Fin de Siècle in the Urban Periphery

Per-Markku Ristilammi

This article deals with urban youth with immigrant background living in a social housing project in a town in southern Sweden, Malmö. The approaching fin de siècle creates an abundance of contradictory, and often fetishistic representations of urban life. Caught in these representations, we find urban youth. Representations as these date back to colonial structures of feeling. These kinds of fetishistic responses are now resurfacing in the responses to ethnically segregated housing areas where immigrant youth are perceived as a threat to the surrounding society. This paper suggests possible methodological approaches to this problematic, coupled with examples from previous work in Malmö concerning the housing area Rosengård (the Rosegarden).

Per-Markku Ristilammi, Ph. D. Department of European Ethnology, Lund University, Finngatan 10, S-223 62, Lund, Sweden.
E-mail: Per-Markku.Ristilammi@etn.lu.se

The approaching fin de siècle will bring forth an increasing amount of both utopian and dystopian representations of urban life.[1] In Utopia the urban experience is dissolved in hyperspace where we will all be happy netizens. In Dystopia the urban landscape consists of clusters of fortresses separated from each other by dangerous no man's lands (cf. Davis 1992).

Caught between, but also entangled in, these representations, we find urban youth, trying to navigate through an everyday life filled with contradictory representations of their future. These representations are, however, not new. They date back to structures of feeling evoked at the heyday of European colonialism in the 1800s.[2] Modern man defined himself in contrast to what he thought was inferior people at the same time as he had a secret admiration for the uncivilized (cf. Torgovnick 1990).

This kind of fetishistic double-bind is now resurfacing in the responses to ethnically segregated housing areas. The inhabitants are considered as a dangerous threat to society, at the same time as they are regarded as full of energy. This presentation deals specifically with urban youth with immigrant background living in a social housing project in a town in southern Sweden, Malmö.

I would like to map out possible methodological approaches to this problematic, coupled with examples from my previous work in Malmö concerning the housing area Rosengård (the Rosegarden) (Ristilammi 1994). This is a housing area with approx. 14,000 inhabitants. It was built in the late 60s and early 70s. In some parts of the area over 80 % of the inhabitants are of foreign origin. Over 70 different nationalities live in Rosengård. In the school serving the area not one of the first-graders has parents of Swedish origin.

In Swedish political debate areas like these are considered as growing problems. The social democratic government has newly appointed a minister of integration whose main objective is the betterment of living-conditions in areas like Rosengård.

These teenagers, all of them unemployed and most of them with refugee background, are trying to negotiate their identities through images from a global popular culture that draws authenticity from mimetic representations of alterity. On videos, on CD, on film the exciting life is lived on the edges of society, where criminal activity – regardless of whether it is committed or fought against – is a source of escape from a life of failure in school and unemployment. The titillations derived from these representations are used by these teenagers to pro-

Areas like Rosengård are symbolically cut off from other parts of the city with borders as this railway bridge.

voke responses of fear and interest from the surrounding society, resulting in demands for disciplinary action.

Fetishistic Encounters

An example of this would be an article from southern Sweden's largest newspaper (*Sydsvenska Dagbladet*): "We are going to take over Malmö", followed by: "Respect! We will take over the respect! We will make sure that Rosengårds reputation as the worst place in town lives on.

When these guys realize that I am a journalist and want to ask some questions, they are drawn to me like flies to a cube of sugar."

This meeting clearly echoes and evokes other encounters of a colonial nature. The representatives of the Other are drawn to him like flies to a lump of sugar, but at the same time, he as a reporter is also drawn to them.

This encounter takes place in a suburb that is treated as a threat that risks to contaminate the surrounding society. These structures of feeling are old. They derive from a time when techniques of dealing with indigenous populations in the era of high colonialism were being

brought back to western cities and were projected to the "big-city jungles" here at home (cf. Ristilammi 1995 a and b). The reporter clearly has a mission to tell a story about otherness among us. He tells the same story that has been told about the Other from the beginning of modernity and indeed is a story that could be said to be constitutive to the creation of modern identity.

Rosengård's population comes to a large degree from abroad. This can be seen as both positive and negative. The area can function as an interface in which distanced communications can take place between that which is understood as ethnic alterity and that which is Swedish normality. In such a process normality and alterity are adapted relationally to one another.

A large concentration of ethnic alterity can, however, be perceived negatively, with an increased risk of "ghettoization" and the development of criminal gangs. These are processes which signify Rosengård as a sign of modernity's back side. Rosengård is always forced to relate to the processes of stigmatization which want to fix its identity through geographical determinism. The inhabitants are forced to

defend their place of living, and thereby their identity, in front of people who live in other areas. The classical modernity question, "Who am I and who am I in relation to other people?" is constantly brought to life whenever contact is made with other people. Consequently, identity is not only something worth striving for, but can also be seen as something which boxes in, locks, and reduces one's possibilities to a positive view of one's self (cf. Ristilammi 1995 c).

These negative identity-processes are a result of a historical process whereby certain traits in the identity-processes of modernity itself are being played out. The new areas came to function as front zones in which clear borders were drawn between that which was considered to be modern and that which was not.

The guidelines for these developments (and the public longing for the modern) had been drafted out two decades before at the famous Stockholm Exhibition in 1930, which was a symbolic starting point for the Swedish modernity-project. The houses were meant to be factory-made, but instead the building techniques used were still pure craftmanship (see Pred 1995).

The authorities began to plan for one last push to realize the "people's home". The rundown and unmodern environments were to be cleared and the final bits of dirt and impurity were to be washed off of the body of society. The Swedish parliament made the decision to produce one million new apartments over a ten year period; it was called "the million programme". The construction went very rapidly and people started to move into the area before everything was completed. For many, the move also implied a journey through time and up through the social hierarchy. Moving was, as in the late 1940s, an opportunity to become modern and to become a leading force in the project of Swedish modernity. Rosengård was one of the million programmes housing projects, planned for 20,000 people who were to live in apartments produced by three different construction companies.

You could travel through time-space and social space at the same time. In this stage there was no time for looking back. It was a youthful stage, full of hope for the future. The waves of moving, in the city, from unmodern to modern areas, can be described as compressions of history in which the geographical movements symbolized leaps along a perceived axis of time. History was in this story something that should be left behind, or leaped over. The present was a starting-point for the future.

However, the area's back sides became apparent rather quickly. In the front-lines of modernity, it was possible to rely on the strategy which had been drawn up in Sweden in the previous decades. However, by the beginning of the 1970s more and more people in society began to view Swedish modernity as a cracked entity.

New working forms for the social services were experimented with in several different residential areas in Malmö, and many of these later spread to other cities.

One such new form of work was neighbourhood work. In other words, the neighbourhood was to function as a unit in and of itself, a unit in which people would take care of one another. However, what was important here was that solidarity would arise through mutual action. By working together towards a common goal in the neighbourhood, it was believed that solidarity could be achieved. The opposite of this work was passive consumption which hindered a real spirit of community. Solidarity was to be place orientated, and for the radicals, the residential area was hoped to function as a place where to build community. Resultantly, identity was also linked to place.

The contents of the words and concepts which were in use at the time were no longer obvious. After all, what was meant by "modern society"? In what way should one understand the concept of "democracy"? What meaning was contained in the word "solidarity"? What was "a good living environment"? During the few years between the late 1960s and the early 70s, values which had seemed to be fundamental to society were put into question. Parliamentary democracy was criticized and it was thought that solidarity should be built upon and manifested in residential areas and factories and not through traditional political channels. The process implies a crystallization of genres in which different causal contexts, historical chains of

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development, utopias, and dystopias are created. One of these genres consists of youth cultures.

The Uses of Mimesis

Many of the young people describe themselves as "kickers", a subcultural style that comprises of clothing-elements, such as shiny Adidas tracksuits, sneakers, shiny hair slicked back in a pony-tail and listening to different forms of Afro-American rap-music. The fact that immigrant youth model themselves on Afro-American youth-culture is an old one. At least since the 70s this division has been prevalent. Rock-music played by "white" people has never been the preferred genre by immigrant youth culture. Other important traits in this culture has been the connection to territory and physical strength, the gaining of "respect" – a martial culture.

One of their counterparts is called "skaters", who are to a large extent Swedish youth with middle-class background who subscribe to a youth culture largely modelled on the skateboard-revival that in Sweden has been going on since the beginning of the 90s. This middle-class youth culture has been focused on speed and motion. The arena for the two youth cultures has been the city and particularly the street.

A comparison between these styles of youth culture shows that the "kickers"-style, preferred by immigrant youth is much more based on territory. You "belong" to certain neighbourhoods in the city. To me, this emphasis on physical milieu, is a reflection and elaboration of the surrounding societies fetishism.

Those kids who met the reporter talked about respect. The only way they can get respect is by echoing, in a mimetic way, the fears that the surrounding society project onto them. There is a fetishistic bind between the reporter and the youngsters.

These youngsters are using Rosengård as a free-floating sign which not only signifies Rosengård, but also other similar areas. For them it signifies the respect through fear that they evoke from the surrounding society. It is the gap between the sign and the signification which creates disease and frustration.

Of course it is not free-floating in a way that makes reflection about power-relations redundant. The possibilities for individuals to "free-float" in this society are very unevenly distributed. It is often said that youth of today are gliding in and out of identities like chameleons changing colour according to background. But the youngsters who met the journalist in Rosengård are, I would argue, forced in to very specific forms of cultural expressions if they want to assert some form of dignity towards the outer world.

Whether they are materialized in newspapers, research reports, or oral narratives among the people of Malmö, the stories about Rosengård have become something which have to a certain degree lost contact with the reality of the area. However, this does not mean that this narrative or discourse lacks significance for the people of Rosengård. It is through this gap that the symbolic function arises and which makes the poetry of Rosengård possible.

In this arena which Rosengård constitutes, borderlines are maintained, which recreate and newly-create modernity to the extent that it must relate to the problems of Rosengård. Post-industrial society is not articulated through a

Today, commerce is rich amongst the modern buildings, although tax reasons make the fruit merchants unwilling to appear in the photo.

political centre, but in its periphery where the borders are extremely obvious. Rosengård is one of these peripheral borderlands.

So what are the youngsters trying to defend? Some sense of attachment to the ground, the territory, they are trying to gain respect from the dark image of modernity's threat. It is the same threat that the journalist was using in order to catch our imagination – a mixture of fascination and threat.

Rosengård has been connected to an eternal youthfulness which all those things you can attribute to youth. Energy, immaturity, lack of controll, something to be taught and brought up to your own level. This youthfulness also points to a paradoxical link between ethnicity and the modern Swedishness.

At one point Rosengård was the essence of Swedish modernity. And, as several scholars have shown, the notion of modernity was at the core of Swedish national identity for more than

fifty years. By thinking the suburbs as the counterpoint to Swedishness an important structure of feeling in Sweden is being pushed into a modern unconscious. It became the missing link and evoked a shame over the unfinished modernity project. Official Sweden cannot allow itself to recognize these milieus. The mythical power of modernity was too strong, as was also the feeling of failure.

Politics of Memory

With the approaching fin-de-siècle new ways of connecting identity to place, that echoes old structures of feeling, are being evoked. The concept of place is once again brought forth as an antidote to societal failure. Place is once again being perceived as a socially controlling instance.

But places are also spaces in our imagination. We delimit them, we make them come

One of the most prominent ideas in the ideology of modernist architecture, the nearness to nature, is finally beginning to materialize in Rosengård.

alive through our actions, we tell spaces as stories. Michel de Certeau stated in his influential book *The practice of everyday life*, that haunted places are the only ones people can live in. Every place has its stories but for the most part these stories are dispersed, fragmented, shared between you and me, nothing public. He wrote: "Memory is a form of anti-museum. It is not localizable. What can be seen designates what is no longer there" (de Certeau 1984:108).

So, what do these stories mean for the questions about memory in the outset of my presentation? John Gillis states that both identity and memory has its politics, politics with possibilities and risks (Gillis 1994). What would such politics of memory mean for the neighbourhood that I have described? In my view such a politics would mean taking account of all three of these phases of history that I have described. The obstacles are of course many. The first is the fact that the ideology that created the area was by definition a stranger to history and memory. The houses were to be monuments of nothing but themselves. The modernist vision only

looked to the future. So in order to create physical memories, some sort of monuments, you will have to create a kind of aesthetics that in some way integrates both the modernist vision, and the everyday life of people who have lived in these milieus, that is, you have to *historisize modernity*. Some may call this a postmodern approach, but since this concept has been so diluted as to mean everything and nothing, I would like to avoid it.

The second problem, as John Gillis points out and that also Stuart Hall addresses, is that the creation of place-bound production of history has to be selective and that means that the space of collective memory is a contested place (Gillis 1994, Hall 1996). All identity-production is a boundary-making activity that excludes as well as includes. It is this kind of excluding activity that many of the youngsters in Rosengård are engaged in.

As Manuel Castells points out; in this age of global information society, the tendency of the elites of this society is to take power away from the locale, leaving bitter local struggles behind

them (Castells 1996). The capital wants to free itself from the constraints of memory and history, pushing those whose only weapon is the defence of space, to precisely that, a defensive often bitter and often futile activity, that excludes people from different locales, but from the same social strata, from each other. The new forms of historizing and identity-making must take these negative processes in account and make the local a place where the information society and the local everyday life can meet and find cultural expressions that exclude as few people as possible.

Powerful metaphors taken from the information society talk about flows of information. Its equivalent in the financial world is the flow of money. Increasingly the flow of information, and the flow of money tends to be the same. In this metaphorical world nothing is allowed to stop these global flows, not time, in the meaning of time-zones and fluctuations of night and day, and not the frictions of place. This powerful metaphoric language is of course spreading into other areas. Work forces has to be flexible, and not bound by neither time nor place. This is a threat to mnemonic processes bound by place and time.

Michel de Certeau stated that haunted places – places with ghosts – were the only places people could live in. What is important is to symbolize these ghosts and not be content to let them live in the anti-museum of memory, that is to bring them back to the material world and let them constitute places. In my view this is the sort of activity in which we as ethnologists could participate, not as collectors, not as ideologists, but, as the angels in Wim Wender's *Himmel über Berlin,* as guides and listeners.

Notes

1. Paper given at the SIEF Conference in Amsterdam April 20–25, 1998. Research founded by the Swedish Council for Building Research.
2. I am at the present engaged in a project that deals with alterity and modernity in the city of Malmö. Influenced by Michael Taussig's use of Walter Benjamin I try to identify the fetishistic qualities in the spectacles of the fin-de siècle Malmö eg the attractions of the recurrent exhibitions (Taussig 1991, 1993).

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