

An unusual glimpse of 20th-century Denmark

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Abstract

The history of Danish dreams is a family saga set in 20th century Denmark. The novel details the fate of a handful of characters from different social backgrounds, whose lives become intertwined. A central idea in the novel is the uncertain flow of time that can be controlled by people, and mutually, that controls people. The suspension of the natural laws of time is closely attached to the suspension of another physical point of orientation: places. This article investigates *The history of Danish dreams* by Peter Høeg following the theoretical framework on places and non-places of Marc Augé; and on the significance of time in literature of Patricia Waugh. An investigation of the critique of colonial practices and the use of mimicry in the novel are also part of the study following the theories of mimicry and unhomeliness of Homi K. Bhabha. The aim of the article is to connect the special role of place and time to the creation of magical events in the novel.

Keywords

magic realism; Danish prose; postcolonial literary criticism; theory of space; Peter Høeg

1 Theoretical framework

The following text is an analysis of *The history of Danish dreams* (*Forestilling om det tyvende århundrede*, 1988) by Peter Høeg. In this article my goal is to determine what circumstances create the background for the magical to occur in a magic realist novel. At the core of my research lies the idea that the ‘magical’ happens when the normal course of life is diverted. By this it should be understood that absolutes or universal truths are suspended. The English title references dreams, that can also be interpreted as visions of a world where natural laws do not necessarily apply. In this case, the dreams ought to be understood as expectations and hopes about life in Denmark. *Forestilling* in the original title also points to an act of ‘imagining’, which is not entirely identical to the act of conventional dreaming. The present investigation aims to connect the most important points in the plot to the ‘dreams’ explicitly mentioned in the text. These dreams generally concern the role, status, and expected behaviour of the Danish people.

More often than not, the dreams comprise an idyllic, perhaps unrealistic image of Denmark, however, as the article will demonstrate it, the magical events in the plot create an interesting discourse between the explicit ‘dreams’, and the dream-like descriptions of events.

In this investigation the definition of magic realism is based on the concepts established in *Mimesis, genres and post-colonial discourse: deconstructing magic realism* by Jean-Pierre Durix (1998). In this book magic realism is defined as a later stage of ‘social realism’. As Durix points it out:

”‘magic realism’ [...] witnesses to the creators’ desire to question the naive ‘mirror theory’ according to which fiction directly represents reality. They use metafictional devices to debunk the realistic illusion, while continuing to believe that fiction should have a firm base in reality.” (Durix 1998:23–24)

Starting out from this thought, it becomes clear that Høeg’s handling of places and time in the novel are of key importance. With the so-called anthropological places turned into non-places, and the flow of time being freely manipulated, the text provokes a need for new interpretations for an otherwise historically grounded narrative. The world in which the novel takes place resembles a ‘real’ Denmark, with many scenes being localized as existing parts of the country, yet the narrative does not comply with the natural laws of the world, rather contradicts some of them, as contradiction itself is an important metafictional device.

In literary analysis, understanding the interplay between place and time allows the interpretation of the significance of settings within texts, unravelling the complex layers of meaning embedded within physical landscapes and their cultural meanings. This analytical approach facilitates deeper insights into how spatial elements contribute to narrative construction, character development, and thematic exploration in literature.

This article focuses on the novel by Peter Høeg because it represents both the use of magic realist style, and themes of family, coming of age and modernisation. My investigation of *The history of Danish dreams* showed that the magical consistently occurs in non-places. The non-places in the novel do not appear as malls or airports that are repeatedly referred to in Marc Augé’s text (1995). Rather, they are spaces that once used to be meaningful places for one or more characters, however, they lost what made them a source of identity for the characters that used to inhabit them, and thus they ceased to function as places.

”Every unexpected event, even one that is wholly predictable and recurrent from the ritual point of view (like birth, illness or death), demands to be interpreted not, really, in order to be known, but in order to be recognized: to be made accessible to a discourse, a diagnosis, in terms that are already established, whose announcement will not be liable to shock the guardians of cultural orthodoxy and social syntax. It is hardly surprising that the terms of this discourse should tend to be spatial, once it has become clear that it is the spatial arrangements that express the group’s identity.” (Augé 1995:44–45)

As the following examples will indicate, home in the novel, the epitome of a place, loses its quality of a home and becomes a non-place. Home ceases to identify the people that inhabit it, and as a place becomes completely independent of the characters. These changes are most often brought about by personal traumas and insurmountable differences.

In these destabilized spaces, which do not engender identities for their inhabitants, the characters of the novel face a reality that lost its ground. The greatest personal tragedies are associated with running away and drifting; losing an anchor by committing a mistake, or by falling victim to the violence of the circumstances.

This uncertainty, the loss of foundation makes it possible for the characters in the novels to witness the magical and simply accept it; because the unnatural does not seem to be so, once the most common human experience of the recognition of a place and the identification by that place is suspended.

In literary theory, space refers to the abstract, conceptual aspect of location, often associated with the physical dimensions and properties of a given area. It encompasses the broader, more generalized notion of environment or territory within which events unfold.

Place—more precisely anthropological place, on the other hand, refers to the specific, subjective experience and meaning attributed to a particular location. It encompasses the emotional, historical, and cultural significance imbued within a space by human interaction and perception. Augé defines an anthropological place, that "serves as a reference for all those it assigns to a position, however humble and modest. [...] place—anthropological place—is a principle of meaning for the people who live in it" observing that one's understanding of the world is dependent on the place they occupy. Thus, an anthropological place could be viewed as a place that creates identity. It is interesting to connect the previous thought to Edward Said's notion of memory being affected by consumerism, which he refers to in his memoir (2000). Said describes his time as a student in the United States as lonely, because the linguistic and cultural foundation to make friends was lacking among the American students in his boarding school.

"There was always the feeling that what I missed with my American contemporaries was other languages, Arabic mainly, in which I lived and thought and felt along with English. They seemed less emotional, with little interest in articulating their attitudes and reactions. This was the extraordinary homogenizing power of American life, in which the same TV, clothes, ideological uniformity, in films, newspapers, comics, etc., seemed to limit the complex intercourse of daily life to an unreflective minimum in which memory has no role." (Said 2000:186)

This resonates in Augé's text which describes the anthropological place as a principle of meaning and of intelligibility. The characters in *The history of Danish* dreams lack a solid foundation, the places that provided the characters' identity

are corrupted and often reduced to non-places, which leads to the many hardships and dismay in the novel.

Non-places are defined by Augé as a type of space "in which neither identity, nor relations, nor history really make any sense; spaces in which solitude is experienced as an overburdening or emptying of individuality" (Augé 1995:87). He further elaborates that "As anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality" (Augé 1995:94). By contractuality he refers to the purpose of his exemplary non-places, such as terminals, supermarkets, etc. where people are both seeking a sort of service and are bound by the rules and instructions imposed by these non-places. He concludes that "a person entering a space of a non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of a passenger, customer or driver" (Augé 1995:103). Adding that "[t]he space of non-place creates neither singularity nor relations; only solitude and similitude" (Augé 1995:103).

Parallel to places, another measure of physical existence, time is questioned or suspended in *The history of Danish dreams*. At the beginning of the novel, time is suspended in a medieval noble estate. One of the main characters sets time back in its natural course and escapes both the estate and the grip of the past. However, in another location time is again stopped, given the death of a character who had defined the rules of life in the family, as much as in the local community. Later this dead character is referred to as travelling to Copenhagen. All these irregularities in the natural flow of time are not simple poetic devices; they are represented as realistic events in the lives of the characters. Anomalies in time, such as time travel, temporal loops, and chronological disruptions (for example non-linear storytelling) serve as powerful narrative devices that challenge the conventional understanding of linear temporality.

These temporal anomalies often function as a means to explore deep philosophical questions about fate, free will, and the nature of reality. As Patricia Waugh (1984) argues, the disruption of time in literature creates a reading that invites readers to question the stability of their own temporal existence. The manipulation of time within a narrative enables a reconfiguration of historical and personal identity, allowing literature to question the complex relationship between memory, history, and experience. By altering or distorting the flow of time, authors not only engage in a form of literary experimentation but also offer profound insights into the human condition, and the chaos of the modern world. In *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* Waugh describes contradiction as a characteristic of metafiction, that stops the reader in interpreting the text according to the norm of the real word (Waugh 1984:137). On the contrary, these contradictions in metafiction do not suggest an obvious conclusion, rather, they leave the text in a loop of reinterpretation. In *The history*

of *Danish dreams*, these contradictions usually appear as impossible plot elements: the Countess dies and then travels; a street performer removes several masks and vanishes into thin air as the last mask is shed.

In the chapter of *Metafiction*, Waugh calls metafictional collage or ‘objets trouvés’ ”pieces of undigested ‘real life’ appear to float into the fictional frame” (Waugh 1984:143). Høeg incorporates historical events into the narrative, blending his fiction with an accurate account of the past of Denmark. There lies a stark contrast between the aforementioned anomalies in time and the chronological order in which important events of Danish history are presented in *The history of Danish dreams*. The presence of historical facts in the novel creates contradiction with the impossible fictional elements, such as Carl Laurids growing up at an estate that did not age for centuries. The narrator even point out Carl Laurids’ well preserved, youthful appearance that seems to fade in a slower manner than that of his contemporaries. This remark can be related to the manipulation of time in the first chapter. Possibly Carl Laurids conserved some of the suspension of time that happened in Mørkhøj and that helped him slow down life once he got to the position and status that he did not want to let go of repeating the pattern started by the Count.

Since *The history of Danish dreams* can be interpreted in a postcolonial context, and this latter area of literary criticism has been widely cited as a channel to understand magic realist texts, the present investigation seeks to combine the areas of space theory and postcolonial theory. Looking at the novel through the theoretical framework provided by *The Location of Culture* by Homi K. Bhabha offers insight into the engagement of the novel with issues of cultural identity, colonial history, and the complex interplay between the colonizer and the colonized.

The concept of hybridity of Bhabha is central to understanding *The history of Danish dreams*. The narrative employs a magic realist approach to Danish history, blending the factual and the fantastical. This blending results in a hybrid narrative that questions fixed notions of cultural identity. The novel introduces alternative perspectives and interpretations of historical events, creating a dynamic space where cultural identity is fluid and constantly evolving.

The concept of mimicry, where the colonized imitate the colonizer, can be observed in the exploration of historical events in the novel. Høeg engages in a form of mimicry through the reimagining of Danish history, subverting established narratives and challenging the authority of historical representation.

An example for his interpretation of mimicry is the lifestyle and performance that Carl Laurids and Amalie conduct, that leads up to the departure of Carl Laurids: They build a villa on Strand Drive that is filled with the legacy of different, mostly non-western cultures, that give a sense of having brought something of the ‘outside’ into their life permanently. Carl Laurids even hires a

black woman as their housekeeper in the villa and commands the servants to fear and obey her. The housekeeper and the lower servants in the villa represent another form of mimicry, where the housekeeper assumes authoritative power over her equals, mimicking the position in which Carl Laurids stands, even though the housekeeper herself is an inferior to Carl Laurids.

The couple also welcome many esteemed guests of the Danish elite into their home, where they hold elegant and decadent parties. The mask of the open-minded, perceptive person is shown; however, the narrative unveils the hollow meaning behind the rich and exotic decoration that adorns the family home. This setting is replaced after the birth of Carsten, when the villa is turned into a 'safe' home for the child, that he cannot escape. The uninterest shown by Carl Laurids in both the foreign cultures he so enthusiastically tried to confine behind the walls of the villa, and in his own son highlights the lack of empathy and the superficial, estranged relationship of Carl Laurids to the world around him. Furthermore, Carl Laurids becomes engaged in trading with weapons and is later seen on a picture in the newspaper with an unnamed Latin-American dictator. The reality of wealthy white men interfering in a colonized region's politics resonates in this scene.

The racial prejudices prevalent in Denmark in the mid-century period are also mentioned:

"They were given a warm welcome by Danes who said that at least Ramses wasn't a damn Negro or an Arab and that even the Princess looked more like a white person than the natives of this region, whose dirty fingers had cultivated the spices or felled the trees that were shipped back to Denmark via this trading post." (Høeg 2008:123)¹

Another example is the often-cited scene in which the old street performer (Ramses) removes his masks one by one, until there is nothing left but the mask of a boy and beneath that emptiness (Høeg 2008:128). Denmark has turned its back on sensibility in favour of temporary truths of material subjects.

The narrative maintains a sense of ambivalence, disrupting binary oppositions between colonizer and colonized, historical fact and fiction, and inviting readers to navigate a space that defies fixed categorizations.

This is especially notable in the remarks made in relation to the experience of Adonis and his family's experiences. The sons of Ramses have different political views: Adonis believes in empathy, Pio, a brother to Adonis believes in socialism while H. N. Andersen, president of the Danish East Asia Company, and brother to Adonis believes in capitalism and imperialism. A commonality for the children not only in this chapter, but throughout the novel is that they are rebelling against

¹ "De blev modtaget med venlighed af danskere som sagde at Ramses i det mindste ikke var en satans neger eller araber, og at selv Prinsessen mere lignede et hvidt menneske end en af disse egne indfødte hvis beskidte fingre havde dyrket de krydderier eller fældet de træer som fragtedes tilbage til Danmark via denne handelsstation." (Høeg 1990:104)

the way of life of their parents. The fate of H. N. Andersen is particularly interesting, since he can be viewed as a second-generation immigrant, simultaneously he is the first one in the family to assume a fully 'Danish' identity. Not only is he a leading actor in Denmark's commercial ventures in Asia, but he drifts so far away from his family, that when he and his parents travel on the same ship, they do not recognise each other:

"He amused himself with these two strange old characters – Ramses and the Princess that is – because, since they at least spoke his mother tongue, he could explain to them that the company had become what it was only by honoring Duty and Work, the sole true gods, which were to replace the ridiculous idols of the natives in these Hottentot countries." (Høeg 2008:123)²

The theory of the 'third space' by Bhabha is fitting to the narrative structure of the novel. Høeg creates a narrative space that exists in-between established categories, disrupting conventional understandings of history and cultural identity. This 'third space' becomes a site for cultural translation, where different historical perspectives and narratives converge. Many examples can be traced throughout the novel where fictional characters interact with real life, prominent figures of Danish history. An interesting example is a conversation between Carl Laurids, Johannes V. Jensen and Thomas Madsen-Mygdal,³ who are presented as close acquaintances in the novel. J. V. Jensen and Th. Madsen-Mygdal often visit the Mahogany-villa, where they drink champagne and talk about political questions. The following citation shows Carl Laurids as a source of inspiration for Johannes V. Jensen:

"There then followed a short break in the conversation while the two men's glasses were topped up with champagne, and during this break Carl Laurids places his hands on their shoulders and says, »Gentlemen, you need have no fears for the Good Old Days; we'll start turning them out again just as soon as demand is great enough.« This sentence, like so many of Carl Laurids's other remarks, was committed to memory and was to crop up several times in Johannes V. Jensen's works, along with other pearls of wisdom regarding science and finance." (Høeg 2008:250–251)⁴

² "Han underholdt sig med de to sære gamlinge, som altså er Ramses og Prinsessen, fordi de i det mindste talte modersmålet så han kunne forklare dem at Kompagniet kun var blevet hvad det var ved at tilbede Pligten og Arbejdet, som bar de eneste sande guder og som i disse hottentotlande skulle erstatte de indfødtes latterlige statuer." (Høeg 1990:104)

³ Johannes V. Jensen (1873–1950) and Thomas Madsen Mygdahl (1876–1943) were a Nobel-prize winning author, and a former Minister of Agriculture and Prime Minister of Denmark, respectively.

⁴ "og her kom en kort pause i samtalen, fordi de to mænd fik fyldt deres glas op med champagne, og i denne pause lægger Carl Laurids sine hænder på deres skuldre og siger mine Herrer, De gode gamle Dage skal De ikke være bekymret for, dem begynder vi at producere igen når efterspørgslen er stor nok. Denne sætning blev husket som så mange andre af Carl Laurids' bemærkninger, og den skulle dukke op flere steder i Johannes V.

In another example, Emil Glückstadt,⁵ then director of Landmandsbanken, is implied to have been friend of Carl Laurids, who in turn is implied to have been partially responsible for the crash of Landmandsbanken. This example, together with the previous one refers to Carl Laurids as a genius background figure, who took part in many of the 1920s most important political events and scandals. The active role of Carl Laurids in the financial and political life echoes his time at Mørkhøj, where he also controlled the flow of events, and his role in setting time back into its natural course. The use of magic realism by Høeg facilitates a cultural translation that challenges the otherwise hegemonic representations of Danish history.

2 Key moments in *The history of Danish dreams*

The history of Danish dreams demonstrates the exploration of the magic realist landscape by Høeg, intertwining the historical and the fantastical to craft a narrative that transcends conventional boundaries. As the title suggests, the novel becomes a canvas on which Danish history is painted with strokes of imagination and wonder.

Høeg's text invites readers to reconsider the past through a magical lens, questioning the veracity of historical narratives and the impact of collective dreams on the identity of a nation. This history is presented through the lives of eight people who all become related as they form three generations of a family and step into the future with the fourth generation. The personal level often reflects the sentiments of a whole segment of society, thus introducing the dreams that inspire and weigh down both the characters in the novel and the Danes of the twentieth century in general.

The structure of *The history of Danish Dreams* consists of a foreword and three parts. The first part is made up of four chapters concerning the generation of grandparents. The second part is of two chapters, and it depicts the lives of the generation of the parents. The last part contains a single chapter only, that is about the generation of the children. This specific structuring aims to highlight not only the linear nature of the story telling, but also to emphasize that *The history of Danish dreams* is a family saga.

The foreword of the novel sets up the context of the performance of storytelling. It frames the main plot as a long chain of family anecdotes discovered by an anonymous narrator, who reached out to the generation of the children in the novel, that is to Maria and Carsten, and who finally reveals itself to be Mads, the

Jensens forfatterskab sammen med andre gyldne sandheder om videnskab og økonomi.” (Høeg 1990:207)

⁵ Emil Raffael Glückstadt (1875–1923) was a director of Landmandsbanken, Scandinavia's biggest bank at the time. Landmandsbanken later became what is known today as Danske Bank.

grandson. The foreword already creates a dual air of documentarism and mystery, that are typical for the magic realist style. The realistic descriptions of towns and landscapes around Denmark in the novel, combined with the recognizable historical events and personalities leave the impression of a historical novel, however they only highlight the realism that Høeg is working with.

The first chapter shall disrupt the image of absolute realism swiftly, as it takes place in a special place in Denmark where time stood still for centuries. In 1918 Carl Laurids traces back the happenings in Mørkhøj for over 400 years earlier when the estate of Mørkhøj was founded. A most explicit question arises: does time matter? To escape the inevitable fall of the aristocracy that the Count of Mørkhøj had foreseen, he ordered the people of the estate to stop recording time. Later, after a debate with other prominent figures of Danish history he also has the clocks stopped around the estate and a wall to be erected as an act of isolation. Carl Laurids takes over the position of the companion of the Count and spends a lot of time reading through the secret records about the life on the Estate of centuries past. When the Count gets sick, the young man reads him the records, reaching the present at the exact moment when the Count dies.

Mørkhøj is the only real place in the novel according to the description of a place by Augé. With the passing of time suspended, Mørkhøj does not take part in the modernization of Western Europe during the industrial revolution and the following period. As such, the estate constantly identifies its residents, lending them eternal life. When Carl Laurids, a literal extraterrestrial, who only ascended to his position because he was adopted by the steward of the count, catches a glimpse of the outside world and the significance of history, he develops an interest in knowledge, it is even implied that he murders to get closer to more power and to obtain more knowledge. With his actions, time returns to its natural course in Mørkhøj, and the Count inevitably perishes because of that. Mørkhøj begins to catch up to the rest of the world in 1918, the last year of World War I. The estate ceases to be the place it used to be because such estates no longer exist in 1918. The Count has died and Carl Laurids, who set the events in motion will abandon Mørkhøj, since it does not have any opportunities for a young, ambitious man like himself, causing the estate to deteriorate and blend into the rest of the world.

The following chapters continue the description of acceleration: In these times people, who are no longer remembered—such as the grandfather of Amalie—fade out of life. Amalie notices that her father is losing his contours, becoming transparent just like her paternal grandfather. She spends her childhood in a closed off, labyrinth-like mansion. There is a parallel between this isolation, and the fenced-off life Carl Laurids experienced.

Contrary to the welcoming attitude towards the future of the Teander family, the surroundings of Carl Laurids are all about shutting out the future and change,

even though Carl Laurids himself is also a bringer of the future, reinstating time in Mørkhøj. Following her grandmother's death, time seems to become unregulated and slip out of control—that is, the person who appeared to have manipulated time had passed away. The will of the grandmother describes everything from World War I to the future life and habits of the family. A small, but rather magical detail is that the will predicts eternity, something that is impossible to grasp, impossible to write down and fit into an envelope. After the grandmother's death time loses its meaning and day and night merge in Rudkøbing.

Many categories of dreams are explicitly named throughout the novel. After all the English translation of the title is also *The history of Danish dreams*. The first chapter explained a dream about sustaining a moment in time, thus stopping the natural flow of events. The second chapter acts as an answer to the first: the new dream is of the nouveau riche, a perfect grip on time. There is an obvious change between social classes of influence, but also of attitudes towards time. While the first dream wanted to suspend the course of time, the second dream acknowledged it, yet thought itself to be superior to time. It is noticeable though, that time in itself is not the only key factor in the novel. It does appear to assume an important role, given that the core question asked in the first chapter and reflected on in the rest of the novel is time, but time is always interpreted in relation to a place.

Taking the theory of Augé as a starting point, the spaces that the characters in *The history of Danish dreams* inhabit should generally be labelled as places. A place, that helps to identify a person, a home for example. Given the nature of a family saga such as the novel by Høeg, the most featured locations are family homes. At least they must be associated with the family home, because a group of relatives live in them. However, as most examples will demonstrate, these locations do not qualify as places in the theoretical sense. The mansion, where Amalie is brought up does not identify Amalie as a daughter. It does not identify Christoffer, the biological father of Amalie as a father either. Most people who do not escape the mansion simply disappear, such as the grandparents and Christoffer. The estate of Carl Laurids is similar in the sense, that by the time it catches up to modernity, meaning it is a 'home' to Carl Laurids, he does not find an identity there. He is an orphan, he finds his calling outside the walls of the estate, dressing as an outsider and bringing about the fall of the isolated world that was established by the Count. Isolation is another heavily featured theme in the novel.

Isolation is also related to the non-place theory, since non-places single out the individual, provide them with anonymity and eliminate situations of conversation. Some spaces that are thought to have been places in the past become non-places because they disappear; they no longer can be found.

The third chapter introduces a new dream: the dream of evangelical mission to free the world of sin and a dream of universal salvation via the rise of the working class and preaching of holy poverty supported by miracles performed by Anna Bak.

The fourth chapter provides a spatial intersection with the previous ones, because the new characters cross paths with the ones from chapter one, two and three. Throughout the fourth chapter several personal dreams are mentioned: Caesar, the paternal grandfather of Adonis dreams of everlasting fame thanks to his widely publicized crimes and adventures. Ramses dreams of the life of a performer, of freedom, peace, and isolation from the world of Caesar. The narrator mentions that it dreams the same dream as Ramses, S. S. Blicher and H. C. Andersen⁶. Their common dream is about towns to be destroyed by a certain mysterious monster. The dream is referred to after a scene, where Ramses is witness to the preaching of his son, Pio, about socialist ideas in Rudkøbing. Pio is later cornered by the police for his ideas.

Running away is a recurring theme in the novel, that brings about determinative changes, often in more than a single character's life: Carl Laurids escapes poverty, Amalie escapes the controlled life, Anna escapes the congregation of her father, and Ramses and his sons all try to divert from the course of life of their forefathers.

The fifth chapter begins the discussion of the next generation; the main characters who used to be children and teenagers in the first four chapters grow up, and the focus shifts from their parents to themselves and their relationships with each other.

People living in the slums of Christianshavn keep dreaming of the idyll of the meadows and small houses. The dream of Copenhagen is the villager.

After having moved in, Anna starts cleaning the home frantically, having envisioned that the building is slowly sinking. She attempts to become a perfect Danish housewife, which is yet another dream of the century. She aims to penetrate through every layer and clean everything—and that absolute cleanliness becomes the next dream. This pursuit of the impossible also resonates in Amalie's grandmother and the Count.

Anna and Adonis dream of protecting Maria from becoming like the other kids in the slum. Maria is involved with a gang of youth in the neighbourhood with whom she commits violent crimes. This results in a later questioning, which draws upon the dream of scientific regularity among human beings. Maria is put to trial at the children's welfare panel for participating in the crimes committed by youth gangs. Similarly to her parents, the judges cannot comprehend her and can only see her as the manifestation of the Danish dream of the innocent child. But it is Maria who wants them to see this image of her. It also alludes to the dream of the

⁶ S.S. Blicher (1782–1848) and H.C. Andersen (1805–1875) are both prominent figures of poetic realism in Danish literature.

youth escaping the slum. Maria spends most of her time on the streets, eventually meeting her grandparents—the Princess and Ramses—and Adonis at a railway station where Adonis is performing.

They are reunited because the Danes "had imported an Indian village"⁷ (Høeg 2008:187) to Copenhagen. This is a work of Adonis' imperialist brother, N. H. Andersen. He tried to take a step towards realising the Danish dream of the exotic. The Danes are thought to be thinking, that the imported people are happy to continue living their life in the ad hoc marketplace imitating the essence of the western thought of South Asia.

The second to last chapter begins with Amalie leaving Rudkøbing along with her father and two sisters, for Copenhagen. Amalie tells her dreams of her future to her father. This dream is about Amalie herself being the patron saint of the march of heroic poverty through Copenhagen.

The dream of affluence makes itself present after Amalie and Carl Laurids meet in a hot air balloon. The circumstances of this romance lead to the dream of making something of oneself. After the wedding Amalie and Carl Laurids live in a villa on Strand Drive overlooking the village of Skovshoved.

After the birth of Carsten, the relationship between Amalie and Carl Laurids deteriorates because the man cannot tolerate that Amalie feels a deeper, unconditional love for their son. Soon after this Carl Laurids begins to 'fade', and in a short time he leaves Amalie and Carsten. Thus, the dream of a happy and well-to-do husband and wife is gone. A dream of the dishonoured, single mother in despair follows, that is soon replaced by the dream of Amalie fixing her life and keeping Carsten safe via her and Carl Laurids' acquaintances. On the seventh day after the departure of Carl Laurids, work starts in the house, and it goes on for another week. The goal is to transform the house into a 'barred incubator' for Carsten. Amalie becomes a courtesan and a perfect host in elegant circles, performing the Danish dream of reticence. Contrary to that, Amalie has a dream of the 'truth' where she has only one lover.

The seventh and last chapter reveals the fate of Carsten, Maria, and their remaining family. After leaving the sunken building, Maria becomes accomplice in prostitution. The idea of the 1940s dream of how to treat young girls is mentioned in contrast with the life of these poor, neglected girls whose innocence is taken in exchange for some money.

At Annebjerg, where Maria is taken after her trial, she becomes the protagonist of the dream of a lost and now saved girl. She loses track of time, because for the first time she feels safe and at home somewhere.

During an encounter with a repairman, a dream of life resembling western movies, which implies exaggerated feelings and interactions, and unquestionable attraction between men and women, is referred to.

⁷ "[...] her havde importeret en indisk landsby." (Høeg 1990:155)

In a decisive moment, Maria meets a young man by the highway near the institution. The dream of the charming soldier takes her over and she follows the man down the road, leaving the safe walls of Annebjerg. The soldier turns out to be German, referring to the occupation of Denmark by the Third Reich during World War II. After suffering repeated attempts of sexual abuse, Maria leaves for Sorø. By the time when Maria leaves Annebjerg, Carsten has been studying in Sorø for two years. Sorø Academy stands for several dreams: the dream of Athenian education, the dream of Spartan discipline and strength and the dream of fragile love of the idyllic Danish countryside. Carsten can stay out of the shadow cast by the clouds of an approaching world war at Sorø. He develops a patriotic identity and manages to live the life of an unscathed, though privileged youth. At a festivity during midsummer night Carsten and Maria meet by chance, and they fall for each other.

After Carsten and Maria settle down in a villa by the lake, their life seems to imitate the general attitude of the 1950s, a dream of ideal oblivion, when the country forgets about its immediate past, more so, attempts to sink into binding denial. One important reference to this is the army intelligence's secret office on the first floor of the villa where the couple lives. On a bicycle trip, Carsten and Maria visit many locations that have been mentioned in the novel before, such as Mørkhøj and Rudkøbing. During this trip Maria gets pregnant.

Maria gives birth to Madelene and Mads, and both parents have different dreams about their future identities: who they belong to, because they see them as their own, and what their future might be.

The family moves in next-door to Amalie on Strand Drive. Carsten and Maria cannot hold out under the pressure of their countless dreams that do not seem to come true. The family moves between Gentofte and the house by the lake, while the parents are repeatedly hospitalized for their severe mental health issues.

The family reassembles for a short period—Ramses, the Princess, Adonis, Amalie, Maria, Carsten, Mads and Madelene. Christoffer is not found, nor his side of the family, while Carl Laurids is seen on a picture taken in an unnamed South American dictatorship standing in the background. In an absurd turn of events, Ramses and the Princess are run over by trucks. Adonis witnesses that and simply walks away. Madelene becomes an addict and later joins an extremist group. Mads starts many careers but cannot finish anything and finally moves back to the house by the Lakes to assist to his parents. His only happy moments are when the family gathers, but they never stay together for long. Maria and Carsten organise the launching of a ship on the Sortedam lake, with the goal of leaving Denmark, but disguising it as a gift to the country.

Many influential people attend the event, and they all seem to believe that there is truly a magnificent ship being gifted by Maria and Carsten. Mads attempts to shed light onto the absurdity of the scene, but Maria waves him off.

”And now Maria and Carsten stepped on board, together with the mayor and the Prime Minister and Amalie and Madelene and a good number of other people; an orchestra played and, as though to order, the moon rose up into the sunset sky.” (Høeg 2008:407)⁸

Mads goes back to the house and thinks of his family who might never return. Mads identifies as the narrator and says that all Danish families had similar attitudes towards, and dreams about life in Denmark. He continues with the suggestion that humanity should attempt to picture the totality of the 20th century.

3 An unusual glimpse at places and the role of family

The non-place theory of Augé cites highways, airports, metro stations, shopping centres and similar spaces of high fluctuation as the primary examples of non-places. People who occupy these spaces only do so temporarily, and they are generally losing their identity, gaining freedom through anonymity, and extracting themselves from the hardships of life pre-supermodernity.

It is noticeable that magical events occur repeatedly in places—anthropological places—that somehow lost their quality of ‘place’ and can be interpreted as non-places. A complex example for this is the ending of Anna’s storyline. After Anna and Adonis became a couple and moved to the slums of Christianshavn, Copenhagen, their relationship swiftly deteriorates, just as the building in which they supposedly reside begins to sink. Christianshavn is home to hopes for a simpler, old, provincial life to return, but the big city keeps expanding and swallows everyone instead. The villages, the countryside that used to surround the city are devoured by the industrial modernization and increasing population. Capitalism eradicates the traces of more peaceful and balanced life in the countryside.

The neighbourhood is described as a shifting, unstable land from which all residents wish to escape. Anna has a vision that the building is going to sink into the canal. Neither Adonis nor Anna have a connection with the apartment in Christianshavn. Adonis roams the streets trying to live the performer’s life that he wished for, unconsciously repeating his forefathers’ pattern of leaving their family behind while trying to break out of poverty. Not even the birth of their daughter, Maria, whom Thorvald, the father of Anna had thought to be the new chosen one, can change the parents’ lack of connection to the apartment.

Anna and Adonis are not fit for parents, just as the other children in the novel had difficult childhoods and unfit parents. Carl Laurids became an orphan early on, the mother of Amalie died young, and her father could not take on the challenges of the world due to his upbringing, Adonis and Carsten are abandoned by their fathers, Ramses and Carl Laurids, and Amalie develops an incestuous

⁸ ”Nu gik Maria og Carsten ombord, og overborgmesteren og ministeren og Amalie og Madelene og en del andre mennesker fulgte med, og der var et orkester der spillede, og som om den var bestilt til det steg månen op på solnedgangshimlen” (Høeg 1990:333)

relationship with Carl Laurids, while the identity of Anna as a daughter was replaced by the identity of a martyr in her childhood. Just like Carl Laurids, Anna and Maria before, Carsten is treated as a chosen one, and as such, he is bound to spend his childhood in confinement; Maria grew up on the streets and thus her missing home also forced her into isolation; isolation from childhood and from her family. The parent-child relationship is representative of the restlessness and misery whole century; it does not matter which social class one was born to, the identities of the parents and children are suspended by more pressing matters, by a fight for wealth, power, glory, and freedom. Following Augé's thought process, if the tasks that a person must do at a certain place are determinative of the place's quality, then it can be concluded that stepping up as a parent is determinative of a family home. In *The history of Danish dreams* the parents never really behave as parents, and because of that none of the family homes are functioning as homes anymore.

Anna's tireless cleaning reflects on the instability of the first decades of the twentieth century that saw women trying to cope with the ever so hostile and dangerously rapid world. The desperation of Anna and her tireless cleaning kept the apartment on the second-floor height, even though the building sank under it.

The tenants move away from the building where Anna and Adonis lived. Another place disappears. Anna stays within the sinking building, having achieved her goal of getting to the depth of things and to clean all irregularities out of the house, so she walks away through water and moonshine to live the youth she was not given. This event is perhaps the most important for my research in the whole novel. A house sinks in the course of a few days, moving vertically down in a canal in Copenhagen, floor by floor. Nobody seems to notice anything irregular, only Anna is aware of the motion, but she does not panic or flee the building either. For some time, the apartment even remains hovering in the air at its original height on the second floor, but later it also sinks. One could argue that the apartment where Anna and Adonis live and raise their daughter is a non-place. Anna and Adonis did not really live together in that apartment in the traditional sense of living together. Nor did they raise Maria, who is raised by the streets and is assigned the identity of a gang member, a criminal. Maria is not a daughter in the apartment and Anna and Adonis are not parents. They barely speak to each other, and when Maria and Adonis converse, it happens outside. Anna, who is obsessed with cleaning acts somewhat like a person at home, because people are generally supposed to take care of their territory. However, Anna does not simply take care of household chores. Anna cleans every irregularity in the apartment, practically erasing it. Perhaps a consequence of a childhood spent in a cage, Anna disinfects and sterilises every surface around her, until all life that could survive in that environment vanishes.

By the time she considers the apartment clean, Adonis and Maria both disappear completely from her life, and she has no reason to stay either. The apartment sinks and thus ceases to exist. Anna walks away on the surface of the water, erasing herself after having erased everything else from her life. The hardships of life, the lack of opportunities, the reality of the slums and the traumas of youth created a life situation in which a group of related people could not function as a family, and their property could not function as a home. This loss of identity and purpose is expressed with the sinking of the building and the departure of Anna.

In a scene prior to Anna and Adonis' building sinking, Amalie sees her paternal great grandfather collecting latrine buckets from their Copenhagen courtyard. This is another magical vision, one of many examples in the novel, that highlights the weight of a past carried on the shoulders of the characters. Elsewhere Amalie begins fasting for attention and to have more intense visions. She develops anorexia but the family and teachers do not bother. Amalie is often on the brink of death. In a sense, the deteriorating body of Amalie is another example for a place that is about to be abandoned and thus begins to shut down. Amalie cannot be herself in her own body, she wishes to stay in a half catatonic state.

The last pages of the novel seem to reinforce my theory of the intentional use of non-places as a base for absurd, and often magical things to occur.

To begin with, the saga of the Mahogany family⁹ ends with the inauguration of a boat owned by Maria and Carsten. It is important to note that the launching of the boat in the novel takes place by a lake, which contradicts the purpose of the inauguration as in getting on a boat and sailing away. The novel also describes the mass hypnosis that seems to be effective for all the characters except Mads. They all believe that they are about to witness a great ship setting sail. This is also expressed in the way the characters interact: the mayor and the Prime Minister also board the boat even though they are not members of the family and are appointed political leaders. Maria scolds Mads who has been helping both her and Carsten for so long.

Another example for a non-place is the death of Ramses and the Princess witnessed by Adonis. They try to cross a highway, a typical example of a non-place, when they are run over by several trucks. Adonis walks away, but he keeps following the highway. The Princess, who spent her life living off the identity she had, and Ramses, whose identity is a consequence of generational trauma that was passed down to Adonis and through him to Maria, die in an accident where identity is reduced to a single identifier: a license plate. Later the narrator reveals that the corpses were taken to a crematory, another non-place. A crematory is an example of a non-place that historically used to engender identities. In previous

⁹ Carl Laurids assumed this surname when he started his businesses, and so his wife, Amalie, and their children and grandchildren are collectively the Mahoganys.

eras death and attending to the dead was a ceremonious phenomenon. With modern times, the act of disposing of the bodies becomes reduced to invisibility. In the case of the Princess and Ramses the lack of identification is even more striking.

Their remains are transported to the crematory already lacking an identity, since their corpses are not recognizable, and nobody comes to identify them. Then, they are cremated, turned into ashes and dust, and disposed of in a common grave. These examples show that the loss or reduction of identity that occurs when people navigate through non-places engenders the unexpected, however the shock of the unexpected is not sensible anymore, because those, who could react to the shock have already freed themselves from an identity.

Høeg employs magic realism in *The history of Danish dreams* to weave an alternative historical tapestry, while constructing a familial saga, since the novel traces the lives of various characters whose destinies intersect through time, creating a system of interconnected stories that echo through Danish history. Høeg uses magic realism as a tool to transcend the limitations of conventional storytelling, offering readers a heightened, imaginative experience, and a reflection upon the collective consciousness of Danish society. Time stands still, buildings sink, the dead keep on participating in real life events. The realism of the historical accounts in the novel is masked by the impossibility of the magical. The characters do not seem to notice the uncanny nature of some of the happenings, following the magic realist tradition of the magical raising no doubt or concern. All fantastical elements are accepted and integrated well into the reality of the narrative. The reader might be confused and thrown off thinking rationally as the realism in the novel would presuppose, but the magical highlights the human conditions, the hidden truth in Høeg's depiction of Denmark in the 20th century.

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