

# *The Production of Place*

## *Stockholm and the Invention of “Capital of Scandinavia” as Space of Representation*

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### **Preface: On the Elusive Nature of Cityscape**

In the opening sequence of Ruben Östlund’s 2017 film *The Square*, Christian, the manager of the X-Museum of contemporary art, presents the eponymous installation of artist and sociologist Lola Arias as a source of positive sentiment. Arias installation is encouraged and instructed to be regarded with respect and compassion by museum-goers and, by synecdoche, society at large.<sup>1</sup> In the square, occasional occupants are constrained by a collective identification as responsive and elected members of the social order. The square appears to possess an imaginative and metaphysical quality, representing a social construct that encompasses wishful thinking, moral imperatives, and configurations of public space.<sup>2</sup>

The fictional work of art by Lola Arias evinces a number of correspondences with the imaginative conception of the city. In a similar manner to how the square is regarded as an empty frame awaiting its content, urban areas are shaped by functionalization and planning, conveying specific meaning. Both the square and cities, although situated within a physical space and shaped

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<sup>1</sup> The installation consists in a 4x4 metre square. In 2015, Östlund and artist Kalle Boman presented the same piece of art, *Rutan* (“The Square”), at Vandalorum Museum in Värnamo. In the film sequence, Christian stands on a grand staircase in a figurative state of superiority towards the assembled audience at the foot of the steps.

<sup>2</sup> It is evident that the entire sequence is imbued with a sense of irony. Christian commences his address by consulting his notes. He then pauses and begins to speak extemporaneously, with the intention of conveying a more immediate and genuine message. The appeal to sincerity is, however, somewhat contrived. Christian has rehearsed his speech in the bathroom mere seconds before, where he also ceased reading from his notes to appear more genuine. The appeal to reality ultimately proves to be nothing more than a pretense.

by architectural and design elements, extend beyond the boundaries of our sensory perception: “the cityscape has no horizon and is only weakly grounded in the land” (Ringgard, 2017: 203). Cities have all been shaped by economic growth and local and global historical changes. Nevertheless, they have also furnished their own distinctive narrative and a sense of place, informed by both experience and imagination. Different media facilitate the development of specific sets of ideas, fantasies, and representations of urban spaces. Literature, for example, plays a role in shaping cities as both real and imagined entities, fictional and physical, as Brian McHale asserts: “This is not a matter, in other words, of *choosing* between alternative states of affairs, but rather of an ontological oscillation, a flickering effect” (McHale 2004: 32). Cinema and space on the other hand establish a “scopic affinity” which can be “explained by the fact that the emerging modern city seemed to naturally complement the ability of the cinematic apparatus to capture the city’s defining characteristics: its architectural forms, movements, illuminations and, of course, its people” (Koeck 2013: 8).

Stockholm emerges as poignant example of a city both real and imagined, material and made of filmic impressions. The city has a long literary tradition, and has thus established itself within the national and international canon of literature, becoming a genre in its own right, namely *Stockholmslitteratur*. This has contributed to the formation of an urban sensibility, linking tangible edifices and locales to memories, dispositions, and customary practices. In contrast, films and film history centred on Stockholm have provided a “geopsychic exploration” of the city, which has involved both mental reconstruction and physical experience of urbanity, allowing for a probing of space (Bruno 2018: 15).

The city of Stockholm has been at the center of an unprecedented process of reconstruction from the early 30’s. The transformation affected the centre, which was subsequently cleared of all its previous heritage and reconstructed in a modern style, but also impacted the periphery, where new neighbourhoods were constructed as evidence of the production of place; space was created anew, following the direction and a vision for the city:

It [the city] is made up of cells with different functions and is the centre of many activities. Its healthy life depends on the right cells being coordinated in the right way. To understand the city and guide its development in the desired direction, one must analyse its structure and study its cells. But the city is not just the sum of its parts. It cannot grow merely by adding neighbourhood to neighbourhood and activity to activity. It is a living totality, and the goal of its growth and change must be a harmonious and purposeful organization of the whole.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Original version: “den är uppbyggd av celler med skilda funktioner och utgör säte för många verksamheter. Dess sunda livsyttningar beror av att rätta celler samordnas på rätt sätt. För att förstå staden och leda dess utveckling i önskvärd riktning måste

The city of Stockholm is intended as a living body, governed by political and economic forces, the result of urban and general plans, visions and guidelines published by the City Council. While artistic expression offers “narratives as culturally mediated practices of (re)interpreting experience” (Meretoja 2018: 2), urban planning seeks to establish a city according to a set of practical and functional principles. The conjunction of artistic interpretation and political urban planning engenders a fruitful encounter between the tangible and the conceptual aspects of the city. While the nature of the cityscape will remain elusive and challenging to comprehend, flickering between the real and the imagined, it will give rise to a multitude of interpretations and representations, exerting an influence on cinema and literature, and in turn being shaped by these artistic forms.

The case of the inauguration of the suburb of Skärholmen, in the south-east of the capital, provides an illustrative example of the ever-changing and elusive essence of the city. In the inaugural speech of city councillor Hjalmar Mehr the new neighbourhood is deemed as a model for future progress, “a unique example of a social residency programme on a large scale” (Wirtén 2015: 23)<sup>4</sup>; Skärholmen is described in reports as being “extremely well planned” and as representing the paramount of a “luxury community” (Lindström 1968: 6; Kellberg 1968: 46). An opposing viewpoint, as articulated by Lars-Olof Franzen, effectively reverses the situation: “The only thing one can use Skärholmen’s centrum for is to roll non-returnable bottles, because it sounds terrible between walls. Wreck it!” (Franzén 1968: 5).<sup>5</sup> From there on, Skärholmen ceased to exemplify a model community and transformed from a paragon of modernity and sophistication to a social catastrophe, where housewives experience profound isolation, children lack constructive activities, and familial structures disintegrate, so to shape “welfare State concentration camp” (Wirtén 2015: 38).<sup>6</sup>

Same city, same urban planning and buildings, but indeed completely different interpretations. While the periphery is characterised by a sense of isolation and monotony, the city centre is produced by the imperative

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man analysera dess byggnad och studera cellerna. Men staden är ej blott summan av delarna. Den får inte växa endast genom att stadsdel fogas till stadsdel och verksamhet adderas till verksamhet. Den är en levande totalitet, och målet för dess tillväxt och förändringar måste vara en harmonisk och ändamålsenligt organiserad helhet,” *Det framtida Stockholm: riktlinjer för Stockholms generalplan*, Stockholm, Stockholms stads stadesplanekontor, 1945, p. 6-7. Unless stated otherwise, all translations in this study have been conducted by myself.

<sup>4</sup> Original version: “inom den västliga världen unikt exempel på samhällsbygge i det stora formatet”.

<sup>5</sup> Original version: “Det enda man kan använda Skärholmens centrum till är att rulla engångsglas så det låter riktigt jävligt mellan väggarna. Riv det!”.

<sup>6</sup> Original version: “välfärdssamhällets koncentrationsläger”.

of business and modernity. It embodies the attractiveness of Stockholm's *storstadspuls* ("metropolitan pulse"):

This can be said to construct an urban atmosphere, as it refers both to the physical environment and to something else, an atmosphere or social climate. The terms "attractive" and "lively" may sometimes denote certain specific urban structures or settlement characteristics that are considered attractive, but they can equally be used without specification, as a general goal of urban planning - the *attractive, lively or good city*. (Tunström 2009: 100)<sup>7</sup>

The aim of this article is to conduct a more detailed examination of the multifaceted artistic representations of real and imagined Stockholm and confront them with guidelines of urban planning. This entails an examination of the model of production of space as it is applied to the city, with a view to identifying the recurring patterns in both fictional and non-fictional sources. The article thus seeks to highlight the emergence of cultural, urban and experiential elements that are key to the city centre. Writer and architect Lars Mikael Raattamaa defines these elements as metronormativity, whereby the notion of centrality is reduced to productive, capitalist values such as consumption and the accumulation of normative experience (Raattamaa 2005: 207).

The principal methodological framework will be Geocriticism. In the view of Bertrand Westphal, Geocriticism implies a more expansive interconnection between the conceptualisation of place and artistic expression: "adopting a geocentered approach amounts to arguing that literary representation is included in the world, in an enlarged reality, and in infinitely adjustable space that is in direct contact with a plurality of discourses"<sup>8</sup> (Westphal 2011: 116).

The principal resources employed in the discussion encompass literary texts, cinematic works, press material, and comprehensive urban development plans for the city of Stockholm. The focus of this discussion will be urban policies applied to Stockholm, beginning with the *City 67* plan and subsequently examining more recent documents, including the general plan for 2018, *Översiktsplan*, and the vision document, *Ett Stockholm för alla* ("A Stockholm for everybody"). I will draw my considerations from Per Hagman's debut novel *Cigarett* (1991) and will investigate spatiality in Ruben Östlund's

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<sup>7</sup> Original version: "Detta kan sägas konstruera en stadsmässig atmosfär, då det både refererar till den fysiska miljön och till något annat, en stämning eller ett socialt klimat. Begreppen attraktiv och levande kan ibland markera vissa specifika urbana strukturer eller bebyggelsekaraktärer som anses attraktiva, men de kan lika gärna användas utan specifikation, som ett generellt mål för stadsplaneringen—den *attraktiva, levande eller goda staden*".

<sup>8</sup> Original version: "adopter une approche géocentrée revient à considérer que la représentation littéraire est incluse dans le monde, dans un réel élargi et dans un espace infiniment modulable qui est en prise directe sur une pluralité de discours," in Westphal 2007: chap. 4.1 Apple Books.

*The square.* In both works, the central space of the city is depicted as a dynamic and malleable entity, perpetually receptive to the prospect of transformation and engagement.

### Theoretical Framework: Spatial Practices and Representational Spaces

A prominent figure in the recent discourse on space has been Henri Lefebvre. His 1974 work, *La Production de l'espace*, has established a foundation for theoretical discourse. According to him, space is a social product, constructed by interaction between people and subjected to the control of located powers: "a society secretes the society's space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it"<sup>9</sup> (Lefebvre 1991: 38). Indeed, in his complex interpretation, space is classified in three distinct categories as "perceived space" of the everyday life, "conceived space," designed and ordered by power and "lived space," reproduced and re-mediated by artistic expression (Lefebvre 1974: 33-35). Perceived space is linked to the ways in which residents utilise a given location on a daily basis, to the spatial practices they employ in order to make that location their own: "embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation"<sup>10</sup> (Lefebvre 1991: 33). Representation of space is instead connected to planning and control: "tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to 'frontal' relations"<sup>11</sup> (Lefebvre 1991: 33). The concept of representational space is primarily associated with the domain of art: "linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art (which may come eventually to be defined less as a code of space than as a code of representational spaces)"<sup>12</sup> (Lefebvre 1991: 33).

Building from the lefebvrian triad, human geographer Edward Soja posits that the tridimensionality of space can be understood through the lens of three distinct dimensions: firstspace, secondplace, and thirdspace (Soja 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Original version: "une société secrète son espace; elle le pose et le suppose, dans une interaction dialectique: elle le produit lentement et sûrement en le dominant et en se l'appropriant" in Lefebvre 1974: 48.

<sup>10</sup> Original version: "englobe production et reproduction, lieux spécifiés et ensembles spatiaux propres à chaque formation sociale" in Lefebvre 1974: 42.

<sup>11</sup> Original version: "liées aux rapports de production, à l'ordre qu'ils imposent et par là, à des connaissances, à des signes, à des codes, à des relations 'frontales'" in Lefebvre 1974: 43.

<sup>12</sup> Original version: "liés au côté clandestin et souterrain de la vie sociale, mais aussi à l'art, qui pourrait éventuellement se définir non pas comme code de l'espace mais comme code des espaces de représentation" in Lefebvre 1974: 43.

Firstspace refers to the material and objective physical extension of space in urban environments; secondplace encompasses the collective interpretations of reality shaped by strategic marketing and political control of territory, as well as their reflection in the collective imagination. In the last category, physical and conceptual connotations of space overlap: “everything comes together in thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious” (Soja 1999: 56-57).

Stockholm’s urban area is a tangible manifestation of a conceived production of place, where the architectural forms that populate this space are a direct reflection of a state-driven and meticulously planned disposition. Its city centre has been comprehensively rebuilt and reoriented towards commercial and business activities. While this is a common trend in many European capitals, with city centres becoming Central Business Districts (CBDs), in Stockholm this functionalisation of space is achieved through the architectural substitution of the old with the new (Murphy 2017: chap. 1).

Concurrently, extensive reconstruction has been undertaken also in the suburbs of Stockholm. The shift in economic circumstances and the considerable enhancement in the standard of living that followed *Rekordåren* (“the record years”) rendered housing a significant political issue. The dearth of adequate housing for the working class in major urban centres prompted the Social Democratic government to implement *Miljonprogrammet* (“the Million Programme”) (Arnstberg 2000).<sup>13</sup>

In this context, the development of public space does not occur in a natural process where private and public initiatives shape the public realm. Instead, urbanity is produced solely through the representation of space, which is coherent with the vision and functions established by governmental power. The public areas of Stockholm are constituted as secondspaces, defined by their specific purposes and the discourses that they generate, informed by a future-oriented and optimistic view of society.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The planning and construction of new residential areas is a common practice throughout Nordic countries, “one of the most significant physical manifestations of the Scandinavian welfare states” (Stenbro, Riesto 2014: 211). In Denmark, the phenomenon of urban sprawl has been a prominent feature of the socio-political landscape since the conclusion of the Second World War (see Høghøj 2019). More recent developments also had an impact on Oslo, contributing to the reshaping of the city’s outer districts (see Hansen, Guttu 2000). In Finland “until the late 1960s, suburbs embodied the contemporary architectural and social ideals of a new kind of healthy, child-friendly living close to nature in contrast to the densely built city centers. Then both professional and public views on suburbs changed abruptly and condemned the mass-produced suburbs as aesthetic and social failures” (Saarikangas, Moll, Hannikainen 2023: 204).

<sup>14</sup> An optimistic view of the future is a common thread in the Nordic interpretation of post-Second World War progress (see Stråth 2012: 25-48).

An examination of the representations of these areas in literature and art, and the confrontation between the real and the imagined city will facilitate an understanding of Stockholm's secondspaces.

## The Shape of the City: Urban Planning of the City of Stockholm

Stockholm underwent significant changes at the core of its urban fabric. In 1962, the city council approved a new general plan for a comprehensive renewal programme, which included the majority of Norrmalm, the neighbourhood which encompassed the main railway station. This was intended to facilitate a *sanering* ("clearance"), which entailed the notion that the city centre, with its decadent fashion, small and unwealthy apartments, was outdated and that a bright future could be built by giving Norrmalm new infrastructure.

*City 67* constituted a continuation of the original programme. The concept of *funktionsduglighet* ("operativity") was a central tenet of the renovation project (Stahre 2004: 22-23). The centre had to be easy to access and to explore. In order to instate the new social function of shopping haven and perform an urban normalization, blocks between Kungsgatan and Tunnelgatan were dotted with *parkeringshus*, multi-storey car parks, that provided the staggering number of 18,000 parking places in a gross area of around 0.7 km.<sup>15</sup> *City 67* also scheduled tearing down 457 buildings, 48 % of the total number in the neighbourhood, 67 % of the buildable area.<sup>16</sup> The implicit goal was to entertain and reward shopping needs of short time visitors, who, once they had parked their car, would streetwalk the richness of city life. The sequence of shops would create a visible and external attitude, which should make Stockholm look like other cities in Europe, although lacking a distinctive local character. Here the multifaceted commercial offer of the centre produces identity options, life models, narratives derived from advertising, ready to be used and in line with the mythology of consumerism and capitalism. The ritual of exploring the centre, the seduction of the shop window and the purchase in fact establishes a connection between body, mind and space (Bowlby 2001: chap. 4).

The idea was replicated on a smaller scale in outer neighbourhoods, where *stadsdelscentra* ("districts' main squares") were designed to host the metro station, shopping, educational and sport facilities. Space is divided according to its function: the main square is for collective activities, outer locations for housing.<sup>17</sup> As Moa Tunström has observed, the city is ordered in "scenes," each

<sup>15</sup> *City 67, Principplan för den fortsatta citysaneringen framlagd i maj 1967*, Stockholm, Nord. bokh. distr., 1967, p. 35. The newest and biggest shopping mall in Sweden, inaugurated in 2015, has 4,000 parking places.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Generalplan för Stockholm 1952*, Stockholm, Stockholm Stads stadsplanekontor, p. 180.



distinguished by a fixed design and a clearly defined function. The city centre is devoted to trade and administration, while the suburbs are primarily residential (Tunström 2005: 57–69). Within the centre, a pattern of *flânerie* is established, with pedestrians flowing into a commercialised area, situated within a system of consumption, where the spaces for autonomy and personality seem to be reduced and aligned with a sense of metronormativity.

After *City 67*, Stockholm city council presented many more comprehensive prospects for the future of the urban area. The 2018 *Översiktsplan* gives very interesting insights into the material and immaterial transformations taking place in the capital of Sweden.

The publication places considerable emphasis on images that portray individuals engaging in leisure activities within the urban environment during summer. These images predominantly feature locations that serve as social hubs, routes for walking and cycling, coastal areas, and outdoor pursuits. Of the 126 images contained within the booklet, only four are set in the winter season.<sup>18</sup> Even *visionbilder*, project images of future neighbourhoods, hint at an engaging neighbourhood where “cutout people,” silhouettes used to assess proportion in each area, allude to social thrills. Clearly, the imaginary people of the capital of Sweden portrayed in *Översiktsplan 2018* seem to enjoy a never-ending day-off in a Stockholm-like city blessed with Mediterranean weather<sup>19</sup>: “in the city of the future there is no grey weekday—no cloudy day either” (Ferring 2016: 181).<sup>20</sup> The imagination of future Stockholm pushes everyday life out of the picture, as the city becomes an entertainment venue, listing the amenities and commodities of a consumer-oriented experience.

Key term for *Översiktsplan* is *attraktiv* (“attractive”), which, as adjective or noun (*attraktivitet*, “attractivity”), recurs 66 times in the 169-pages record, an average of one occurrence every 2.5 pages: “an attractive big city that appeals people, companies and visitors”<sup>21</sup> is the catchline that soundly resembles the marketing strategies of an advertising corporation. In *Översiktsplan 2018* Stockholm adopts a confident and marketing-oriented stance that reinforces the concept of *stadsmässighet* (“urbanity”). This term points to the city’s infinite resources of vitality, “the cure-all for environmental and social ills” (Tunström 2007: 686). Vitality is in fact denied in the suburbs, which represent

<sup>18</sup> *Översiktsplan 2018*, Stockholm, Stockholm stad, 2018, p. 21; 142–143; 157; 164–165. Interestingly, the winter images, while inspiring (depicting respectively the glassy, illuminated coastline of Södermalm, the elegiac Skogskyrkogården - a Unesco World Heritage site - and the colourful, snowy facades of Mursmäcкан, a block of small town houses), mostly appear very late in the publication.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2–3; 4; 25; 28; 29; 48; 64–65; 83; 86–87; 96; 110–111; 138–139; 146–147; 150–151; 168–169.

<sup>20</sup> Original version: “I framtidens stad finns ingen grå vardag—heller ingen molnig dag”.

<sup>21</sup> *Översiktsplan 2018*, *op. cit.*, p. 20–21, original version: “en attraktiv storstad som lockar människor, företag och besökare”.



the original sin of the *folkhemmet*'s urban planning, the uniformity of style (*enformighet*), seen as the antithesis of the city centre's mixture and richness of different designs.

In *Översiktsplan*, Stockholm is presented as a space of representation that only clings to a life of social engagement and collective thrills, devoid of a Nordic identity. Consumption plays a key role as citizens-consumers enjoy the vitality of an unlimited and inexhaustible thirdspace where soft power of late capitalism can display its appeal. The impetus for innovation, the demolition and subsequent modernist reconstruction of central districts in a manner conducive to a new business-fuelled dis-identity, has resulted in the formation of a diminished sense of place: "the city constitutes a commercial arena, a social and cultural space which is filled with advertising pillars, shopping areas and places of pleasure and relaxation" (Johansson 2004: 169).<sup>22</sup>

If *Översiktsplan* alludes to a city rich in existential unpredictability, the suburb can be viewed as its antithesis. The pervasive atmosphere of uniformity and the pernicious influence of "the fear of everyday life" become manifest in periphery, as posited by Mats Franzén (Franzén 2005: 162).<sup>23</sup> The suburban environment represents a milieu in which the creative potential that underpins collective representations of urban centres is eroded and replaced by a representation of everyday life that is perceived to be devalued, a paradigm of placelessness which "involves detachment from the particularity of places [...] manifest wherever human-made landscapes lack distinctiveness and have little connection with their geographical contexts" (Relph 2017: 21).

The conceptual output derived from general plans and visions influences the artistic representation of space, which is then re-mediated in films and novels. The following section will be then dedicated to examining the artistic description of cityscapes.

### **Stockholm as Representational Place: Ruben Östlund's *The Square* and Per Hagman's *Cigarett***

The eponymous square depicted in Ruben Östlund's film utilises the spatial elements to convey ideas and an interpretation of society. It is thus designed as a space of representation, which encompasses the collective aspiration of the upper class towards elevation, self-segregation and separation from the rest of society.

In the first sequence of the film, Christian is interviewed by the art reporter Anne. Two key words emerge from this conversation: the first one is "concurrence," with which Christian refers to the constant competition

<sup>22</sup> Original version: "staden utgör en kommersiell arena, ett socialt och kulturellt rum som fylls med reklampelare, shoppingområde och platser för njutning och avkoppling".

<sup>23</sup> Original version: "en rädsla för vardagen".

between museums and private buyers and the bottom line of profitability; the other is “site.” In her discussion, Anne makes reference to the artist Robert Smithson’s theory of “nonsite.” In 1968 Smithson arranged an installation with title *Nonsite*, which consisted in the display of piles of rocks and slate fragments translated from geological sites to a gallery. There he wanted to challenge the museum’s desire for containment: a *site* disposes space according to a scheme, a strategy of control. A “nonsite” instead lacks a hierarchical disposition of space. Smithson’s introduction of material from a “nonsite” to the museum results in its immediate transformation into components of a “site” (Stückelberger 2006; Linder 1999: 6-35). Collocation, or “site,” is determinant in making sense and making art: Christian reiterates Smithson’s line of reasoning, proposing that if Anne’s bag were to be situated within the museum premises, it could be regarded as an artistic installation in its own right. Context is of paramount importance, as it is for urban space, which is perceived as either safe or dangerous depending on the perspective.

When analysed using the framework proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen, the sequence can be defined as narrative, as it is basically built on dialogues and with little interaction between the characters (Kress 2006: 48-50). The visual structure of the shot is characterised by the museum’s white, empty space.<sup>24</sup> In lieu of Anne, the viewer is presented with the work of fictitious artist Gijoni, entitled *Piles of Gravel*. The artwork is evidently a reference to Smithson, as it displays irregular accumulations of geological material, akin to the site-nonsite 1968 installation.

The next sequence applies a “transitivity process” from narrative to conceptual.<sup>25</sup> To make room for the square, a four-sided illuminated space, the statue of King Charles XIV is dismantled with complicated manoeuvres. The visual structure of the shot is characterised by a tone of white, coming from the clouds, used as backdrop. It evokes the hues associated with the museum, while the music brings salience to the figure of the king.<sup>26</sup> The sequence can be read in the context of the contemporary concept of art. In the attempt to elevate the statue, this is ultimately severed from the ground; symbolically, the monarchy is decapitated in this act, paving the way for the emergence of a democratic work of art: “the square is a sanctuary of trust and caring. Within it, we all share equal rights and obligations”.

With another “transitivity process,” the square comes to outline an inner and outer boundary. Inside the boundary dwell those who share same values

<sup>24</sup> Irony emerges again a key element in the film, as Riis notes about the neon letters behind Christian: “The coloured lights of the artwork similarly invoke, in context, an urban consumerist culture, a contrast to its message of poverty” (Riis 2023: 293).

<sup>25</sup> For the adaptation of the concept of “transitivity process” to film studies, see Wildfeuer 2014: 34.

<sup>26</sup> For the concept of *salience*, the concentration of meaning in objects and figures in the visual and musical structure of a shot, see van Leeuwen 1999; Tseng 2013.

and are sensible to art, those who, according to Richard Florida, form the “class of the creatives” (Florida 2011). This rising class encompasses both the domains directly concerned with the generation of novel content and the cohort of individuals engaged in sectors where personal initiative is essential for problem-solving, including professionals such as lawyers, software programmers, engineers, and those employed in finance. In the case of *The Square*, the creatives are both the artists responsible for the artwork itself and the content creators who convene at the museum with the objective of devising a marketing strategy for the artwork. The establishment of a horizontal network is observed within this team of creatives, whereby younger PRs and older experts engage in the exchange of opinions without any sense of hierarchy. The architectural design of the interior is characterised by the use of glass, with transparency evident in the walls, cups and boards that feature in the shot. The small society is horizontal in the sense defined by director Bo Widerberg in film-making (1962: 22): there is no hierarchical structure or vertical reference, but rather an informal community. As the conversation makes clear, this community must provide the square with profitability.

In the absence of a discernible vertical structure within the creative class, an invisible yet robust barrier emerges, effectively segregating these individuals from the broader society. The creatives believe in the power of education of the masses, are detached from productive duties, and address art as an “instrument of sociopolitical reform” (El Moncef 2018: 9). Masses outside the squared creative class are instead unable to comprehend the artistic works.<sup>27</sup> This becomes clear in the sequence at the gala dinner for Art Awards, where guests arrive on a red carpet and after a photo opportunity. In the exclusive interiors of the royal rooms, the creative class revels in its elevated and distinctiveness in a “space for consumption” (Miles 2010). They enjoy their wealth and celebrate life in all its seductive forms, make use of their disposable time, pamper with fine humanist art, and indulge in social extravaganzas, while workers at the wealthy feast are on duty.<sup>28</sup> Interiors design a “gated community,” separated by the mass, even though, as is the case of the square, borders are intangible.<sup>29</sup>

At the gala guests are informed that a “wild beast” is entering the room: it is indeed Oleg Rogozjin, the performer who impersonates an aggressive ape. The atmosphere is one of exhilaration, with a tang of the unexpected proving a powerful draw for the affluent attendees. Creatives and their peers in *The*

<sup>27</sup> This is exemplified by the ironically charged sequence where one of the cleaners vacuums one of the piles of gravel. To him it is just gravel, to Christian and the creatives the site has made these piles a work of art.

<sup>28</sup> One of the waiters at the gala appears to be beyond the typical working age and seems confused as he staggers with a bottle in his hands.

<sup>29</sup> Karin Gunström identifies these exclusive enclaves as being “related to the segregating process of hierarchization” (Grundström 2018: 21).

*square* look for that unpredictability, need a temporary breach, otherwise the evening at the Art Award would have just been boring (Ezra 2020: 110).

Rogozjin makes an appearance, but the initial sense of exhilaration soon gives way to tragedy as the ape-man resorts to violence against some of the participants. His actions are considered tolerable until he is forced to halt and the authority of a hierarchical structure is reinstated: Rogozjin is neutralised through the use of violence, the sense of hospitality turns into the practice of hostility, the inaccessibility of the gated community protected, sanctuary is safe (Fernández Jiménez, Martinicorena Zaratiegui, Paris Arranz 2020: 233).

The constraints of the creative class are also pertinent in another narrative section of the film. Some moments after the interview with Anne, Christian emerges from Odenplan metro station in central Stockholm. The city here has a name: the letters for Odenplan appear in the frame, the location is populated by a multitude of individuals, and the auditory and visual stimuli characteristic of an urban setting enhance the salience of the scene. There Christian finds himself robbed of his smartphone. He asks passers-by to lend him their telephone but finds no trust or caring outside the square. Later the same day, in a state of elevated alcohol consumption and self-assurance, he opts to pursue the strategy proposed by his assistant, Michael, which entails tracking the misappropriated smartphone. To do this, the tracked mobile—depicted as a green dot moving on the map of Stockholm—is visualized on a screen in Michael's office, allowing them to monitor its location in real time. The dot subsequently relocates to the southern suburbs of the city.

Christian and Michael, imbued with a sense of retaliation, compose a menacing missive to the occupants of a residence where the telephone is purported to have been taken. In the missive, Christian indiscriminately accuses the residents of being the perpetrators of larceny. His assertions are devoid of specificity, and the atmosphere is pervaded by a sense of bias, distrust, and a lack of compassion. The people of the building are guilty just because they live in the *site* of small criminality.

Their car travel to the unnamed suburb is portrayed as an operational raid against the enemy: Michael and Christian arrive spirited by loud music—modern time's *Walkürenritt*—in the fashion of war films.<sup>30</sup> Upon arrival, the camera is positioned within the vehicle, offering a limited perspective of the external environment, which is characterised by a sense of unease. The suburb is indistinguishable, and the people who approach are unsettling. Moreover, the characters are represented without any discernible physical characteristics, as the camera does not reveal their appearances: they are faceless, in a manner

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<sup>30</sup> The utilisation of pop music with an introductory tone that is both solemn and haughty serves to provide an ironic counterpoint to the prevailing tenor of the mission in which the two characters are engaged. Michael repeats the name of the musical group, namely Justice, which constitutes a further ironic reference to the type of mission in which they have both embarked.

that reflects the lack of identity and anonymity that pervades the suburban environment. The square and the city really look alike: the former is an empty box which provides value to objects located in its premises and neglect any relevance to the outside.

Here the tendency to self-segregation of the class of the creatives is blatant.<sup>31</sup> In the delimited and self-segregated square of space, the creatives enjoy the commodities of life towards which also *Översiktsplan* tended, imagining the city as a list of amenities and thrills.

The Odenplan square, where Christian misplaces his smartphone, is also the setting for the principal characters in *Cigarett*. Figures and space lack an immediate identification: the reader is only made aware of the protagonist's name towards the latter part of the novel, with the narrative unfolding from his perspective. Space is regarded as a primary element, where characters move in a state of frenzied activity. Locations in the city of Stockholm are reconstructed according to a personal chronology. Urbanity is perceived as a subjective entity, devoid of objective reality. Odenplan, which is arguably one of the most significant urban spaces in the city, despite its rich historical legacy, has been rendered unrecognisable in Hagman's novel. History is a subjective account; it does not create a "storied space," but appears instead to be a void that is only occasionally filled with action and experience.<sup>32</sup> Odenplan appears devoid of any significance and of historical importance, limited to a pointless present. Johan, the main character, is busy trying to fill the city as blank space—as Lola Arias intended to do with her work of art—but the movement always takes him back to the starting point in a circular process, void-action-void. In this unending movement, Johan and his peers are able to experience space solely as a physical extension of their bodily and concrete experiences, motivated, as postulated by Mats Franzén, by the "fear of everyday life." This indeed stimulates social engagement, yet is perpetually in need of a subsequent step, the next significant development. The sole focus is on the absolute present, devoid of any connection to the actual society: "The protagonists are realists. They know that it is not possible to change the world, they dare to resign and dare not to care" (Wallner 1991: 3).<sup>33</sup> In a context where engagement and

<sup>31</sup> Christian finally has his phone back. The object is returned to a convenience store, which functions as meeting points of cultures and societies, the upper/creative and the lower/working. Clerks show low to zero interest in Christian, since, in this limbo in between two worlds, he has lost his status. In this inbetweenness, the meeting point is visually depicted as a sort of underground entrance to another world, under a bridge, and halfway between heaven and hell.

<sup>32</sup> The concept of *storied space* points to the interconnectedness "of time and space by underlining that spatial formations are always taking shape at a specific point in time and thus acquire features characteristic of their time" (Malmio, Kurikka 2020: 8).

<sup>33</sup> Original version: "Huvudpersonerna är realister. De vet att det inte går att förändra världen, de vågar resignera och våga låta bli att bry sig."

personal commitment are no longer central to the way of life, consumption becomes the dominant mode of conduct.

Hagman's Stockholm is constituted by a multitude of entertainment venues, meeting occasions, parties and locations that are perceived as providing a certain degree of coolness. The city's imaginative capital evinces a sense of place akin to that of *Översiktsplan*, manifesting a penchant for exclusive events, the prospect of lifelong entertainment, and alluring diversions. City is again a "space of consumption," erected within the borders of normativity for the consumer experience.

Nonetheless, the frantic city explorations do not build an actual appreciation of life either for Johan or for his fellow mates, nor does the city inspire any given sense of belonging. The incipit of the book is an example of *ex abrupto*: "[...] and then we were in Ios and it was so damn cheap that we couldn't stop from buying" (Hagman 2017: 3).<sup>34</sup> The Greek island of Ios displays an elusive nature, where space is no longer recognizable, and serves for scenario for drug-recreated social thrills in which no space-identity arises or is possible to discern. Ios shares a similar opacity with Stockholm, where the focus on entertainment is centred on the individuals involved, and the city itself serves as a mere backdrop for their actions. Here, space is defined only by social practice, and entails a thirdspace only connected to consumption. This practice is deprived of any shared sense of history, because the past is limited to a bare, single-layer surface: Odenplan is as new as Ios.

In a manner analogous to the constitution of the public space of the city centre, the experiential tokens which Johan seeks will contribute to the constitution of a super-identity that is, in all respects, similar to the geographic-commercial one designated by general plans and by the narrative of consumption. This construction is entirely contingent upon the construction of the city as spectacle (Lindell 2013). This results in the formation of a liquid space, or *plassein*, which can be defined as "a mobilized, shared and fluid space" (Bylund 2012: 246).

The spatial practice composed by Johan and fellow mates reveals a crack in the picture of the city that Stockholm has been willing to convey. The city of amusement is indeed a city of nomadic souls with no wanderlust. The relentless search for thrills and engagement ends up in a broader dis-identity: the attempt to indulge in consumerism finally erodes individuality as "totally absent" in the main character, annihilated by the overarching promise of never-ending and metronormative consumption of wealth, time, space (Hagman 2017: 34).<sup>35</sup>

Within the paradigm of capital-driven accumulation of individual and experiential tokens, Johan's companions find themselves unable to establish any specific bond with him or with each other. Caring, by its very nature, is an

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<sup>34</sup> Original version: "och sen var vi ju på Ios då och det var ju så jävla billigt att man liksom inte kunde låta bli."

<sup>35</sup> Original version: "total frånvarande."

immaterial state that cannot be stored, purchased or used as an experiential token in any capacity. Upon attempting to establish communication with one of them, Johan is met with silence. The infinite possibilities afforded by unlimited wealth and within the space for consumption ultimately result in nothingness. In a hushed voice, Johan confesses, “I felt nothing, absolutely nothing,” as the culminating statement in the novel (Hagman 2017: 157).<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

In recent years, the city of Stockholm has undergone significant urban development, a process which has been extensively discussed in general plans, visions and guidelines. These urban transformations have had a profound impact on the form of both the city centre and the periphery, providing these areas with a function, or, as posited by Moa Tunström, reshaping these neighbourhoods into “scenes.” The city centre of Stockholm has been transformed into a vibrant and dynamic hub characterised by a palpable sense of energy and a thriving social “scene.” As demonstrated in *Översiktsplan*, the concept of metronormativity has been identified as the structuring ideal of the centre, characterised by the pursuit of a fulfilling and consumption-driven life replete with diverse experiences, where effectiveness and creativity are fundamental. A mere negative opposition to this world is the uniformity of suburbs, which, as in the case of Skärholmen, have been deemed as antithesis of the celebrated *storstadspuls* and embodiment of “the fear of everyday life”.

The urban reconstruction of the city and the heightened opposition between centre and suburb have been since established as a major theme in literature. The materials under consideration, namely the film *The Square* and the novel *Cigarett*, have demonstrated how urban development has reinforced the idea of a fatal separation between the city centre and the suburb. *The Square* has indeed served to heighten the idea of self-sufficiency and elevation that self-elected creatives use to differentiate themselves from the masses located in the suburb. The square functions as a metaphor for the notion that centrally located neighbourhoods possess the capacity to generate a locale and bestow value upon those who inhabit its environs. Consequently, the square serves as a space of representation for metronormativity, while what lies outside its borders is deemed as inert material dislocated in a “nonsite,” a scene of implacable otherness, impossible to cure and fated to succumb to the gloomy shadow of predictability and routine. Further ahead moves *Cigarett* where metronormativity, established as foregrounding value also in *Översiktsplan*, becomes the only viable instrument to explore space.

The narrative produced by urban planning and modern architecture—the result of the transformation of the city in a space of representation—is critically

<sup>36</sup> Original version: “Jag kände ingenting. Absolut ingenting”.



mediated by *The Square* and *Cigarett*. These sources, whilst interrogating the social development of the city, engender a more expansive interpretation of urban space.

The issue of urban planning has been a contentious one, with the production of space in Stockholm having been a key point of discussion. However, the discourse has evolved, moving from considerations of urban planning to those of literature and, subsequently, to a broader societal context. A notable example of this evolution can be seen in the 2022 general elections in Sweden, where the “problem of periphery” became largely discussed: criminality and unrest were not regarded as a social issue per se, but rather as a distinctive phenomenon of the outer districts and separate from the positive evolvments of the city centre. This interpretation is consistent with previous sociological analyses of suburban social development and aligns with the observations made regarding the isolated housewives of Skärholmen, and the outer neighbourhoods as “welfare State concentration camp.” The specific issues may vary, but the opposition within the leading centre and the problems afflicting the periphery remain constant.

However, it is precisely from this condition of separation that a new awareness can be gained. Building on the insights of a critique of urbanity as space of representation, an opportunity to contrast the “Euro-phallo-metrologo-centricity” may be seen as a chance to make way for a new polycentric view of the city structure (Raattamaa 2005: p. 209).

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