

Collage City — City Collage: On the Relation Between Aesthetic and Political Mobilisation in Sven Holm's *Min Elskede* — *En Skabelonroman*

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Abstract This close reading analyses how collage technique is used for critical, theoretical and creative purposes in a typical “revolutionary novel” of the 1968 movement. As a genre hybrid, Sven Holm's *Min elskede* — *en skabelonroman* (*My Beloved* — *A Pattern Novel*, 1968) illustrates the urban society's estrangement from the organic community, the arbitrary construction of meaning by the difference of signs and the ongoing process of collage. These three issues are critical with respect to the urban society, the interaction between human language and everyday life, and even fleeting art forms (happening, concept art). In fact, collage technique as writing and composition process turns out to be much more important than the results of collage and montage themselves. At the same time, different problems of social communities are discussed in the text because of their ambivalent demands on group solidarity and respect for individual interests. It is evident that Holm's novel is a unique “city collage text fragment” using the latest art and architecture expressions of the sixties but also with a retrograde romantic notion on politics.

Key words 1968 movement; aesthetics and politics; metafiction; criticism of the welfare state; Sven Holm

The Danish writer Sven Holm (born in 1940) is a typical artist representing the protest movement of 1968. During the Welfare State consolidation and its economic upturn (*rekordår*), many left wing artists in Denmark protested against e. g. the isolated and standardised life in industrial societies, excessive consumption, pollution, efficient city planning and the warlike traffic of private cars in the expanding cities (Wischmann 2003, 81 – 85, 99 – 104). Influenced by the English architect group *Archigram*, Holm invented an example of literary concept art as a contribution to both the Danish counter culture and politics — and to the international “counter aesthetics” as well. According to his criticism of recent city planning, Holm later on became an advocate for the independent, experimental subcultural community of *Christiania* in Copenhagen, which promises the realisation of a utopian city (Wischmann 225).

The following close reading of the novel *Min elskede* — *en skabelonroman* intends to give proof of how Holm's aesthetic collage process and his linguistic-metaphorical

model of the city are combined in order to mobilise the participating readers and to make them feel compelled to take a critical point of view of the 1968 movement.

Over København ligger København. Luften over byen er en fortælling om den. Men den varer kun det ene døgn hvor den er blevet til. Den forsvinder efter at have ført alle fortællingens elementer sammen, ladet dem glide ind i hinanden som i en drøm om alle tings samhörighed og om fortællingens grænseløshed – hvor der ikke længere findes adskillelse, hvor væggene er nedlagt og etagerne ophævet, hvor der ikke er forskel på op og ned og til siden. Kort efter opgiver fortællingen sin samlede kuppel og spreder stykkerne for alle vinde. Det er et billede. (Holm, *Min elskede — en skabelonroman* 46).

(Above Copenhagen is Copenhagen. The air above the city is a story about it. But it only lasts as long as the day on which it was created. It disappears once it has connected and interweaved all the elements of the story, as if in a dream of the common identity of all things and the boundlessness of the narrative—where there are no more divisions, where the walls and floors are removed and dissolved, where there are no more differences between above, below, or to the side. A short time later, the story disperses its collected dome and scatters its pieces to the winds. This is an image.)

In this extract, a text collage is marked as conceptual art and the collaged product is dissolved into its constituent parts, so that the illustrative process appears as if deconstructed. What remains is the term “image” as the linguistic label for a model.

This process description is characteristic of Holm’s novel which elevates the relationship between linguistic or figurative signs and what they denote to a topic in itself. The book is a modernist urban novel which opens a debate on the status of language in relation to the extratextual world. At the same time, *Min elskede* is a work which is sceptical of urbanisation, its criticism of civilisation foreshadowing the urban crisis and criticism of capitalism in the 1970s.

Holm’s novel presents a utopia of Copenhagen—and its supposed failure. With his definition of existence in Copenhagen as “på et tyndt blad mellem oppe og nede” (living on a fineline between above and below) (Holm 61), Holm elaborates on the notion that both the city’s development and urban living are at a turning point at the end of the 1960s. In this major upheaval “København er nedlagt” (Copenhagen was closed) (Holm 113), the revolution is consummated by a reversal of relations: “ed og op skifter retning” (above and below have exchanged their viewpoints) (Holm 110). Revolution as a consequence of the “up-and-down movement” not least alludes to the *Sanct Hansaften-Spil* (1803) by Adam Oehlenschläger, striking a characteristic revolutionary-romantic note. Beyond this, Holm’s novel explores the question of how the notion of the “city as a conglomerate text”, which in this case consists of highly heterogeneous elements, is related to a politicised text calling for action. In what follows, I would like to investigate how the aesthetic and political processes of mobilisation are interwoven.

Montage and collage are the key interdisciplinary techniques of composition and

internal structure in Holm's novel, which is divided into 38 brief chapters, an epilogue, a conversation, and a letter. The text characterises itself as a genre hybrid:

Det er en reolbog. Fyldt op med alle genrer. En rodekasse. Det er en æske lysbilleder af København og en tegnefilm om hvad man måske burde gøre. Det er et hyrdebrev og en traktat og en opbyggelsesbog. (Holm 117).

(This is a shelf book. Filled with all genres. A crate full of odds and ends. It is a box with Copenhagen slides and a cartoon on how one might take action. It is a pastoral letter and a tract and a devotional book.)

Holm's novel deals (non-chronologically) with a pre- and post-revolutionary Copenhagen. To protagonists, the agents A and B intend to build a new alphabet of human beings which are supposed to start a kind of counterrevolutionary movement. In the epilogue of the novel a bizarre technocracy illustrates the risks of utopian socialism.

A number of chapters are linked by the satirical revolutionary actions of the two agents, others can be understood as part of plot strands. References to genre can be discerned, for example to filmic or dramatic forms: film episodes, the performances of the Marx brothers, improvised scenes, street theatre or revue interludes; the satirically coloured portrayal of a gun battle in the harbour, resembling the travesty of a civil war during the revolution, includes the stage direction, "Der er ingen musik til denne del af kapitlet" (There is no music to this chapter) (Holm 59).

When reading *Min elskede*, the fragmentary novel is run through in its performative consummation, the text is to perform itself and become a reading event which goes beyond a mere constitution of meaning.

City and Text as Collage

The novel's epilogue concerns the fantastic architecture of the English artist group *Archigram*, which practised radical criticism of urban planning in the 1960s (Cook 60–62). *Archigram* raised the collage to a principle for its urban planning and architectural designs, applied both conceptually and to the concretisation of the landscaped areas and buildings it described.

Analogous to specific structuralist premises which also stand out in the linguistic reflection of *Min elskede*, *Archigram* calls for a fluctuating city which does not just continuously transform itself but can even move and invoke itself in another place. As an example, the "Blow-Out Village" from *Archigram* develops like a dome in a process similar to metamorphosis. It is precisely this metaphorical concept that Holm selects to illustrate the structure of words which stretches over Copenhagen in a text-conscious manner (Holm 46). In contrast to the technology-affirmative, modernistic vision of *Archigram*, Holm's utopia also includes anachronistic elements: horse, cart, and tent for the "travelling people" or showmen which can form voluntary nomadic communities. The agents A and B, who want to recruit an alphabet of revolutionaries, are also voyagers. The invigoration of urban forms of cohabitation in *Min elskede* acclaims the organic and foreshadows ecological values. This has nothing to do with *Archigram's* glorification of Le Corbusier's machines for living in, as I have argued

elsewhere (Wischmann 2003, 235 – 243).

The Swarm

The demands of a peaceful revolution and a change of awareness are expressed with great clarity in the sensual metaphor of the swarm: the swarm of fish or insects reorganises itself unremittingly, finds new forms of organisation, remains defined by the interests of the individual, and is non-hierarchical; The swarm of fish represents the harmonic community of sensitive individuals with a fulfilling collective experience (Holm 63). The fishes swimming side by side in the water are united in their slight moves and they are moving as one body in dialogue with environment and nature. But by an arbitrary signal the swarm splits up and each member of this temporary community focuses her/his concentration on different aspects of the living conditions. The perceptions and sensations of each member stay individual, even unique.

As the personification of Copenhagen as beloved already suggests, fluctuating characteristics are mainly positively connotated, such as ability for metamorphosis, movement and change (e. g. a dancing crowd, groups of animals, growing grass, evocative gardens in moonlight). Mobility and dynamism display a fundamental suitability for trying out utopia. At a love-in in forest park Dyrehaven, the heady crowd resembles a swarm of fish: Hver bevægelse er langsom, som et kærtegn i distraktion, huden står søvnigt åben og ånder med gæller. “ (Every movement is slow, like a distracted caress, the skin is sleepily open and breathes through gills.) (Holm 82). This is a vegetative state understood in a positive way, characterised not by stagnation but inner dynamism.

The presentation of a gathering of like-minded people as an organic community may seem like a notion indebted to the 19th century. The organic concept as we find it in Ferdinand Tönnies and elsewhere, however, is regenerated or even problematised by Holm in several respects: the organic communities are characterised on the one hand by physical sensuality, on the other the formation of the temporary self-sufficient group is played through medially and textually. The members of the swarm—the following example deals with picture elements and insects—only form a meaningful whole for a certain period of time and only from a specific perspective. Once this totality has been created, the context dissolves, as the novel repeatedly stresses. This image formation and dissolution also relates to the collage units of the novel themselves.

In a solo feminist effort, a young woman lures the four men who have actually arrived for a rendezvous into an image trap:

De [Herrerne, AW] gar sammen hen til døren og åbner den. De mødes af et stort spejl som viser fire mænd i festtøj på vej ind i et soveværelse. På sengen, under en lille lampe, ligger et legemsstort fotografi af deres veninde. Hun er nøgen. [. . .] Fotografiet er forstørret. Når de fire mænd bøjer sig over det ser de tydeligt de grove korn i eksponeringen af den afklædte krop. (Holm 90).
 (They [the men, AW] go to the door and open it. They are standing opposite a large mirror which shows four men on their way to the bedroom. On the bed, be-

low a small lamp, is a life-size photograph of their girlfriend. She is naked. [...] The photo has been enlarged. When the four men bend over the image they can clearly identify the rough grains of the image in the enlarged photographic print of the naked body.)

In this example, it is first the overall figure and its outline which is the focus and then the constituent elements, similar to the art of Roy Lichtenstein and Sigmar Polke who in their graphic and painterly conceptions work with the rough image grid of newspaper photos. The dots receive their semiotic character as picture elements related to one another only in the overall image. Only in context can certain dots express lighting states or diverse material surfaces.

The metaphor of the swarm receives a further dimension when in a “sociological nature scene” the grains of the image in press photos or in pop art is directly projected onto a swarm of mosquitos. The narrator describes how the insects buzz in the air after they have sucked their bodies full of blood (and can thus be visualised clearly as dark picture elements): “Afstanden mellem de enkelte blodpunkter ville blive stadig større ligesom et fotograferet portræt går i opløsning i lutter korn. Ligheden med et menneske vill aftage” (The distance between the blood dots becomes increasingly large, just like a photo portrait dissolves into mere image grains.) (Holm 104).

In the model of a community in *Min elskede*, a collective multipartite movement, participation, and organic harmony are emphasised. The overriding intention of the temporary multipartite organism, which remains constantly in motion, nevertheless remains unclear. The event of its existence is more important than its intended actions, the happening itself more important than the outcome.

Urban Revolution and Linguistic Renewal

The novel reveals that a political movement also presupposes a linguistic and aesthetic movement. What is at the bottom is moved to the top. The energetic urban body ultimately prevails, the stomach and drives triumph over the intellect, and grass overgrows the stony city. The typical watchword of the time, “Under brostenene ligger stranden” (The beach is below the paving), suggests itself.

Beyond this, an existing freedom is also to be reclaimed as an aesthetic and political experimental sphere: there should always be sufficient air between the words and the buildings to drive forward dynamism and change in the sense of a system-critical revolution (Wischmann 2003, 225). It is first the successful work of the agents A and B which demonstrates how the potential of these possibilities of political involvement can be gradually harnessed, who enlist ever more members for the “up and down movement”, so that the foundation for an alphabet—the structured variant of a swarm made up of letters—is laid. Due to the assassination by their stooge, they must flee prematurely. Their contribution to the revolution of 1968 is therefore of doubtful value.

Post-revolutionary Copenhagen also sees itself faced with insoluble problems: linguistic doubt makes itself felt in the epilogue. Or must the author of the “statutes for a mobile Copenhagen” in the style of the “walking city” from *Archigram* possibly

adapt himself to the demands of the censors and revise his utopian project? Might the urban utopia, once enacted, tip over into a dictatorship because the socially emancipatory ideal of the swarm cannot be achieved? Does the figure of the author remain such a captive of his text that he comes to doubt the urban planning utopia for precisely the reason that it is founded in language? Or should the limits and possibilities of politicising literature be generally problematised?

The reader ultimately gains the impression that the figure of the author suffers under the pressure of expectation to contribute proactively to the 1968 movement.

By contrast, the work of the agents merges linguistic and political activity directly. Their provocative actions aim to show the Copenhageners what is latent within them, what unexploited energies and abilities lie dormant; the demand for an experimental testing ground can be understood as a call to translate latent possibilities into (linguistic) action and realise utopian projects. Linguistically, this approach—to paraphrase Saussure—can be grasped as a transformation of units of a potentially possible linguistic system (“*langue*”) into a genuinely practised linguistic system (“*parole*”). Provocative linguistic work could thus be understood as encouragement to consciously enlarge the previously linguistically active register, proceeding from linguistic potential in particular to better exploit aesthetic and political potential.

The process of mastering language and mobilising the “*langue*” is simply illustrated by the agents A and B, as they learn Danish in order to recruit members. They perform acts of language and motion simultaneously: “*vi taler og cykler dansk*” (we speak and cycle in Danish) (Holm 37). Significantly, with their non-Danish linguistic backgrounds, they formulate different idiomatic expressions than those typically used by Danes in daily life. They also make use of many quotations and linguistic clichés which they re-enact in puns and plays on words. The figures employ an improper language, phrase things experimentally and tentatively, use phrases or markedly ambiguous expressions; the stooge of A and B, a tailor, for example says: “*jeg hæfter mig ikke ved det*” (I’m not stuck on it), or the figures recognise their own phrases in the other: “*Det er som om det er mine ord.*” (It seems to me that your words are mine.) (Holm 39, 24). (These plays on words are not really translatable, but they even show that—as in Saussure’s semiotic model—a single altered letter completely changes the meaning of a word: “*fugten og fuglen*” (Holm 15); “*magesløst und magesløst*” (47); “*på dens gamle plads und på den gamles plads*” (113). The leitmotivic formula of the “fine line between above and below” also relates to the meaning-generating difference of the relations of signs. The textual metaphorisation of the “city as text” is thus developed linguistically and philosophically.

Copenhagen as Narrative

In the quotation about the collected dome and the description of the hybrid genre (Holm 45, 117), the overcoming of boundaries, the flowing transitions and the merging process are emphasised. This fulfilling experience, according to the quotation, is bound to the time it takes to read the novel. In addition, the challenge here is to bear in mind the model character of the dome city I identified as the “Blow-Out Village” by *Archigram*, which is not a literally formulated utopia with direct call to action but

an arrangement of exemplary urban texts which in its composition forms a linguistic image for a conceptual metaphor of a city.

The novel plays textually and self-reflexively with the figure-ground relationship: the writing on the page, the buildings on the earth's surface, the incomplete revolutionary movement of A and B as an aborted writing movement in Copenhagen's text. On the departure of the agents, the scenography is dominated by whiteness, as if the printed text were being removed from the page of the book (Holm 109, 107). A free city of words promises a non-hierarchical language. This hope is not fulfilled, the swarms lose their outlines and move aimlessly, the alphabet of revolutionaries illustrated as letters, potentially complementary and mutually enabling proves not to be sound. Nevertheless, the narrator—following a fictitious conversation with a dissatisfied critic and a baffled reader—remains true to the ideal of the swarm of fish and thus also to the dream of pre-linguistic intuition (Holm 119).

Mobilisations

Min elskede reveals a specific mobilisation for change—starting from the indignation and criteria of system-critical left-wingers and the grassroots movement. The positively connoted dynamism is obviously not related to the economic growth of the Danish “record years”, an increase in efficiency or accelerated everyday life. It is to be understood not teleologically but organically. Bourgeois capitalist society and its conventional social models represent destructive stagnation, even death in isolated portacabins: “Ingen kan flytte sig uhindret op og ned, gennem væggene, hen over pladserne og i parkerne.” (No one can move freely from below to above, through walls, across squares and into parks.) (Holm 105, see also 83, 119). In the social-realistic chapters of the novel, a lack of mobility and openness represents isolation and the absence of communal energy or communicative circulation. Planned existence and functional and rational building are equally denounced as having caused a state of deficiency.

Voluntary mobility and bodily or collective-intoxicating experiences of movement often hold sensual and erotic potential; they have a welcome deregulatory effect on the subconscious and civilisation's safety mechanisms. This is emphatically underscored by the love-in in the Dyrehaven forest park (potentially driven by animal instincts). In place of proverbial codification, fragmentation and restructuring are advocated.

In Holm's work, the image of the extendible domed city from *Archigram* accentuates the fact that the urban everyday world becomes a mobile artefact under the influence of revolutionary action. The domed city resembles a mobile which can be frozen for the moment, which remains in temporary constellations for a brief time. These stills of the mobile are presumably not repeatable, at the very most certain set pieces can be cited or certain semantic contexts can be recapitulated. The consequences of the actions of the city dweller inspired by revolution are just as unpredictable as the formations of the social collective themselves.

Holm's 1968-inspired views of the time can be interpreted in terms of cultural history as close to the *Provie* movement, a rebellious subgroup of provocative agitators who infiltrated and disrupted other groups or created their own happenings (Österberg

91). This movement celebrated its own burial once, in its own assessment, there was a danger of the *Provis* petrifying into an established organisation. In *Min elskede*, the movement guarantees the individual and not the other way around (Österberg 91). The human criterion may not be lost, the “good intentions” should in no way be abused or ideologically manipulated by state interests.

The contradiction between the organic swarm metaphor and the collage’s conscious use of models is striking: an intuitive community, characterised as pre-linguistic, and an overriding analytical concept of urban society in the style of a “supertext” face each other. The metaphor of the swarm is already itself ambivalent, as an anachronistically-coloured, social romantic idea of community encounters “modern individualism”. The question of the actual motives and values which make the swarms actually cohere remains unanswered. It is, however, evident that it is the demand of bodily and sexual politics which stands out in the thesis of the political integration of physicality and the glorification of the organic in *Min elskede*.

The swarm concept must be described as ahistorical because a shared understanding of community, in the sense of an intuitive feeling of common identity, is presupposed amongst all members (see here the criticism of the unbalanced positive evaluation of “community” in Bauman 2009). Processes of inclusion and exclusion, such as the status differences between members and non-members, the freedom of the “others” or the potentially arduous and protracted building of consensus are absent. Alone the emphasis of the protected right to individuality is reminiscent of the possible risk that the common movement might become an end in itself and the needs of the members one day subordinated to the collective interest, a development which would mark a point of change from utopia to dystopia.

Although the swarm can be integrated within the overall concept as a collage element, this image represents a somewhat retrograde utopia. The visionary idea, presented in the epilogue, of a post-revolutionary Copenhagen which transforms *Archigram’s* “Blow-Out Village” and “Walking City” in a literary way, directs the focus to an uncertain future. Here, language appears to be threatened by an endurance test between mimetic function and self-reference. The decision to be met collectively on who is to supply the guidelines for the communal life also involves danger. In 1968, the yearning for community is evidently directed towards the past and the future simultaneously.

The aesthetic mobilisation primarily exists in the efforts of the reader required to bring together the many component parts into a text dome and in doing develop a highly personal interpretation. Performative understanding of the construction of the text and meaning is required of the reader. The recipients create their own collage in reading which is tied together via intra- and intertextual connections (Riha). As the discussion between the author figure, critic and reader at the end shows, the fragmentary challenge of *Min elskede* aims to provoke. The process of provocation is widespread in both concept art and the political culture of the 1968 revolution and can be understood as the epitome of combined aesthetic and political activation.

The process of setting in motion points to the call to action and the challenge to adopt a position, in this case to critically examine the idea of community and in parti-

cular the swarm metaphor and investigate the ambivalences of this model (Togeby). This also includes careful consideration of all the aesthetic and political connotations of the swarm (and might also be inferred from the current and usually careless use of the swarm metaphor in the context of social networks). In a further frame of reference, the process of plunging into turmoil of the “above and below movement” suggests adopting an attitude of the groupings and demands of the 1968 movement—a counter-revolutionary, feminist, ecological, or, intellectual-philosophical one? This positioning is a key and easily underestimated consequence of mobilisation. And it is precisely the kaleidoscope of text elements which opens up a perspective on these highly different tendencies and dynamics. Contradictions, confrontations and interstices remain clear, as in a collage of heterogeneous or prefabricated materials. In this experimental novel, Holm forges a link from the romantic fragment to pop art.

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