I may be a little afraid that there won’t be anyone, or not many, that will make people realize that the earth’s resources are not enough. How can I explain … that we people are too many? There are too many animals dying and nature is going bankrupt. That man is destroying the earth. (Girl, 14 years)

The idea that man is about to eradicate himself and destroy the globe, as the 14-year-old girl is describing above, is not a new thought. Stories about the devastation of the world seem nevertheless to be of great importance at the beginning of the present century, in politics, social life and in popular culture (cf. Määttä 2015). Since the late 1900s, several scholars have claimed that we live in a time of fear, or even in a culture of fear (see e.g. Furedi 2005; Pain & Smith 2008; Svendsen 2008). Whether it is the fear of environmental catastrophes or the fear of terrorist attacks, many people currently live in a state of constant anxiety about the dangers that is presented daily in the media, in popular culture, the internet, emails and in many other ways (Bauman 2007; Pain & Smith 2008). “Some scholars go so far as to state that ‘public policy and private life have become fear-bound; fear has become the emotion through which public life is administered’” (Pain 2009:468; cf. Bourke 2005). The dangers and threats to mankind presented and circulated in different media have become increasingly dystopic over the past decade. It is, in any case, often so described.

Whether, this widespread and globalized fear is a reality for individuals or not, many children and teenagers at the beginning of the twenty-first century seem to fear the present as well as the future. By focusing on children’s narratives and adult memories of fears in childhood, this article aims to examine the relation between how visual and textual narratives that signal “catastrophe”, “apocalypse” and “collapse” create special conditions for emotions such as fear. My overarching aim in this article is to examine fears as cultural and embodied experiences, and how emotions (e.g. fears) are socially and culturally conditioned. I understand fear as a cultural phenomenon and embodied experience, which means: first, to have a basic understanding of fears as changing and situational; second, a cultural perspective will draw attention to the fears that are conceivable within different eras and how narratives of fears and bodily experiences are culturally determined.

Central questions to be discussed are: What cultural narratives concerning fear are articulated in the children’s and the adults’ accounts? What narratives of fear are available in different social and cultural settings and how do these narratives affect individuals’ self-perceived fears? What does it mean to grow up in times when the future is characterized as particularly dystopic? In what ways are the narratives of fear and the apocalyptic narratives intertextual, and how are they utilized?

By combining a broad contemporary analysis of textual narratives and visual culture with stories from folklore archives it becomes possible to say something about the intertextuality and the contexts from which fear narratives derive their power and authority. I use intertextuality as an approach to analyse how the narratives and the informants’ statements about fear of, for example, the end of the world cannot be understood in isolation from either the past or contemporary cultural
manuscripts of fear and ideas of doomsday (Allen 2011). Sayings and stories should rather be interpreted as a network of associations and past experiences that are both created and constantly create our understanding of different narratives of fears. Furthermore, I attempt to understand the cultural meanings and impact of images that signal catastrophe and apocalypse.

Method and Data
In this article, the emphasis lies on what the fear narratives actually communicate about the fears, although the way of presenting them is also of interest here. To be comprehensible, individuals describing their fears need to conform to certain narrative structures such as genre, form and vocabulary. Besides, the act of speaking one’s fear also changes the sensation of fear (Bourke 2005:287). Nevertheless, and similar to other ethnologists, I primarily see the narratives as empirical sources that shed light on complex discourses that both create and describe fear and objects of fear (cf. Farahani 2007:44).

The specific but heterogeneous group that I am studying in particular is children and teenagers between 7 and 16 years old with different social and ethnic backgrounds. This article is primarily based on two focus group interviews with one group consisting of three children (one boy and two girls) of different ages (11–14) and one group consisting of four, 14-year-old girls. In addition, I have interviewed one boy aged 9 and one girl aged 14. These interviews were conducted in Stockholm. In addition, the material contains about twenty individual interviews with children aged 7–16 conducted in Strångnäs, a small city south of Stockholm and short interviews with a class of 14-year-olds. I also had the opportunity to take part in fifteen focus group interviews and two single interviews with children aged 9–13 carried out by a theatre company in Malmö. These interviews focused on the children’s thoughts about the future. Besides this, I have conducted three interviews with adults about their childhood fears and read about fifty ethnological questionnaires about fears and childhood fears stemming from the Swedish Folklore Collections in the Folklife Archive in Lund (Luf 172). In addition to interviews, other categories of textual material have been relevant such as magazines, movies and literature for children. I also have read a handful of surveys about fear of climate change conducted by different organizations in Sweden and in other countries and newspapers articles about children’s fears.

This method, basing my analysis on small-scale in-depth interviews, does not result in findings about children’s fear that can be understood in any respect as generalized or able to serve as a benchmark for the validation of the experiences or understandings of other children. Rather, I have interpreted the interview data as articulations of discursive fears employed by children, which tell us something about the times we live in and the conditions of children’s everyday life.

Few researchers have studied Swedish child and adolescent fears from a cultural perspective. The field has rather been dominated by psychological and educational studies. The psychological research on children’s fears implies a kind of individualization and privatization of fears and feelings, which is why it needs
to be improved with social, cultural and structural perspectives. My study intends to capture the cultural and social character of fears but also, more generally, the cultural-analytical potential of emotions. The risk of reducing emotions to a mere psychological phenomenon is that, as the Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen describes, the psychological perspectives fail to understand emotions as a testimony about society and the world (Svendsen 2005:135).

Fear as Emotion
Since fears, as Joanna Burke has put it, are “the most pervasive emotion of modern society” (Bourke 2005:x) there is an urgent need for further research on how fear works as a cultural phenomenon. Fear-inducing discourses about the world’s devastation are circulating all around the world, especially, as it seems, in the western part of the world. The question is however, how do these fearful discourses worm their way into people’s everyday life? Do they at all? And if they do, in what ways do they have impact on how both children and adults experience and comprehends their own fears?

Despite the resolutions reached at the Paris Climate Change summit (in 2015) and studies showing that people’s living conditions in Western countries have improved significantly, surveys show that people have become more afraid of being subjected to various phenomena such as climate change, crimes, acts of terror, natural disasters etc. (cf. www.futurion.se; Svendsen 2008:14). Moreover, experts, the media, political discourse and people in routine informal discussions continue to propagate a picture of a very dangerous society and a world that is moving towards its doom. The sociologist Frank Furedi writes that many of our fears today are provoked by the testimonials and predictions of scientific experts that warn the public of dangers far (or near) that cannot be distinguished by ordinary people (Furedi 2009). These kinds of apocalyptic narratives are also something which seems to attract the kind of young person “who […] just naturally wants to see the adult world go up in flames and build it again, better” (Walton 2005:38). Besides, the themes in apocalyptic narratives, such as adult dishonesty, hostile environments, strong emotional content (love, loss, fear and hatred), friendship, loyalty and chosenness touch on something central to young people (Määttä 2015:427).

Besides the fact that, like other emotions, they have an impact on how we understand the world, fears are largely a physical experience, manifesting themselves in the form of palpitations, sweating, nausea, dizziness and tremors. Thus, the body has its own agents in the actual experience of fear. However, palpitations and nausea occur in situations that we have learned to interpret as dangerous and threatening. Therefore, fears form the body in a kind of learned behaviour (cf. Ahmed 2004). The child’s fear of spiders, darkness, and scary beings under the bed is thus something that is created in relation to certain narratives of fear available to the child.

Based on the above reasoning, this study may be placed within a theoretical tradition of emotional and affective research (Ahmed 2004). In the last few decades, research about emotions has grown into a special field within the humanities.
and social sciences. This new interest is partly seen as a reaction to how psychology has made emotions into something private/individual and thus disregarded their social and cultural aspects. Over the years, ethnologists have written a great deal about emotions such as pain, nostalgia, intimacy, violence, love, fear and desire, although these studies always have had an ambivalent relationship to the field of emotions (Frykman & Löfgren 2005: 11ff.). The risk of reducing feelings and emotions to a psychological understanding and to something that is separated from awareness is always present when it comes to understanding emotions. Addressing emotions however, can help us expand the ethnological debate about the interaction between action and reflection, body and intellect, movement and touch, essence and construction. The ethnologists Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren write that emotions can “act as indicators of something that is happening, a change, innovation, degradation or reinforcement” (Frykman & Löfgren 2005:15). According to this reasoning, in this article, fear is analysed as something that can tell us something about changing mental landscapes and how the well-known, the world we are used to, becomes something different and new. The anthropologist David Scruton writes, in his initial delineation of fear, that:

It is impossible to understand fully what human fearing is, how fears happen in the individual, how they are expressed both to self and to others, how they are received and reacted to by others in the community, and what their function in our lives is unless we treat fearing as a function of cultural experience, which people participate in because they are members of specific societies at particular times (Scruton 1986:9).

Fear is therefore, according to Scruton, a cultural experience that people share and in that way fear is a social act, which takes place within a cultural setting. In that sense, fear (like other emotions) is crucial to the forming of collectives. Moreover, fear as an emotion interlinks individuals and groups with the surrounding society and its materiality.

In addition, the discussion in this article touches upon an ongoing and important discussion on the contemporary focus on the threat to personal well-being as well as the safety of society at large and what this preoccupation with risk and safety means for children’s self-image, living conditions and their images of the future (see Furedi 2009; Guldberg 2009).

**Apocalyptic Narratives of the Atomic Bomb**

People’s fears vary both over time and in context. Panic-inducing incidents in the media disappear just as quickly as they come. Who in 2018 is afraid of mad cow disease or fairies, clouds or meteors that were some of the most frequent children’s fears in the nineteenth century (Gullone 2000)? Some fears, however, have continuity: darkness, certain animals, fear of nature’s power over humanity in the form of earthquakes, lightning and thunderstorms (Bourke 2005; Gullone 2000; Stattin 1990).

I have examined what kind of fears, threats and apocalyptic narratives different generations have grown up with. In the older records I have studied, people remembering their childhood fears recall feelings of discomfort in regard to some animals and strangers with a different exterior such as the chimneysweep and
tramps (Luf 172). There are also several people that bring up fictional beings like the evil spirit of the water and “brunsgubben” (a scary old man living in the well that threatened to pull one in (the well) if one came too close) (see e.g. Luf 172 M 20045:75, M 20227:1). In comparison with the beginning of the twenty-first century, the children in pre-industrial society had relatively large freedom of movement, which was partly a consequence of a lack of childcare facilities. The hazards were found in the vicinity of the well, the hot fire, the brook, etc. The made-up scary beings were something that the adults could use to get the children to avoid these dangerous places as far as possible. The adults thus invented scary beings, or they invoked the existing fictional beings that served as educational tools for parents (cf. Kuusela 2017; Stattin 1990:71). The fears of the past were largely about nurture through educational threats and some kind of external social control through designed objects for fear. The objects of fear were thus clear and distinct, albeit fictional. The older records also reveal other more realistic fears, such as fear of strict parents and teachers as well as fear of suffering from diseases such as lung disease and child paralysis (Luf 172).

If children in contemporary society to some extent fear the future of the earth because of climate change, the generation I belong to – the 60s – also feared the extinction of the world for an altogether different reason, the atomic bomb. In the interviews with people born in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s they all stress the fact they felt very safe and secure despite the wars and conflicts taking place around the world at the same time. Hans, born in 1954, remembers that the only thing he feared during his childhood, in a safe environment, full of future possibilities, was the atomic bomb.

I grew up in a safe environment, and I don’t mean, not just where we lived but also the whole society in which you felt there were no problems. Talking about fears, there was always a safety net for everything. You weren’t afraid, the only thing you were a little afraid of was your parents, and you felt that there was something going on there. But otherwise you felt it was an incredible, yes, it is my memory, very safe childhood in relation to society. Extremely safe! If you’re going to get into fears, the only thing I was afraid of was the terror balance, the atomic bomb, […], it was very clear.

Maria, born in 1964, also remembers the feeling of living in a secure world but then, when she got older, understood that in fact it was a world full of contradictions.

So, we were lulled into… On the one hand, we had grotesque images from a reality that nobody could handle. On the other hand, we had ehh, a social democratic time there, yes, that’s all everyone looked forward to and just saw that everything would be better. Everything would be better, and then I think, I thought it was painful when I realized it was not.

The grotesque images that Maria refers to are photographs and popular cultural representations of the Holocaust and television news showing burning children and napalm from the ongoing Vietnam War. Then this TV series came, I don’t know if you saw it too – The Holocaust – and it completely undermined my world-view, because then, it was really like this. You lie, it’s not at all as good as it looks and then I was 13, 14 years old when it played and then I started looking out on the world properly and see: Was this the way it was? Why had nobody told me before, this is more damaging than
you could ever imagine and then you started, just like with all the stories that you try to understand their existence, put together one by one and then it was, it was at that time, it was like Brezhnev and yes, you could name the names of these great guys. I remember (laughing), I don’t know if it was due to my mother, but she was never interested in Finland, but that was never something she commented at all. But you saw Uri Kekkonen standing and shaking hands with Brezhnev as well, and you realized that if the balances were being disturbed here, it would be crazy. Eh, and then, now, let’s see, now I have to go back in history, Nixon and yes, that gang that the world consisted of, completely brutal men with power who really just waited for bombing. And the rest of the world was burning, the children burned and everything burned and they dragged the corpses into the piles in those horror movies you saw.

The informants also remember that it was quite clear that the threat to this safe society came from the east. Niklas, born in 1967, recalls a clear division in his (and, in the west, many others’) perception of the world of who were the good and who were the bad ones.

N: When I was a child, World War II was not too distant and so it was very much on television, a lot of such American propaganda films from the forties, which in some ways glorified this black and white with allies and an evil Hitler and so on. That was what you grew up with and hated. It was very black and white as a child, it was, of course, that, where the evil was and where the good was in the world.

Interviewer: And the evil then was?
N: The evil was Hitler then. But it was history so that the evil was the Russians, that’s where the threat came from. So, that’s how you experienced it as a child.

The presence of the Cold War and the threat of nuclear bombs were found in both the mental and physical landscape. The informants’ memories of the atomic bomb threat and the Cold War show some common features such as discomforts on hearing “Hoarse Fredrik” (the alarm alert warning of danger), identity badges in the form of neck tags that would be worn in case of war, shelters, gas masks and the idea that someone would press the wrong button or a loss of control over the technology. All those materialities constantly reminded everyone that the sense of security in fact was fragile and temporary. An apocalyptic narrative about the bomb and the devastation that it had already caused nourished the fear of the atomic bomb that unites the informants. Several generations were raised with the perception that a new world war could start at any time; it would be enough for someone to accidentally hit the wrong button and thus involuntarily send missiles to either the Soviet Union or the United States. Paradoxically, the constant presence of the threat of a third and final world war that created fear and concern both for individuals and for the nation as a whole, existed at the same time as the threat emerged as a kind of normalized present. Sweden, as shown in the accounts of the informants, was experienced as a largely safe country for the vast majority in the 1960s and 1970s, and in addition, the belief in the future was strong. Side by side, the Cold War generation (in the West) lived with two stories, one that conveyed an unprecedented confidence in the future and dreams of prosperity in the culture of consumption, while the second conveyed total destruction. In other words, there was not much to fear if it had not been for the ever-imminent threat of total destruction (see Hörfeldt 2015:296).
Apocalyptic Narratives of Climate Change

In my interviews with children and adolescents about fears, the same pattern appears to some extent. The vast majority begin by explaining which animals are unpleasant and scary and then talk about what I perceive as other distinct items of fear, such as thunder, illness and accidents. In this way, the stories testify to quite traditional and to some extent constant fears.

In one of the group interviews with five 12–13-year-olds in a suburb of Malmö (in the south of Sweden) they talk about how they imagine the future.6 In these passages and in the interviews in general the children mix different popular-culture-infused apocalyptic narratives about an expected dystopian future.

Girl A: In the future, I believe the Third World War will come.
Girl B: I think so too.
Boy A: I think the Fifth World War will come.
Girl C: It has already arrived.
Girl A: Well, I think it will happen because there are so many wars now, all the time and there are more and more countries getting involved so I believe it will come.
Interviewer: Tell me more about this war.
Girl A: Well, about the war, what will happen?
Interviewer: Yes.
Girl A: Well, I believe.
Girl B: This country may not exist any more.
Girl A: I think many countries will disappear, well become smaller...there will be more water.
Girl C: No more football players.
Girl A: Well, I think that many people will die, well, extremely many people will die I believe.
Interviewer: By what?
Girl A: Of being, either from different kind of toxins or being shot or something.
Interviewer: What will happen then? What will the consequences be?
Girl B: Buildings destroyed.

Girl B: The people will die out.
Boy B: The end of the world.

The children imagine scenarios in which there is no more oxygen, no more trees and all the animals are dead or have disappeared. In the aftermath of the catastrophe, humans no longer reign since robots have taken the power over the world. The children in the interviews address their fear of the future and especially how they fear the future in regard to climate changes, artificial intelligence and upcoming political conflicts.

The children’s discussion about the end of the world above is not unique. Both in the interviews in general and in surveys addressed to children and adolescents they seem to be occupied with future catastrophes and apocalyptic narratives. In the USA, Britain and in Sweden several opinion polls concerning the climate threat have been conducted in recent years. A British study conducted in 2009, for example, says that half of all 11-year-olds often lie awake at night worrying about climate change (Jones 2007). In a survey conducted by the WWF with a thousand young Swedish people aged 15–25 in 2013, 35 per cent of the respondents believed that climate changes will not be solved but will result in a total global catastrophe within the next 90 years (www.wwf.se). Comparable surveys among preteens and teens in the USA show similar patterns, saying for example that one out of three children aged 6–11 fears that Mother Earth will not exist when they grow up, while more than half (56%) worry that the planet will be a blasted heath (or at least a very unpleasant place to live. On a sliding scale of fear, minority kids, urban
kids and girls are worst off (Roy Britt 2009).

The children’s imagining of the future and their fears in relation to this is obviously characterized by fictional images of a dystopian futuristic landscape described in many Anglophone apocalyptic narratives since the 1950s. In their imagination the future will bring melting glaciers, slavery, war, typhoons, leaking nuclear power plants etc. The Spanish philosopher Ana Marta González identifies these kinds of emotions as fictional that have colonized the public sphere. “Indeed, media culture has become a powerful agent of emotional socialization, fostering a new kind of emotional self whose relationship with real life seems mediated by narratives and fictional characters to a greater degree” (González 2012:7).

One powerful symbol of fear related to apocalyptic narratives of the atomic bomb and today’s climate change is the “Doomsday Clock” that has served as a globally recognized arbiter of the planet’s health and safety since 1947. The Clock is updated every year by the board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists at the University of Chicago. In its two most recent annual announcements on the Clock, the Science and Security Board warned: “The probability of global catastrophe is very high, and the actions needed to reduce the risks of disaster must be taken very soon” (Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 2017). At the beginning of 2018, the clock was updated again, and it is now two minutes to twelve. In the announcement from the bulletin it says: “In 2017, World leaders failed to respond effectively to the looming threats of nuclear war and climate change, making the world security situation more dangerous than it was a year ago – and as dangerous as it has been since World War II” (Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 2018).

The Doomsday Clock as a visual symbol of the potential extinction of human-kind may not reach all that many children but the political and medial rhetoric that it signals probably does. The world has never been so close to a global catastrophe since the Second World War. The rhetoric of the Doomsday Clock and other similar symbols of now existing and future threats are affecting both political and social life. In Sweden, for example, after years of military disarmament and pre-alignment of social protection, the political and medial discourse about safety and protection of both the society and its citizens has fundamentally changed in recent years. The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, for example, has only just updated the old information brochure “If war (or crisis) comes” for distribution to every household in Sweden during the spring of 2018. The last time this was done was in 1961.

**Apocalyptic Visual Narratives**

As shown in the previous sections, fears are often expressed in reference to visual narratives. In two of the group interviews, I displayed pictures of different stereotyped fear objects such as snakes, darkness and monsters but also pictures of more existential fears such as bullying, loneliness, illness, violence, disasters and other forms of vulnerable experiences that children and young people often have to confront. I used these pictures at the end of the interviews to elicit their reactions and reflections but likewise to explore the method as such. Since one girl in one of
the interviews, as she said, learned that walking alone in a dark alley could be frightening, I decided to end this procedure, as it seemed problematic from an ethical point of view. Nevertheless, most of the objects of fear displayed in the pictures were familiar to the children, and their recognition of the fears displayed and identification with the portrayed individuals were generally high. In that sense, the connection between visual narratives of fear and the physical emotions of fear is strong.

So how do images and visual culture that signal “catastrophe”, “extinction” and “collapse” create special conditions for emotions? In the interviews when children imagine the catastrophe and the life after it, they seem to picture themselves wandering in a burnt-down, deserted and destroyed landscape. These mental images are clearly linked to visual narratives of both catastrophes that have actually happened and of fictional ones.

The pictures showing the aftermath of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear bombs in 1945 have become iconic symbols of total destruction. Researchers who have studied historical doomsday stories claim that images of the devastation of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima, and of the Holocaust gave birth to the modern versions of apocalyptic narratives (Shapiro 2002). The bomb itself as a real tangible thing, with all those atomic bomb films that followed the Hiroshima and Nagasaki events “has worked its way into the history of human consciousness as an emblem
of the apocalyptic imagination” (Shapiro 2002:307).

The apocalyptic visual narratives about the atomic bomb and climate change share some similarities. They are both often in a greyscale and show ruined buildings, collapsed cities and lonesome humans walking in a devastated landscape. Further, they also depict scorched or parched landscapes where neither people nor animals can survive.

Although (scientific) knowledge and evidence about the effects of the atomic bomb and climate change differs in a number of ways, the visual narratives are surprisingly similar. Climate change will not end the world with a bang and the effects will vary at different places on earth. Some parts will become drier and some will probably sink under water. Yet many people, especially children and young people as it seems, do imagine the future of the world as a disastrous and deserted landscape, an uninhabited place after the big catastrophe – as, for example, shown in the visual narratives and in the surveys above.

These images and narratives mediated by experts, media and popular culture that signal “catastrophe”, “extinction” and “collapse” seem to have an impact and affect people in very concrete ways. In the interviews when children talk about their fear of the threats to the climate it is obvious that these visual narratives are present. The situation of the polar bears is something that children have in mind when they reflect on the future of earth. The solitary polar bear on the vanishing ice floe depicts in a dramatic way the fragility of both the climate and our own existence. One boy in sixth grade says that, even if humans will be all right in the fu-
ture, the polar bears will not. He also states that there are only two (wild) polar bears left in the world. Likewise, in general the children are often preoccupied with what man has done to nature, especially animals, and with what climate change will do to children living in the most affected countries where drought and hurricanes devastate societies and make life difficult for children living there (cf. Lagerblad 2010). Their empathy is directed primarily towards other children and animals. It is not easy to foresee the consequences of these kinds of narratives.

These images clash with the idea of living in a secure and predictable world. Bauman writes that modernity’s promise – to get away from the ever-present fear and the constant darkness, seems to have caught up with humanity in the form of a greater uncertainty about the present and the future (Bauman 2007:8). Perhaps the fear has increased from the first post-war decades onwards, since social media and 24-hour news updates have made us significantly more defenceless against terrifying incidents and events that threaten our very own existence and our trust in society’s capability to protect us. This is true especially in the prosperous western world where many have become accustomed to security and a sense of being in control of their environment. In addition, empirical studies show that those who live in the safest parts of the world feel most threatened, insecure and afraid (Bauman 2007:150; RSA 2010). However, the images that show the now existing effects of the climate changes and the fictional ones narrating an imagined future after the climate has collapsed do create anxiety and fear and they also do this intentionally – to get people to react as well as start acting.8

Furthermore, the visual narratives of the devastation after an atomic bomb show similarities to how the children seem to visualize the future in relation to the threat of climate changes. It is the same...
meta-narratives of a dead landscape, a place without any signs of life, as the anti-landscape of a nuclear war.

In the previously quoted dialogue the children discussed how wars, pollution and climate change would end the world. The quotation below is the continuation of that discussion.

Interviewer: What happens to people and nature then?

Girl A: Everything is on fire.
Girl B: I think it will be, then worse, the air gets worse and worse, then /no/ oxygen. Yes, and then I think that plants and things will get harder to grow and eventually it will all die out.

Interviewer: Which plants?

Girl B: All plants. Animals and humans too, because you can’t cope no matter what.

The children then express their thoughts about human survival after climate change has made the world uninhabitable. According to one of them, the humans who will survive the doom will be the ones who have built themselves a bunker. Another interviewee believes it will be those who believe in and care for nature. Yet another child thinks it will be those who believe in God that will survive the climate catastrophe. The idea that only those who believe in God or in other ways have done good to earth and humankind will survive the apocalypse has the same ideological background as biblical apocalyptic narratives in several ways, even though words with explicitly religious origins have been disengaged from their etymological and historical contexts and applied to more general global disasters (cf. Cowan 2011). In the Christian context, the doom is understood as a punishment on humankind for treating the earth in an irresponsible and selfish way and only those who believe in God will survive the apocalypse.

In the interviews, the children not only imagine themselves in a dystopic future, several of them also visualize a future in which everything has turned to the better and humankind has an opportunity to start all over again. One girl in sixth grade de-
scribes how the only things that will manage to live on earth in 50 years from now are the robots, since the pollution has first extinguished the animals and then mankind. She then goes on to explain how the world will be saved.

Girl: It’s more like this, there will be, probably, I hope, some people actually that will find out, actually wake up. Okay, we are destroying our world. So, either we get to escape to another planet or maybe some people have found out [...]

In school, they try to get children to understand that we are destroying the earth in the way we are carrying on. And I think more people will understand it so that we invent more environmentally friendly solutions. So, in that way we will be able to save the earth even though it is almost completely destroyed.

Interviewer: So, you think that knowledge can stop such a development?

Girl: Yes, and although it takes time, we will be able to rebuild the earth in the way it was from the beginning. Yes...(giggles).

Etymologically “apocalypse” denotes an uncovering or revelation. In the children’s accounts, they express hope for the future of the earth and they pin their hopes on an awakening of humankind and technological development and as the girl expresses it above, the earth will go back to the way it was in the beginning. The apocalyptic narratives often include these kinds of stories of recovery and reconstruction or even a future utopia (Määttä 2015:428). Furthermore, the children imagine, for example, that everyday life in the future will take place in big city-like cupolas where there will be clean air and nature will flourish. The interviewed children simultaneously imagine a dystopic and hopeful future in the sense that humans can solve the climate crisis through collective action. In that sense their beliefs correspond to a secular apocalyptic discourse that offers a vision of a better future – a new golden age that can be assured through human intervention (cf. Salvador & Norton 2011:58).

The threat of climate change is complex in that it involves a real threat to mankind, flora and fauna and at the same time it also carries the distinct features of apocalyptic narratives. Looking at the post-world-war narratives, where the nuclear war and climate threats appear to be the big downturns, they are both related to a real threat to some extent. In that sense, one could say that these apocalyptic narratives are based on science and realistic political outcomes. But this is not the only explanation; the apocalyptic narratives appear to be closely linked to crises and renegotiations of previous orders (cf. Määttä 2015) when the old arrangements are replaced by something new. After World War II, for example, the future appeared very bright and it was definitely time for something new. In connection with that, the story of the nuclear war arose. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, when both the ecological and political landscape are under (major) transformation, the apocalyptic narratives serve as a kind of pressure valves and as mental preparation tools for a different world from what many, especially in the western parts of the world, are used to.

Bauman writes that the people of twenty-first century, facing the unpredictability of the future, probably feel the same way people did when they were overwhelmed by endless oceans and giant mountains (2006:109). In these globalized and medialized times, children and adolescents are exceptionally aware of events taking place all over the world. In a simi-
lar way, as people in the past were astounded by the magnitude of nature and afraid of unprecedented extremes of weather, people today – and particularly as it seems children – fear widespread droughts and melting ice caps even though these environmental changes does not affect the children interviewed for this study in any concrete sense (cf. Hulme 2008).

The children seem preoccupied with the purposeless impoverishment of the earth’s resources and all the evil humankind has inflicted upon the earth, nature and each other. Apocalyptic narratives are often about finding meaning in our lives and function as a response to cultural uncertainty and fear when traditional cultural assumptions are destabilized by present-day events (cf. Brummett 1984). The power available in these stories affects people in a very concrete way. All threats of disaster and discourses of the End of the World circulating in the media and in politics have effects on people in the sense that they understand themselves and their future in certain ways.

Concluding Remarks
In this article, I have examined how fears are socially and culturally conditioned. The objects of fear vary with time and space. The Swedish generations born in the 1950s and 60s were raised in an exceptional period when safety nets and economic welfare characterized society and people’s everyday life. At the same time, life was permeated by a great fear that it all could end at any time when nuclear war eventually broke out.

In the interviewed children’s accounts from the beginning of the twenty-first century, they most of all seemed to fear the future, which they at the same time imagined as both very uncertain and hopeful. In their visions of the future, society had either turned worse with a state of (nuclear) war or a total environmental disaster including a dead landscape without living creatures, or things will eventually, partly as a result of the collapse, have turned to the better. It also seems that they feel confident that technology itself will be able to solve many of the challenges faced by the earth and humankind. Hence, paradoxically, they simultaneously believed that the world, as we know it, is heading towards its doom and that the future (after the doom) would be bright and bring more equality and better conditions for all living beings. It is obvious that few of them imagined a future in which the world and our societies would stay the same. Their images of the future were clearly related to medically spread images of the earth’s demise. One striking example is the starving lonely polar bear on an ice floe, which has become a kind of key symbol of climate change and functions as a representation of the collapse of nature and the extinction of the species. In that sense the children utilized the apocalyptic narratives in some way to prepare themselves for a future world different from what they are used to.

The earlier fear of nature and all the inexplicability that it harboured, as shown, for example, in the questionnaire Luf 172, has in many ways been transformed into a fear of and concern for nature (cf. Stattin 1990:140). Today, fears related to nature in the children’s accounts are oriented towards all the depraved things mankind has done to the earth more than what nature itself cause humans. In that sense, there has
been a shift in the question of responsibility. The nature itself is no longer responsible for its actions since most of the changes in the climate are caused by humans. However, this shift has been going on for a long time. Even in the 1970s, the fear of environmental degradation was high, especially among children and young people.

As we have seen, the apocalyptic visual narratives of future wars and conflicts and the threat of climate change, particularly in relation to children, create fear. Additionally, the object of fear itself being so vague and obscure enhances the fear. Not even climate researchers are able to predict what the changes will mean for the future of earth. Bauman writes that fear is most horrific when it is diffuse, scattered, liquid and without a clear address or reason (2007:110). The fear of climate change is an example of such a fear. No one knows with certainty what the earth is heading towards; the only thing we know for sure is that no one will be able to escape the climate changes even though some children imagine a future where humans have relocated themselves to other planets. Regardless of hopes like this, there will be no borders, fences or walls to stop the climate changes, which in turn makes the fear even more daunting.

To be afraid or to feel fear is an ambiguous state of mind, not only through nature but also in the meaning of the emotion. This ambiguity, however, is partially overcome through the contextualization of fears in “emotional regimes”, which regulate their expression and create social expectations that determine the range of meaningful emotions for any given situation (cf. González 2012:2). Fear also functions as a testimony about society and the world, since it embodies values (cf. Frykman & Löfgren 2005). The embodiment of values is furthermore expected to follow certain emotional rules, which in turn vary from society to society and from time to time. The analysis of fear as an emotion can therefore provide us with relevant cues, not only about fear manuscripts but also about the eventual emotional instability that can follow social and cultural change (cf. González 2012:2). In today’s fear narratives, there is an inherent postulate about how we are expected to fear the destruction of the world. These embodied fear narratives are intertextual. The children’s statements about their fears and their imaginings of an apocalyptic future cannot be understood as independent of either earlier or contemporary fear narratives.

In a time characterized by rapid transformations and major upheavals, many of the old routines and traditions of life can no longer be taken for granted (Furedi 2005:67). Besides traditional fears, such as fear of thunder, darkness and certain animals, the children’s fears at the beginning of the twenty-first century concern more diffuse objects such as a general uncertainty about the future. The new states of emotional regimes are thus dominated by uncertainty regarding the future, and that uncertainty seems to have induced the children’s self-perceived fears. The children’s accounts of their fears are closely connected with widespread fear narratives in society. It is thus the pictures and causes of fear, mediated through stories, fairy tales, films and pictures, that become means through which the children can understand their own fears. In that way, our
emotional perception always passes through history (cf. Ahmed 2004). Whether something feels threatening or dangerous it always involves some kind of process of interpretation. The children’s accounts are filled with emotions of fear that are closely linked to discursive fears or meta-narratives of fear, but also filled with hope in regard to the future.

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Notes
1 All the quotations from the empirical material have been translated into English by the author.
2 This idea that the western world is facing a particular “culture of fear” is not the whole truth. Apparently, there have been other times when fear has dominated both politics and everyday life. The period preceding World War II was also, for example, evidently subject to a culture of fear (Moïsi 2009:94; cf. Bourke 2005).
3 Historians have argued that humans always experience their own time as the most dangerous and uncertain (see e.g. Shapiro 2002).
4 According to psychological research, fear occurs when threat is certain, proximate and imminent, while anxiety may take place without the presence of actual danger. The function of fear is that the body and the organism must be alert and quickly prepared for immediate action, either fight or flight (Muris 2007/2014:2). Anxiety is however directed towards the uncertainty and it moves between different objects. This movement also works as an intensification of the sense of anxiety (cf. Ahmed 2004:66). Even though fear and anxiety as analytical concepts are differentiated in psychological research I intend to use them interchangeably here as examples of fear. In that sense fear is understood in this article as a broader concept than the psychological one and therefore includes emotions such as worry and anxiety.
5 Research about emotions and affects often draws a dividing line between feelings, emotions and affects. Affects refer to the body and physiology, indicating a more unintended intensity beyond the linguistic denominations. Emotions are understood as names of more complex and constant qualities that we communicate in social life, that is, qualities we call love, sorrow and shame. Feelings, on the other hand, stand for the personal physiological and psychological experience (Brânström, Jönsson & Svensson 2011). In this article, I primarily use emotion as a notion, and I view emotions primarily as social, historical and cultural practices.
6 The producer of a theatre company in the city of Malmö did this interview in 2015. Since I have collaborated with the theatre company they allowed me to use these interviews for my research. The children have given me permission to publish excerpts from the interviews.
7 The literary scholar Jerry Määttä points out four (five) distinct periods or high points for Anglophone apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives. There are the early 1800s with novels such as the The Last Man (Mary Shelley); the inter-war period especially the years after the depression in 1929; the post-war era 1950–1975; the second Cold War of the early 1980s. Finally, a rise of apocalyptic narratives is seen after 9/11. There was, however a decline of these kind of apocalyptic narratives during the two world wars and during the 1990s (Määttä 2015:427).
8 In recent years, climate researchers have discussed which strategy is the most effective to get people to act against climate change. Is it by scaring people by showing the worst scenarios of climate change or is it by empowering the public to overcome barriers to individual and collective agency (see e.g. Foust & Murphy 2009)?
9 There are both Christian and secular versions of the apocalyptic narratives, with the former, Armageddon, preceding the return of God and the latter left open for human intervention to avoid the looming catastrophe (Salvador & Norton 2011:47).
References

Unpublished

Interviews with 28 children aged 7–15 carried out between 2013 and 2017 in Stockholm and Strängnäs. 17 interviews with children aged 9–13 in Malmö (done by a theatre company in 2015). All transcripts and recordings are archived at Stockholm university, Department of Ethnology, History of Religions and Gender Studies, except for 17 interviews made in Malmö by Theatre company 23.

Interviews with 3 adults (born in the 1950s and 60s) carried out in 2013 in Stockholm.

Archive

The Folklife Archives in Lund

Answers to questionnaire Luf 172 “Ångslig och rädd” (Anxious and afraid).

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Lagerblad, Anna 2010: Ibland tänker jag att jor-


