



# Mapping a Postmodern Dystopia: Hassan Loo Sattarvandi's Construction of a Swedish Suburb

*Cristine Sarrimo*

The Million Housing Programme is the name of a well-known housing development in Sweden. It was initiated by the Social Democratic government in 1965. The aim was to build one million apartments to rectify the shortage of housing and to improve the standard of living. Between 1965 and 1975, approximately one million apartments were built in small towns and outside the city centers of the largest cities (Gråbacke and Jörnmark 2010, 236–7).

Today, in the mindset of people and in public discourses, the Million Housing Programme areas are often apprehended as places of social unrest, unemployment, problems related to migration and poor schooling—places where the idealized Social Democratic welfare state is demolished or has failed (Ristilammi 1997, 75).<sup>1</sup> Certain areas have become stigmatized, and even perceived as spaces outside “real” Sweden. In *Expressen*, one of the largest Swedish tabloids, an article series about suburbs is introduced as follows:

---

C. Sarrimo (✉)  
Lund University, Lund, Sweden

Nearly half a million live in a Sweden that is forgotten, abandoned but at the same time at the center of the debate. It is about parallel societies, scared police officers, conflicts with religious signatures and networks of criminals that have the power. It is about economic poverty, social vulnerability and a galloping gap with the rest of society. But also about the inhabitants' struggle for a better future. (Moreno 2016, 8; Trans. CS)

The above excerpt summarizes a widespread picture of certain suburbs in contemporary media: especially those located in the urban areas of the largest cities in Sweden. The word “suburb” has even become a metonymy in media discourses telling the “entire” story of deprived childhoods and marginalization. In France, a comparable representation of *la banlieue* is detectable in mainstream media: there is a “reductive view promoted in the mass media of ‘*la banlieue*’ (without the plural ‘s’) as a ‘singular’ (i.e., undifferentiated) space of alterity” (Prieto 2013, 107). In a manner similar to that of Sweden, discussion of the “*crise des banlieues*” in France “almost invariably turns to talk of immigration and minorities” (Prieto 2013, 108).

Many artists, musicians and authors have first-hand experience of living in a Million Housing Programme area. One out of four people in Sweden now lives or has earlier lived in one of these areas. One of them is the author Hassan Loo Sattarvandi, who in his novel *Still* (Sattarvandi 2008) portrays a Million Housing Programme area called Hagalund, which is located north of the city center of the capital Stockholm. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze Sattarvandi's construction of Hagalund with the aim of mapping the novel's dystopian space.

Sattarvandi was born in 1975 in Tehran and came to Sweden when he was three years old. He grew up in Hagalund. The area is mostly known for its eight light blue skyscrapers located on a hill. The blue buildings are interconnected with footbridges overarching spacious yards. In Stockholm, Hagalund is often called Bluehill [Blåkulla n.d.], the place where witches are said to fly on their brooms on Easter Eve. It is also called Blowinghill [Blåskulla] due to the spacious yards where the wind is said to constantly blow. When building these skyscrapers at the beginning of the 1970s, a former working-class suburb consisting of small wooden houses dating from the 1890s and onward was demolished. Hagalund is thus a multilayered cultural historical site, but in *Still* its history is absent. In the novel the skyscrapers, footbridges and yards are the main sites and they play a pivotal part in how the protagonists perceive the place in which they move around. The novel is mostly narrated in the present tense, which is one of

its main features, showing that the space constructed is characterized by the loss of memory, and the absence of both a past and a future.

To grasp how the novel's dystopian space is constructed and what the term "dystopia" entails, the theoretical framework is informed by the geocriticism of Bertrand Westphal (Westphal 2011), Eric Prieto's study on the postmodern poetics of place (Prieto 2013), and Fredric Jameson's concept *cognitive mapping* (Jameson 1988, 1992). According to Westphal, geocriticism is geocentric, multifocal, stratigraphic and polysensorial. This means that the primary focus is a geographical site that is possible to locate on a map. The place analyzed is viewed as an accumulation of different historical strata, which necessitates a multifocal approach, that is, other texts and representations than literary ones must be taken into account to broaden the perspectives on the site chosen. Finally, the sensorial perceptions of place consist of the auditive, olfactoric and tactile, and not just the visual. Literature and other art forms can thus contribute to diversify the understanding of individuals' sensorial perceptions of place (Westphal 2011, 111–47).

Eric Prieto prefers to use the term "place," making the following distinctions: "Place, then, will be understood (...) at the most general level, to designate any geographical site (of any size, scale, or type) that is meaningful to someone, for whatever reason. (...) A site does not become a place until a person comes along and enters into a meaning-generating relationship with it" (Prieto 2013, 13). Following Prieto, "place" in this chapter will be used to designate a site distinguishable on a map or in the landscape: Both Hagalund and Stockholm exist in reality and can be visited and perceived. Having said that, Sattarvandi's Hagalund is a literary representation. To underscore its representational and discursive functions, the terms "space" and "spatiality" will be used. The dystopian space Sattarvandi constructs in his novel will in this chapter be understood as a postmodern one inspired by Prieto's study on postmodern literary places and Fredric Jameson's view on how globalization and a late capitalist society can affect the individual's conceptions of and relation to place (Prieto 2013; Jameson 1992).

### GEOGRAPHY AS DESTINY: A CAGE OF EXILE—SOCALLY DEPRIVED AND CULTURALLY APPROPRIATED

*Still*, the novel's title, has similar significations in both Swedish and English: calm, quiet, smooth and something that stands still (including the stillness of death). The main character and first person narrator is a young man called Nemo. There is no traditionally structured plot culmi-

nating in a cathartic solution. The novel is mostly narrated in the present tense in a constant flow without any dots, and depicts Nemo and his few male friends, their movements, dialogues, their drug abuse and sometimes violent behavior.

Due to the present tense, *Still* seems to take place in a constant “here and now” without any past or future, which creates a feeling of claustrophobia. The young men never leave Hagalund. Unemployed, with no studies, no leisure time and no family ties, they have no reason to go to the Stockholm city center or elsewhere. If their movements were traced on a map, they would mainly be limited to passing back and forth over the footbridges connecting the yards between the light blue buildings. Occasionally, the friends use the elevator to go up to an apartment, and at times they go down to the building’s cellar or garbage room, where they use drugs. The geographical and physical environment is a very limited part of the suburb Hagalund:

(...) några timmar senare—efter jag gjort en hel del menlösa och helt intetsägande saker—gick jag från första gården till den andra gården, från andra gården till den tredje gården, från den tredje gården till den fjärde gården, allt var så identiskt—så lika, ibland visste jag inte ens var jag var, var jag stod, vad jag såg, vem jag såg och allt omkring mig var byggt på samma sätt, med samma färger och vi som gick omkring i detta gick i samma takt, med samma blick, och samma—samma—samma och inne, innanför bröstet vaknade tristessen mer och mer och paniken spred sig ut i kroppen och känslolösheten var där och inget kunde döva den nu, tänkte jag och när vi alla hade gått runt så i några varv satte jag mig på den första gården och bara väntade på att någon skulle se mig och fråga—hur allt var, vad händer (...) *det var en exakt lika tråkig och menlös dag i exil som alla andra dagar*, men just den här dagen var något menlösare, något tråkigare och helt olidlig att andas igenom (...) (Sattarvandi 2008, 121–2; Italics CS)

(...) a few hours later—after I did some bland and completely meaningless things—I walked from the first yard to the second yard, from the second yard to the third yard, from the third yard to the fourth yard, everything was so identical—so similar, sometimes I didn’t even know where I was, where I stood, what I saw, who I saw and everything around me was built in the same way, in the same colors and we who walked around in this, we walked at the same pace, with the same gaze, and the same—same—same and inside, inside the breast, aridity awoke more and more and panic spread in the body and apathy was there, and nothing could deaden it now I thought, and when we all had gone around like that a few turns I sat down in the first yard and just waited for someone to see me and to ask me—how everything

was going, what's happening (...) *it was just as boring and empty a day in exile as all the other days*, but this day was a bit more pointless a bit more arid and completely excruciating to breathe through (...)<sup>2</sup>

Depending on the lack of a traditional plot, there are few markers of time passing and no movement forward by the characters. They have no ambitions except finding and taking drugs; there is no individual or psychological development. Only daylight and twilight indicate that time passes. "Exile" is the word highlighted in the quotation above, and it sums up the life Nemo and his friends are living. They move in a limited space as in a prison. Everything stands still in a literal sense.

The focus of the novel is geocentric, that is, it solely depicts a limited part of the suburb of Hagalund. The rest of Hagalund and the area outside the suburb are described as a distant noise. Sweden and the world outside Sweden are never an integrated part of the diegesis. The "world" is exclusively present through other inhabitants in Bluehill, who are racialized or attributed another nationality than Swedish: they are called Greeks, Poles and Gooks, but never portrayed. Romani people are pictured as enemies to the main character Nemo, who bullies a disabled Romani boy.

"Sweden" as a nation is only present in *Still* by billboards with election slogans; there is obviously an election to come but Nemo and his friends take no part in it. The nation is also present through well-known discourses about migration and the suburbs. They are voiced in the novel by an omniscient narrator, by Nemo and one of his friends, Saladin. Critical views on cultural appropriation are put forward in the novel, expressed by an implied critical authorial voice. These views, however, never affect the life world of the suburb or the inhabitants of the "prison." A production company is making a music video with a hip hop group whose members live in Bluehill, and the cameraman in charge of the film is ridiculed:

*Grabbar, sa han och pekade mot det fjärde huset, det skulle vara bra om vi kunde få med båda husen på den sidan—det ger ett jävligt coolt förortsintryck—lite getto och om man håller kameran så här, då ser husen helt enorma ut—det skulle se jävligt maxat ut (...) Kom igen nu—killar, sa den tunnhåriga snubben bakom kameran, attityd, attityd, attityd, förort, förort, förort, attityd—kom igen nu—visa att ni är tuffa, farliga och att ni kommer från gettot, det ska bara skriiiiiiiiika förort—den här videon ska filma rakt på pucken—rakt in i verkligheten, farliga blickar som ska skrämma tittaren (...)* (Sattarvandi 2008, 30–1; Italics original)

*Guys, he said and pointed toward the fourth house, it would be nice if we could film both houses on this side—it will make a hell of a cool impression of the suburb—a bit ghetto and if you hold the camera like this, the houses look completely enormous—that would look fucking great. (...) Come on now—guys, said the thin-haired dude behind the camera, attitude, attitude, attitude, suburb, suburb, suburb, attitude—come on now—show that you are tough, dangerous and that you come from the ghetto, it must blaaaaaaaaaast out suburb—this video must film right on—right on reality, dangerous gazes that must scare the viewer (...)*

The cameraman uses one of the most worn-out metaphors of the contemporary Swedish suburb—the melting pot—and thus shallowly connects it to migration and celebrates its presumed exoticism: “*Det är förbannat synd att man inte är från förorten, det är här det händer—(...) förorten är grejen, förorten är maxad, kulturerna möts, exotisk mat och—och—alla exotiska kulturer som bara möts i en gryta*” (Sattarvandi 2008, 32; Italics original). (“*It is too bad that you don’t come from the suburb, it’s here that everything happens—(...) the suburb is the thing, the suburb is the coolest, the cultures meet, exotic food and—and—all exotic cultures that only meet in a pot*”).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, novels and poetry called “immigrant literature” written by so-called immigrant authors were discussed in the literary public sphere in Sweden. The appearance of these concepts was, according to the Swedish literary scholar Magnus Nilsson, a consequence of critics reading literature through an “ethnic filter.” Certain authors were identified as representatives of an imagined contemporary multicultural society, which led to a discriminating, homogenizing and racifying attitude toward them, as well as to a reductive understanding of their works (Nilsson 2010, 15–53). These attributes—immigrant literature and immigrant author—were therefore criticized and ironically depicted, not least in novels by authors who had been ethnically identified and hence read as telling authentic stories of contemporary immigrant experiences. Instead, Nilsson offers a class oriented and social reading of these works, arguing that the authors are defying the “ethnic filter” and contesting the contemporary Swedish view of the multicultural society, which basically is an imagined ideologically constructed space (Nilsson 2010, 80–135).

In *Still* there are recognizable traces from this debate about immigrant ethnic culture when Nemo’s friend Saladin gives voice to what can be defined as a cultural appropriation of the experiences and reality of Bluehill inhabitants:

*(...) de vill ha förortshumor, de vill ha Gringo, de vill ha skitsnack och piss—du vet, förut trodde jag att jag levde i verkligheten, sen kom den rakt upp i mitt ansikte varje dag—jag läste om den, jag hörde den och det var alltid de som sa att den äntligen var här—verkligheten är här—nu kan man höra den, nu kan man se den och nu kan man läsa den på riktigt och på deras språk, med deras ord—verkligheten har äntligen visat sig för oss, sa de och där satt jag mest och undrade om jag var verklig, fanns jag här och nu—eller var jag lika falsk som det de kallade verkligt?* (Sattarvandi 2008, 99–100; Italics original)

*(...) they want comedy from the suburb, they want Gringo, they want bullshit and piss—you know, before I thought that I lived in reality, then it came right in my face every day—I read about it, I heard it and it was always them who said that it was here at last—the reality is here—now you can hear it, now you can see it and now you can read it for real and written in their language, in their words—reality has at last shown itself to us, they said and I sat there and wondered if I was real, did I exist here and now—or was I as false as that what they called real?*

The words chosen by Sattarvandi echo the discourse on culture from the suburb which has accompanied not only certain literature but also music and comedians: The deprived voice from the margin is supposed to tell the true story from the suburb which has never been heard before. The point made by Sattarvandi has also to do with power relations, where the classes in power appropriate the voices from the suburb:

*(...) och helt plötsligt blev min verklighet en jävla disneyvärld där mina erfarenheter, dina erfarenheter och varenda jävla människas erfarenheter i förorterna blev en produkt som såldes ut till medelklassen av medelklassen—vafan har hänt nu—inget är verkligt längre, det som vi ser finns inte, det vi känner existerar inte längre—vi är inte längre oss själva, vi finns inte längre, vi har suddats ut av dem—ju längre tiden går, desto mer suddas vi ut, desto mindre finns vi och ändå påstår man det motsatta hela tiden—ibland undrar jag, eftersom de alltid skriver om hur verkligt det helt plötsligt blev, om jag någonsin har varit verklig (...)* (Sattarvandi 2008, 100–1; Italics original)

*(...) all of a sudden my reality became a fucking Disney World where my experiences, your experiences and every fucking human's experiences in the suburbs became a commodity that was sold to the middle class by the middle class—what the fuck has happened now—nothing is real any longer, the things we see don't exist, the things we feel don't exist anymore—we are no longer ourselves, we don't exist anymore, we have been wiped out by them—the longer time passes, the more we are wiped out, the lesser we exist and yet they claim the opposite all*

*the time—sometimes I wonder, because they always write about how real it suddenly became, if I ever been real at all (...)*

As formulated by Saladin, Nemo's friend, reality is at stake: Who has the power to publicly voice experiences from the margin, in this case, the suburb? When the inhabitants are not heard, their reality is silenced twice over: first due to no interest, second due to appropriation by agents in power. Consistently, the characters are portrayed as ruled by external forces beyond their control; "everything" is said to have destroyed Nemo without his consent. He has no power over his own decisions and his circumstances. He moves in nothingness, staring into a void:

(...) och sen gick vi (...) tillbaka in i intet, där vi gick halvdöda fram och tillbaka över broarna och några timmar senare (...) gick [vi] (...) förbi de gråtande blåa husen och in i ett tomrum där vi stod och stirrade vilset omkring oss—de blåa husen, den tomma gatan och den tysta hopplösheten som skrek mitt i alla dessa valplakat som omringade oss med ... (Sattarvandi 2008, 199)

(...) and then we went (...) back into nothingness, where we walked half dead back and forth over the footbridges and a few hours later (...) [we] went (...) past the crying blue houses and into a void where we stood staring disoriented around us—the blue houses, the empty street and the silent hopelessness screaming in the midst of all these election slogans surrounding us with ...

Nemo is Latin for Nobody, but is also the main character in Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. In Verne's novel Nemo is a prince from India who after a major catastrophe lives on his submarine Nautilus where he rules as sovereign. He is described as a genius who chooses to live outside society and who rejects the rules of other humans. Sattarvandi's Nemo is Nobody, living in limbo or in exile. But in contrast to Verne's Nemo, Sattarvandi's Nemo has no status as a genius, nor does he live in the suburban limbo by his own choice. He is trapped. Verne's novel seems to be used as a contrasting feature by Sattarvandi; his Nemo lives in a dystopian space without any anchoring points, and has no "submarine" allowing him to move and travel around.

Nemo experiences a fundamental alienation in relation to the place where he is living, indicating a loss of situatedness. His lived experience does not fit into any encompassing understanding of the place he is occu-



pying, whereas the camera man is an agent with the means to decide how to depict the suburb and its inhabitants. Places and spaces on a larger scale such as the city and the nation are absent in the novel and hence give no meaning to Nemo and his friends. There is no position from where they can have a detached critical view of themselves or society. Sattarvandi shows the consequences of living in a place exempt of kinship, meaningful activities and future projects. The space described is detached from the inhabitants; it only exists, and does not give Nemo and his friends any meaningful or fulfilling experiences, leaving them disoriented and underscoring their marginalization.

There is a fundamental lack of interrelatedness between the inhabitants and the environment, one of the main points that Jameson makes when identifying the spaces of the postmodern. He uses the term “cognitive mapping,” arguing that individuals in a postmodern society have difficulties in locating themselves and in cognitively mapping their position: “this alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment (...) can itself stand as a symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (Jameson 1992, 44). Hence, it is impossible to encompass and to grasp the power structures governing one’s lived experiences, a significant theme in the novel, the protagonists being governed by faceless forces called “they” and “them” (Sattarvandi 2008, 222). It is nevertheless important to stress that the act of mapping cognitively is also “applicable in other historical moments in which an individual’s ability to grasp his/her relationship to the external world is in crisis” (Goddard 2014, 32). It is not unique for a late modern or postmodern situation. On a general level, the act of perceiving and being able to map one’s environment is a basic and necessary human capacity without which it is difficult to exist.

In his analysis of Mehdi Charef’s novel *Le thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed* (1988), Prieto discusses what he calls geography as destiny, asking why Charef has written a novel confirming many of the “negative stereotypes that have emerged around immigrants and the suburban poor.” This is because the novel is mainly “about place, and more specifically, about the ‘*effet de lieu*’ (...) pushed to its deterministic extreme” (Prieto 2013, 121). Charef’s novel is accordingly “a story about stasis—even entrapment” as well as about “environmental determinism” (Prieto 2013, 124). This also

holds true for Sattarvandi's novel: it is not about immigrants or ethnicity, but a novel showing how a certain place determines some of its inhabitants.

Prieto argues that certain French novels depicting the suburbs tend to describe the protagonists' positions in terms of "interstitiality, inbetweenness, and lack" (Prieto 2013, 113). In these French novels the characters have no anchoring points and are obliged to invent their own "roots" (Prieto 2013, 113). The concept of the *entre-deux* has "taken on a particular importance in the current, transitional (postmodern, postcolonial, globalizing) moment of world history." As these interstitial places "all too often" are "thought of in terms of what they lack or what is wrong with them," Prieto's effort is to emphasize "the overlooked productive potential of in-between places" (Prieto 2013, 1). In the novel *Still*, Nemo and his friends are living in a similar space in between the city and the nation; they are free floating in a limbo, but the search for roots or anchoring points is never an issue. The novel *Still* solely depicts a space of lack and interstitiality.

To interpret Sattarvandi's dystopian space more productively amounts to situating the novel in the wider social and ideological context of contemporary Swedish immigration and housing policies. As stated above, suburbs such as Hagalund have been identified as places of unrest, related to migration and poverty. Magnus Nilsson argues that Sattarvandi in *Still* criticizes a contemporary *imagined* multicultural society that understands social inequality in ethnic terms that make social and class-based issues invisible (Nilsson 2010, 157). The issue of interpreting certain suburbs as socially deprived will be further elaborated in the concluding discussion.

### THE SENSORIAL FLIGHT INTO ANOTHER DIMENSION: DRUGS AND MUSIC

Nemo's and his friends' solution to their predicament is to try to leave limbo, the place that stands still, although their eventual destination is unknown. One night there is a power outage in Hagalund:

*Kolla, allt försvinner.* Vi ställde oss upp i en ring med ryggarna mot varandra och det blev mörkare och mörkare och Foggy undrade: *Är det strömavbrott?* Kanske, tänkte jag och vi vände oss mot varandra, stirrade upp mot himlen och stjärnorna blev klarare och Leo log och sa att den där stjärnan som lyser lite mer än alla andra, det är ingen stjärna, det är en planet, och omkring oss skalades verkligheten av sig själv och det var nästan som om vi stod på en

plats som inte fanns längre, som med tiden skulle dö och vi svävade bort från denna förruttnade plats och upp mot himlen, slingrade om varandra, likt ormar, svävade vi upp mot himlen och det enda vi lämnade kvar efter oss var våra fotspår och våra andetag och vi svävade bort dit där inget stod still (Sattarvandi 2008, 228; Italics original)

*Look, everything is vanishing.* We stood up in a circle with our backs against each other and it became darker and darker and Foggy wondered: *Is it a blackout?* Maybe, I thought and we turned toward one another, staring at the sky and the stars became clearer and Leo smiled and said, that star which shines a bit more than the others, that is no star, it's a planet, and around us reality was stripped away by itself and it was almost as if we were standing on a place which didn't exist anymore, as if time would die and we floated away from this decayed place and up into the sky, intertwined, like snakes, we floated into the sky and the only thing we left behind were our footsteps and our breath and we floated away to where nothing stood still

The novel ends with the above quote without a final dot which shows that this story is never-ending. Nemo and his friends dream about floating away into the sky intertwined “like snakes”: no individual autonomy or unique identity is called for; instead a utopian collective animal-like experience of leaving the earth for a dimension characterized by movement is described. A pivotal thematic in *Still* is this flight from a place that stands still into another dimension. The senses are often used to depict the flight and flying. Thus, there is a sensorial characterization of spatiality that can be understood as a polysensorial construction of space in Westphalian terms.

Traditionally, sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste are viewed as external senses, all of which are activated in the novel. As mentioned, the first person narrator Nemo and his friends are addicted to drugs. The drugs constitute, besides music, the foremost unifying force within this group of friends: their main concern is how to afford drugs, who might have drugs, where to consume them and what will happen when taking them. To describe the sensations when consuming pot, alcohol or Rohypnol, Sattarvandi juxtaposes Nemo's perceptions with beating music:

(...) när jag öppnade ögonen igen stod jag i en soffa, mittemot mig dansade Ivan, Foggy till vänster om mig och Saladin satt skrattande på golvet och musiken pumpade ut och mina armar hängde livlöst ned för sidorna, knäna vek sig och huvudet hängde ned mot bröstet och musiken pumpade ut—*Then I heard the turbine go, yeab, out of my window was the sunset*—och i musiken försvann jag bort bakom ögonlocken, det kalla på insidan av bröstet

spred sig och mellan pekfingret och långfingret brände jointen till och skrat-  
tet ekade ut över rummet och beaten pumpade på och jag log, grät, skrat-  
tade och grät, *bambambambambam bambambambambam klapp  
klapp so I started to dance, without wearing no seatbelts, we all started to  
dance, without wearing no life vest, bambambambambam bambambam-  
bambambam klapp klapp—my plane noise went down*, och vi skrattade och  
Ivan höjde musiken och dansade och hoppade och jag lutade mig tillbaka  
mot väggen och kände pulsen långsamt gå ned i samma takt som beaten och  
Foggy spydde ut magsyra på glasbordet och jag fortsatte att dansa med  
huvudet hängande mellan axlarna, ögonen pullade under halvt slutna ögon-  
lock och när jag lutade mig mot väggen puttade Caspian till mig, skrattade  
tillgjort och slog mig på axeln (...) (Sattarvandi 2008, 85–6; Italics original)

(...) when I opened my eyes again I stood on a sofa, opposite to me Ivan was  
dancing, Foggy on my left and Saladin sat laughing on the floor and the  
music pumped and my arms were hanging lifeless down my sides, my knees  
buckled and my head hung against the breast and the music pumped—*Then  
I heard the turbine go, yeah, out of my window was the sunset—and I disap-  
peared into the music behind my eyelids, the coldness inside my breast  
spread and between my forefinger and my middle finger the joint burnt and  
the laughter echoed in the room and the beat pumped and I smiled, cried,  
laughed and cried, bambambambambam bambambambambam  
klapp klapp so I started to dance, without wearing no seatbelts, we all started to  
dance, without wearing no life vest, bambambambambam bambambam-  
bambambam klapp klapp—my plane noise went down*, and we laughed and  
Ivan raised the music and danced and jumped and I leaned against the wall  
and felt the pulse slowly go down in the same pace as the beat and Foggy  
threw up gastric acid on the glass table and I continued to dance with my  
head hanging between my shoulders, my eyes rolling under half-closed lids  
and when I leaned toward the wall Caspian pushed me, laughed artificially  
and hit me on the shoulder (...)

The lyrics of the music are from the single “Manila,” with electronic music  
created by the Swiss composer Beat Solèr. The song is about a plane crash  
where all the passengers, instead of panicking, start to dance. The singer is  
Michael Smith, a 12-year-old boy from Compton in the south Los Angeles  
area. Compton is well known for the hip hop group *N.W.A* and the  
group’s second album was called *Straight Outta Compton* (1989). On  
YouTube Smith performs to the lyrics of “Manila” at the same time as an  
animation shows rabbits dancing in a plane and ends with them jumping  
off the wings (YouTube n.d.).<sup>3</sup>



*would not succeed any longer—we would just vanish—fly away and they would  
just stand there and stare confused—as—the—stupid—fucking—morons—  
they—always—will—be———— they would always———— beeeeeeeeeeeee  
eeeeeeeeeeeeeeee*

The image of the skyscrapers in Hagalund invades his consciousness when it is not sufficiently intoxicated. When it is, the omniscient narrator shows how this consciousness gradually changes the pace to one resembling the music beat: *bambambambambambam bambambambambambam klapp klapp*.

Thus the thematics of flight and flying, escape and entrapment are pivotal in the novel, as is the vertical structure. Looking out from one of the apartments in the skyscraper does not give a satisfactory overview of the world; it just enhances the feeling of distress and nothingness. No panoramic encompassing perception of the suburb, city or nation is available to Nemo and his friends (Wistisen 2013, 8). There is no topos from which the main character Nemo can perceive something new or revelatory that would change his depressing situatedness. Being in Hagalund amounts to being powerless, subjected to a power that never shows itself; it is a faceless anonymous power without any clearcut agency. It is called “they” and “them” (Sattarvandi 2008, 222) and is never used to mobilize any effort to escape the cage.

### *STILL*: A “CARTOGRAPHIC” NOVEL? MUSIC AS A LOCAL- GLOBAL SUBURBAN DYNAMICS

Music has another function in the novel besides being an integral part of the characters’ perceptions when taking drugs, which lead to sensations of flight and escape. The critical view on cultural appropriation and unequal power relations commented upon above can be understood as a critique of how cultural expressions today are part of a culture industry which markets and labels artists according to preconceived notions. The camera-man ridiculed when screening the hip hop group in Hagalund is in this respect a symbolic representative of the contemporary global music industry. In *Still* there are several references to contemporary popular music.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the lyrics and beats constitute a main source of intertextuality in the novel, which merits being thoroughly investigated. In this context, another aspect of this intertextuality will be addressed, namely its “cartographic” or spatial function.

Fredric Jameson has argued that in late capitalist or postmodern society “the phenomenological experience of the individual subject—traditionally the supreme raw materials of the work of art—becomes limited to a tiny corner of the social world.” The individual’s “lived experience” no longer “coincides with the place in which it takes place.” According to Jameson, this leads to a “growing contradiction between lived experience and structure, or between a phenomenological description of the life of an individual and a more properly structural model of the conditions of existence of that experience” (Jameson 1988, 349). Hence, there seems to be a “gap” between the individual’s perceptions of place and his or her understanding and interpretation of this place.

In *Still*, it is clear that the cognitive mapping of Nemo and his friends is alienating. The space of exile, which is Sattarvandi’s version of the suburb of Hagalund, is disconnected from the city of Stockholm as well as from the nation. Hagalund is an enclosed local space which in this chapter is interpreted as a postmodern dystopia, though another interpretation of the novel’s alienating local situatedness is possible. Sattarvandi’s Hagalund is mapped according to a local-global scale due to the several references made to globally transmitted popular music.<sup>5</sup> The ridiculous cameraman and the hip hop group he is filming underscore this dynamics. Hagalund is a well-known site for Swedish hip hop artists, as is Compton in the south Los Angeles area, the place referred to in the Swiss electronic music discussed above. Thus, an interrelationship between Hagalund and Los Angeles as well as Switzerland is constituted through music. Music is also used to underscore the thematics of violence in the novel. When Dire Strait’s rock ballad “Tunnel of Love” is playing on Nemo’s radio in his apartment, he is having a violent fight with his friend over a former girlfriend (Sattarvandi 2008, 169). Instances such as these show how cultural expressions such as music can be an “important component in the cognitive mapping process” (Goddard 2014, 33). This holds true for literary texts as well, “as instances of fantasies or storytelling” (Goddard 2014, 33). In *Still* the protagonists’ cognitive mappings of music beats are mainly paralleled with the sensations of drug addiction and bodily pain. The common denominator of Nemo and his friends is this global space triggered by the music they are experiencing together. In this respect, a sort of community is created in situations when their interactions are accompanied by music. The crucial point is that this postmodern space is not at all grounded in the national, nor solely in the local, but precisely in the local-global, which is detectable through the references to music.

Following Prieto's chronology of postcolonial place models, one could argue that the space of exile in *Still* corresponds to a contemporary postcolonial experience: the nation is no longer "the primary scale of place narrative," nor "the emphasis on the neighborhood as a way to contest essentializing visions of the nation as an undifferentiated whole," but rather "the niche, which emphasizes the place of (...) society within the global cultural ecology" (Prieto 2013, 183). "The niche" is not defined by national borders, but is scaled locally globally. A similar place model is detectable in *Still*.

In this respect, *Still* is a cartographic novel, that is, defined by its local-global scale and not by being grounded in the nation nor in the neighborhood in an essentializing manner. It should be clear, too, that *Still* is no *Bildungsroman*. There is no psychological growth or coming of age, no phenomenologically fulfilling identity formation; on the contrary, the spatiality in the novel is an integral part of the characters' loss of the past, the future and of humanity. Consistently, the characters are portrayed as ruled by external forces beyond their control, "everything" is said to have destroyed Nemo without his consent (Sattarvandi 2008, 169). Referring to French *banlieues* novels, Prieto promotes Jameson's view on cognitive mapping. These French novels—like *Still*—can be understood as "dramatizations of the attempt to break out of a naïvely phenomenological perspective and enter into the more worldly 'cartographic' perspective that Jameson promotes: after the *Bildungsroman*, the *Kartografroman*" (Prieto 2013, 190).

#### TO SITUATE A POSTMODERN DYSTOPIA STRATIGRAPHICALLY: A CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Two aspects of Westphal's geocritical conceptualizations, which were briefly mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, are stratigraphy and multifocality. The former term is borrowed from geology and archeology, meaning that the place studied should be viewed as an accumulation of earlier moments and different historical strata. To be able to do this, a multifocal view is necessary. The place Hagalund will therefore be put in relief to other texts than the novel *Still*, hopefully leading to a more complex understanding of the place under scrutiny.

In Sattarvandi's case it is a narrow, not to say claustrophobic, picture of Hagalund he gives us: a cage in which some of its inhabitants are entrapped and where the rest of the world is absent. An anonymous power practices



its discipline on them by undermining their own possibilities to escape. Nemo and his friends seem to be their own worst enemies—checking to see that none take any steps to change their situation. Power is internalized and functions in a self-regulatory way; they seem to have a “wall in the head” (Hanley 2012, xiii).<sup>6</sup>

The question is, what would the difference be between Sattarvandi’s postmodern dystopia and a historically situated Hagalund? To discuss this, a brief historical account of Hagalund is necessary. The area belonged to an estate before parts of its land was sold as plots. During the end of the nineteenth century, houses were built on these plots and a municipal community was established in 1899. The association The Friends of Old Hagalund (n.d.), whose aim is to cherish old Hagalund’s legacy, summarizes its character on its website:

At most 6,000 inhabitants lived in this area. Hagalund probably represented the country’s foremost example of a mixed suburban municipality, where larger apartment buildings stood side by side with small privately owned houses, and a primitive rampant development. (...) During the years 1966–1975 the municipality underwent a total makeover. Almost all houses were demolished and a skyscrapertown, a part of the Million Housing Programme, came in their place. The area is now more known as Bluehill. (Trans. CS)

Many of the citizens who bought the plots and constructed houses were artists and craftsmen. They helped each other to build and adorn their houses in a variety of styles. Often three houses were built on each plot due to the housing shortage. Most of the houses had shops facing the streets. The artist Olle Olsson Hagalund (1904–1972), a naivist painter, protested against the demolition of Hagalund in the 1960s. It is to his merit that a few of the old houses still exist, one of them being his own house, now a museum. On the Stockholm County Museum (n.d.) website, one of the visual representations of the old and the new Hagalund is telling: in one photograph the turquoise color of the Olsson museum, a two-story wooden house, is pictured in front of Bluehill’s skyscrapers.

A cultural historical account of Hagalund is given on the museum’s website. Here the architects, Ragnar Westrin and Stefan Szejnman, and their vision of Bluehill, is presented: “The vision was that the buildings should be perceived as gigantic Atlantic passenger liners on their way to a new modern society where people could live with light, air and greenery.”

Despite the fact that “people opposed the large scale” when they were built, “today we esteem the buildings as majestic landmarks of highly cultural historical value and national importance.” When the houses were built, the architect Bo Ahlsén and the artist Lars Abrahamsson were assigned to adorn the frontages: “The skyscrapers’ glazed sheet metal in blue enamel waver in heaven’s nuances and is contrasted with the clinker bricks of the groundfloors.” This artistic effort is said to “join the street space and create an overall milieu that makes Bluehill a Million Housing Programme area of national importance.”

The museum’s presentation differs radically from Sattarvandi’s version of Bluehill, and the metaphors are telling. The architectonic vision is typical of a functionalistic view of a new social democratic society: the citizens must leave the old world behind them and embark on a journey toward a bright new future. Implicit in the architects’ vision is that the old world that should be left behind is not light, filled with air and green fresh colors. It seems to be implied that the old Hagalund is the opposite to the new one: dark and suffocating.

According to the Friends of Old Hagalund, traditional Swedish popular movements expanded in the area in the beginning of the twentieth century, including youth organizations, Social Democratic associations and temperance societies. In 1909, the year of the general strike in Sweden, Hagalund had a general strike committee, showing that there was political and organizational commitment in the municipality. This story is not told by Sattarvandi, whose characters are pictured as cut loose from history and from political engagement. The postmodern society in Sattarvandi’s version is an unhistorical and futureless location, which indicates a break with history when the Million Housing Programme was carried out.

In public discourse there are contradicting views of the area. On Flashback (2017), one of Sweden’s largest chat forums, one user asks what it is like to live in Bluehill. The answers are well-known opinions about Swedish Million Housing Programmes: not enough Swedes, too many immigrants, noisy, downtrodden, high crime rates, unsafe, but also beautiful views from the modern, large and well planned apartments, nice neighbors, excellent public transport, close to the Stockholm city center.

*Still* was published in 2008. At this time, there was—and still is—an ongoing gentrification of the suburban areas of Stockholm due to the shortage of housing. A major sign of gentrification is rental apartment buildings being transformed into housing societies. Hagalund was built in the 1970s. The first housing society, called Bluehill (Blåkulla), was estab-

lished there in 1983. To become a member in such a society, one has to pay the former tenant of the apartment the price set by the housing market; it is not rare that with potential buyers bidding, the prices go up. Housing societies are becoming more common in Sweden and rental apartments increasingly scarce. In the first housing society in Hagalund there were 439 apartments of which 38 were rentals. The society's website tells that the society owns the land on which the buildings stand, and that the society sells each rental apartment when tenants move.

These discourses about Hagalund including Sattarvandi's literary dystopia—the cultural value of Bluehill, the area's historical past worth commemorating and the ongoing gentrification countered by futurelessness and deprivation—create a multifaceted, contradictory and common picture of a Western postmodern urban space in transformation. It contains ingredients typical of Sweden's conversion to a Social Democratic welfare state: when building a new equal society one should preferably look forward and not back to be able to leave poverty behind you. To move to a Million Housing Programme area was “a chance to become modern and a force in the Swedish modernization project” (Ristilammi 1997, 78; Trans. CS).

In Sattarvandi's narrative construction of Hagalund, this ideal future, symbolized by the eight clear blue skyscrapers, has not yet come. Sattarvandi's depiction is more attuned with the presumed darkness of the old Hagalund, which was demolished when the Million Housing Programme area was built. Sattarvandi's Bluehill is not gentrified or viewed as a cultural history worth preserving. *Still* is not constructed chronologically, following a line of progression, common in narratives about modernization, as in the story told by Stockholm County Museum: in its version Bluehill has become a part of a national cultural history. Time stands still in *Still*, as do the citizens depicted. When chronos is not an issue, topos is what is left: in Sattarvandi's version this topos is not a utopian space of modernity but a postmodern cage of exile only worth destroying. Nemo and his friends dream of flying away and Nemo has visions of completely demolishing the skyscrapers: “hela gatan låg i ruiner—husfasaderna var bortblåsta, fönsterrutorna ut- eller inslagna och betongplattorna var upprivna” (“the whole street was in ruins—the walls were blown away, the windows were smashed and the concrete slabs were torn up”) (Sattarvandi 2008, 31).

The visions of flight and escape in *Still* stand out as ironic and sinister when compared to the modern architectural vision of the Million Housing Programme, where citizens would presumably embark on a journey to a

brighter future when moving to the light blue skyscrapers. The postmodern dystopia of Sattarvandi and the modern utopia of the Million Housing Programme stand in stark contrast. Put in relief with Olle Olsson Hagalund's naivist paintings of the old working-class Hagalund, the sense of an early modern Swedish vision or utopia is underscored. In many of Olsson Hagalund's paintings a small scale municipality is depicted. Small wooden houses with gardens are shown, and streets where citizens happily walk, sometimes chatting with each other. The same café, shop and church appear in several paintings. These paintings capture an atmosphere of community, peace and security. Three different visions of the same geographical site are thus detectable in the material discussed: the early modern, modern and postmodern.

The stratigraphic and multifocal approach acknowledges that a specific geographical site is constructed by a complex network of political and architectural visions, literary narratives and artistic representations, as well as by discourses projected over a long period of time on certain urban areas such as the Million Housing Programmes. When built in the 1970s, these areas were associated with "social otherness"; it was here that the socially "underprivileged" lived hopefully heading toward a more privileged future. From the 1990s onward they became increasingly associated with "ethnic otherness" or areas for "non-Swedes" (Ristilammi 1997, 75).

Above Prieto's postcolonial models of place were discussed which led to identifying *Still* as a cartographic novel on account of it being scaled by local-global dynamics. The modern vision of Hagalund, the "chance to become modern" and "a force in the Swedish modernization project" (Ristilammi 1997, 78) is grounded in the nation, so is the museum's claim that Bluehill today is a site of national cultural importance. But how should one understand the discourses on ethnic otherness projected onto urban areas such as Bluehill?

In the introduction to this chapter a passage from a Swedish tabloid was quoted saying that certain suburbs are "parallel societies" with religious conflicts and criminals in power. The inhabitants are poor and socially vulnerable. A "galloping gap with the rest of the society" is detectable according to the journalist who wrote the series of articles introduced with the passage quoted (Moreno 2016, 8–14). Thus, in this tabloid, certain suburbs are constructed as sites "outside" society and the nation. These statements correspond with Sattarvandi's postmodern dystopia: in *Still* Hagalund is a space in between the city and the nation; it is a limbo without any anchoring points.

Thus, the nation is no longer the scale of Sattarvandi's "place narrative" (Prieto 2013, 183). Nor does he see the neighborhood as a way of situating the protagonists in a more favorable position. Olle Olsson Hagalund offered images of the neighborhood as an exemplary space of community, whereas Sattarvandi's dystopian limbo is situated within a "global cultural ecology" (Prieto 2013, 183) linked to globally transmitted popular music.

When discussing Mehdi Charef's *banlieue* novel, Prieto encounters an ethical dilemma, even though he does not use that notion himself. If the scholar draws the conclusion that a novel like Charef's or Sattarvandi's is about geographical determinism, how should he or she handle the question of emancipation, change and social mobility? Prieto chooses to call Charef's novel a tragedy, "implying a deterministic sense of inevitable submission to an implacable destiny" (Prieto 2013, 123). The thematics of immobility, flight and escape are central in *Still*; Sattarvandi tells a story about confinement and stasis with no way out for Nemo and his friends. In Charef's novel, Prieto detects the same thematics (Prieto 2013, 123–4). If no escape route or change is in sight, are these two novels complicit in reproducing stereotypical discourses on the suburb and its male immigrant inhabitants? Is *Still* but one among many other contemporary discourses constructing the suburb as an ethnic and social otherness?

Prieto solves this dilemma by arguing that Charef "pivots from the ethnic to the geographical theme," highlighting what Prieto calls "the place effect" (Prieto 2013, 125–6).<sup>7</sup> The thematics of mobility and immobility in the novel needs to be viewed as a spatial element. Social mobility is connected to geographical mobility, and to obtain change one needs to move from the place which entraps you (Prieto 2013, 126–7).<sup>8</sup> Charef shows rather than tells how geography is destiny in a certain suburb in France. Sattarvandi, for his part, does not tell the reader what political or ideological conclusions to draw, but shows in a similar manner as Charef how a specific place exerts power over a few of its male inhabitants. In this respect, *Still* too is a post-modern tragedy telling the story of how social inequality is place-bound.

## NOTES

1. Per-Markku Ristilammi argues that the suburb has been viewed first as a modern otherness, later as a social one, and now as a place for ethnic otherness.
2. All translations of *Still* are mine.
3. Seelenluft—Manila (official video). The composer Solèr uses the stage name Seelenluft.

4. In Sattarvandi's *Still* references are made to among others: Ini Kamoze's "Hotstepper" (149), Pretty Ricky's "Call Me" (157), Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall" (164–169), House of Pain's "Jump Around" (165–166), Dire Straits "Tunnel of Love" (169), Bruce Springsteen's "The River" (170), Chet Baker's "The Thrill is Gone" (182), Aaliyah's "We Need a Resolution" (201), Daddy Yankee's "Gasolina" (212) and Bob Sinclar's "World, Hold On" (215).
5. See Endnote 4 above for music references made in the novel.
6. Lynsey Hanley (2012) writes how growing up in one of Britain's largest council estates affected her self-esteem and how she had to struggle with what she defines as the wall in her head.
7. Prieto refers to the French sociologist Catherine Bidou-Zachariassen (1997) who has shown what effects *le territoire* has on inhabitants in urban areas in "La Prise en compte de l'effet de territoire' dans l'analyse des quartiers urbains."
8. Prieto refers to the French sociologist and novelist Azouz Begag (2002), who links social mobility to the need for geographical mobility in *Les Dérouilleurs: Ces Français de banlieue qui ont réussi*.

## REFERENCES

- Begag, Azouz. 2002. *Les Dérouilleurs: Ces Français de banlieue qui ont réussi*. Paris: Mille et une Nuits.
- Bidou-Zachariassen, Catherine. 1997. La Prise en compte de 'l'effet de territoire' dans l'analyse des quartiers urbains. *Revue Française de Sociologie* 38 (1): 97–117.
- "Blåkulla". n.d. Website of the Housing Society Blåkulla [Bluehill]. Accessed June 22, 2017. <http://www.blakulla.net>.
- Flashback. 2017. <https://www.flashback.org/t2474810>.
- Goddard, Jeanette E. 2014. Plotting One's Position in Don Quijote: Literature and the Process of Cognitive Mapping. In *Literary Cartographies: Spatiality, Representation, and Narrative*, ed. Robert T. Tally Jr., 31–46. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gråbacke, Carina, and Jan Jörnmark. 2010. The Political Construction of the 'Million Housing Programme': The State and the Swedish Building Industry. In *Science for Welfare and Warfare: Technology and State Initiative in Cold War Sweden*, ed. Per Lundin, Niklas Stenlås, and Johan Gribbe, 233–249. Sagamore Beach, MA: Science History Publications.
- Hanley, Lynsey. 2012 [2007]. *Estates: An Intimate History*. London: Granta Books.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1988. Cognitive Mapping. In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 347–360. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

- . 1992. The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. In *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1–54. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Moreno, Federico. 2016. Knarket, klanerna och kyrkan tog över i centrum. *Expressen*, June 30, pp. 8–14.
- Nilsson, Magnus. 2010. *Den föreställda mångkulturen: Klass och etnicitet i svensk samtidsprosa*. Hedemora: Gidlund.
- Prieto, Eric. 2013. *Literature, Geography, and the Postmodern Poetics of Place*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ristolampi, Per-Markku. 1997. Betongförorten som tecken. In *I stadens utkant. Perspektiv på förorter*, ed. Karl-Olov Arnstberg and Ingrid Ramberg, 75–85. Tumba: Mångkulturellt centrum.
- Sattarvandi, Hassan Loo. 2008. *Still*. Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag.
- “Stockholm County Museum.” n.d. Accessed June 22, 2017. <http://stockholmslansmuseum.se/sok-bilder/fotosamlingar/?idno=ldng2014-0559>.
- “The Friends of Old Hagalund.” n.d. Accessed June 22, 2017. <http://hagalundsvanner.com/om-foreningen/om-gamla-hagalund/>.
- Westphal, Bertrand. 2011. *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*. Translated by Robert T. Tally, Jr. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wistisen, Lydia. 2013. En sång om Trojas murar. En analys av maskulin identitet och utanförskap i tre samtida svenska förortsskildringar. *Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap* 43 (3–4): 5–16.
- YouTube. n.d. Seelenluft—Manila (Official Video). Accessed June 22, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mh2SiGuDT1A>.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

