

The Image as a Site of Aesthetic Renegotiation in Kerstin Ekman's *City of Light*

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Abstract This article is a study of the novel *City of Light* (1983) by the Swedish author Kerstin Ekman. The novel features a friction between image and text that is expressed in an attempt to recreate in novelistic form the spatial properties inherent in images. The temporal flow of the narrative is interrupted by retakes and repetitions as it endeavours to illustrate a complex “now” by letting preamble and epilogue inhabit the same temporal position. The novel also strives to supply alternatives to a stereotypical tradition of images of women. The opposition between spatiality and temporality is mirrored, for example, in the way the novel takes to task the representation of woman in Western philosophy. By scrutinizing the relationship between image and text, its ideological connotations are deconstructed, which allows the narrator to make peace not only with her own body but also open herself to other human beings. *City of Light* is permeated by the tension that W. J. T. Mitchell maintains is a characteristic of the present, that is, the simultaneous suspicion and admiration of the visual power of pictorial media. Ekman's writing explores the relationship between verbal and visual art and simultaneously tests their ideological powers of signification.

Key words Kerstin Ekman; *City of Light*; image and text; ekphrasis; Rune Hagberg

Time & Space are Real Beings

Time is a Man Space is a Woman

—“A Vision of the Last Judgement” by William Blake

Kerstin Ekman (b. 1933), considered one of Sweden's most important, experimental and original authors of the twentieth century, made her literary debut with the detective story *30 Meters of Murder* (1959). Following a decade of writing criminal fiction, Ekman has continuously moved between genres such as documentary fiction, prose poems, historical narratives as well as postmodern experimental fiction. Ekman's novels are often realistic depictions of our time and share the element of social critique at the same time as they resound with mythological undertones. Another characteristic of Ekman's *oeuvre* is its multifaceted relation to a literary tradition, which is simultaneously incorporated and challenged. In addition to a large number of novels in various genres, Kerstin Ekman has also produced films, written film scripts, programmed

a computer game, as well as worked with digital hypertext. The interplay with other media such as paintings, photography, film and digital narratives is an important building block of Ekman's fiction.¹

Image Construction —Image Destruction

In 1974 the first novel in the tetralogy, sometimes referred to as *The Katrineholm's Suite*, *Witches Rings*, was published. This narrative about the birth and development of a Swedish city from the middle of the nineteenth century and onwards, continues in *The Spring* (1976) and *The Angel House* (1979). In the final book of the series, *City of Light* (1983), the epic and linear narrative structure of the former books has been replaced by a narrative structure that is based on other temporal qualities such as repetition, returns, fragmentation, circularity and immediacy. *City of Light* orchestrates a movement away from the novel as a trustworthy description of reality, and focuses instead on narrative problems and possibilities. Another way of describing it is as movement from realism to modernism (Wright 1 – 27). *City of Light* is the final part of *The Katrineholm's Suite* and has thus, with good reason, been looked upon as a conclusion. But, it also shapes the beginning of a new orientation; Ekman initiates a more critical and theoretically inclined phase of her literary career. The novel's themes are configured in a tension between word and image, which in Ekman's work incorporates ideological values bound up with aesthetics, culture and gender. In *City of Light* it takes the form of a critical re-evaluation of dichotomous concepts previously taken for granted, including reality-fiction, image-text, nature-culture, man-woman and man-animal. This new direction continues and appears in different forms in subsequent novels such as *Blackwater* (1993) and *Revive-Me* (1996).

Two pictures emerge in *The Katrineholm's Suite*. In *Witches Rings* a photograph that is taken on a market day in a Swedish city the year 1876 is described:

There is a picture of Edla.

But how to describe a face? Is it thin or broad? Are the eyes deep set, and is the mouth unusually small or just tightly shut? The more familiar it seems, the more difficult it becomes to describe. You recall it as if in a dream and afterwards you couldn't possibly say what it looked like. Still, the expression on a face is the true message it reveals, and it remains.

Edla's face, the face of the thirteen-year-old with brushed-back tightly clasped hair, wears a solemn expression. [...]

A photographer from Stockholm had posted a sign offering people's photographic portraits for only half what it cost in the capital. Lans took his daughter Edla there to have her picture taken. Her mother, who didn't have the clothes to wear to market, had stayed at home and so she couldn't stop him.

The photograph of Edla has faded and yellowed now and her face is blurred. What shows most clearly is the plaid pattern of her dress. But her solemn expression remains. (Ekman *Witches' Rings* 21 – 22)

The picture of the thirteen-year-old maid Edla, who is raped and dies giving birth,

recurs on several occasions in *Witches Rings*. For Tora Otter, who is Edla's daughter, this photograph is her sole memento of her mother. It is nearly destroyed in a fire and Tora feels as if she again is losing the mother she has never met. The photograph functions as a trustworthy representation and an opening to the past.

In *City of Light*, that takes place a century later, another picture appears. The protagonist, Ann-Marie who is Tora Otter's foster-grandchild, has an adopted daughter, Elisabeth, who has disappeared. When Ann-Marie is waiting for Elisabeth's return she is looking at a photograph of her daughter. But she does not like it: "It was as if she had been nowhere and asked someone to take this snapshot that arrived here in my hands out of nowhere" (76).² So she cuts out the figure of Elisabeth, puts it in a flower pot, arranges the leaves of the plant, color the edges of the photograph so that they no longer are white, before she again takes a photograph of her arrangement: "The shadows had to fall just right, so it wouldn't look like I had simply photographed a flat picture. I was very happy to have achieved that picture of a moment that had never been but that I had still managed to capture" (77). Ann-Marie's relation to the photograph is not the same as Tora's. For Ann-Marie the photograph does not bring the past to the present, so she cuts in it to create something that feels alive. The flat surface of the photograph is associated with something that is inanimate and circumscribed — similar to what Roland Barthes in his well-known book *Camera Lucida* (1980) has called "the flat death" of photography (Barthes 92). According to Barthes the photographic moment transforms a subject into an object whom then undergoes a "micro-version of death: [he is] truly becoming a specter [...] Death in person" (Barthes 14). Further, Ekman's work can be read in the light of the pictorial turn that W. J. T. Mitchell describes in *Picture Theory* (1994). The postmodern information society is imbued with images of various kinds, above all in printed media, television, video, computers and the Internet. According to Mitchell, there is a paradox in the fact that the latter part of the 1900s can be described from the perspective of this turn. On the one hand, it is evident that information technology has created, among other things, new visual representations, simulations and illusions. On the other, the fear of the image, as fraught with danger and even potent enough to destroy its maker, has a long history. Idolatry, iconoclasm and fetishism are, as we know, not postmodernist phenomena (Mitchell *Picture Theory* 15). This paradox — the profusion of new, visual, impressions in parallel with dread and suspicion of the medium — permeates also Kerstin Ekman's writing.

In *The Katrineholm's Suite* a century of technological development lies between the two women's different interpretations of the photographic image. Whereas Tora is doing everything to keep the photograph and the memory of her mother intact, Ann-Marie destroys the image to create something new out of the fragments. The tension between confidence in the image and rejection of the image works as a site of renegotiation of aesthetic, cultural and intellectual conceptions. The ambivalence towards the image reveals itself partly in a deconstructive practice where the images of tradition have to be destroyed, and partly in a constructive practice where the fragmented images create new, but not always truer, images. Ekman's ambivalence towards the image is very complex and raises the question of whether it is possible to interpret and

understand the past and the contemporary. This oscillation between image construction and image destruction is, as will be discussed below, prominent in *City of Light*.

Spatial Form

City of Light is a first-person narrative that takes place in the city and in a world of light that emerges in the revelations that Ann-Marie, the narrator, experiences. The novel is about the woman called Ann-Marie, whom through flashbacks the reader follows from early childhood to middle age. When the novel opens, Ann-Marie has returned from Portugal to sell her father's house. Upon returning to the house at Number 13 Chapel Road, she receives the message that her daughter Elisabeth has disappeared. Ann-Marie has to postpone the selling of the house, and during the time that she waits for Elisabeth's return she makes an inventory of her own life. We learn about Ann-Marie's childhood and adolescence; that her mother Lisa was not present, that she grew up with her alcoholic father and with foster parents. She moves to Uppsala to study at the university but fails to keep up with her studies, returns to Chapel Road 13 and is employed at the local newspaper. She falls in love with her much older colleague, Victor, but marries her childhood friend Hasse. The couple move to Portugal and adopts Elisabeth. Ann-Marie's father, Henning, dies, Elisabeth grows up, disappears, returns and gives birth to a child. This account of *City of Light* suggests that it is a story told in a straightforward manner. However, it has a very complex narrative structure, and the novel is fragmentary and full of contradictions. For Ann-Marie, the past is fragmentary and elusive and the narrative structure is as variable as her memory is.

City of Light establishes a fundamental tension between image and text that works on several levels. One such level is Ann-Marie's revelations. Early in the story, Ann-Marie seeks refuge in a land called Choryn, which is synonymous with entering an image. It is difficult for her to recreate her past. She tries to remember by studying photographs, even manipulating them to create her own image. Although Ann-Marie destroys the photograph of her daughter early in the story, the image is presented as more stable than the text. Writing is most painful for Ann-Marie, and is contrasted to the feeling of wholeness that she experiences when she "stepped forth from [a] bath of images" (293) in Choryn. However, in the end, it is writing that will set her free and she moulds herself into a "body of words" (472). I will return to these aspects below.

On a formal level, *City of Light* features a friction between image and text that is manifested in the attempt to recreate in novelistic form the spatial properties inherent in images.³ The temporal flow of the narrative is constantly interrupted by retakes and repetitions. For example, when Ann-Marie tries to remember her father's death she begins to describe it but stops when it becomes too painful. The reader is then caught in the passage that describes how her father died, and it is not until several pages and restarts later that the course of events is completed. Continually, the narrative stems, circulates and returns to different episodes and such repetitive narration hinders singulative ("narrating once what happened once") narrative structure (Genette 114).⁴ Also, the narrative is highly analeptic, which means that the text alludes to itself and

thus creates a code of doubling since the narrative refers to the story with anachronies within the superordinate analepsis (Genette 40).⁵ The anachronies then stand in a relation to each other in different degrees of subordination. This means that they can become very complex and in *City of Light* they continually disrupt the linear movement of time.

However, the most important feature of the novel's spatial form is that it endeavours to illustrate a complex "now" by letting preamble and epilogue inhabit the same temporal position. The novel begins when Ann-Marie in the present tense says that she is in "the canopy of the linden and it is in bloom" (12). We then follow her in a downward movement that is described as a birth into the city: "down in gravel and iron at the bottom of a pit" (12). The first two pages are narrated in the present tense, but it is not until almost five hundred pages later that the same present tense again becomes the dominating mode. In the preamble, it is late summer, and in the epilogue "it's still summer" (461). Ann-Marie says that she "was in the treetops not very long ago, and the city was no more than bits of iron and gravel at the bottom of a pit" (461). Ann-Marie's description of how she was recently in the treetops— in a reference to the preamble — soon enters a temporal succession when she says that "it's still summer" (461). The epilogue confirms temporality, and the spatial elements that previously hindered temporal successive movement are now released. Time is presented as moving — not cyclically — but temporally and the discrepancy between story and narrative is dissolved; they are now synchronous. The employment of this narrative technique may be derived from Ekman's use of a variety of images as her constructive bedrock, but also from her positing of the image as the point of departure for a critique of her time and of representation.

Naturally, spatial form is not unique for *City of Light*. Joseph Frank, in his well-known essay "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" (1945), argues that spatial form is quintessential to modernist literature. The reader thus apprehends the textual elements spatially, in an idealised moment, instead of moving along with the temporal flow of the narrative. Frank writes: "[P]ast and present are seen spatially, locked in a timeless unity which, while it may accentuate surface differences, eliminates any feeling of historical sequence by the very act of juxtaposition" (Frank 225). In modernist literature (James Joyce, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot), story and narrative are replaced by mythical simultaneity that hinders the temporal flow.⁶ It is obvious that Ekman's novel experiments with a similar interest in simultaneity as an aesthetic device; *City of Light* also presents an alternative to this type of narrative technique.

The Escape to and from the Image

The tension between spatiality and temporality on a formal level corresponds to themythical revelations that Ann-Marie experiences as a child, teenager, and grown up woman. She describes three different occasions when a goddess called Ishnol has manifested herself and taken her out of time. On every occasion, something dramatic has happened and the revelations are associated with Ann-Marie's breakdowns and deep depressions. Naturally, these visions could be read as mental breakdowns, but they are also significant passages that comprise a meta-aesthetic discussion about the

relation between image, word and representation.

When Ishnol and the dancing figure Wonda manifest themselves, Ann-Marie experiences another realm that she calls Choryn. Afterwards she “is liberated from all smells” and “all sounds were distant as well” (169). For the young girl, Ishnol and Choryn represent an escape from a turbulent and difficult life. However, after moments of fulfilment in Choryn, Ann-Marie always ends up in Karun – which represents the life she leads as a motherless girl and with a father who is an alcoholic. The ontological boundary between the two worlds is absolute, and Ann-Marie seeks out the other world that is characterised by light and stability. Ishnol has been interpreted in different ways, such as the Sumerian goddess Inanna and the Egyptian goddess Ishtar, while others have argued that there are no connections between those myths and Ishnol (Schottenius 123 – 149; Wright 1 – 27). I would argue that Ishnol could be interpreted as an image or idol that has to be destroyed in order for Ann-Marie to be able to break free from her isolated existence.

The second revelation occurs when Ann-Marie is a teenager. It is associated with her suicidal attempts and permeated with images of death and destruction. The course of time initiates an awareness and presence of death depicted through negations:

When I opened my eyes I was looking into the round, uninformed face of the clock. It had been one and it was un-one, the only fathomable thing about it. The factory whistle sounded and un-sounded. The clicking followed me into the darkness, little recurrences I could lie and anticipate. Not recurrences of the same thing, but of roughly similar things that would fill me with desire, fool me into thinking they were Exactly the Same Thing. But they weren't. The clicking sounds followed me now like a little troupe, they would stick with me now, for sure. Eyes closed, I expected the recurrences, but they were being diluted with something inconceivable, and they grew farther and farther apart, more and more irregular, and eventually they were gone. (292 – 293)

The image of the clock and its variations function as a symbol of negativity and nothingness. The clock “had been one and it was un-one”, the oppositions neutralize each other and the only thing that is certain is *nothing*. A wide-ranging literary tradition uses the negation to formulate a deep scepticism of modernity and secularity, but here the topos of nothingness is driven to its extreme in Ann-Marie's longing for annihilation and to be taken “out of time”. In *City of Light*, the negation stands for a *via negativa*, how the notion of God can only be expressed through negations, but it also represents spatiality in the sense of an image where everything is still. Ekman's use of the negation can be compared with the Swedish poet Edith Södergran. Södergran's poem “Nothingness” is quoted in *City of Light*; it has been described by Anders Olsson as “a portal to the line of negation in modern Swedish poetry” (Olsson 241). Even though Ann-Marie feels as if she is stuck in the treadmill of time, she experiences moments of relief when Ishnol takes her out of time. On one occasion, this is expressed in an allusion to another poem by Södergran, “Landet som icke är” (1925, “The Land which is not”):

Everything had its place inside me now. Apparently this country that was not a country had been spreading inside me for a long time. Like a map on stretched parchment it was there on the inside of my skin, where the blood vessels outlined rivers and winding tracks I could follow if I had the time and patience, fragments of paths, never properly trampled, only just begun. Brook-threads, thin, splintered arteries seeking a sea or a lake beyond the map. (290)

The land can only be described through negations; Södergran's poem indicates a relation that cannot be named. The longing is directed towards a state of "non-being" that exists in the land that cannot be reached. In the passage above, the body is described as a mirror of the world; this is an expression of how the transcendence has started to level out. The description of the body indicates a longing for the dissolving of boundaries, and it is particularly clear that the inward projection towards "the fetal hiding place of [her] soul" (126), eventually is changing towards an outward projection where the body consists of "(b)rook-threads, thin, splintered arteries seeking a sea or a lake beyond the map" (290). However, the flow of the water is still too weak and the barrages have not yet burst. The inward projection of Ann-Marie, expressed through a resilient longing for something outside of life, will eventually be turned towards life and an acceptance of her own body and "the springs that have been blocked will burst forth with great force" (435). From the impasse of negativity something new is created, and on a meta-aesthetic level this is expressed with a shifting from image to text.

By comparing the revelations, a difference in attitude towards Ishnol emerges. For the child, Ishnol and the land of Choryn are places of refuge; for the teenager, the perspective has shifted – it is the notions of time and body that are central. The middle-aged Ann-Marie is clearly ambivalent towards Ishnol. The last time that Ishnol reveals herself is when Ann-Marie's daughter has disappeared; as a consequence, she falls into deep depression. Now, the border between Choryn and Karun is dissolving, or, in other words, the transcendence as an oriented movement towards another sphere has been dissolved. When Ishnol manifests herself, the border between ontologies is not as definitive as before; Ann-Marie is not certain whether Ishnol has "stepped out of the dimension into the world, or if I had been shifted instead" (107). In an erotically charged image, Ann-Marie is elevated by a warm swell to a state of perfection. This passage describes different transformations that Ann-Marie experiences in the limbo between Choryn and Karun. Finally, Ann-Marie hears "the familiar rattling of the Paraphernalia" and realises that Ishnol has sent the "Bewilderer"; he wants to show his wand: "The wand! I didn't want to see his old wand. Grinning, he held it straight out so it was pointing at me. Would I be so kind as to measure it?" (120). Naturally, the wand is a phallic symbol and mirrors the tool that make writing possible: the pen. The Bewilderer soon disappears, but then the so called Garbles approach her and they want to "Play Games" (123): "They let me choose between Stone and Sky, between Time and Space and between Sun and Earth, but whatever choice I make they laugh and say it was wrong" (123). The ep-

isode that follows the Game Play, with its allusion to the Icarus motif, is an attempt to convert the wand to a pen with which to gain power over the body:

[T]hen they take hold of my body and beg me to tell them if I am Fish or Fowl, Fly or Butterfly. When I say Fly! they pull off first one of my wings and then the other shouting: Fly now, then! And I have to trip out onto the Slab in my pain, they force me forward, I cannot take off and I must not fall. Then they tear off my legs shouting: run, then carrion! and I creep on my stomach and they laugh at this monstrosity that is neither Fly nor Fish but only pain and weight. (123)

Ann-Marieh as fallen down. She is heavy and full of pain when the Garbles exclaim:

“She is a Book!” they shout, and bend me back and start turning my pages. They turn past the first few pages, exposing my stinging membranes and I scream out in fear because I know they can hurt me.

“Now we’re going to read you,” they yell, quite distracted with glee, laughing, “now we’ll read all your secrets!”

They turn more and more pages but find nothing, and they drive their earth-covered fingers into me saying: “Nothing! There’s nothing here. Nothing but emptiness!” (123)

Eventually, Ann-Marie becomes a book — but not for long. The Garbles get tired of the Book-Game and let her go. Then the Bewilderer returns. But this time it is not the wand that attracts Ann-Marie’s attention but an abscess on his forehead, a “carbuncle that shone brighter and clearer for every moment”:

Then the boil burst. In a stream of blood-colored water and pus, a little fetus was rinsed out. It moved feebly, was a sickly yellow color and its tiny extremities lay curled into the body as if it had cramps. It was an odious child, nothing but hair and teeth and flesh. I could see that it was unfit for life, that it was bringing nothing but contagion with it into the world and I wondered if I would be given the task of killing it. I sensed, in spite of the frailty of the little body, that it would not be easy. There was a diseased and dogged force in the compact limbs of this child, and under its tightly shut eyelids. At that moment, Ishnol crossed the dimension forcefully and her voice called out, as if from within a bell of incandescent ice:

“You who have seen yourself been born, now rest!” (124 – 125)

The carbuncle motif has its roots in Antiquity; during the Middle Ages it was connected with the blood of Christ. Later, from the 19th century and onwards, according to Gunnar D. Hansson, it has been associated with a double nature that comprises “mythical devotedness *and* inflamed inflatedness” (Hansson 319). The carbuncle motif has consistently been associated with *lux et vita*, with light and life that emerges from the inside, and is here transformed from a gem to a helpless fetus, allegorising

the vulnerable or degraded human being. For Ann-Marie, Ishnol is light and hardness. She is described as a gem that “in her crystalline forms [breaks] through the greasy dirt of Karun” and that she “is made of heavy crystals, her waist is calcite and indestructible, it divides and the split is perfect; a new rhombohedral Ishnol sparkles, hard as glass” (110). When Ann-Marie expects to see the birth of a gem, she thinks that, as Ishnol’s “little Chip” she will be included in Ishnol’s heavy crystals. Instead, she sees herself being born as a helpless fetus. The transformation of the carbuncle motif in the passage above constitutes the beginning of Ann-Marie’s identification with other human beings rather than with the idol/image of Ishnol. The earlier discussion about the change in narrative technique from circular/spatial to temporal parallels the change in attitude towards the revelations that Ann-Marie experiences. When she no longer wants to be taken out of time, or in other words, when transcending to a “bath of images” (293) in Choryn is no longer desirable, the progression of narrative time is resumed.

The Image of the Female Body

In aesthetics, the relation between spatially organized art forms such as visual art, painting and sculpture, and temporal art forms such as music and literature, has been much discussed.⁷ In the famous *Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766), which treats the inter-relations of poetry and painting, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing claims that the two forms are diametrically opposed in so far as they are two media tied to different dimensions: the text to time and the image to space. Lessing’s *Laokoon* constitutes a rejoinder to his contemporary theorists who either wanted to place word art and visual art in the same category or make them interchangeable. However, in *Laokoon*, Lessing instead gives prominence to the distinction between visual art and poetry. Painting (which to Lessing embraces the visual arts in general terms) does not use the same kind of signs or expressive means as poetry since the former uses forms and colours in space, and the latter combines sounds/tones in temporal sequences (Lessing 114). With *Laokoon*, Lessing pleads the purity of the arts; poetry should use temporal signs whereas visual art should use spatial signs (Lessing 114). According to Mitchell, words and images are not static and eternal categories; they are constructed and gain meaning in relation to historical and cultural processes of change. There is no immanent difference between word and image. Mitchell emphasizes the importance of historicizing. He also states that the relation between word and image contains ideological, and often gendered, dimensions connected to other binaries such as time and space, male and female, culture and nature, soul and body, and internal and external. Mitchell bases his arguments upon the philosophy of among others G. E. Lessing and Edmund Burke when he states, for example, that: “paintings like women, are ideally silent, beautiful creatures designated for the gratification of the eye, in contrast to the sublime eloquence proper to the manly art of poetry” (Mitchell *Iconology*, *Image* 110). Instead, Mitchell proposes that we study the *relations* between different forms of art and, to make doubly sure, view these as constituting an ideologically tainted *power struggle* between word and image. This tension or struggle between word and image is fundamental in *City of Light*, where Kerstin Ek-

man explores the relationship between word and image and simultaneously tests their gendered, ideological powers of signification. This is a particularly significant in terms of the representation of the body in *City of Light*.

The dualism that characterises the relation between Choryn and Karun corresponds to the way that Ann-Marie describes her body. When she experiences her visions mind and body are described as strictly separate, and the desire for Choryn also involves a desire to leave the physical body behind. She wants to have a mind or soul rather than a child: "It frightened me. I wanted to have a soul. I wanted to have a soul more than I wanted to have a baby" (316). Further, the earth is described as a female life-giving principle strongly associated with reproduction. Similarly, Ann-Marie describes her body as a "sludgy riverbed full of little animals that had burrowed down into me and sometimes moved around, trying to dig even deeper" (292). Historically, the notion of woman has been connected to physicality and nature, aspects that are typical of biological features such as reproduction and giving birth. These are widely recognised cultural concepts in Western philosophy, art and literature; they have not only created woman as the other but also generated an image of her that is closely connected to place, spatiality and circularity rather than to movement and progression.⁸ The connection between woman and earth also alludes to the portrayal of woman as a passive vessel that only waits to be filled with new life. Almost a truism by now, the notion of woman as a vessel that passively takes part in reproduction is a recognised image in Western literature and art (Ortner). Ann-Marie reproduces this as she talks about herself in the third person, describing her body as a vessel, only useful for food processing:

She [Robor] is one long skin, a casing of flesh held up by bones as tightly set as the stays in a corset. She encloses a tube into which nourishment goes down and comes out again; she is that tube. I was Robor and felt the sluggish mass pass through me with heavy, jarring movements. Day after day I was given over to this process; I was nothing but a container for it. (128)

The body is sharply separated from the mind and described as a fence from which she observes the world. Ann-Marie's teeth are described as a confining fence and the body is the "slack sack" (126) that forces her to live in Karun, when all she wants is to transcend to Choryn where "no rotting remains can adhere" (125). By talking about herself in the third person, the gaze also internalises the objectification which could be described as a double gaze that looks at the body from the outside and it from the narrating I. The body is described as grotesque as the narrator emphasises reproduction, food, the stomach and genitals. The open body, such as it is described by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World*, comprises a power that recognises the possibility of modifying the bounds of possibility and freeing oneself from limiting norms (Bakhtin). But no such relief is offered in *City of Light*. The leaking body that transgresses boundaries is rather a sign of social weakness and unrestrained conduct, and is ridden with anxiety for Ann-Marie. Instead of being a subversive strategy, the grotesque charges the representation of the female body with death.

At the same time as Choryn is no longer an option for Ann-Marie, the discrepancy between story and narrative is equated and the novel ends with the present tense as the dominating mode. At the same time as the image and spatiality are abandoned, Ann-Marie picks up the pen and formulates her own identity by writing it down.

I stay at the kitchen table. There is no one here but me. It's only me and the paper, the point of the pen, the ink. I am changing. With every word I undergo a shift. An alphabet is creeping up out of me, moving across the paper like little creatures at the bottom of a stream. I creep up out of an alphabet; all of me is flux, reflexes on a bed of sand, the shifting of the water and the flashes of light are me. The pen point drives me.

I drive the handwriting into the paper. No, the ink drives me like rain, like a brushfire across the pages. It leaves writing in me, tracks in my flesh, scars full of ink. It's only me, only the pen point moving. Writing. (13)

Ann-Marie describes herself as being born from an alphabet and at the same time she gives birth to a written text. Through writing, she defines and takes charge of her body and identity. In the novel, writing corresponds to the progression of time; it has been most painful for Ann-Marie to renounce the spatial and solipsistic qualities of Choryn for the temporality of life in Karun. We have seen that the conquering of the pen, represented as a phallic symbol, was a deeply painful process. But, simultaneously as her body is born by writing it, it is released from patriarchal determinations:

I have nothing, not even hair and teeth. I am hair, teeth, blood. I do not have a soul. I am possessed, pervaded, illumined. Through me courses water I am unable to retain. I am not a vessel. I move through the world; the world moves through me. (403)

It is neither the vessel nor “the great mother” that is the solution for Ann-Marie, as some critics have argued (Schottenius 327). She has written herself out of that determination and transgresses the boundaries put by a Western tradition of philosophy and literature, where woman has been described as a biological creature without a soul.⁹ Ann-Marie's body is a construction in and out of language but, and this is essential in Ekman's *oeuvre*, it is also physically situated; Ann-Marie's creeping in and out of an alphabet leaves writing in her as tracks in her flesh and scars full of ink.

Ekphrasis: the Verbal Description of a Visual Object

The concept of *ekphrasis* exists at the intersection of image and text and Heffernan, who has worked out a now well-established definition: “[E]kphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation”, describes it as a site of “struggle” between verbal and visual art forms, a paragonal dimension that has informed contemporary literary and aesthetic theory and expose ideological as well as epistemological workings (Heffernan 3).¹⁰ Central to *City of Light* are the white boxes made by The Whitepainter—a prominent character in the novel. He lives in the same house as Ann-Ma-

rie, who is very sceptical towards him and the other so-called “character” that live there. But eventually The Whitepainter will play a significant part in Ann-Marie's life. Mikael, which is his real name, makes white, sealed wooden boxes.

Most of the works were things he had made. Oblong boxes reminiscent of coffins but not large enough to hold more than a forearm. He still makes those boxes, always sealing them with white string. No one knows what they contain. Some of them slosh a bit, or rattle like sand or whisper as if balled-up paper were rolling around in them. But some are silent, and they will all be silent one day, anyway, when whatever it is in them has shrivelled up and been disintegrated. [. . .] The mummies or chrysalises in the oblong boxes are idols that can not be invoked. There is no way to know what is in them; the germ of life or a trivial joke. Fragments of words from newspapers. Or just a stain. The seed of physical or mental illness. Or nothing. The whole secret; nothing (401).

The Whitepainter's boxes are *ekphrases* of the monochrome sculptures of the Swedish artist Rune Hagberg (b. 1924).¹¹ In 1978, Kerstin Ekman and Rune Hagberg contributed to a series of articles published in the Swedish journal *Expressen* with the theme of “Word as image, image as poem”. It was here that Kerstin Ekman's poem “This is the sign for wood and water”, originally a private and poetic letter to Rune Hagberg, was published. The same year, a handwritten copy of the poem was exhibited together with Rune Hagberg's art at Gallerie AIX in Stockholm. Early in his career Hagberg studied eastern calligraphy and it was his experiments with the brushes that he made himself that eventually developed into a simple monochrome style of a few easy strokes of the brush. During the 1950's, Hagberg started to scratch on the surface of his white paintings, resulting in openings and ruptures. In a documentary film, Hagberg describes how the image strives forward out into the room and becomes three-dimensional.¹² This practice is what will eventually result in the white monochrome objects that he made during the 1980's. Kerstin Ekman writes about this technique in her poem:

Chang Seng Yu created signs on rice paper / the indian ink flew with great power / with courage and presence inside his body / each stroke was lined by the rigid sable's hair [. . .] He flayed the skin of the paper / and drew in its unsavoury flesh / in the membrane of the paper.¹³

The poet equates paper and flesh, but if the reader cannot feel the stroke of the brush in her flesh, he ties his paper together and says: “these are my signs / you cannot see them.” The poem establishes a link between artwork and body by way of the Indian ink that flows on the paper as well as in the artist's blood. The same connection between paper and flesh is made by the protagonist in *City of Light*: “I drive the handwriting into the paper. No, the ink drives me like rain, like a brushfire across the pages. It leaves writing in me, tracks in my flesh, scars full of ink” (13). For a long time, the protagonist of *City of Light* lives in a visual world that is permeated

with a gnostic denial of the physical body. This is something that the novel tries to dissolve, establishing instead a confirmation of body, flesh and physical touch. The trajectory from body to soul and back again moves along a *via negativa* where the negations carry Ann-Marie's longing for transcendence, that is to rise above the body. This negative aspect and the apophatic theology characterises Rune Hagberg's aesthetic, which he has described as an "apophatic attitude". Kerstin Ekman's oeuvre reflects a similar apophatic attitude and concept of God — it can only be described through negations and where God, from a linguistic point of view cannot be named or determined. However, in *City of Light* it is not an absent god that is invoked. It is other human beings. That Ann-Marie has finally replaced Ishnol with other human beings is conveyed through descriptions of how hands meet skin to skin, for example, when Ann-Marie sits beside her dying friend Ann-Sofie and she puts her hand over hers, and of how the White painter literally — with the help of his own body — brings Ann-Marie back from her existence in Choryn:

He [The White Painter] tormented me with his returnings and in the end he had sunk me so low by constantly forcing me to combat his presence that I was lying in Robor's body once again. [...]

He sat on the edge of my bed so close I was unable to take in his entire body at once and he took my hand and raised it to his chest.

"Feel," he said.

And I felt the skin of my fingers the soft matted covering on his chest and he helped me sit up with one arm behind my back. Once I was sitting my face fell towards him and I buried it in the shaggy creamy sheepskin that smelled of food and tobacco. I rubbed my face into it and wept. (129 – 130)

This time, Ann-Marie wishes that she also could smell the Whitepainter's shabby waistcoat, and his stubborn presence pulls her down from a state where the body (Robor) is described as a prison. *City of Light* interlaces the conditions governing fictional creation and processes of flesh and blood. This is a theme that is focused in the *ekphrases* of Rune Hagberg's white boxes where image and word, inside and outside, ink and flesh meet.

In *City of Light*, as well as in her subsequent novels such as *Blackwater* and *Revive Me*, Ekman investigates the ideological and aesthetic values that have been connected to image and word respectively. The description of the two photographs in *Witches Rings* and *City of Light* illustrates that in Kerstin Ekman's oeuvre an aesthetics of fiction is formulated at the intersection of, and oscillation between, image-construction and image-criticism. This oscillation is intertwined not only with the aesthetic practice characterizing her work but also with their problematising of the past and the contemporary. Kerstin Ekman's oeuvre formulates a criticism of images and their various representational forms (paintings, photographs, the images of virtual reality, for example) while integrating different media's aesthetic expressions by theme and narrative technique. Occasionally, images are represented as deserving credence, that can be described in words, but also with a faith in their power to animate or recreate

the past, capture the moment and freeze time. But as often as they are utilised as tools for creation, images are employed for the critique of civilization that characterizes Ekman's entire body of work. The tension between image-construction and image-criticism is also intimately connected to the issues that, at their core, are bound up with the relation between verbal art and visual art, a fundamental trait of Ekman's aesthetic practice.

Notes

1. For an overview, see Cecilia Lindhé, 2008.
2. Only page numbers will be shown in the following citations from the text of *City of Light*.
3. For G. E. Lessing's definition of the spatial quality of the image, see footnote 5 below.
4. Gerard Genette establishes a difference between three types of frequency relations between the narrative (recit) and the story (histoire): singulative, repetitive and iterative narration. Genette's definition of singulative narration: "narrating once what happened once", See Genette, 1995, 114.
5. Genette defines an anachrony as "various types of discordance between the two orders of story and narrative", Genette, 1995, 34. Analepsis is according to Genette's definition "any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment", Genette, 1995, 40.
6. The concept of spatial form has been questioned by several critics and some argue that the concept couches fascist and ahistorical ideologies, see Frank, 1981, 202 – 243. W. J. T. Mitchell claims in his critique that all literature are more or less spatial and that it would be difficult to find literature that is not spatial. Another problem with Frank's essay, according to Mitchell, is that he does not question the normative force of G. E. Lessing's distinction between spatial and temporal art forms in *Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766), see Mitchell, 1980.
7. The difference between spatial and temporal art forms that Lessing claims in *Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766), is based on the supposition that art forms are differently equipped to convey subject matter. See Lessing, 1994.
8. For an overview, see Ortner, 1974.
9. I have demonstrated in another essay how *City of Light* describes woman as body, nature and not least as merchandise. These are metaphors that allude to the modernist novel *City in Light* (1927) by Eyvind Johnson — Ekman both applies and repudiates this type of modernist aesthetics. See Lindhé, 2008.
10. *Ekphrasis* is a millennia-old concept that is both a technical device and an enduring literary mode. As a technical term within the study and practice of rhetoric, the origin of *ekphrasis* is documented in the first century AD where it occurs in the *Progymnasmata* – exercises in rhetorical composition used in the Hellenistic schools. Etymologically, *ekphrasis* originates from Greek *ek* (out) *phrazein* (to explicate, declare) and meant originally "to tell in full" (εκφραζω). The goal of *ekphrasis* was *enargeia* (εναργεια) – to make the motif graphic and alive for the spectator to "see" what was before him, see *Progymnasmata*, 2003.
11. Rune Hagberg's early art practice is characterised by a critique of the establishment. Early in his career he got in touch with the Japanese Bokuji group and were invited to exhibit in Japan (1956). However, his art had already been presented in the Japanese journal "Bokubi" (1955) together with Alberto Giacometti, Hans Arp, Willem de Kooning and Henri Michaux.
12. *Gränsens position. Ett möte med konstnären Rune Hagberg. En dokumentärfilm om och kring Rune Hagbergs tankar och verk* was directed and produced by Johan Hagberg in 2005.
13. The handwritten poem "This is the sign for wood and water" has been published in Lindhé, 2008. Cecilia Lindhé has translated the parts of the poem in this essay.

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