



Det hänger i luften

Aerial Architecture and Suspended Identities in Jonas Karlsson's Short Stories

Giovanni Za (University of Naples "L'Orientale")

Abstract

In Jonas Karlsson's work the configuration of external or internal, imaginary, concrete or metaphorical spaces is central. The depiction of unstable, aeriform architectures is the primary focus of the short novel *Utgången* (2012). In this text, the theatre suspended in mid-air serves as a metaphor for the state of suspension experienced by the protagonist and mirrors the opaque identity of the first-person narrator's dim self. Unstable subjectivities recur throughout the author's short novels and epitomises the frequently comedic *homo karlssonianus*. Elsewhere, characterisations of space are equally significant, as seen in the diptych *Min kompis på Gondolen*, where the building's suspension reflects the elusiveness of the self and its ethereal identity, and in the short novel *Rummet*, where the interior of a public office changes its coordinates and physical dimensions. This article investigates spaces in Jonas Karlsson's literary production within the methodological framework of Geocriticism and in the attempt to highlight connections between the suspended architecture of a location and an elusive subjectivity. What is gained is a novel interpretation of place as *thirdspace*, hanging afloat the *chaosmos*, here intended as "the interlocking relationship or space of rhythm and chaos".

Keywords: Jonas Karlsson, *thirdspace*, geocriticism, *chaosmos*, subjectivity



1. INTRODUCTION: IN THIN AIR

In an evocative sequence from the short novel *Utgången* (*The Exit*), an actor appears on stage, unaware of his role: “ridån går upp och du är skådespelare” (Karlsson 2011:7).¹ He is uncertain as to the reason for his presence on the stage. He tries to delay his entrance, tapping his foot on the boards in an apparent gesture of attempting to gain some time. He proceeds to prepare his voice, yet he is still unable to recall his lines. His 18th-century French costume and the attention of the spectators render him an actor in the performance, albeit unconsciously. The narrator indicates the same process of individualisation by referring to the character in the second person, “you are an actor”, with the pronoun “you” giving form to the hitherto opaque self, which, detached from all other chronological dimensions, is brought to life by the narrator’s definition and designation.

Without any lines of flight, the actor eventually advances towards the wings of the stage, but a chasm suddenly opens just outside the designated perimeter: “hela bygget hänger på något vis i luften” (Karlsson 2011:8).² The theatre is situated in a state of suspension, as if the actor were adrift in the void. Here, everything vanishes into thin air, in line with Marshal Berman’s famous analysis of Modernism (1988), drawing on the following lines from the Communist Manifesto:

All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. (Marx & Engels 1976:487)

Exposing the self on stage forces the actor to question his own existence and ask who he is and why he is there. As Massimo Ciaravolo notes in his discussion of the self in modernist literature, this task is indeed perilous: “a tumultuous forward movement makes their [the characters’] existence precarious, exposed to the risk of being subjugated and even annihilated by the project of self-assertion that was the initial premise” (Ciaravolo 2022:4).³ Similarly, the actor and many other protagonists in Jonas Karlsson’s short stories consistently grapple with the challenge of affirming an elusive self-assertion.

The unaware actor in *Utgången* attempts to flee from the stage. An avenue of escape is provided by the seating area. The actor’s endeavour is partially successful: he moves away from the audience but his escape is thwarted by a column of people moving outwards towards the two large staircases. Here the actor is once more positioned in a state of suspension between the architectural robustness and the emptiness, with the stairs traversing the void and situating the characters in a physical and metaphorical condition of unresolvable indecision.

He is not acknowledged by the other individuals with whom he is queuing initially, but subsequently a moment of epiphany arrives. The audience identifies him and seizes the opportunity for exact vengeance, propelling him into the void. As he descends, he encounters his co-star: “hur kan du vara här?” the actor asks her. “Det är ju teater”, she replies (Karlsson 2011:19).⁴

¹ “The curtains open and you are an actor”. Unless stated otherwise, all translations in this study are mine. Jonas Karlsson is a Swedish author, actor, playwright and director. His experience as an actor resonates with his literary characters, who often display behaviours and characteristics reminiscent of roles they have adopted in their personal lives, seemingly without their own awareness of this fact.

² “The whole building is somehow hanging in the air”.

³ “Un tumultuoso procedere in avanti rende la loro esistenza precaria, esposta al rischio di essere soggiogata e perfino annientata dal progetto di autoaffermazione che pure costituiva la premessa iniziale”.

⁴ “How can you be here?” / “It’s theatre, after all”.

Jonas Karlsson's literary work often returns to key themes: the search for the self, the constraints of identity, architectural images of suspension, both physical and metaphorical, and a fascination with the void. This article explores how these themes are connected and depicted in Karlsson's short novels. In this analysis, space is interpreted as a bearer of meaning detached from any social construction. Space is here intended as an extension of the self in a constant process of formation/deformation.

The primary material is the short prose collections by Jonas Karlsson, from his debut work *Det andra målet* (2007; *The Second Goal*) to the subsequent publications, *Den perfekta vänner* (2009; *The Perfect Friend*), *Spelreglerna* (2011), *Ingenting* (2015a; *Nothing*), and the most recent *Nya människor i fel ordning* (2021; *New People in the Wrong Order*). The English translations recently published, limited to three novels (2015b; 2016; 2020), will be used, but most of the texts have only been published in Swedish.⁵

Karlsson's work as a writer has received little scholarly attention in his home country. Besides a small number of reviews published in mainstream newspapers, critical readings of his narrative have identified a connection to autobiographical elements and a generic reference to Kafka, especially as concerns the plots, evoking, as some reviewers have noted (cf. Bromander 2011; Eriksson 2011), a 'Kafkaesque' atmosphere.⁶ Indeed, my purpose is to investigate also other references, using an intertextual approach.

The methodological framework draws on studies from the field of Geocriticism, particularly useful for analysing the interrelations between 'space in literature' and 'the literature of space' (Westphal 2011).

The article is divided into three sections. The first section explores the condition of the self and its inherent instabilities in social interactions. The second section delves into the utilisation of subjective place and the weakening of space as a social phenomenon. The final section addresses the attraction to the void displayed by the characters in the short novels and provides some concluding thoughts about the condition of ontological suspension experienced by the characters.

2. AN IMPOSSIBLE AUTOBIOGRAPHY: A 'LOST EGO'

In the short novel *Fakturan* (*The Invoice*, 2016), included in the collection *Spelreglerna*, a narrating 'I' receives a payment note for a sum exceeding 5 million Swedish crowns. He subsequently attempts to establish communication with the entity responsible for issuing the invoice, named W.R.D., "World Resources Distribution", only to find himself subjected to an interminable series of telephone queues. Once communication has been established, the telephone operator explains that elements such as the sky, the sun, scents, and dreams, among others, have an inherent cost. In essence, "det kostar på att leva" (Karlsson 2011:37).⁷

The main character in this short novel is thus compelled to re-examine his life, engaging in a playful wrestling match with the concept of reality (Lindblom 2011:27). While suggesting a bureaucratisation of life conducted by an overarching and all-encompassing system, Karlsson presents another poignant argument: the protagonist is unable to perceive his life as his own. The recollection of his life is not anchored in his own memory, but rather in the distant and indifferent records of a debt collection company. The cost of living is not

⁵ Translations into other languages may differ from the original version in terms of plot development and stylistic choices, as agreed by the author and translators. All considerations and conclusions for this article will be based on the original versions in Swedish.

⁶ In interviews, Karlsson himself has expressed his admiration for Kafka, see Gustavsson (2011).

⁷ "Being alive costs" (Karlsson 2016:chap. 3).

the exorbitant amount of money due to an unidentified entity; rather, it is the inability to ascertain the meaning of one's own existence, and to reconnect the past to the self.

This element is a recurring motif in Karlsson's literary production. In the short novel *Ingenting*, the protagonist becomes aware of being followed. The individuals pursuing him are not particularly circumspect and the protagonist easily establishes contact with them. It subsequently comes to light that the individuals pursuing the protagonist undergo professional training for an unnamed government agency, with the objective of creating a personal profile of the protagonist-narrator.

Upon the conclusion of the observation phase, the protagonist is allowed to read the report. Subsequently, he is unofficially informed of his evaluation when he finally encounters one of the individuals who has monitored him and with whom he is now acquainted:

- Tja, i ditt fall... det var väl liksom inte så lätt... Man kan säga att vi, ja vi misslyckades med uppgiften.
- Hur då? [...]
- Jo men alltså, ta det inte personligt, du verkar ju trevlig och så. Men vi fick liksom inte fram någonting. Förstår du?
- Nej. [...]
- Ja. Du är liksom... ja, hur ska jag säga... ingenting.
- Ingenting?
- Exakt, sa han och nickade.⁸ (Karlsson 2015a)

The example illustrates a recurring pattern. As in the novel *Fakturan*, it may be posited that the protagonist is reliant on external sources to construct an account of his own life. He is unable to build a coherent account of his personal history in a unified narrative; instead, he lives in the present moment, in the urgency of an unrecognisable now. So does the protagonist of *Tre meter Hornsgatan* (*Three Metres of Hornsgatan*), included in *Nya människor i fel ordning*: "Är det att vara i nuet? Eller är det möjligen att inte vara i nuet? Det där nuet känns så kravfyllt på något sätt. Aldrig är det riktigt bra" (Karlsson 2021:chap. 5).⁹

To these characters, life is a series of molecular events that is impossible to collect in an autobiography, in a history of the self.¹⁰ As François de Smet posits in his essay *Lost Ego*, it is the very possibility of 'I am', which is put into question:

Notre rapport au monde est un immense flux, au sein duquel notre mémoire capricieuse reconstruit en permanence ce qui nous arrive pour lui donner ordre et cohérence. [...] L'homme est un être de récits autoconstruits et ajustés continuellement les uns aux autres, et que tout essentialisme de la conscience est une construction simulée par la physiologie humaine à des fins de conservation de l'espèce.¹¹ (De Smet 2017:Introduction)

⁸ "– Well, in your case... it sort of wasn't that easy... You could say that we, well we failed in our task. / – How so? / [...] – Well, listen, don't take it personally, you seem nice and all that. But we didn't really get anywhere. You know what I mean? / – No. [...] / – Yes. You're like... well, how should I say... nothing. / – Nothing? / – Exactly, he said, nodding".

⁹ "Is this being in the present? Or is it possibly not being in the present? The present feels so demanding somehow. It is never really good".

¹⁰ Karlsson's use of internal focalisation serves to accentuate the unattainability of an autobiographical account. Confined to the present moment, his characters experience only glimpses of a scattered identity. The concept of 'internal focalisation' was first proposed by Genette and refers to a narrative device whereby the narrator, who is also a character in the plot, expresses thoughts and points of view from her/his own perspective (Genette 1983:186).

¹¹ "Our relationship with the world is an immense flux, within which our fickle memory constantly reconstructs what happens to us to give it order and coherence. [...] Man is a being of self-constructed narratives that are continually adjusted to one another, and any essentialism of consciousness is a construction simulated by human physiology for the purposes of preserving the species".

All the characters in Karlsson's short stories have in common an unstable self, which aligns with De Smet's (2017) description of a 'lost ego'.

2.1. FROM A 'LOST EGO' TO RECOGNITION

Karlsson's 'lost egos' appear to gain some form of definition when considered in relation to the 'Other'. This process of self-recognition does not occur as a result of social interaction. As observed in the cases of *Fakturan* and *Ingenting*, the protagonists try to comprehend their own personalities by accessing the records of distant companies, rather than engaging in social interplay. This element enables an investigation of the concept of *recognition* in Jonas Karlsson's writing.

The concept was already present in Aristotle: ἀναγνώρισις, *anagnorisis*, or recognition, can be "either the detection of one person by another (whose own identity is clear) or mutual recognition between a pair" (Aristotle 2013:1452b).

Building on these considerations, the philosopher and sociologist G.H. Mead put forth the notion that the self is a 'social construct', shaped by the dynamics of interaction: "self-consciousness, rather than affective experience with its motor accompaniments, provides the core and primary structure of the self, which is thus essentially a cognitive rather than an emotional phenomenon" (Mead 2015:173). For Mead, "to be self-conscious is essentially to become an object to one's self in virtue of one's social relations to other individuals" (Mead 2015:172).

The most recent commentary on Mead's sociology of the self suggests an alternative explanation for the emergence of self-consciousness. According to Zahavi and Zelinsky, the self is rather connected to the embodied dimension of the self:

Whereas I can approach and remove myself from spatial objects, my body is always present as that which makes it possible for me to adopt a perspective on the world and as phenomenologists have often observed, the world reveals itself to us according to our bodily ways of inhabiting it. The objects I perceive are perceived as being to the right or left of me, or as being within reach or further away from me. The body is present in every perceptual experience as the experiential zero-point, the absolute "here" in relation to which every appearing object is oriented. As an experiencing, embodied subject, I am the point of reference in relation to which all my perceptual objects are uniquely related. (Zahavi & Zelinsky 2024:45).

Zahavi and Zelinsky refer to this anti-meadian constitution as 'minimal self', which appears to be neither complex nor univocal. As the sole Zahavi had posited before, "the self is something that is better viewed as multifaceted and multidimensional" (Zahavi 2020:21).

The concept of the 'minimal self' is applicable to the recurring patterns of the main characters in Jonas Karlsson's short stories. The majority of his protagonists exhibit a sense of detachment from socially engaging activities: "han blottlägger på så sätt hur dåligt människorna mår i dagens hektiska och prestationsinriktade samhälle" (Hamberg 2011:20).¹² They live "i ett vakuum, avskurna både från sin omgivning och från sig själva (Eriksson 2007:37).¹³ Interaction is always mediated by a 'minimal self' that is centred on its embodied experience in a limited environment, as emerges in *Tre meter Hornsgatan*: "om jag bara slapp vara med dem. Jag gör mig bäst så här på avstånd. Mitt ibland dem men ändå för mig själv. I den andra världen. Närvarande i mitt inre. Det är som om jag bär ett slags mentala hörlurar"

¹² "He exposes just how badly people feel in today's hectic and performance-orientated society".

¹³ "In a vacuum, separated both from their environment and from themselves".

(Karlsson 2021: chap. 5).¹⁴ As a self-organising and ego-centred system, the ‘minimal self’ arranges its knowledge of the world according to *enaction*, which is defined as embedded cognition that enables the subject to orientate itself in its environment and make it readable (Varela et al. 2016:XLVII).

In this context, he recognises himself not in social interaction with the ‘Other’, a real person with whom he has engaged in personal exchanges, but within himself, confronting only factual accounts originating from disembodied entities.¹⁵ He does not know the ‘Other’ in a Meadian sense: it remains as a vague and undifferentiated entity, only becoming relevant when it provides information about the ‘minimal self’.

For these reasons, most connections with the ‘Other’ are unsuccessful. In *Högläsning 2 (Reading aloud 2)*, the protagonist encounters an old acquaintance and, as a figure external to the self, he is unrecognisable: “det var inte han. Det var en stand-in” (Karlsson 2011:145).¹⁶ The ‘Other’, again intended as the main character’s acquaintance, physically disappears in *Cirkus (Circus)*. In this instance, a magician states his intention to make a member of the audience at a circus show disappear. The magic words are effective: the ‘Other’ disappears from the stage and never comes back. As Byung-Chul Han posits: “the time when there was the Other is gone. The Other as mystery, the Other as seduction, the Other as Eros, the Other as desire, the Other as hell, the Other as pain disappears. The negativity of the Other gives way to the positivity of the Equal” (Han 2018:6).

In *Huvudsaken (The Main Thing)*, the short story that concludes *Spelreglerna*, the ‘Other’ finally departs from the self. Here a narrating ‘I’ escapes the city and the ordinary to wind down and find himself, when the ‘Other’ makes its sudden appearance:

En morgon var bulan så brant och huden så spänd att jag förstod att någonting skulle hända under dagen. [...] Jag sprang ideligen fram till spegeln och någon gång på eftermiddagen syntes mycket riktigt början till en liten reva. En spricka öppnades mitt på hakan och bland vätska och var kunde jag skymta något som såg ut som ett litet, litet... huvud.¹⁷ (Karlsson 2011:164)

This absurd metamorphosis ultimately results in the complete separation of the self from the ‘Other’. The latter indeed leaves the ‘I’ and goes out to live in the world: “tro mig, du skulle aldrig klara dig där ute” (Karlsson 2011:183).¹⁸ The narrating ‘I’ stays home instead, motionless, in a Joycean condition of paralysis.

Without the Other, the ‘minimal self’ is therefore alone.

3. AN UNLIKELY GEOGRAPHY

In the conceptualisation of the human geographer Edward D. Soja, the notion of space can be understood as a threefold entity. The first aspect of this conceptualisation (*firstspace*) concerns the material and objective physical extension of space. The second aspect (*secondspace*) pertains to the various visualisations and mental representations of place (Soja 1999:66f.). In *thirdspace*, however, the two aforementioned declinations unite: “everything

¹⁴ “If only I didn’t have to be with them. I do best like this, at a distance. Among them, but still on my own. In the other world. Present in my mind. It’s as if I was wearing a kind of mental headphones”.

¹⁵ Examples of this can be seen in the distant entities such as W.R.D. in *Fakturan*, or the governmental office responsible for drawing a personal profile of the main character in *Ingenting*, or the General Director who has the final say and opposes the main character’s view in *Rummet*.

¹⁶ “It was not him. It was a stand-in”.

¹⁷ “One morning the bulge was so steep and the skin so tight that I realised something was going to happen during the day. [...] I kept running to the mirror and sometime in the afternoon I did indeed see the beginnings of a small tear. A crack opened in the centre of my chin and among the liquid and pus I could make out what looked like a small, small... head”.

¹⁸ “Trust me, you would never make it out there”.

comes together in *thirdspace*: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious” (Soja 2009:54).¹⁹ The unlikely geography that emerges from Jonas Karlsson’s short stories can be interpreted within this framework.

In the short story *Rum 2316 (Room 2316)*, which concludes the collection *Nya människor i fel ordning*, the protagonist arrives at a gigantic hotel and is accompanied to the eponymous room by the receptionist. The journey to the room appears to be longer than expected: the rooms are arranged in a linear sequence, commencing with room 1 and continuing to room 2316. An unconventional geography applies to the hotel: “det märkliga med korridoren var att den hela tiden fortsatte rakt fram, och ändå var det omöjligt att se slutet på den” (Karlsson 2021:chap. 11).²⁰

The geography of the hotel corridor is seemingly impossible; it is no longer a mere interstitial connecting space, or a ‘non-place’ (Augé 1995), but undergoes a process of subjectification: the protagonist adapts spatial reality to his perception, creates a *secondspace*, in which he establishes himself. This is exemplified by the protagonist in *Tre meter Hornsgatan*: “vi bor ju alla i vårt inre. Den yttre världen förflyttas bara runt oss och byter skepnad” (Karlsson 2021:chap. 5).²¹ Space is here a mere prolongation of the embodied experience, mediated by the ‘mental headphones’ that cut off the main characters from the objective space.

The short novel *Rummet* provides further evidence of this phenomenon. The protagonist, Björn, is an employee who has recently been reassigned to an unnamed public administration office. Here he discovers a room that offers the opportunity to restore his energies and come up with innovative solutions to the challenges he faces in his professional life. However, the room seems to exist only in his imagination. While Björn can see the room and enter it, his colleague Håkan only perceives a wall where the door should be. The confrontation then shifts from Håkan to the other colleagues, with one eventually proposing a geographically unsustainable solution: “skulle vi kunna enas om formuleringen: ‘rummet finns inte för alla?’” (Karlsson 2007:136).²² The *thirdspace* reverts to the two-dimensionality of the *secondspace*, representing a process of “cognitive dissonance reduction” (Karlsson 2021:chap. 5).²³

The definition of space as mere projection of the self is opposed to Lefebvre’s theorisation of space as *social product*.²⁴ In the Karlssonian context of pervasive virtuality, where spatial dimensions are extended into the domain of the imaginary, the traditional understanding of space as a three-sided Lefebvrian composite entity, shaped by perception,

¹⁹ Soja’s conclusions naturally draw on both the thinking of Homi K. Bhabha and Henri Lefebvre’s spatial triad. Bhabha conceives the ‘theory of the third space’, meaning the place where the individual’s real intentions and propensities find expression beyond the social and professional constraints constituted by the first and second space (Bhabha 1994:55). By contrast, Henri Lefebvre (1991:39ff.) proposes a tripartite conceptualisation of space. This comprises the perceived space of everyday reality (*espace perçu*), the conceived space defined and arranged by power (*espace conçu*), and the experienced space reproduced and re-mediated by expressive means (*espace vécu*).

²⁰ “The strange thing about the corridor was that it went on and on, yet it was impossible to see where it ended”.

²¹ “We all live inside ourselves. The external world just moves around us and changes shape”.

²² “Perhaps we could agree on the formulation ‘the room does not exist for everyone?’” (Karlsson 2015b:chap. 59).

²³ The concept of “cognitive dissonance reduction” is introduced by one of the secondary characters in *Tre meter Hornsgatan*. Helene has misinterpreted her colleague Rasmus’s appreciation of her job skills as personal interest. Upon discovering that Rasmus was not genuinely interested, Helene realises that she has been living in a self-constructed reality, where her beliefs were perceived as genuine.

²⁴ According to Lefebvre (1991:8), space is also the result of the accumulation of *spatial practice*, “a projection onto a (spatial) field of all aspects, elements and moments of social practice”.

conception, and experience, no longer holds. Instead, it has become fragmented and self-centred, lacking the coherence and integration that characterised it in the physical world.

In its physical representation, the pattern of unsteadiness and suspension is often depicted with challenging architectural shapes and literary castles in the air. As previously observed, the theatre in *Utgången* is situated in mid-air; similarly, the restaurant *Gondolen* (*The Gondola*) is in a bridge-like suspended position. In the restaurant setting, a series of unfulfilled expectations and miscommunications unfold in the three short stories of *Det andra målet*, namely *Min kompis på Gondolen* (*My Friend at Gondolen*), part 1 and 2, and *När jag vaknar är hon borta* (*When I Wake Up She Is Gone*). In the first episode, the main character awaits the arrival of a person, who, however, does not show up. Furthermore, this does not occur at a second appointment, scheduled for the following day. At the third appointment, the long-awaited meeting finally takes place, but then the person moves on to another table. In the short story *Min kompis på Gondolen 2*, we follow the perspective of the other, the friend who is expected but who does not show up. In *När jag vaknar är hon borta*, a young woman who had observed the failed meetings provides an additional perspective, integrating the accounts of the two preceding narrators. The identity of the narrators is in a state of flux in each respective narrative, thereby challenging the reader to identify the speaker in a game of lost recognition. The restaurant acts as a metaphor for this state of suspended communication.

The suspension of these characters, reflected in the architectural structures reminiscent of castles in the air, can be attributed to the failure of reciprocal recognition, whereby each character establishes their own personal space. The *homo karlssonianus* inhabits a monadic *secondspace*, on a casual trajectory intersecting intermittently with the paths of others, but there is no common ground on which to interact with other individuals. As atoms of accidental inclination, individuals in the Karlssonian *secondspace* collide with each other at random. As the Latin poet Lucretius would have postulated: “corpora cum deorsum rectum per inane feruntur ponderibus propriis, incerto tempore ferme incertisque locis spatio depellere paulum [...]. Id facit exiguum clinamen principiorum nec regione loci certa nec tempore certo” (Lucrezio 2007:102, 108).²⁵

In Karlsson's writing, the world is constituted by a multitude of intersecting trajectories and paths. No sense of hierarchy is established; rather, a heterarchical and desecrated simultaneity is posited, in which the experience of place depends on the embodied and personal encounter.²⁶

In a condition where the Other has been expelled, the world is absorbed into the self and manifests as an externalisation of inner feelings. The actual environment seems to be constituted by elements that resonate with the mental and projected perception of place and virtuality, “linking together many radical subjectivities and creating new ‘meeting places’ and real-and-imagined ‘spaces’ for diverse oppositional practices” (Soja 1999:84).

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS: INTO THE VOID

In the context of this peculiar Karlssonian physics of suspension, the act of falling can be considered a natural consequence of the casual aggregation and *inclination* of the monads floating in the *secondspace*. In *Högläsning 2*, as mentioned earlier, two persons meet

²⁵ “While atoms move by their own weight straight down through the empty void, at quite uncertain times and uncertain places they swerve slightly from their course. [...] That the minute swerving of atoms causes, in neither place nor time determinate” (Lucretius 1997:book 2).

²⁶ Douglas Hofstadter (1979:134) postulated the existence of a *heterarchy*, which he defined as “a program with a structure that lacks a single ‘highest level’ or ‘monitor’”.

at *Gondolen*. The narrating 'I' fails to recognise his friend and later, as they approach the docks at Stadskajen, in central Stockholm, the two finally meet, but the consequences are unexpected:

jag började tröttna på det där evinnerliga ryckandet och ryckte tillbaka. I den hastiga rörelsen halkade jag till och tappade balansen. Han som såg ut som min kompis gjorde ett försök att hålla i mig och jag greppade instinktivt hans utsträckta hand men vi var för nära kanten för att kunna rädda oss från fallet.²⁷

The unpredicted encounters with other monads in similar transitions function as the Lucretian *inclination*, interfering with personal trajectories and resulting in the alteration of the individual path. These *inclinations* open up "sprickor i tillvaron där verkligheten växlar in på ett annat spår" (Karlsson 2011:145).²⁸

These openings work in the fashion postulated by Deleuze in his late essay on Leibniz and the Baroque. In the closed condition in which the subject is confined, the *fold*

finitely represents infinity. It gives the world the possibility of beginning over and again in each monad. The world must be placed in the subject in order that the subject can be for the world. This is the torsion that constitutes the fold of the world and of the soul. (Deleuze 1993:26)

The openings, cracks, and folds of subjective space are always unpredictable gaps with the potential to create new paths. In *Rummet*, Björn enters his imaginary place with a young woman for an intimate encounter during the Christmas party at the office. He catches their reflection in the mirror: "när vi kysstes var det som om hon var jag. Jag var jag, men hon var också jag" (Karlsson 2009:58).²⁹ The *fold* does not result in the formation of a world of contact, social engagement, and recognition. Instead, it creates unforeseen openings where the self expands at the expense of the presence of the 'Other'. The room stands as Björn's *secondspace*, a context in which he fosters romantic engagement, conceptualising the 'Other' as a mere reflection of the self. In this environment, a distinctive form of narcissistic love emerges as the sole viable option: the *homo karlssonianus* experiences love for himself, because he perceives himself as the sole entity in the room.

In this context, the relationship between the proliferating *secondspaces*, established by the monads in the process of their adaptations of the world, becomes a source of significant difficulty.

Every individual will, as a result of their 'minimal selves', design their own *secondspace* in accordance with their perception. The folds and accidental *inclinations* that cause the trajectories of the monads to collide, produce extemporaneous lines of connection and precarious formations suspended in the air. On the brink of this fragile boundary, the actor and his co-star in *Utgången* converge. From that precarious balance, they ultimately fall into the void.

This void can be read with the conceptualisation of *chaosmos*, introduced by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaux* (1987) and further developed some years later by Deleuze

²⁷ "I was getting tired of that eternal jerking and jerked back. In the rush of the movement I slipped and lost my balance. The guy who looked like my friend tried to hold on to me and I instinctively grabbed his outstretched hand but we were too close to the edge to save ourselves from the fall".

²⁸ "Cracks in the existence where reality shifts into a different track".

²⁹ "When we kissed it was as if she was me. I was me, but she was me too" (Karlsson 2015b:chap. 13).

alone in *The Fold*. It may be defined as “the interlocking relationship or space of rhythm and chaos, the border zone between the two intervals in a differentiated system” (Bonta & Protevi 2004:137).³⁰

The chaos in the neo-formation of *chaosmos* is “a purely disjunctive diversity” (Deleuze 1993:76). In Karlsson’s literary universe, each character is trapped in a subjective and disjunctive singularity that prevents them from establishing contact with the ‘Other’. Through its ‘minimal self’ the character will rather adapt the physical domain to his perception and make the world a private *secondspace* within the coordinates of his soul. This condition provides him with a certain stability, an ‘order’, akin to the ‘order’ that ties Björn in *Rummet* to his firmly held beliefs. Although weakly grounded and under threat from inconsistencies, the ‘order’ is the only way in which the ‘minimal self’ can be designated.

This ‘order’ is subsequently challenged when the monad encounters the ‘Other’, as evidenced by the Lucretian *inclination* “in neither place nor time determinate”. From the perspective of the monad, the notion of the ‘Other’ is inconceivable and beyond the reach of its philosophical understanding. When the ‘Other’ is encountered as a result of an accidental *inclination*, it will be interpreted as an undifferentiated and unfathomable phenomenon, or Chaos.

The *chaosmos* will then be “a continuous coming and going between chaos and order”; here “the subject, i.e. the receptive surface of this coming and going, is not a stable form, [...] but a form that is constantly forming and deforming itself. It is a form in perpetual formation” (Tarizzo 2004:chap. 1).³¹ In this continuous transformation “chaos passes through order and order passes through chaos, as everything which is empirical is entangled with its transcendental genesis, and vice versa” (Zanelli Quarantini Brini 2023:48). The *chaosmos* represents the fragile and precarious boundary between the ‘order’ of the ‘minimal self’ and the undifferentiated essence of the ‘Other’. The void is then the ultimate point of departure, functioning as the pinnacle upon which the theatre in *Utgången* is suspended, the edge of the quay from which the characters in *Högläsning 2* fall. In its suspension between chaos and order, in its radical openness, the void represents the condition of man in the times of *homo karlssonianus*.

From this evidence, one could infer that Jonas Karlsson is not truly evoking a Kafkaesque atmosphere in the streets of Stockholm. Rather, his literary works appear to highlight the instabilities of a contemporary monadisation of life and the inconsistencies of subjective place at the brink of the void.

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³⁰ The term is a neologism that combines the concepts of chaos and cosmos. It was coined by James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*: “every person, place and thing in the chaosmos of Alle anyway connected with the gobblydumped turkery was moving and changing every part of the time” (Joyce 2000:part 1, chap. 5). The tenet is presented in *A Thousand Plateaux* as follows: “What chaos and rhythm have in common is the in-between — between two milieus, rhythm-chaos or the *chaosmos*” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:313).

³¹ “Un continuo andirivieni tra il caos e l’ordine, il soggetto, vale a dire la superficie di ricettività di questo andirivieni, non è una forma stabile, [...] ma una forma che si forma e si deforma di continuo. È una forma in perenne formazione”.

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Giovanni Za

University of Naples “L’Orientale”
 Via Putignani, 50
 70121 Bari
 Italy
 g.za@unior.it