



The Dystopian Past and the Disappointment with the 1990s in *Ur varselklotet* by Simon Stålenhag

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Abstract

Simon Stålenhag's popularity has grown in recent years. Situated between picture books and anecdotal narration, his works have circulated widely and even inspired an American TV series. This paper focuses on *Ur varselklotet* (2014), a science fiction graphic book combining evocative images with short prose passages that both narrate personal anecdotes and serve as captions. The story recounts events from the narrator's childhood and adolescence in the 1980s and 1990s, set against the backdrop of the Stockholm region. In a snowy landscape, the ruins of a fictional, now-abandoned particle accelerator, the world's largest, loom: arch towers, metal spheres, and robotic machines blend seamlessly into the scenery. This analysis aims to explore how Stålenhag's imagined architectures enable a rereading of Sweden's political and economic history through a dystopian lens. Through visual and narrative elements, the author critiques Sweden's transformation from a perceived "happy island" in Europe to a vulnerable state exposed to the consequences of 1990s neoliberal economic reforms. The dystopian imagery reflects disillusionment with a declining welfare system and the erosion of collective structures due to privatisation. Stålenhag thus uses retro-futurist aesthetics to comment on national identity, memory, and the socio-economic shifts of recent decades.

Keywords: Simon Stålenhag, *Ur varselklotet*, retrofuturism, speculative fiction, 1990s Sweden



1. INTRODUCTION

From 1969 to 1994 a huge underground particle accelerator known as Slingan (The Loop)¹ ran beneath the Mälaren area. Designed in the 1950s, it was the largest physics facility in the world. At the centre of the accelerator was the Gravitron, whose power was hard to control. Its architecture, obsolete technology, and strange robotic machines have influenced and continue to influence Swedish daily life on the Mälaren islands even after its closure. This is the fictional premise of *Ur varselklotet: illustrerade sägner ur Slingans landskap 1984–1994* (lit. “From the echo sphere: illustrated tales from the Loop’s landscape 1984–1994”, translated into English under the title *Tales from the Loop*, 2015), Simon Stålenhag’s debut book of 2014. *Ur varselklotet*, a narrative art book, creates an alternative version of reality. It rewrites Swedish history through a rich set of images, created through digital art, and accompanied by short prose passages and a series of anecdotes that form a fragmented, non-linear narrative plot. The cohesion is maintained by the voice of the narrator/illustrator who, writing in the present, reflects on his childhood and on the landscape in which he grew up. Stålenhag is a graphic designer and the images in the book, which blend realism and science fiction, were already known to several admirers as they had been published online and made freely accessible. These images later found their way into *Ur varselklotet* and, in part, into the subsequent *Flodskörden: illustrerade sägner ur Slingans landskap 1995–1999* (2016a; lit. “The flood harvest: illustrated tales from the Loop’s landscape 1995–1999”, translated into English under the title *Things from the Flood*, 2016b).

Ur varselklotet evokes 1950s Sweden, a time when targeted industrial policies, which included the creation of structures such as Slingan, were implemented. In Stålenhag’s story, it is operated by the country’s largest employer, which draws much of its workforce from the Mälaren islands’ population.

I slutet av andra världskriget synliggjordes, med all tydlighet, de samhällsomvälvande krafterna inneboende i kärnenergi. [...] I Sovjet hade den smått slumpmässiga upptäckten av magnetrineffekten gett upphov till de fantasieggande magnetskeppen och fullständigt revolutionerat transportindustrin. [...] Det var i den här atmosfären i början av 50-talet som planen för en statligt ägd och driven partikelaccelerator lades och snart stod det klart att det skulle komma att bli den största acceleratoren i världen, till och med starkare än den som några år tidigare färdigställts i Nevada.² (Stålenhag 2020:4)

Though referring to the economic and societal transformations that occurred in the 1950s, the landscape described in the texts and represented in the images is essentially that of 1980s and 1990s Sweden, onto which other elements are grafted as if they naturally belonged to it. Machines and disused industrial buildings are merged into the landscape, causing its progressive transformation and defamiliarization. *Ur varselklotet* was a publishing success and has been translated into numerous languages.³ In 2017, it became a tabletop role-playing

¹ The translation “loop” is used not only for the English, but also for the French, German, and Italian versions of Stålenhag’s work.

² “The revolutionary powers inherent to nuclear technology became apparent at the end of World War II. [...] In the Soviet Union, the seemingly random discovery of the magnetrine effect had given birth to the wondrous magnet ships, and it had completely revolutionized the transport industry. [...] It was in those pioneering days in the early ’50s that the plans for a government owned and operated particle accelerator were hatched. Soon it became clear that it would become the biggest accelerator in the world, more powerful even than the one that had been completed in Nevada a few years earlier” (Stålenhag 2015:4).

³ The text had the following spin-offs: Bergström et al. (2017) and Antroia et al. (2019), in which Stålenhag’s name appears only among the illustrators.

game, distributed by Fria Ligan Publishing (see Stålenhag et al. 2017).⁴ *Tales from the Loop* is the title of a television series inspired by Stålenhag's text, produced by Amazon Prime and available on the platform since 2020.⁵ Stålenhag's name soon became a sort of brand name, and the same fate befell the sequel to *Ur varselklotet*, i.e., *Flodskörden*. The second book presents equally astonishing images but does not have the same appeal as the first, probably because it incorporates into its narrative many more explanatory notes mentioning political conspiracies, extra-terrestrial contacts, and time travel. These supernatural causes offer speculative hypotheses for the transformation of the territory, whereas in the first book no tentative explanation is provided. *Flodskörden*'s narrator is a young adult, no longer a teenager, and as such, shows a deeper knowledge of the extraordinary events and phenomena he describes. Given the potential of the first book, it is likely that the author designed the second as a more marketable product.

This article aims to investigate how Stålenhag's alternative reality reflects the specific social and political conditions of Sweden at the end of the 20th century, as well as his generation's disillusionment with the Swedish state and with the myth of a social-democratic Sweden with its welfare system. Through speculative fiction, Stålenhag illustrates the collapse of *folkhemmet*. He employs dystopian world-building to explore a profound and real societal transformation. The use of chronotopes and the interconnections of heterogeneous spatial and temporal planes thus make Stålenhag's work a powerful metaphor for the political and social melancholy of Generation X (and perhaps millennials) towards Sweden's recent past. This melancholy reflects both a lost connection to nature and the environment, and a loss of the state's former role in the lives of the Swedes.

2. WORLD-BUILDING IN SPECULATIVE FICTION, BETWEEN RETROFUTURISM AND CYBERPUNK

A short introduction to the genre of Stålenhag's work helps clarify the text, the author's possible intentions, and his representation of the world. RETROFUTURISM, CYBERPUNK, and KITCHEN SINK REALISM are the terms resulting from a Google search about the author and his art.

The first two of these trends can be encapsulated by the umbrella definition SPECULATIVE FICTION. This includes any form of expression offering a vision of reality in which one or more fantastic, yet plausible elements create a world that differs from the one we know. The peculiarity of speculative fiction is not only to present readers with a hypothetical world, but also to engage them in a communication based on questions such as "What would happen if...?", "What would the world be like if...?", providing one or more possible answers. Stålenhag does this by drawing on these genres/subgenres – retrofuturism, cyberpunk, and kitchen sink realism – to present an alternative world, posing his own "What if...?"-question. In this process, the rhetorical and communicative strategy is world-building, developed through two forms of expression: narrative and illustration (Roine 2016a:13).

As for retrofuturism, it could be described as an "ambivalent fascination for [...] 'Yesterday's Tomorrow'" (Latham 2009:340). It is a style that looks back at how the future was once imagined, socially, technologically, and aesthetically. Elizabeth Guffey and Kate C. Lemay (2014:434) define it as a "fascination for a future that never came to pass" as it marks "the discrepancy between what the future once represented and what it no longer

⁴ The game is accompanied by various complements, such as a scoreboard, a map, and a dice set.

⁵ <https://www.primevideo.com/detail/Tales-from-the-Loop/0IZJLPR9WFYI965ZVREZFLJYPD> (15 May 2025).

means” (Guffey 2006:152).⁶ Stålenhag’s work clearly shows a retrofuturistic influence through a pervasive sense of mistrust in the world he depicts. Retrofuturistic artistic productions, both literary and visual, generally reflect dissatisfaction with the present through the use of futuristic or pseudo-futuristic elements and settings from a recent past, while also evoking nostalgia and melancholy for what was once identified as the future (Guffey & Lemay 2014:435). Sharon Sharp (2011:25) defines retrofuturism as a fascination with the past that reflects modern individuals’ nostalgia for an idea of the future that was contemplated and cherished but never realized.⁷ Lynn Spiegel (2001:382) pinpoints this feeling as “a sense of nostalgia, not for yesterday per se but, more specifically, for yesterday’s future”.

While the term ‘futurism’ referred to individual and collective expectations of what was to come, thus expressing an immense confidence in the future, the term ‘retrofuturism’ casts serious doubt on the near future by relating it to the past – a time in which the future was idealized and imagined as saturated with technology. The same mistrust in the world can be found in another sub-genre of science fiction, cyberpunk, whose label,

coined by sf writer Bruce Bethke, refers to postmodern sf’s concern both with the socio-technological aspects of information-based societies and with the latter’s capacity to generate subcultures comparable to those spawned by rock music. (Den Tandt 2013:94)

Cyberpunk works, set in underground contexts and characterized by dissatisfaction and rebelliousness, are generally distinguished by their visionary intensity and acute objectivity. They usually feature technology as a dominant force that has reshaped the world and turned it into a dystopia.

For the cyberpunks, by stark contrast, technology is visceral. It is not the bottled genie of remote Big Science boffins; it is pervasive, utterly intimate. Not outside us, but next to us. Under our skin; often, inside our minds.⁸ (Sterling 1986:xiii)

While in Stålenhag’s work the futuristic setting is clearly visible in the illustrations that feature futuristic architecture, time capsules, and robots, the sense of nostalgia for yesterday’s future is probably less obvious and will be the subject of the following paragraphs. In his fictional world, technology and cybernetics have not yet taken over, nor does the protagonist have subversive or revolutionary impulses towards the world in which he lives. The pervasiveness of technology and information technology in Stålenhag’s storyworld does not subvert the order of things: his work depicts the bare Swedish landscape as being ostensibly different from the real historical and political context of the 1990s. It is, in fact, immersed in a grey and dark atmosphere, with the addition, however, of sophisticated machines, robots, and technologically advanced equipment. Stålenhag’s Sweden, thus, is a sort of past light-dystopia or a gloomy form of retrotopia.

The label ‘kitchen sink’ that Stålenhag himself chooses for his work – the definition appears, in fact, as a subtitle on his website (<https://www.simonstalenhag.se/>) – clearly refers

⁶ Referring to the popular strand of futurism that flourished from the late 19th century until the 1970s, the term retrofuturism is usually applied to a range of early and mid-20th century pop culture objects, from robotic toys to architectural utopias. The term ‘retrofuturism’ was coined in the 1980s, at a time when the concept of progress was strongly questioned in the light of troublesome events like the oil crisis, environmental disasters, pollution, and NASA’s closure of the Apollo programme (Guffey 2014:254). Sometimes the term retrofuturism is also used with another meaning, i.e., as the description of the past and the way people of the past perceived the future (Meyer 2021).

⁷ As Sharp states, “Retrofuturism uses iconic imagery of previous visions of the future, such as jet packs, homes of tomorrow, ray guns and other space age manifestations of technological progress, because our sense of the future is often inflected with a sense of nostalgia for imaginings of the future that never materialised” (Sharp 2011:25).

⁸ For further readings about cyberpunk, see McCaffery (1991).

to the cultural movement born in 1950s Great Britain, characterized by a realistic representation of the angry working-class youth in humble, domestic situations (Chlivers 1994:267). This label best fits Stålenhag's aesthetic and political goals. The author, in fact, locates his characters and the fantastic architecture portrayed in his book in the desolate landscape of rural Sweden. This setting frames many episodes in which we read about family car rides and childhood games in the woods. However, unlike the typical protagonists of the 'kitchen sink' tradition – those *angry young men* of proletarian England – Stålenhag's characters are no longer rebellious or insubordinate. Instead, they seem to have resigned themselves to an environment offering no hope for the future.

Simon Stålenhag undoubtedly draws inspiration from these three genres or subgenres. His highly original work is the result of merging of different sources of inspiration to produce something new, visionary, distressing. Furthermore, as a work of speculative fiction, his art acts as a rhetorical and communicative tool, inviting readers to reflect on crucial social, cultural, and political issues, and to question their own place in space and time.

3. SPATIAL METAMORPHOSES

Stålenhag's book focuses more on space than on characters, who are presented as mere extras. The narrator himself, who is the protagonist of some episodes, is portrayed as the keeper of collective memory rather than as a character. Space, on the other hand, has both a functional and semiotic value. It constantly invites comparison between the real and fictional worlds. The latter offers a surreal vision of a place where government and state are now entirely absent, forcing the reader to reflect on alternative scenarios.

The material dimension of Stålenhag's text is vividly expressed through a unique and highly realistic world-building technique. The text explicitly names real locations on the islands of Lake Mälaren, which are depicted faithfully in the images. At the beginning, there is even a map of the Mälaren area, alongside another specifying the location and size of this territory in relation to Sweden. The writing adds further information by providing precise toponymic and chronological indications.

The definition of place in the book is therefore central and fundamental. The main chronotope of the narrative is introduced at the book's very opening, which immediately clarifies the references to the spaces and the historical moment in which the story is set, that is, the Mälaren area in the 1980s and 1990s. The Swedish landscape, despite its post-futuristic and science-fiction elements, is realistically described and inspired by Swedish painters such as Bruno Liljefors, Lars Jonsson, Gunnar Bruswitz, John Conway (Andersen 2015; Ascari 2018:119; Widerberg 2015).

Stålenhag repeatedly blends the real and the fictional: he incorporates Slingan-related architecture and machinery into the realistically reproduced scenarios of the Mälaren islands. These extraneous elements inserted into realistic contexts are undoubtedly disturbing, yet at the same time they appear perfectly ingrained in the territory. Stålenhag's grand structures reflect Sweden's past fascination with nuclear power. In 1947, the Atomenergi (which the Riksenergi in the text is perhaps named after), a nuclear energy research organization, was established and, in 1954, the first research reactor, the R1, was built (Jasper 1990:65ff.).

In Stålenhag's book Sweden's rural landscape appears scarred by the government's policies. The Slingan project, in fact, included massive arch towers, colossal cooling structures, and gigantic metal echo spheres brutally installed into an otherwise idyllic scenery. These structures were later abandoned. When the government gave up the project in 1994, nothing was done to immediately restore the landscape to its former condition or to guarantee its inhabitants' safety. The anecdotes reported and drawn by the narrator refer to teenagers

who happen to come across metal spheres and robotic machines and who explore and play with the remains of these elements after Slingan was decommissioned. Stålenhag draws enormous, striking arch towers in Klövsjö, which dominate the landscape and are visible from the road to Härjedalen. These arch towers, at night, emit strange flares of light that flicker in the air and produce a loud noise, a sort of groaning, due to a lingering charge of static electricity, harmless at a distance (Stålenhag 2020:15).

In the small town of Bona, near Munsö, three massive cooling towers measuring more than 250 metres stand as part of the reactor. Three alarms, horn-like blasts, can be heard every day, matched by ground tremors and landslides throughout the area (Stålenhag 2020:10). The esker along the Uppsala Ridge is a repository of machinery and buildings, and a massive steel echo sphere:

[G]rustaget fungerade som lokal monteringsplats och accesspunkt för de enorma maskiner som användes. När bygget var färdigt lämnades många av maskinerna och byggnaderna kvar.⁹ (Stålenhag 2020:19)



Figure 1. *Varselklotet (Echo Sphere)*. Source: Stålenhag (2020:18f.).

Stålenhag's dystopia is not devoid of supernatural, uncanny traits. The energy of the magnetron, in fact, has probably curved in space-time. Echo spheres (Fig. 1) are said to be portals that connect the present with the past and allow prehistoric animal species, such as dinosaurs, to exist in the present (Stålenhag 2020:44). Gigantic magnetrine discs with a diameter of over 30 metres emerge from the water in the middle of Spånviken. Once intended for transportation, they were produced and repaired in Dävensö until 1979, when, following an economic crisis, the factory was closed, the discs were left floating "and the plant itself was left to be reclaimed by nature" (Stålenhag 2020:25).

⁹ "The gravel pits became an assembly site and access point for the huge machines that were used. A lot of the machines and buildings were simply left there when construction was completed" (Stålenhag 2015:19).

Places belonging to Slingan and their surroundings have turned into dumping grounds:

Det fanns ett hål i staketet bakom fabriksområdet i Lunda som ledde till en plats där vass växte rakt upp ur asfalten och luften luktade brännässlor. Vi brukade ta oss in där och leta gamla saker – möbler, en dammsugare, kanske en dator. Inte helt sällan hittade vi saker av mer exotisk natur. Magnettrindiskar, varselklot, griparmar. Höjdpunkten var gropen med de kasserade androiderna.¹⁰ (Stålenhag 2020:116)

Stålenhag's images are characterized by a certain gloominess and twilight tones. However, as can be surmised from some passages, the memory of Slingan is not negative, nor do people blame the downfalls of their existences on it. On the contrary, the book's images and anecdotes emphasize that the accelerator had become part of the lives of the inhabitants of Mälaren, who felt emotionally attached to it despite the daily threat it posed to the landscape and to their health. This sense of closeness and devotion comes precisely from the fact that these structures and constructions are not perceived as extraneous but as deeply ingrained in the landscape, a *natural* part of it. In a couple of passages, these huge constructions are even compared to churches or bell towers, architectural elements that can be found in any village and that are, at the same time, places of worship and symbols of community and aggregation. The acoustic signal of Bona's towers (Fig. 2) is like bells marking the end of the workday; the cooling towers become, by analogy, like bell towers (Stålenhag 2020:10). Inside Munsö's alarm sphere, human voices echo as in a church (Stålenhag 2020:19).



Figure 2. *Bonaverken*. Source: Stålenhag (2020:11).

¹⁰ "There was a hole in the fence behind the factories in Lunda that led to a place where reeds grew straight out of the asphalt and the air smelled of nettles. We used to sneak in there and look for old stuff, like furniture, a vacuum cleaner, or maybe even a computer. We would regularly find things of a more exotic nature; magnettrine discs, echo spheres, and hydraulic arms. The highlight was the pit filled with discarded androids" (Stålenhag 2015:116).

4. TIME PARALLELS

The 1950s as well as the 1980s and 1990s, the key time periods in Stålenhag's work, were crucial decades in Swedish history, particularly regarding the evolution of the Swedish welfare model. Stålenhag's work describes a country in which the state has withdrawn from control and oversight (Slingan was the property of Riksenergi, a name that clearly indicates its state ownership). As the state retreats and privatisation expands, the security and welfare of Swedish citizens are lost. As Stålenhag states in an interview:

Ur varselklotet handlar om det gamla Sverige. Om sådant som fallit i glömska eller förfallit. Forskningsstationen under marken får stå symbol för det framåtsträvande, som möter den nya tidens privatiseringar och försämrade ekonomi.¹¹ (Widerberg 2015)

Stålenhag's work highlights the state's absence in the periods he depicts in his book. His dystopia emphasizes this absence, portraying a world in which there is no state at all.

Simon Stålenhag draws and describes the late 1980s and the 1990s, the years of his own and the narrator's adolescence. In the work, the 1990s are presented as the years in which large buildings and technological works, once at the service of the state as parts of Slingan, are abandoned and at the mercy of anyone. The 1990s constitute the main temporal frame of the story. The narrator, however, writes in the present day and draws on his own memories and those of a friend. Moreover, the story frequently goes back to the 1950s, the years when Slingan was designed and when it all began, and to the 1960s, the decade when Slingan was fully operational. These three time periods, and the setting, Sweden in general and the Mälaren region in particular, form the book's three main chronotopes. They constitute the organizational centre of the main events recounted in *Ur varselklotet*.

The analysis of the three temporal frames explored in the book vis-à-vis the fictional world Stålenhag creates highlights a unifying theme in the whole text. *Ur varselklotet*, thus, represents the invisible continuity that runs through Sweden's historical, social, and political transformations.

Historically, the 1950s marked a time of economic growth in Sweden, during which the government's social policy aimed at supporting individuals in every sphere of life, both public and private. The text highlights that Slingan represented a source of income for the entire area. In the 1950s and 1960s, it provided employment for a large part of the community and was perfectly integrated into the surrounding environment.

The book thus faithfully reflects the pervasiveness of the welfare state in 1950s Sweden. The welfare state was, in fact, implemented according to a reform plan started after World War I. In these years, therefore, the idea of *folkhemmet* was emphasized, i.e., Sweden as the home of all Swedes, with a government supporting citizens in all areas of life: family, health care, policies for women and for the unemployed.¹² Following the crisis of 1929, Swedish social democracy showed an original solution to social imbalances, combining socialist strategy and economic rationality and merging the pursuit of social justice

¹¹ "*Ur varselklotet* is about Old Sweden. About things that have fallen into oblivion or decayed. The underground research station becomes a symbol of the forward-looking perspective, which meets the privatization and deteriorating economy of the new era". My translation.

¹² The concept of *folkhemmet* is quite broad and difficult to define. I am here referring to the current use of the word *folkhem* as a label which indicates the political vision formulated in 1928 by the social-democratic leader Per Albin Hansson in his famous speech in Riksdagen (Hansson 1982), mirroring the political, economic, and social ideology carried on by the Social Democratic Party and supporting the Swedish model from the 1930s to around the end of the 1980s. The Swedish Social Democratic Party, in 1917 the largest party in Riksdagen, grew in popularity over the years and became part of the government for over forty years (except for brief interruptions). For further interpretations of the concept of *folkhemmet* and its history, see Dahlqvist (2002:444–465); Götz (2004:97–107).

with the need to face economic crises. The Swedish model long functioned as an outstanding example for the workers' movement. It was globally praised by scholars and political activists alike, as it demonstrated that it was possible to build a perfectly balanced welfare state based on a fair compromise between capital and labour, between companies and trade unions (Telò 1984:280). The Swedish model became both a national trademark and an admired global export.

The idealized image of Nordic social democracies, however, is completely absent from the book, which instead portrays the present-day desolation and abandonment. The 1980s and the 1990s are in fact the decades in Swedish history in which the cost of the welfare system began to have significant economic consequences. Signs of decline were already visible in the early 1980s. After years of great development, Sweden had to face the economic crisis of the mid-1970s. After the 1982 elections, the government led by Social Democrat Olof Palme began reducing the deficit through stringent measures, including the devaluation of the crown by sixteen percent to boost Sweden's industrial competitiveness, but the consequences were inflation, lower living standards, and increased unemployment. In 1985, the Central Bank launched the liberalization of the credit market, the so-called *novemberrevolutionen*, which, while briefly boosting the economy, also contributed to the economic crisis that hit Sweden again in the early 1990s. The next step was to liberalize state control over the economy; the Social Democratic government, embracing neoliberal doctrine, actively removed key control over capital flows. The scale of the social cuts proved shocking, surprising not only the party's electorate but also the bourgeois parties and many within the Social Democratic leadership itself who expressed their profound disappointment regarding the harsh austerity (Östberg 2024:239f.).

The severe economic crisis that hit Europe shook the foundations of the Swedish system and forced the government to question some of its assets and cut public spending and benefits. The economic austerity of the 1990s became the main concern of the government, which strived to stabilize and improve finances. The consequence of such a policy was a change in welfare support levels. The conservative government led by Carl Bildt, after the elections of 1991, implemented important measures such as the abolition of the solidarity funds for workers initiated by Palme, privatizations, disengagement of the state from welfare, and support for private entrepreneurship (Östberg 2024:248).¹³ The 1980s are often seen as the final phase of *folkhemmet*. The symbolic dates of its end are identified as 1986, the year of Olof Palme's assassination in Stockholm, and as 1991, the year in which the general elections were overwhelmingly won by the centre-right coalition, which began the dismantling of the welfare state.

Stålenhag's work depicts the 1980s and 1990s as eras of crisis, shown through the gradual abandonment of factories and infrastructure connected to Slingan. Some passages of *Ur varselklotet* are, for instance, devoted to the so-called MS Ancylos, in the text one of the first magnettrine ships constructed in Sundsvall in the early 1960s (in full activity between 1962 and 1968), and a symbol of progress and technology. After an accident in 1969, it was taken out of commission, abandoned in the Bastlagndö shipyards, and never recovered because of economic problems due to the Ural Crisis in 1978 (Stålenhag 2020:7).

¹³ The economic crisis cost the Social Democrats the 1991 elections, ushering in a Moderate-led government – the first right-wing prime minister in over sixty years. However, this new bourgeois coalition, unable to secure an outright majority, depended on the support of the xenophobic New Democracy. This administration then escalated economic liberalization by aggressively privatizing public services, notably in healthcare, schools, and housing, reversing earlier Social Democratic caution (Östberg 2024:245f.). The drop in production, unemployment, capital flight, and the financial crisis resulting from the recession led the government, in agreement with the opposition, to pass economic measures such as the decision to let the crown float, which resulted in the loss of 20% of the crown's value in 1992 (Goetschy 1995:11f.; Berg & Gröthheim 1997:140f.).

After the Ural Crisis, the important magnetron disc factory in Dävensö also had to close (Stålenhag 2020:25) to become, by the late 1980s, a concrete heap with a caved-in roof, whose ruins have become a hiding place for children (Stålenhag 2020:93). These abandoned premises reveal the gradual distancing of the central administration, the state, which no longer cares either for its facilities or the environment. The state has, in fact, abandoned its own citizens. This is exemplified, for instance, by the caretaker of an experimental power plant for wireless transmission of electricity built in the 1960s, who finds his death in the explosion of a vacuum tube in 1994 (Stålenhag 2020:108), or by a kid and his obese mother, who lived in Karlskär, in a crumbling, dark house with Eternit walls and a river of moist garbage, made of cardboard boxes, pillows, and mattresses, flowing outside. They did not receive any help or support from the social services, whose work had proved entirely ineffective.

Pojken gick inte i skolan och kunde varken läsa eller skriva. Det var osäkert om han ens kunde prata. Pappan satt i fängelse och det var nog lika bra för han var en ökänd snuskgubbe. Mamman satt fastvuxen i soffgruppen framför TV:n. Hon var så fet att hon inte kunde röra sig och hon brydde sig inte längre om att ta hand om pojken. Därför hade den lille stackaren blivit tvungen att lära sig skaffa föda på egen hand, och i gryningen strök han runt som en grävling i grannskapets soptunnor och letade matrester. Då och då kunde man höra hans segertjut när han lyckades fälla ett vildsvin eller rådjur. Nog hade han också ljustrat personal ur socialtjänsten vid några tillfällen och kanske plundrat en och annan pizzaleverans.¹⁴ (Stålenhag 2020:104) (Fig. 3)



Figure 3. *Kid in Karlskär*. Source: Stålenhag (2020:105).

¹⁴ “The boy didn’t go to school and could neither read nor write. It was doubtful he could even speak. The father was in prison and that was probably just as well, because he was an infamous dirty old man. The mother was firmly rooted to the couch in front of the TV. She was so fat she couldn’t move, and she couldn’t be bothered to take care of the boy anymore. The poor thing had to fend for himself, and at dawn he prowled around, digging through the neighborhood’s garbage cans like a rat, looking for scraps of food. Now and then you could hear ecstatic whoops when he managed to bring down a boar or a deer. Supposedly he had speared visitors from social services on a few occasions, and had maybe looted a pizza delivery truck or two” (Stålenhag 2015:104).

5. CONCLUSIONS: MELANCHOLY AND FRAGMENTATION

Stålenhag's fiction displays a close relationship to Swedish history, blending real and (trans)figurative landscapes. Its conclusion casts a melancholic gaze on the area's recent transformations. The changes and the losses suffered by the territory are recounted as direct experiences of the narrator and the people he knows, as though the landscape had absorbed their lives and emotions.

SLUTORD

Slingan togs slutligen ur bruk den femte november 1994. Dagen efter hade vi akne. Samhället höll på att förändras, det märkte vi. Slingans gula bilar försvann från vägarna. Statliga företag blev privata och bytte namn. Vi sörjde inte de här förändringarna när de skedde, vi var fullt upptagna av vår nya feta hy och spruckna röster.

Våra lekar ersattes en efter en av hemdatorn. Snart tillbringade vi nästan all vår fritid i skenet från en monitor. Men minst en gång varje dag blev man utslängd av en arg mamma (papporna var nästan alla omgifta och bortflyttade vid det laget) och då återvände vi till våra tidigare lekplatser som zombier kring ett köpcentrum. Vi satt nedklämda i gungorna utanför skolan eller ihopkrupna med stulna cigaretter i någons gamla koja.

– Vi vallfärdade ut i långa rader om vinternätterna och man kunde se små ljuspunkter tändas och släckas i mörkret – cigaretterna från rökande tonåringar som samlats kring sina havererade minnen, som en dödsMESSA.

Vi vände mot dygnet, kisade mot horisonten och suckade. Där borta grydde det.¹⁵ (Stålenhag 2020:125)

In the book's last section, the public and the private spheres converge. The dismantling of what remains of Slingan and the subsequent privatization of what was once owned by the state occur at the end of the narrator's childhood and at the beginning of his adolescence, a time of growing awareness and disillusionment.

The nostalgia for his childhood merges with a sense of generational melancholy for the future that could have been but did not occur. This melancholy, which reflects the 'structure of feelings' of Stålenhag's work, as Raymond Williams (1977) defined it, derives from the disappointment of a generation that heard praise for the Swedish model but never fully experienced its benefits.¹⁶

This disappointment is not new in Swedish literature. In the 1990s and even more in the 2000s, a major Swedish editorial phenomenon was detective stories and crime fiction. At the very moment of the collapse of the Swedish system, at a time of change and rupture in the nation, a large number of crime novels came out, revealing the existence of a weak, frightened, and vulnerable Sweden, as Kerstin Bergman (2012:61) underlines with regard to Henning Mankell's novels and Daniel Brodén (2011:97f.) to Swedish crime films.

¹⁵ "FINAL WORDS / The Loop was finally decommissioned on November 5, 1994. By then we all had acne. Society was changing; it was obvious to everyone. The yellow cars from the Loop disappeared from the roads. Government-owned companies became privately owned and changed names. We did not grieve these changes when they occurred; we were fully occupied with our greasy skin and breaking voices. / Playtime was replaced, piece by piece, with computers. Soon we spent almost all our free time in the glow of a monitor. But at least once a day each of us was thrown outside by an agitated mother (nearly all our fathers were remarried and had moved away by this time), and then we returned to our old playgrounds like zombies around a mall. We sat wedged into the swings outside the school, or crouched in someone's old treehouse, smoking stolen cigarettes. / We walked in long lines through winter nights, and you could see little points of light go on and off in the darkness – cigarettes smoked by teenagers who had gathered around their wrecked memories, like a requiem. / We made our nights our days, squinted at the horizon, and sighed. Way over there, the morning dawned" (Stålenhag 2015:125).

¹⁶ The term 'melancholy' is clearly indebted to Freudian theorization, meant as a state of the psyche akin to mourning (Freud 1962:243ff.). Moreover, the expression *white melancholia* has also been widely used by the scholars Catrin Lundström and Tobias Hubinette (2020) – who, however, focus primarily on a racial dimension that is completely absent in Stålenhag – to voice the naïve idealization of Sweden's past.

Some important authors of Nordic noirs, like Sjöwall-Wahlöö, Mankell, Stieg Larsson, have a solid Marxist ideological background, as Per Hellgren (2019) points out. Their works, admirable examples of entertainment literature, attempt to provide a response to the social changes that had affected Sweden and the rest of the world since the late 1960s. They analyze the impact that the end of communist regimes, the failure of social and economic planning in post-colonial states, and the explosion of private capital had on Swedish society (Hellgren 2019:3f., 9f.). Stålenhag belongs to a later, younger generation. His work is a far cry from the realism of detective fiction, yet through a fragmented structure, made of snapshots of (alternative) time and pieces of narrative, it reproduces the same fragmented world. The Sweden he represents, too, has lost its past cohesion, as privatizations and personal enterprise have replaced the unitary leadership of the state. As Jenny Andersson (2009:239) points out, this sense of disorientation and loss is noticeable in other expressions of Swedish culture: for instance, in Roy Andersson's movie *Du levande* (*You, the Living*, 2007), where "people walk around like the dead, looking for a future disappeared"; in the pictures of photographer Lars Tunbjörk, who represents "material and human wrecks of the Swedish model"; in the paintings of Karin Mamma Andersson, who portrays deserted houses whose typical Swedish-style furniture looks like "remains of an archaeological site".

Stålenhag's visionary and sometimes uncanny perspective, despite being distant from detective fiction, has given body to the fears and anxieties of a country that was increasingly scared of its uncertain future, and tried to come to terms with its often controversial and troublesome past. More than just an entertaining read, his work is an intriguing experiment in speculative fiction. It skilfully pushes readers to ponder the world's potential forms of existence, thereby forcing them to face the transformations and crises of their time. What Hanna-Riikka Roine says about constructs, the worlds created in speculative fiction, applies to Stålenhag's dystopian creations as "consciously drawn collections of particular elements, characters, sequences of events in the form of master plots and such, and locations falling into particular relations to one another" (Roine 2016a:15). These constructs not only mirror real-world societal shifts but also reflect the 'structure of feeling' of teenagers living in Sweden during the 1990s. Rather than emphasizing the distance between reality and fiction, the book challenges readers to ask why the world (or Sweden) is the way it is – and how it might be otherwise (Roine 2016b:66).

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