

## Riku Korhonen's *Kahden ja Yhden Yön Tarinoita* as Reflection on the Suburban Fragmentation of Community

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Riku Korhonen's novel *Kahden ja yhden yön tarinoita* ("Tales of two and one nights," 2003) describes a motley collection of lives in a suburb of Turku, Finland. Presenting a variety of different voices, it offers a cross-section of Finnish society through the description, not of the capital, nor of what could be considered as a second city, but of a suburb of one: Turku.<sup>1</sup> In the decades following the Second World War, urban expansion happened increasingly, in Turku as elsewhere in Finland, in the form of high-rise concrete suburbs constructed in natural environments at some distance from the city centre, and it is one such satellite concrete suburb that is in focus in Korhonen's novel. Korhonen's *Kahden ja yhden yön tarinoita* describes, then, a "second city" in two senses: first, by engaging with an urban environment other than the pre-eminent city

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175

in the Finnish context—Helsinki; and second, through describing what is in effect the most typical current Finnish living environment second to the metropolis: sprawling suburbia in southern Finland. This environment bears some similarity to the “nebulous” or gas-like city of late modern “post-industrial” urbanity, as introduced by Keunen in this volume. The suburban area and its inhabitants in this novel appear here not only as a darker mirror image of Turku itself, but as the everyman of post-war Finnish (sub)urbanization. The universalist characteristics of the concrete suburb in the novel are reinforced by the use of an invented toponym (“Tora-alhontie”) to describe what is in effect an “archetypal suburb,” although the area can partly be identified with the actual Turku suburb of Ilpoinen (see Laaksonen 74) in the period from the early 1980s to the early twenty-first century.

In Korhonen’s prose, real-world historical events as well as political and economic processes function as a background for the depiction of intimate relations between people, usually two people in love. Violence, often motivated by political radicalism, is also part of Korhonen’s depiction of everyday life. The rampant development of technology is often thematized in his novels, and raises mixed feelings: on the one hand, it offers possibilities for entertainment, but it also enables the mediatizing and consumerist processes of post-modernization that give the impression that everything that is solid—in the famous dictum of Marx and Engels—melts into air (see also Berman). The future becomes unforeseeable, the relationships that underlie everyday (sub)urban interaction appear unreal. Scepticism towards ideals and visions of progress and modernization is also typical of Korhonen’s thinking with regard to urbanization and suburbanization. Something wicked always follows from well-intended but unrealistic plans and decisions—a judgement that can be passed on the actions of city dwellers as well as on those of the urban planners.

This chapter analyses Korhonen’s work as a satirical commentary upon the late twentieth-century discourse of urban development, in particular with regards to the rise of the suburb in post-war Finland, and to more recent social projects that aim to invest suburban life with a renewed sense of community. The question of community cohesion is examined here in terms of the narrative structure of the novel, which presents a kaleidoscopic perspective on a large set of characters. This complex structure invites a reading that emphasizes how the narrative mirrors, questions and re-enacts the fragmentation of the urban fabric and the social

cohesion in the post-industrial city. The environmental crime at the heart of the plot draws explicit connections between flaws in the built and planned environment, moral corruption, and physical disease. Based on an infamous environmental scandal in a Helsinki concrete suburb, which in the novel is transposed to a context near Turku (Laaksonen 84–85), this plot line also reinforces the universalist outlook of the narrated concrete suburb in the novel, which thus becomes a reflection for Finnish post-war concrete suburbia in general, rather than strictly referential terms. Our key argument is that in its style, thematics and narrative structure, *Kahden ja yhden yön tarinoita* retraces some of the properties of the late twentieth-century Finnish concrete suburb, both in its density of perspectives and in its lack of moral coherence or of a clearly delineated authorial centre. But simultaneously, Korhonen explores the possibilities of a new sense of community (see Kirstinä and Turunen 72). The novel's kaleidoscopic perspective offers a measure of redemption, recreating the egalitarian and multi-voiced perspective that was at the core of the democratic thinking of the post-war urban planners, and inviting the reader to distill a meaning-making story against all odds.

In our exploration of the connotations of this secondary city of sorts in the novel, the analysis of spatial metaphors is of particular importance. The conceptual metaphors GOOD IS UP and BAD IS DOWN (cf. Lakoff and Johnson), in particular, are ever-present in the novel. The two central settings in the novel carry the revealing names Tora-alhontie (“Quarrel-Hollow Road”) and Sovinnonvuori (“Mount Reconciliation”), combining low and high location with negative and positive connotations, respectively. The concrete suburb appears as a “low” and “base” stratum of urban meaning, a repressed past reality that fatally hinders the protagonists' endeavours to reach comprehensive, panoramic heights. In our analysis, the representational strategy of the panorama, with its suggestion of coherence and meaning-making, will be juxtaposed with that of the diorama – a much more limited kind of spatial representation.

### WRITING THE CONCRETE SUBURB

Korhonen's novel can be placed within a Finnish and Nordic tradition of suburb literature that has gathered strength in the course of the last quarter of the twentieth century, and that has already passed through several stages. It is a thematic orientation in which an imagined urban utopia tends to be up-ended: a critical depiction of a promised, socially

cohesive welfare-state environment that was supposed to combine the best of city and country. Some of the culture- and language-specific characteristics of the “suburb” under discussion here should be noted. What we call here “concrete suburb,” and what is called, in Finnish, “lähiö,” has profoundly different associations than either the suburb or the social housing estate in Anglo-American writing. The concrete, mass-built suburban environments constructed in the decades following the Second World War in Finland (and elsewhere in the Nordic countries) tend to have a mix of social housing and privately owned housing; many provide a range of public and commercial services and excellent green and recreational spaces. While often being working-class or (lower) middle-class districts in origin, these areas have the potential to be either respectable or less respectable districts, although in popular culture and literature, the latter depiction has been the most dominant, especially in the case of areas where social housing dominates.

With roots in the late 1970s and 1980s, Finnish suburb writing became a visible subgenre in the 1990s and continues, in modified form, into the present century. Interesting analogies can be drawn between literary depictions of the concrete suburb and its representations in other media, from the big screen to daily and weekly news outlets. In her examination of media reports, Irene Roivainen has proposed three stages in the discourse of the Finnish concrete or high-rise suburb: in its first decades, in the 1950s and 1960s, the suburb was predominantly seen as a new urban possibility, while from the late 1960s onwards, a problem-centred discourse became more dominant. From the middle of the 1990s onwards, it is possible to discern a more positive “heritage discourse” (Roivainen; also see Wallin 509). In literature, it would seem that the more positive strand of concrete suburb writing is still far from dominant; from Pirkko Saisio’s *Betoniyö* (“Concrete Night” 1981) onward, the concrete suburb has become a stand-in for existential loneliness, alienation, and socio-economic distress.

### THE EPISODE NOVEL: THE NARRATIVE FORM OF A FRAGMENTING SOCIAL COHESION

If the concrete suburb has become the metaphor *par excellence* for the fragmentation of social cohesion in Finnish society from the 1970s onwards, so the episode novel can be considered as the literary form to

render this fragmentation, but also as a literary strategy that paradoxically endeavors to make sense of this disintegration. Its mosaic structure has been interpreted as a pedagogical instrument, a kind of Jamesonian “cognitive mapping,” with which one can rise above a neoliberalist individualism (Ojajarvi 138; cf. Laaksonen 84–85). For our purpose, it is interesting to note that in a range of contemporary Finnish, Nordic, Baltic and Russian contexts, the concrete suburb (as well as the mid-size city) has repeatedly been approached by adopting the fragmentary or episodic novel. Examples of interest are Turkka Hautala’s *Salo* (2009), which depicts the Finnish provincial town of the same name; Mati Unt’s *Sügisball* (“Autumn ball,” 1979), which uses a range of characters to describe a concrete suburb of the Estonian capital; Tore Renberg’s *Vi ses i morgen* (“See You Tomorrow,” 2013), depicting the decline of the formerly prosperous oil-industrial town of Stavanger; and Peter Aleshkovsky’s *Stargorod* (*Stargorod* 2009), subtitled “a novel in many voices” and set in an conjectured provincial town (see Laurila). Language borders have perhaps obscured our understanding of the extent to which this correlation between literary and urban form is an international phenomenon. In North American city literature, Charles Bock’s *Beautiful Children* (2008), set in Las Vegas, provides a relevant reference point (see Salmela, in this volume). In all these literary texts, there would seem to be an intriguing relationship between the form of the depicted urban environment, the threatened resilience of its urban community, and the narrative structure itself.

This correlation is evident in Korhonen’s novel. The complex structure of the novel has been frequently commented upon; it has been described as a “thematic short-story collection” (Vaismaa), a “collage novel” (Kirstinä and Turunen 72), or, in the terminology we will follow here, as an “episode novel” (Juntunen). As a genre, the episode novel has always been suited to the depiction of localities. Some of its early modernist representatives, such as *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) by John Dos Passos, and its Finnish equivalent, *The City of Sorrow and Joy* (1936) by Mika Waltari (see Ameel 117–46), took big cities, in their respective cases New York and Helsinki, as their thematic focus. Short story cycles with episodic characteristics, such as *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) by Sherwood Anderson concentrated on a small town and described its inhabitants and their mutual relations.

All these works have offered generic models for Korhonen’s novel, but *Kahden ja yhden yön tarinoita* conveys also something that seems

largely absent in many of its generic predecessors. While Dos Passos and Waltari, not to mention Anderson, are not predominantly interested in plotting in their episodic works, Korhonen clearly wants to make his work a novel in this crucial respect, too. However, his way of creating plot structures differs from the main and subsidiary plot lines of the traditional novel. There is not one comprehensive story with its beginning, development, and climax, but many smaller ones, all of them equally significant, criss-crossing in the textual fabric, surfacing here and there, challenging the reader to follow them all and make sense of their fragmented totality.

When the plot structure is cognitively challenging, as is the case in Korhonen's novel, the nature of the events depicted also takes on a particular meaning. Events do not have to be thrilling or dramatic; rather, making sense of the plot means making sense of social relationships, understanding how the suburban, fragmented community functions. At the most basic level this means trying to find out who is telling—in other words, what the current first-person narrator's position in the suburban community (and in the novel) is, and what his or her relations to previous narrators are. The first-person narrators are not presented to the reader by an omniscient narrator, nor do they present themselves in any unambiguous manner. They simply start telling, and the reader has to cope with the information they choose to give. In a sense, the situation resembles that of someone who is acting in concrete-suburban reality, facing people (neighbours, for instance) he or she does not know properly but who cannot be ignored.

To illustrate how the plot structure in Korhonen's novel reflects some of the features that can be associated with the suburban experience, we will follow one of its threads from the start through every episode in which it is represented. Put together, these episodes form a fragmentary story about an environmental crime and its tragic consequences. The theme is tentatively presented in an episode titled "Kädet" ("Hands" 29–33). The episode is narrated by a first-person female narrator, who reveals, among many other things, that her daughter Annukka has been hospitalized. It remains unclear what has happened to Annukka, and the secretive reference projects forward to future mentions to the topic in the episodes that follow. The next two episodes concentrate on other subjects, but the episode titled "Safiiri ja Teräs" ("Sapphire and Steel" 42–44) is narrated by a young male narrator who mentions, rather indirectly, that his sister is called Annukka. He also reveals that the residents

of his childhood home apartment have received a letter from the city to tell them the building has been abandoned. As a narrator, he leaves much untold, and does not reveal the contents of the letter. However, he does hint at a link between poisonous substances, the birch trees of the area, and his sister's condition: "nobody then knew as yet, what the birches that had grown so comely on this soil had suffered, and sister still did not know it" (44). The reader can infer that the narrator and Annukka have been raised on polluted soil, and that Annukka is suffering from an illness caused by the poison mentioned.

The hints that an environmental crime has been committed are confirmed in the next episode, "Oskarin hymy" ("Oskari's smile"; 45–50), narrated by an elderly female narrator called Terttu Takalo. She is a local activist, fighting for the rights of the exiled residents. The reader sees her reading her e-mail. One of the messages is from a young man whose sister has died of cancer; the reader is supposed to infer that the sender is Annukka's brother Aleks, and the dead sister is Annukka. The severity of the situation gradually starts to dawn on the reader, especially when it becomes clear that Takalo has also received a threatening message, sent from her husband's e-mail address, warning her to back off. Her husband, Oskari, cannot be responsible for the threats, for he is completely disabled, suffering from a severe stroke—someone else must be behind the threats. And indeed, when Takalo leaves her apartment and goes to the mall, she is almost run over by a red car.

The next episode is narrated from the restricted perspective of Oskari. From his twisted narrative the reader learns that the flat of the Takalos has been broken into, which explains the message sent from Oskari's address. The reader also learns that the incident with the red car is planned by a person called Salonen. In the next episode it turns out that this Salonen is a friend or a servant of the owner of the construction firm that is accused of the toxic disaster. Salonen, Takalo and the owner, the current narrator, are all attending a seminar on a program called "aluekumppanuus" ("area companions"), aiming at the development of the neighbourhood. Takalo claims that the plan is no more than window dressing by the local authorities, to conceal the disastrous economic situation and consequent degradation of social services. She also speaks on behalf of those affected by the environmental crime.

When a heavy crucifix drops from the wall and hits Takalo (61–62), the reader understands that this is not an accident but part of a conspiracy against the activist. However, the reader has to wait for almost two

hundred pages before the plot line surfaces again. In the last episode of the novel, Terttu Takalo—whose name in this passage is not mentioned: she is referred to merely as a woman from Turku—is seen once again through the eyes of another narrator figure, who informs the reader of the consequences of the crucifix incident. It turns out that Takalo, who now lives in a sanatorium, suffers from brain damage, which affects her sense of balance and forces her to move along the walls. We never learn what has happened to her husband, also brain-damaged and now completely helpless without his wife.

As the previous paragraphs show, Korhonen's novel brings together a set of lives that are in touch with each other, without really creating meaningful contact—reminiscent of Robert Park's view of the city as a "mosaic of little worlds that touch but do not interpenetrate" (608). The array of different, intersecting lives, and the fragmented way in which they are presented—detached from their environment, but also detached from the preceding and following moments in their own lives—act as an invitation for the reader to consider the mosaic of intersecting, but often disconnected lives in the suburban community. As a narrative technique, the fragmented presentation also asks questions familiar in post-modern literature: questions of how to make sense of the world based on detached and mediated fragments that lack the proper context or authorial elucidation.

#### SATIRIZING TWENTIETH-CENTURY PLANNING DISCOURSE: CONTACT IN THE COMPACT CITY

Thematically, the subplot discussed above suggests a reading of the urban environment that also surfaces in the rest of the novel, and that emphasizes the causal links between the environment and society's well-being. The suggestion is that it is the urban form of the suburb itself, and the strata of waste underneath it, that are in part responsible for the problems besetting this community. One of these base elements is constituted by the poisonous substances that have apparently been wilfully introduced in the environment, and this environmental crime plot line in the novel underscores the suggestion that society's moral evil, its suburban environment, and citizens' faltering well-being are interrelated.

The link between the built form of the concrete suburb and its inhabitants' well-being, which still routinely arises when speaking of the



suburb (see Jokela), continues pessimistic discourse on the urban condition that was particularly prominent in nineteenth-century and turn-of-the-twentieth-century naturalist and social Darwinist thought. One of the narrators describes life in the contemporary city in terms that are remarkably similar to the gloomy turn-of-the-century thinking on the urban condition:

We know how half-witted those children are, who have to live in overcrowded cities, surrounded by human bustle and by the most diverse incidents, [who have] to ride in tramways and trains, to zigzag through the chaos in the streets, to go to stupid movies and to sit in schools, where nobody demands concentrated intelligence. (24)

While the urban condition is thus described as producing distracted and half-witted people, the post-war suburban environment designed as a reaction to the overcrowded inner city appears as similarly dehumanizing in the novel. The opening chapter sets the scene by describing the suburban environment as an estranging environment that looks to the narrator not like a human environment, but, rather, as the “comb-webs” of an “alien species” (17). The narrator reflects on the planning of the suburb, which, based on “over-rationalist reason,” has created in the middle of the woods “a meticulous row of houses, in which ill-advised acts are carried out” (17). The wording implies that there is a causal link between environment and the misguided acts perpetrated by its inhabitants. According to the narrator, “[i]n this stagnantly temporary atmosphere without traditions, it is hard to remember the duration of time and fate”: the detachment and artificiality of this “prefab colony” causes the inhabitants’ inability to gauge their own past (17). Planning itself is thus presented as responsible for creating the uprooted, detached lives that are tentatively pieced together by the various narrative threads.

*Kahden ja yhden yön tarinoita* reflects on some of the classical criticism of the urban and suburban condition. It also offers a satirical commentary on one of the greatest slogans of Finnish post-war urban development, “Compact city is contact city” (“kompaktikaupunki on kontaktikaupunki”)—a vision that is in stark contrast to the lives of the characters, for whom normal social and sexual contacts seem out of reach. The concept was coined by traffic and urban planner Pentti Murole and used to promote dense semi-satellite concrete suburbs detached from the main urban centres (Murole; Laaksonen 70). It can

be related to the thematics as well as to the literary form of Korhonen's novel, which presents an exceptionally dense and multilayered contact network of literary characters, with all its central scenes depicted from a wide range of viewpoints. Korhonen's fictional suburb can be seen as a textual contact city, even though the original, optimistic meaning which Murole gave to his concept has been reversed. It is revealing that the explicit allusion in the novel to the thesis of the "contact city" depicts a negative kind of contact, an unintended collision:

The black man from house A comes out from the staircase with a bag on his shoulder and takes his yellow Jopo from the bike rack. . . . A boy runs around the corner and crashes into the bike. The boy falls to the asphalt. . . . The boy stands up. The man takes something from his bag and hands it to the boy. The man cycles into the street. The boy observes the thing given by the man. Compact city is contact city. (27)

The description of the collision resembles one particular trope of the city novel (found also in many popular culture narratives set in the city, from romantic comedies to true crime): the eventful chance encounter. But the contact between two strangers in the concrete suburb, in this fragment, is not only unintended, uneventful, and short-lived, it lacks authorial meaning: like the focalizer, a woman watching the events from her window, the reader does not know what really transpired between the man and the boy, or what was given. The reader is guided towards a sense of unease and distrust, because he/she knows that several of the commodities exchanged between adults and children in the novel are suspect and charged in a way that reflects complex power relations, from the submarine toy in the beginning of the novel (15–19) to various later references to sweets. Only in a later episode, when the incident is seen from the boy's perspective, it turns out that the mysterious object is a bouncy ball (68–70).

In its critique of suburban development, and in its endeavors to offer a coherent narrative that could restore some order and meaning to this area, Korhonen's novel engages consciously not only with earlier discourse of the suburb as "contact city," but also with the wave of "suburb projects" (Korhonen 27, 55), which have begun to see the light more or less simultaneously with the new heritage discourse of the suburb. Both in Finland and internationally, such place-making projects tend to aim to restore, often through cultural means, a sense of community

to troubled environments. A central chapter in the novel in this respect is “Aluekumppanuus”/“Area companions” (a name which refers to the actual Turku-project of the same name; see Laaksonen 84), discussed earlier in our treatment of the environmental crime plot. In the chapter, one of the project developers held responsible for the faulty construction on polluted soil and a concrete suburb social worker visit the community to deliver a speech on community building in the area during the twenty-fifth anniversary of the area, and are confronted by activist Terttu Takala. When listening to the highly contrasting narratives of the area during the community meeting, the narrator, in a metafictional detour typical of the novel, ponders the “*genus loci* of a place,” considering that it is “equal to the stories told of a place” (57). While the reader, if he/she realizes that the narrator must be one of the people behind the environmental crime, is bound to distrust his thoughts, it is hard not to read them in light of the schematic narrative structure of the novel itself. In the implicit project of reconstructing the “*genus loci*” of the negatively affected concrete suburb, the novel and its narrators envision a prominent role for the power of narrative. There are several, often highly ironic, examples of literary characters who try to make sense of the environment, and restore a sense of place to it, by means of a retelling and remapping of spatial stories related to the area. One character sarcastically imagines how the local photography society might organize an exhibition with as its “clumsy title ‘the mental map of our near environment’” (35); the poet Kai is—unsuccessfully—working on a collection called *Territory* (“Reviiri”; 39). The exhibitionist in the novel thinks of himself as drawing his own presence on an imaginary map, not dissimilar to what graffiti artist would do (152–57). Another character has a master’s thesis in mind with the working title “the urban experience in pop lyrics of Turku” (225). All these characters try to become writers of their (sub)urban environment, to rise above the low grounds to the Olympian heights of a narrator, but in the novel, their endeavours are presented consistently in an ironic light.

### PANORAMA AND DIORAMA

As has become clear, Korhonen’s novel is closely bound up with seeing and being seen, and with trying to gain an overarching, meaning-giving higher perspective. Several of the characters are stalkers and/or peeping toms, or they try to achieve an Olympian position from which to

overview the totality. The narrator, of course, is the greatest stalker of all, and various panoramic descriptions within the novel can be interpreted as metapoetical reflections on the narrative structure of the novel. The novel opens with a panorama of the concrete suburb, seen by a group of boys rising onto higher grounds, on top of a former rubbish dump. The fact that a concealed layer of waste provides a vantage point for the youngsters is an ominous referent to the lower, hidden layers of meaning that infect and inform life in the suburb. What the boys see can be interpreted as a summary description of the Finnish concrete suburb:

We saw the shopping centre, the library and the sawdust-track in the school forest. We saw the high-rise apartment blocks of Tora-alhontie and the small sheds of the allotment plots. . . . Below us, we saw our crouching homes. Above the unfinished houses, quietly whirring cranes were turning about, the yellow totem animals of hope. The centre of the city, with its churches and scars was far away. Here, everything was only just beginning. Inside us, the swagger of 10-year-old boys was tightening like Geronimo's bow into a force that could propel forwards, far away. (7)

The urban scene presents a reflection of sorts of the ideal of the classical city. According to Pausanias, in *Guide to Greece* (10.4.1.), the essence of a city lies in its public buildings, of which the theatre, the marketplace and the gymnasium provided meeting points to the populace—a built environment that enabled citizenship and a shared sense of community. In the reality of Tora-alhontie, all of these elements can be found, but in diminutive form: the marketplace, the forum of old, has become a shopping mall, culture is represented by a branch library, and the gymnasium is replaced by the sawdust track in the forest. The characters' desire of upward mobility, of rising to the heights, is juxtaposed with their low suburban realities—the “crouching homes” and “unfinished houses.”

The panorama is an age-old literary technique in literature aimed to provide a sense of coherence and authorial meaning—and a perspective that, more generally, has been connected both to the authorial narrator's vision as well as to that of the “space planner urbanist, city planner or cartographer” (de Certeau 92–93). As so often in the city novel, the initial bird's-eye view panorama in *Kahden ja yhden yön tarinoita* is later superseded by a view seen by a character who is situated on a level below that of the framing view: the first chapter in Korhonen's novel is focalized by a security guard working in (what the reader supposes to be)

the shopping mall seen in the introductory sketch. The screen in front of the security guard provides the reader with a second kind of panoramic image, much more fragmented and kaleidoscopic, “[t]he monitors swarm[ing] with the life of the shopping centre” (11).

The kaleidoscopic panorama of the security screen announces several of the central themes of the novel: the fragmentation of reality; the mediation of experience; the privatization and commodification of public space. It also problematizes the possibilities of creating a coherent, sense-making narrative out of the fragments of suburban life. Are we to trust the capacities of the person who is watching, and the limited, mediated construct of these various perspectives? As the novel progresses, the similarities between the fragmented kaleidoscopic security screen in the shopping mall and the interconnecting lives in the novel become increasingly problematized.

The multiple monitors of an invisible urban surveillance machine can be considered as the late-capitalist heir both of the panopticon and of Benjamin’s phantasmagoria, the mesmerizing, unreal representation of urban reality under the sign of commodity culture (GUST 110–16). The theme of interconnected mini-panoramas, and their failure to achieve a meaningful panoramic view, culminate in the chapter “Dioraama” (“Diorama” 190–201), which invites the reader once again to consider the novel itself as the literary form of the described mode of urban (re) presentation. The diorama of the chapter’s title refers overtly to a set of dioramas in the actual Turku Biological Museum, depicting different natural environments in Finland, including those in which birds and animals live in close proximity to human beings. But the chapter’s title also reflects on the physical environment within which the characters move—the café in the chapter is compared to a (movie) studio set (193)—as well as on the artificial way of presenting the taxidermic lives of the various characters in the novel as a whole.

As a distinct form of art, the early nineteenth-century panoramas that provided the antecedents for the sweeping literary vistas of realist and naturalist literature had constituted a “mechanically controlled narrative . . . giving to audiences the illusion of mastery over random, distant, or otherwise incomprehensible events” (Miller 46; see also Lanigan 9). By contrast, the diorama gives a much more limited representation: “A small-scale representation of a scene, etc., in which three-dimensional figures or objects are displayed in front of a painted background, the whole often being contained in a cabinet and viewed through a window

or aperture in the front . . . ” (“diorama,” def. B). Is it possible to distill a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon on the basis of such a superficial, contained, and, in many ways, two-dimensional representation? This is the question pondered by the narrator in the “Diorama” chapter, when she is confronted by the photographic evidence that the husband of her friend Tuula is an exhibitionist—an image of him posing naked in front of the window of his apartment in Tora-alhontie. The narrator connects the picture with the idea of the “diorama, within which a human being and his secrets are enclosed” (201). Simultaneously, she feels a presence glancing through the window of the café, as if watching her—a feeling that enmeshes her, in turn, within the chain of interlacing diorama-like fragments that compose the novel. The tale of the exhibitionist is one of the many subplots in the novel, but the narrative structure of the novel refuses the reader the possibility to simply put the pieces together and identify a wrongdoer. Instead, it asks how we know what we think we know—and how the mode of narration and mediation affects our possibilities to rise above the disconnected pieces of evidence of other lives.

## UP AND DOWN

The juxtaposition between high hopes and the poison lurking in the environment, or between a bird’s-eye view and a more limited, lowly perspective, is visible in the spatial descriptions, the plot structure, and the thematic concerns of the novel, but also in its very language and imagery. Many of the metaphors and similes, as well as the metonymical, realistic details constituting the fictional world of the novel, are structured according to four conceptual metaphors that might be put as follows: GOOD IS UP/BAD IS DOWN and ASCENDING IS PROGRESS/DESCENDING IS DEGENERATION (cf. Lakoff and Johnson). The novel swarms with seemingly literal depictions of things that go up and down: an elevator, an escalator, a yo-yo, a super-ball, a bee buzzing against a window-pane, an arrow, a masturbating hand—amongst many others. The words “up and down” are often explicitly mentioned.

The motives associated with two-way movements invite a schematic reading: upward movement symbolizes progress, and downward movement, of course, symbolizes regression and degeneration. Furthermore, high location symbolizes good things, whereas low location symbolizes evil and imperfection. The two central locations in the novel,

Tora-alhontie (Quarrel-Hollow Road) and Sovinnonvuori (Mount Reconciliation), follow this schematic logic as well.

The characters in the novel aim to higher vantage points: the rocks in Tora-alhontie (42, 215), the top of the former rubbish dump (7), and Vartiovuori, an existing hilltop park also in the actual city of Turku (226). Yet in the constant dialectic between past and possible future, between base, suburban starting point and possibilities of advancement, the lower strata tend to drag them down. The suburb, situated literally “lower” than the city, “down,” close to the sea-shore, and southward-bound from the city, near the terminus of the southward-bound bus no. 6 (Korhonen 35), appears as a base layer of urban meaning, a repressed past (especially for the characters that have moved out) that drags the protagonists down.

A culminating point in this respect comes in the final chapter entitled “matala” (“low,” 242–61), which focuses on a young man, Matias, who lives in Turku. On a fateful summer night, he ascends with a girl he has only recently met the Sappalinnä hill in the centre of Turku, famous for the panoramic view it offers (231). But when he jumps into the open-air swimming pool located in the park, disaster strikes: Matias jumps into the “shallow [in Finnish literally “low”] part” of the swimming pool and is consequently paralyzed. The final part of the novel follows his hospitalization and subsequent slow and in part humiliating revalidation process.

The bipolar or bidirectional symbolism of good and bad in the novel has many different dimensions: moral, psychological, existential, social, even cosmic. The dimension that interests us most in this article is the social one, and its relation to the suburban environment. In Korhonen’s novel, the theme of uncommunal community is related to the metaphoric rise and fall of the Finnish concrete suburb. Built in the 1970s, it was meant to be a planned utopia of the welfare society. The cranes as “totem animals of hope” (7) and the tower blocks themselves symbolize modern progress which has finally reached the backwoods of Finland. However, from the point of view of the later time level of the novel, the towers seem to be towers of Babel. The belief in endless progress has turned out to be a dangerous hubris, and in the current era of neoliberalism the nemesis of environmental disaster and the harsh realities of economy strike back. The intertextual connection to the tower of Babel challenges the conceptual metaphor GOOD IS UP, but it does not refute it completely. It creates a tension, rather, between the social and other dimensions of the orientational metaphors. Existentially and psychologically, good is indeed up, but when it comes to constructing urban or

suburban environments, the novel seems to say that we shouldn't take our conceptual metaphors too seriously.

### *The Mansion of the Gods*

Like the lives of the characters it describes, the novel itself has a range of “low” cultural antecedents. The climactic scene on Samppalinna hill feels to the narrator, Iris, as if it were “a commercial for a soft drink, or from the *Blue Lagoon*” (231). One of the many self-reflexive intertextual references in the novel is that to the Asterix and Obelix album *The Mansion of the Gods* (*Le Domaine des Dieux* 1971). One of the characters discovers new terms to delineate his surroundings by reading this comic book: “the Romans planned houses in the middle of the forest. I learned a new word. Caesar called the suburbs *periphery*” (68). The Finnish translation of the title, *Jumaltenrannan nousu ja tuho*, means “The Rise and Fall of the Mansion [literally: the beach] of the Gods.” Thus, the reference to the comic is part of a dense web of details and images that is based on the spatial metaphors GOOD IS UP and BAD IS DOWN, and, like the omnipresent pop lyric references, it provides the “low” literary antecedents for literature of the urban periphery. The Asterix book as an intertext emphasizes the negative dimensions of suburbanization: in the comic, Caesar builds the Mansion of Gods in order to harness his rebellious subjects.

There are even more far-reaching connotations. The allusion to the comic book is in the episode titled “Hakoristi,” a misspelling of “hakaristi” (swastika). Put together, the title, the Asterix allusion, and the depiction of a group of suburban kids reading a history book in the library create a historical (as well as metaphorical) continuum, connecting and paralleling the Roman Empire, the Third Reich, and the Finnish concrete suburb. The reference to the song *Nuku pommiin* by Timo Kojo functions in a similar way. The untranslatable title was translated as “Bomb Up,” when Kojo represented Finland in the Eurovision Song Contest in 1982 and got zero points. The song is bad indeed, but it has not been referred to only because of its low position in the hierarchy of cultural products. The lyrics are a warning against the threat of nuclear weapons. The reference is thus meaningful, especially because it is situated in an episode which depicts negotiations between Finnish and Soviet politicians about a contentious and politically inflammable gas pipeline project. It creates a wider context for the observations of the



Finnish party, a family man living in the focal suburb, as he goes home from the negotiations.

This parallelism, and the means by which it is created, seem to suggest that Caesar, Hitler and the leaders of the Soviet Union, as well as the modern urban planners, have been able to build their dark empires because they have skilfully and ruthlessly exploited the lower elements of human nature. It would be too straightforward, however, to try to draw clear moral lessons from the novel. On the one hand, the reader is bound to imagine that the words of Matias, in the last chapter, also have relevance for the ethos of the implied author of the novel—Matias ponders that he “could tell . . . a brief story, which is lacking in dramatic tensions and in moral lessons” (219). But is *Kahden ja yhden yön tarinoita* really such a collection of brief stories “lacking in dramatic tensions and in moral lessons”? As the interlacing network of perspectives related to the environmental crime illustrates, dramatic tension is the very result of combining seemingly detached voices. The reader is invited to make sense of what has happened—and this also includes the possibility of passing moral judgement.

## CONCLUSION

In *Kahden ja yhden yön tarinoita*, the concrete suburb appears as a disconcerting second city of sorts—an urban environment that frames and problematizes the dominant discourses of urbanity in post-war Finland, from garden city ideals and their transformation into the concrete, high-rise suburb, to twenty-first-century newspeak about urban renewal through cultural and community projects. It is urban utopia turned perverse, urban possibility turned sour: a repressed, sickening, degenerating environment, not only metaphorically, but literally so, in terms of the poison introduced into the landscape by environmental criminals. The suburban milieu has been planned to make also its inhabitants into rational social beings, but in the harsh reality of the novel, the low and irrational tendencies of the human mind keep on bursting forth in distorted and grotesque forms, such as sexual perversions, cruelty, and vandalism. Regardless of their upward drive and the panoramic, coherence-giving perspective, the protagonists of the novel remain unable to break free from their past, their base antecedents. While the suburb of the novel is nominally located near one of Finland’s second cities, Turku, its invented toponyms are an indicator of its universalist characteristics,

and the relocation, by the author, of a well-known environmental crime in a real-life Helsinki suburb to a context near literary Turku (Korhonen 44) further accentuates the metonymical, rather than straightforwardly referential, characteristics of this environment. More than a reflection on Turku or its hinterland itself, it can be considered as a literary envisioning of the sprawling, diffuse suburban landscape that typifies parts of post-war southern Finland.

In Korhonen's novel, it is not only the description of this suburban second city in its spatial terms that renders a sense of communal fragmentation, loss of cohesion and disorientation. There is also a clear relation between the structure of the urban environment, the failing resilience of the urban community, and the narrative structure itself. It is left to the reader to conclude whether these characters and their environment are beyond coherent rationality or redemption, and to piece together these various perspectives that make up this complex episode novel.

## NOTE

1. The actual city of Turku is the oldest city in Finland (founded in 1229); it was the first Finnish capital (during the period of the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland), before Helsinki, and as a university city with a large port and continuing shipbuilding industry, it has an international orientation, in particular towards Sweden.

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