class and morality – the Madonna and the Whore dichotomy. However, the media narrative about Greta Thunberg is paradoxical, which shows how important an intersectional perspective is to understand how power is exercised. It was only Greta’s *femininity* that was “right” (and solely in comparison with other influencers). Her *age* was still “wrong”, and a plethora of critical texts urged a child like her to return to school.

The Detested Images from the Magic Lantern

Analytically, in this article, I have utilized the word *detesting* as an active verb in the sense that it is not only a feeling but an action; an explicit practice performed by journalists and columnists in the form of resentful or hateful print media texts. More specifically, I have argued that the detesting of influencers is a practice that works

to fight ghosts. Further, I have shown in examples from the texts that the ghost in this setting is a girl, a social figure known, and historically repressed, for being of the wrong age in the wrong gender; for doing the wrong things in the wrong way in the wrong place. In their work as influencers, girls claim their right to be seen, their right to live and breathe in the public eye and by doing so they are in conflict with existing power structures, and this evokes strong reactions and resistance. The aim of this article has been to analyse the reactions against girls/ghosts demanding their due.

How haunting of this sort is met, how the resistance takes shape, could be understood from the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu. He argues that the relative "volume" of the resistance depends on the balance of power within a certain field. While it is in the interest of the dominant position to maintain silence – and preferably to silence the objectors without the need to explicitly defend the dominant position – the dominated strive for the opposite; they break the silence to extort a loud defence (Bourdieu 1991). More specifically, as the philosopher José Luis Ramírez aptly describes it, when the deviating word, eventually, is seen or heard, it is essential for power to avoid the mistake of getting into polemics, for the wise ruler knows very well that the explicit denial of this word does not erase it, but helps to multiply it and keep it alive (Ramírez 1995). The relationship between the deviating word of the dominated – the haunting by the suppressed – and the silence of power, can be summarized thus: the less resistance required to maintain the balance of power, the more secure the power. Thus, a valuation of the acts of resistance can be used to measure the power ratio in a certain situation. As a consequence, I have argued elsewhere that it is conceivable that there is a rising scale of increasingly activity-demanding resistance, from a more implicit resistance, such concealment and trivializing practices, to the more explicitly oppressive, slanderous, disqualifying and eliminating defence strategies (Nilsson 2009).

If we return to Gordon's perspective it becomes clear that the haunting carried out by influencer girls is an indication of a change in the power balance; a sign of a potential change of the existing power structure. The detesting of influencers in the print media is literally, I would argue, a screaming resistance that puts the dominant in a vulnerable position. The ghosts/girls have shown up without any sign of leaving, "with hard-nosed smiles" demanding our attention, leaving us in a situation that wavers. "Something will happen. What will happen, of course, is not given in advance, but something must be done" (Gordon 2008:23). Perhaps what is perceived as most provoking is not that poor girls imitate power, but that they demand, and are on the verge of getting this power. This is something that apparently some of the journalists are aware of. "For even if the occasional representative of the old media industry smiles at YouTube and Instagram and dismisses much of it as light-hearted entertainment, the laughter gets stuck in your throat as soon as you start looking at reach, audience and revenue" (*Borås Tidning* 25/11 2016).

Gabriella Nilsson
Associate Professor
Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences, Division of Ethnology
Lund University
email: gabriella.nilsson@kultur.lu.se

Notes

1. All quotations from print media have been translated from Swedish by the author.
2. The article was written as part of the project “Influencer Life Worlds: New Work in a Changing Time”, financed by the Swedish Research Council 2020–2024. Within the project, the term life world is employed to mean the online lives, the offline lives and the travel and interrelation between these two parallel worlds and identities. Whilst this article concentrates on how these life worlds might look from the outside, the main focus of the project is the experiences and practices made by influencers themselves.

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