

“Magnificent desolation”: The Memory of Welfare and the Archeology of Shame in the Novels of Johan Harstad

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The anthropologist and anarchist David Graeber begins his essay “Of Flying Cars and the Declining Rate of Profit” by noting that “[t]here is a secret shame hovering over all of us in the twenty-first century” (Graeber 2015: 105). As he sees it, this embarrassment is “rooted in a profound sense of disappointment about the nature of the world we live in, a sense of broken promise – of a solemn promise we felt we were given as children” (ib.). Graeber’s “we” is not as inclusive as it might initially seem: even if this sense of shame, he writes, “affects everyone”, it is “particularly acute” for those “in their forties and fifties” – for people like Graeber himself, who was born in 1961, and who was thus, as he notes, “eight years old at the time of the Apollo moon landing” (ib.). To him, then, this sense of shame defines a particular generation, and it is tied to the shared memory of a particular promise that has left this generation disappointed. This disappoint-

ment concerns, Graeber notes, “the conspicuous absence, in 2015, of flying cars” (ib.) – or, less flippantly, the failure of grandiose technological innovations anticipated in the fifties and sixties to materialize. If people in the sixties still expected to see moon travel, flying cars, antigravity fields, and freely distributed immortality drugs by the turn of the millennium, the desultory mood of cultural production since the seventies has in fact been, Graeber writes, “a prolonged meditation on technological changes that never happened” (ib.: 105-106).

So where did we go wrong? For Graeber, the main agent in the downscaling of the future is the pervasive neoliberalization of life, and the concomitant rise of a computerized bureaucracy that keeps creativity and innovation chained to the cash nexus and barred from dreaming up greater things. In a periodizing gesture that finds confirmation in other recent histories of neoliberalism (cf. Arrighi; Burgin; Harvey; Stedman Jones), Graeber locates a turning point in the early seventies – in the direct aftermath of the moon landing: “There appears to have been a profound shift, beginning in the seventies, from investment in technologies associated with the possibility of alternative futures to investment technologies [*sic*] that furthered labor discipline and social control” (ib.: 118). In the demoralized world of neoliberalism, “administrative imperatives have become not the means, but the end of technological development” (ib.: 140). All that is left is a pervasive sense of shame.

Yet why should this disappointment register as shame? Why be ashamed of a socioeconomic shift Graeber and his generation are not in any strict sense guilty of, neither personally nor collectively? Here it is useful to recall the standard distinction between guilt and shame: according to Ruth Leys, if the former refers to a recognition of personal fault, the latter emerges “when the individual becomes aware of being exposed to the diminishing or disapproving gaze of another”

(Leys 2009: 10). Shame thus pertains to “your deficiencies and inadequacies as a person as these are revealed to the shaming gaze of the other” (ib.: 11). When Graeber describes his generation’s sense of shame as an experience of feeling “embarrassed at our own indignation, ashamed we were ever so silly to believe our elders to begin with” (Graeber 2015: 104), it is not hard to see who provides the shaming gaze here: those who were never so silly, those who never held any hope of a “redemptive future that will be fundamentally different than the world today” (ib.: 128) – those, in other words, who have only ever known a fully neoliberalized world, and do not even remember the promise of an alternative future. These younger generations cannot feel the shame Graeber describes; they can only make Graeber and his generation feel it. Shame, in other words, is rooted in different generational experiences, and therefore in different generational memories: what is shameful is a particular memory of a future that never materialized, and the confrontation with a generation that does *not* remember that abandoned future.

If this lack of memory and therefore shame sounds like a good thing for these younger generations, we need to ask what comes in the place of the previous generation’s shame. Indeed, it is possible to consider shame as not an unconditionally bad thing. In their book *In Defense of Shame*, Julien Deonna, Raffaele Rodogno, and Fabrice Teroni argue for a distinction between “episodic” shame, which is typically beset by negative affect, and a more productive form of shame understood as a “disposition”, as a longer-term capacity for shame, which is generally considered to be “revelatory of people’s integrity” (Deonna et al. 2011: 154); it shows people as “decent, *puisque*, or modest” (ib.: 16). Missing such a disposition is, then, as alienating and disorienting as being afflicted by episodic shame. Indeed, if younger generations are not haunted by the betrayed promise of a better future,

they do not for all that recover a new sense of direction and of a different future. At least shame preserves the memory of a past when the future could have been different.

If shame is what sets Graeber's generation apart from younger ones, they share a sense that the future is foreclosed. In the study of cultural memory, it has become customary to observe that the "avalanche of memory discourses" since the eighties has overwhelmed "an earlier activist imagination of the future" (Huysen 2003: 6), or even the hopes and dreams that made people look forward to, say, flying cars. Titles of recent volumes such as *The Future of Memory* (edited by Richard Crownshaw, Jane Kilby, and Antony Rowland) and *Memory and the Future* (edited by Yifat Gutman, Adam D. Brown, and Amy Sodaro) testify to the tension between memory and desire, between an orientation toward the past and an openness to the future; they signal a worry that the rise of memory – and, in this case, a shame-inducing memory – has come at the expense of an imagining of the future (cf. Vermeulen 2016: 473-79). What Graeber's analysis adds to this diagnosis of contemporary memory culture is the insight that the foreclosure of the future is an effect of the ascendancy of neoliberalism and its downscaling of the imagination.

In her recent book *Undoing the Demos*, Wendy Brown remarks on the rhetoric of diminishment that besets neoliberalism's shift from imaginative expansion to intensified control; neoliberal reason officially (but only officially) promotes *small states*, and disguises its operations under a euphemistic vocabulary of *downsizing*, *wage suppression*, *shared sacrifices*, "*realistic*" *social demands*, and injunctions to get *lean* and *nimble*. The upshot of this reprogramming, for Brown, is that larger-scale imaginaries become unavailable (Brown 2015: 108). In this essay, I further explore the relation between scale, futurelessness, memory, and shame. More specifically, I read the work of the Norwegian novelist Johan Harstad to trace

how different generational memories of larger scales and of alternative futures register as different variants of shame. If Harstad's novels do not manage to imagine a livable future, they do present an archeology of the pervasive sense of futurelessness that is the flip-side of a cultural obsession with memory.

Harstad's capitalist realism

The first three novels of the celebrated Norwegian writer Johan Harstad – a fourth novel, *Max, Mischa & Tetoffensiven*, was published in 2015 – offer a sustained engagement with the complex affective disposition of a generation that is too young to remember the promise of an alternative future and yet finds itself incapable of doing without shame and surrendering to a liberating state of shamelessness. Born in 1979, Harstad belongs to a generation that was never silly enough to believe in flying cars; born in Stavanger and now living in Oslo, the generational memory that permeates his writing is that of the gradual unraveling of the welfare state. In Harstad's novels, the aspirations underlying the welfare state are consistently connected to the grandiose ambitions informing the space program (which is not, in Harstad's generational memory, tainted by its association with the Cold War, an aspect that might be inescapable for earlier generations).¹

The generational memory of this program, or the absence of such a memory, defines the lives of his protagonists. Albert Åberg, the protagonist and narrator of *Hasselby* (2007), is born in Sweden 1965, and admits that he “had believed in [the welfare state] for a while” (Harstad 2007: 19); he copes with

1 For an evocation of the affective life of “the heroic era of spaceflight from 1961 to 1972” (Dean 2015, 8) and the recent end of the second space program, see Dean.

the shame this brings by projecting it onto his father, who, born in 1928, is characterized as “a man of social democracy” who refuses to renounce the *Folkhemmet* model – the “most powerful metaphor” for the Swedish welfare state (Francis Sejersted qtd in Waage 235n.; Harstad 2007: 19).² Mattias, the narrator-protagonist of *Buzz Aldrin, What Happened to You in All the Confusion?* (2005), was born on the night of the moon landing, and is not burdened by the shame of having believed in the promise it embodied; the upshot of this lack of shame is a dearth of ambition and direction that leaves him profoundly depressed (cf. Oxfeldt). Finally, Harstad’s Brage Prize-winning young adult novel *172 Hours on the Moon* (2008) looks beyond the alternatives of a demoralizing shamelessness and a shamed memory, and instead imagines an update of the space program. The venture ends disastrously; like *Hässelby*, *172 Hours* ends with the end of the world and leaves no hope for an alternative future.

The novels’ focus on disillusionment and shame – two negative affects that the novels consistently connect – and their failure to articulate credible alternative futures undeniably point to a lack of political vision. Still, I want to argue, this limitation is less an imaginative or aesthetic failure than a feature of the world they depict; it is, in a sense, a measure of their *realism*. Especially in *Hässelby* and *Buzz Aldrin*, the tone and texture of Harstad’s writing is marked by his fairly naïve, deeply sensitive, and emotionally exuberant male narrators, who grant the reader unrestricted access to their desires, anxieties, and thoughts. His novels are also saturated by references to contemporary popular and indie culture,

2. Quotations are from the English translations for *Buzz Aldrin* and *172 Hours on the Moon*, and from the Norwegian original for *Hässelby*, which has as yet not been translated into English. All other translations from the Norwegian are mine.

childhood nostalgia (most clearly through the repurposing of Albert Åberg, or Alfie Atkins, an iconic children's book and animated cartoon figure), geeky space science, and *Star Wars*; for all their occasional surrealism, they are eminently *realist* attempts to capture the texture of contemporary life.³

Unmoored from the memory of the hope of a world that would be resolutely different from the one that generates his protagonists' discontent, the novels' relentless futurelessness is part of the reality they capture. The double absence of a *remembered* and an *anticipated* alternative to the present points to the way that bureaucratized neoliberalism, as it has been analyzed by Graeber, has saturated the generational experience that Harstad describes; for this generation, to recycle a phrase (incorrectly) attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (Fisher 2009: 2). It is perhaps most accurate to describe Harstad's work as an instance of "capitalist realism" as Mark Fisher has influentially defined it: a mode of writing responding to "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (ib.). To the extent that Harstad's writing evokes the affective discontent besetting this imaginative blockage through the articulation of shame and disillusionment, it counts as a work of capitalist realism.⁴

3 The Norwegian critic Bernhard Ellefsen characterizes Harstad's novels as examples of "(neo)realism" (Ellefsen 2009), while Ane Farsethås sees them undertake an "archeology of the present through memory work [*samtidsarkeologisk minnearbeid*]" (Farsethås 2005).

4 Bernhard Ellefsen, who has written the most extensive critique of Harstad's work that I am aware of, reads this imaginative limitation as an aesthetic failure rather than as a mark of its realism: "Harstad's despair over the banality and superficiality of everyday life [...] is almost meaningless without a corresponding desire to change the way we apprehend [*erkjennelse*] this life" (Ellefsen 2009). For

Harstad's work somewhat perversely takes Jameson's and Žižek's observation on the inability to imagine the end of capitalism as an invitation to imagine the end of the world – and to do so without hesitation or consolation. Shifts between scales – the minor scale of personal affect, the vast scale of global apocalypse – are a crucial aspect of his writing. Harstad's literary worlds are organized around the opposition between two scales. On the one hand, there is the middling scale of everyday life, exemplified by Mattias's lack of worldly ambition in *Buzz Aldrin*, by the mundane lives of the three teenagers who will travel to the moon in *172 Hours*, and by the apartment buildings in the eventless and bland Stockholm suburb Hässelby. On the other, there is an imagination that is attracted to a far larger scale; apart from the cosmic catastrophes that end *172 Hours* and *Hässelby*, there are the pervasive themes of climate change and of moon travel, and the attractions of the inhumanly desolate landscapes of the Faroe Islands (where *Buzz Aldrin* is set) and of the moon.⁵ Harstad's novels recognize and even indulge the need for something grander than the uneventfulness of everyday life, but they do not offer a coherent alternative to that life; echoing what Wendy Brown and David Graeber analyze as neoliberalism's "downscaling" of

Ellefsen, "[a] literature that wants to do more than gesture toward an exterior must also manifest the way to that exterior" (ib.). My point is that for Harstad, the lack of a coherent alternative is an aspect of the life that his work aims to apprehend.

- 5 Harstad has called the Faroe Islands "a good stand-in for the moon" (Hovda 2009). See Slettan for an analysis of how the photographs (taken by Harstad himself) featured in the book underscore the association between the island's setting and the moon, especially through their evacuation of human characters (Slettan 2013: 117). Slettan also points to the "NASA-typeface" in the title on *Buzz Aldrin's* original book cover (ib.: 121). For an account of the role of the novel's setting in its protagonist's melancholia and his artistic development (into the novel's narrator), see Oxfeldt 2013.

the imagination, they show that this grand scale is today overwhelmingly colonized by a catastrophic imagery, at the expense of a properly political vision.

In this essay, I show that Harstad's three novels present the imaginative and affective blockages that characterize a condition "in which all social and political possibility is seemingly bound up in the economic status quo" (Shonkwiler and La Berge 2014: 2). Via their insistence on the fundamental role of shame in different ways, all three mediate the memory of the space program and the welfare state, and cumulatively, they map the affective and imaginative discontents besetting that memory as variations of shame: the shame of having once believed in greater things (*Hässelby*), the lack of a shameful disposition that, far from liberating younger generations, translates into a lack of orientation and identity (*Buzz Aldrin*), and the attempt to sidestep all forms of embarrassment and believe again in greater things (*172 Hours on the Moon*). Far from resulting in a release from shame, the revamped space program turns out to be deeply implicated in the dynamic of shame that an older generation unleashes on a younger one. One thing Harstad's novels do not imagine, then, is a life liberated from shame.

Generation star wars (Hässelby)

Harstad's *Hässelby* inhabits the unsettling aftermath of an ideal one could properly be ashamed of. The story is set in the Stockholm borough Hässelby, the result of large-scale suburban reorganization in "the optimistic fifties" (Harstad 2007: 222) that now survives as a memorial to its own decline: in 2007, when the novel is set, "the flats, which once seemed so nice, now looked more like forgotten monuments to social democracy" (ib.: 223). If the apartment buildings were once animated by the spirit of the *Folkhemmet* model,

the latter now only survives as the name of a furniture store (ib.: 14). In 2007, the narrator notes that members of his generation had all “reluctantly and independently from one another” left the *Folkhemmet* “when the concept had already become a parody, an idea that was considered antidemocratic and inhumane” (ib.: 209). The problem the narrator’s generation is stuck with is that there is no democratic or humane alternative in sight; and with no alternative ideal to turn to, leaving Hässelby proves difficult.

The novel dramatizes this desolate condition through the remarkable choice of its narrator-protagonist. Albert Åberg is the Norwegian version of Alfons Åberg (or Alfie Atkins), a children’s book and animated cartoon character who, since he was invented by Gunilla Bergström in 1972, has become a Swedish icon – and, in the novel’s analysis, an agent in the project of turning Sweden into a “nation converted into children’s television” (ib.: 19). Demonstrating that a single father can offer his child a fairly normal life, and that the state can step in for an absent mother, Albert and his father, Lars Rune Waage notes, “are representatives of Scandinavian social democracy” (Waage 2015: 234) in the Scandinavian cultural imagination, and are “themselves a core component in the very construction of the welfare state” (ib.: 238).

In Bergström’s fictional universe, Albert is perpetually seven years old and lives with his father in a flat, with no mother in sight; *Hässelby* adopts both the flat and the father – as well as Albert’s two friends Milla and Viktor – while it adds a back story for the absent mother: on the fourth day of Albert’s life, she decides that she is not interested in raising him (Harstad 2007: 183-87). The novel forces Albert and his father to grow up, and to discover that they cannot live without each other. Albert’s attempt to break free from Bertil and settle in Paris in 1985 and 1986 ends with his return to Hässelby; it is only in 2006, after his father’s

sudden death in a traffic accident – an event recounted at the beginning of the novel – that he finally has to make do without him. One year later, the world has ended.

If Albert can only survive in the ruins of a welfare state he no longer believes in, his father clings to his old beliefs in order to shield himself from an inimical world. Bertil Åberg stands by the *Folkhemmet* model “as if it were a perfect ideology written down in a party program in a stuffy, hidden office no one had the keys to” (ib.: 19), and he refuses to surrender that perfection: for him, “the eighties ruined everything” (ib.: 21), as they inaugurated a time of fateful mediocrity in which “[n]obody is doing well, nobody is doing badly” and “[e]verybody is doing normally” (ib.: 192). Bertil responds to this diminishment by blaming the world and becoming a “bitter, bitter man who never could escape his own disappointments” (ib.: 22). The household of Bertil and Albert is organized around their differing relations to the ends of the welfare ideal, and more specifically, around *their avoidance of the shame besetting their investments in that ideal*. Bertil clings to his generational memory of that investment, and thus denies the need to feel ashamed for it, while he also hides from a world that would confront him with that shame. Albert, for his part, suppresses his own sense of shame at his generation’s short-term belief in the welfare state by casting his father as a preposterous, delusional social democrat who should feel even more ashamed for holding these ideals; cast as a pathetic old fool, Bertil no longer has the power to make his son feel ashamed. Yet this also means that Albert *needs* the father he despises to avoid confronting his own shame.

The first part of the novel is taken up by the recollection of Albert’s first attempt to escape from the shameful cohabitation with his father. In 1985, he goes traveling around Europe, only to end up joining a German businessman on a trip

to Hong Kong in a bid to buy the overstock of *Star Wars* merchandise. The logic behind this investment confirms the futurelessness the novel dramatizes: the businessman speculates that the merchandise and toys, which have gone out of fashion, can now be bought cheaply and later sold at great profit when that fashion will return, as it inevitably will. Nostalgia for the past trumps a vision of the future: all this capitalist surrogate-father can offer Albert is a downscaled scheme based on the assumption of a return of the past rather than on a grandiose new departure – something on the scale, say, of flying cars. Instead of the grand ambitions of space wars, the mundane reality Albert encounters is composed of miniature action figures; when the deal fails, he receives Stormtrooper figures as a farewell gift – “the last soldiers of the universe, thirty in all [...] a kind of farewell to arms, you could say” (ib.: 72).

When he later travels on to Paris, this logic of diminished prospects continues as he fails to participate in a major strike and instead cultivates the smaller scale of the Stormtroopers in an art project. He takes close-up pictures of them, making them look gigantic against the background of “a microscopic city” (ib.: 88). In one of the signature elements in Harstad’s fiction, characters aim to control scalar shifts to help distract them from the radical scalar diminishment that afflict their fully bureaucratized lives: “in my head the photos had a purpose, no all-encompassing and life-determining purpose, but it was at least my small protest against all of this, my humble contribution to the artistic struggle against a new world war and armageddon” (ib.). The last picture in the project is of the “deformed and broken” dolls that he has dropped from the 200-meter-tall Tour Montparnasse (ib.: 162), as if to underscore that even this artistic attempt to shield himself from destruction cannot but end in violent defeat (cf. Harstad 2007: 86-88). Soon after, Albert returns to his father and to

Hasselby, only to be met by the news that Olof Palme has just been killed. An attempt later in the eighties to move away from his father to Stockholm's Södermalm neighborhood ends with his return to the father's flat, and an uneventful job in a shopping mall where he consistently refuses all promotions.

The novel casts the desultory period between 1986 and 2006 quite literally as a time between two deaths (a notion most famously theorized by Lacan and Žižek):⁶ the symbolic death of the father's ideals with the killing of Olof Palme and the father's own physical death, only a few meters away from the place where Palme was killed. The need for repetition to achieve change – everything has to happen *twice* to really register – is not only an essential aspect of the notion of a life between two deaths (cf. Wegner), but also of the novel's narrative grammar and affective rhythm. The death of his father offers Albert the opportunity to revisit the events and people of 1986. Most notably, it also allows him to reimagine his leaving Paris in 1986. The remarkable thing about this imaginative return is that the counterfactual story does *not*, as one might have expected, offer relief from the disappointing trajectory of his life: it instead recounts his failure to prevent the gang rape of a girl in Paris (Harstad 2007: 272-74). In this way, it merely adds one item to the long list of Albert's failures: his failure to interest his mother in raising him, his failure to anticipate and prevent the suicide of his friend Milla, with whom he was in love, his failure to prevent the disappearance of the German businessman in Hong Kong.

If cohabitation with his father allowed Albert to project his shame onto him (as an unreconstructed believer in the welfare state), the removal of his father forces him to confront his

6 See Wegner 2009 for an analysis of “the long nineties” in light of this notion, and especially pp. 17-42 for an elaboration of Žižek's and Lacan's use of the concept.

own inadequacy and to assume shamefulness as his proper condition – not, this time, the shame of having once believed in an ideal, but the shame of not even having lived up to expectations (of basic decency, of character, of morality) that are much less than ideal, yet still, it seems, out of his reach. This sense of inadequacy derives from his autobiographical memory but extends to the species as a whole. The inside covers of the book (like all of the books, designed by Harstad himself) reproduce accounts of global warming, genocide, capitalist exploitation, war, and (especially) the human failure to act on these developments. If shame, as Timothy Bewes argues, is “an experience of incommensurability, between the I as experienced by the self and the self as it appears to and is reflected in the eyes of the other” (Bewes 2011: 24), it can in principle be managed by hiding from the eyes of the other, or by getting rid of them; if shame is a general condition, however, this requires getting rid of the whole species.

This is exactly what happens in the last, surreal part of the novel. It turns out that throughout his life, Albert has been followed by a mysterious figure (who, notably, only ever appears when his father is not there). When he sees that figure in the apartment across from his (following his father’s death), he decides to break into the apartment, only to discover that the rooms in there do not obey the rules of physics; they are too big for the apartment building to contain them (Harstad 2007: 310). Hässelby’s “monuments to social democracy” (ib.: 223) are inhabited by an alternative force that, in the last part of the novel, corrodes them from within: all the apartments will gradually be emptied of people and furniture, and ultimately the whole of Hässelby, and then Stockholm, and then the rest of the world will be flooded. The mysterious figure – who turns out to be one of a legion of demons (reminiscent of the button-molder figure in Henrik Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* and of Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*; cf.

Waage 2015: 241, 243) – informs Albert that, even though he had been singled out as “the best human being of all” when he was a child, he has “simply not lived up to [the demons’] expectations. None of you” (Harstad 2007: 418). If even the best human being fails, there is no reason to keep the species alive (ib.: 430). The novel’s surreal ending, then, underscores what I have called its capitalist realism: it points to an affective and imaginative impasse where shameful memories overwhelm the imagining of a better future, and where the only large-scale event is *not* the advent of a better life but a cataclysm that ends human life altogether.

“*The great story of the parentheses*” (Buzz Aldrin)

Hasselby’s Albert Åberg discovers too late that life on the reduced scale of a demoralized welfare state is, if perhaps not worth living, at least less lethal than abandoning that diminished condition. Harstad’s novel *Buzz Aldrin* is an imaginative attempt to test the possibility of sustaining a fully tamed and downscaled life. The test subject is Mattias, the novel’s sensitive, slightly naïve, and decidedly underachieving narrator, who models his life after that of Buzz Aldrin – the man who, in spite of his skills and talents, was not interested in becoming the first man on the moon, but instead became “the eternal number two who was barely remembered” (Harstad 2011: 157). Harstad’s protagonist renounces his talent as a singer – he is “probably the best singer ever in Norway” (Harstad 2011, “Interview”), yet he refuses to sing in his friends’ band. He is born on the night of the first moon landing, and he has taken a lesson from it that is surprisingly appropriate for a downscaled age: Aldrin, not Armstrong; instead of shame over a silly illusion, the unashamed embrace of a life of underachievement.

What accounts for the difference between *Buzz Aldrin*’s

sensitive, hesitant, and melancholy tone and the more exuberant and aggressive tone of *Hasselby* is that Mattias, unlike Albert, does not need to suppress a sense of shame: never having indulged in illusions of individual grandeur or in large-scale ideals, he does not have to shield himself from a sense of inadequacy and incommensurability. Instead, he assumes Aldrin's lack of ambition as the proper lesson to learn for the aftermath of the space program.⁷ Yet for all that, this lack of ideals materializes for most of the novel as a serious depression and keeps the protagonist confined to the Faroe Islands, unable to sustain life in his native Norway. The novel begins with a short flash forward to April 1999, when the almost-thirty-year-old Mattias has seemingly overcome this depression and resumed his old job as a gardener. Crucially, and recalling *Hasselby*'s concern with the photographs of the Stormtroopers, his restored equilibrium depends on his imaginative ability to manage scale so as not to be overwhelmed by the kind of scale shift that ends *Hasselby*.⁸ Immediately after the novel's arresting opening line – "The person you love is 72.8 percent water and there's been no rain for weeks" (Harstad 2011: 9) – the novel shows the mature Mattias anticipating change by reducing it to a scale he can control (cf. Dorrian 2015):

I wait. Stand and wait. And then I see it, somewhere up there, a thousand, perhaps three thousand feet above, the first drop takes shape and falls, releases hold, hurtles toward me, and I stand there, face turned

7 The novel again references 1986 as a crucial year: it refers to Chernobyl, the Challenger explosion, and the killing of Palme (*B* 27-28). References to the 1980 accident with the Alexander Kielland platform tie this wave of disasters more directly to a Norwegian context (2011: 36-37).

8 The novel obsessively refers to climate change and rising sea levels. See 2011: 89, 94-95, 130, 169, 217, 315.

up, it's about to start raining, in a few seconds it will pour, and never stop, at least that's how it will seem [...] and I stare up, a single drop on its way down toward me [...] the first drop falls and there I stand motionless, until I feel it hit me in the center of my forehead, exploding outward and splitting into fragments that land on my jacket, on the flowers beneath me, my boots, my gardening gloves. I bow my head. And it begins to rain. (Harstad 2011: 9-10)

Several things are happening in this passage, and they cumulatively cast doubt on the composure that Mattias seems to have achieved. He can only accommodate the intrusion of change through a carefully executed act of anticipation. This act consists in an imaginative zooming gesture, in which a change of weather is bracketed through an imaginative focus on one rain drop – as if to defend against the deluge that ends the world in *Hässelby*, which is there anticipated by a dream in which raindrops change into falling human beings (which in their turn echo the falling Stormtroopers; Harstad 2007: 99). This zooming gesture is one way of asserting “domination and control” over the vast distances (“a thousand, perhaps three thousand feet”) Mattias must navigate (Dorrian 2015).

This movement echoes another of the key features in the novel's narrative grammar: a mode of anticipatory memory in which the narrator distances himself from the emotional impact of an event by anticipating its later mediation. When his girlfriend breaks up with him, he avoids a direct response by “puzzl[ing] over who could play her on the TV series” (Harstad 2011: 87); his first encounter with an important character is accompanied by the remark that “[s]omebody should have taken a Polaroid of this moment, should have caught it on tape” (ib.: 107); later on, he imagines his life as a movie being projected, which means that his time in the institution is a screening with a projectionist “who didn't take a break as soon as the film had started to roll, but who stayed

there, sitting in the control room, just in case” (ib.: 121). This act of preemptive memory cannot prevent the eventuality that at some point, “[t]he tape gets screwed up again” (ib.: 168).⁹ Such acts of anticipatory memory reduce the impact of the present by a gesture of “depresentification” that reduces the present to “the object of a future memory” (Currie 2010: 11). It is only after such acts of anticipation or downscaling that the protagonist is ready to return to the scale of everyday life.

The novel’s very last pages, set in 2019, return to the question of scale, as they juxtapose the unspectacular particulars of everyday life with the affirmation that “this very moment can be seen, seen from the moon, from outer space” (Harstad 2011: 469), and with the hope “that [we] are visible, that [we] do [our] best, that [our] lives are true and meaningful, that [we] are not alone” (ib.: 471). This emphasis on visibility is remarkable, as Mattias’ life plan has consisted in an attempt to achieve, precisely, *invisibility* (cf. Farsethås; Harstad 2011: 315). He spends most of the novel in a halfway house in the Faroes, where one of the other inhabitants is called, he thinks, “Ennen”, until he discovers that he has misunderstood the “NN” she uses in order to maintain her anonymity, which thus strengthens the theme of a wished-for invisibility. The engagements with larger scales that open and close the novel intimate that invisibility, and the concomitant absence of shame (as there is no gaze to be shamed by), are somehow insufficient even for a character who is committed to making do with less. What Mattias still craves is a more determinate sense of purpose – a confirmation of a firmer and more definite identity that, as the authors of *In Defense of Shame* show, can be indicated through a disposition for shame. The

9 See Slettan for an account of the novel’s “phototextuality”, which he sees as more crucial than in the cases of *Hässelby* and *172 Hours on the Moon*, which also contain pictures (Slettan 2013: 134).

novel shows that the welfare state can no longer provide such purpose, and instead leaves the protagonist adrift without either a shameful memory or a sustaining capacity for shame. What he craves is to be “a smooth running cog in the world” (Harstad 2011: 17), just “a part of a whole” (ib.: 56).

In the fictional world of Harstad’s novels, the welfare state once provided such a functioning whole, but *Buzz Aldrin* emphasizes that it no longer affords the combination of purpose and relative invisibility that Mattias craves; instead, it has been reduced to archiving and nurturing the fall-out of its own demise. His mother represents the memory of a functioning welfare state; she “worked in child welfare”, and did synchronized swimming, something to which he is deeply attracted for “the way [the swimmers] relied on everyone doing their part” (ib.: 39). His shelter in a halfway house for recovering psychiatric patients may seem like a continuation of child welfare for grown-ups, yet it mainly cares for people whose suffering is caused by neoliberal globalization, a process that also brutally affected the welfare state. Anna, one of the patients, was “at ease with tasks and colleagues” in her first job, a public-office job in the post office, until she was, her file notes, “[a]t 23, laid off without warn. due to restructuring”, which starts a lifetime of psychiatric problems (ib.: 213);¹⁰ Sofia’s (the girl initially known as “Ennen”) problems begin when her father loses his job in Greenland and is forced to relocate to the Faroe Islands, where she suffers “from a sense of being completely forgotten”, as “apart from her parents there is nothing around her to confirm her existence” (ib.: 186-87). Such is life in a reduced welfare state whose only remaining mission is to curate its own afterlife.

The halfway house is located in a fish factory that is no

¹⁰ The abbreviation is there in the original to mimic the style of a psychiatric report.

longer in use, as it is no longer profitable in the global market (ib.: 116-20). The institution survives, but without the industrial infrastructure powering it. Instead, the patients spend their time in the “laughable production of model animals” for tourists (ib.: 148); they put on “work clothes” because it gives them “the feeling [they] were running a business, [they] were workers” (ib.: 167). The narrative grammar of *Hässelby* was marked by change through repetition and delay, whereas that of *Buzz Aldrin* consists in repetition *without* variation. While fishing used to sustain a whole way of life, deindustrialization turns the Faroe Islands into “a country in perpetual debt and companies that are closed down and people that are left to their fate without jobs without money without plans or prospects pushed aside forgotten hidden away sent packing on the wind” (ib.: 391). In this state of affairs, Mattias’ desire for purpose and affirmation remains unaddressed. It remains unaddressed by a welfare state that has become a monument to itself, and that survives as a mere archive. This is where the novel abandons its test subject: suspended between a vaguely remembered welfare state and a future that fails to attract, and riveted to a downscaled life where no sense of shame can direct him.

Back to the future (172 Hours on the Moon)

Hässelby and *Buzz Aldrin* present two attempts to sound the affective fall-out of the downscaling of human aspirations since the early seventies: in *Hässelby*, disillusionment and the shame-inducing memory of having once believed in an ideal that has rapidly become unthinkable; in *Buzz Aldrin*, the endeavor to imagine a life without such memory and therefore without such shame – an attempt that turns out to be compromised by the continued solicitation by larger forces and grander scales. The request to write a young adult

novel for Stavanger's time as European Capital of Culture in 2008 offered Harstad the opportunity to boldly imagine such larger dimensions; and even if Harstad describes *172 Hours* as "very, very different from [his] other books" (James 2015), it continues the archeology of shame that marks his first two novels. The novel imagines a resurrection of the space program, and it ties it to a generation that has never even experienced the original version. In order to gain financial and public support, NASA organizes an international lottery aimed at people between 14 and 18; three of them can win a trip to the moon – and more specifically, to DARLAH 2, a moon station constructed between 1974 and 1976, before the project was discontinued for lack of resources. The global lottery for "a glamorous space version of a trip to Disneyland" (Harstad 2012: 7) turns out to be a great success, yet the novel also underlines that the ambition to travel to the moon is as much that of the children's parents and school teachers as of the children themselves; two of the three winners, Norwegian Mia (an unambitious underachiever very much like *Buzz Aldrin's* Mattias) and French Antoine, are notably lukewarm about the prospect of visiting the moon. Even in this novel that focuses almost exclusively on the three teenagers, it is the psychopathologies of the generation that lived through or just missed the turn of the sixties that animates Harstad's writing; his writing is again essentially concerned with testing the relations between shame, generational memory, and the future (or the lack of it).

Through a number of devices, the novel intimates that the trip to the moon will end badly. There is the character of Mr. Himmelfarb, living out the senile end of his life in an old people's home. He used to work as "a custodian with the highest security clearance at NASA's Goldstone Deep Space Communications Complex" (Harstad 2012: 24), and while he knows the mission is doomed, he has been "reduced to a

bag with eyes, a box no one really know where to send”, and cannot communicate this knowledge (ib.). Furthermore, the three teenagers all witness and experience mysterious forebodings – a plane crash only one person has seen, an airport terminal that might not exist. Yet the clearest clue to the novel’s generational imagination is the prologue, in which a sinister group of powerful men draw up the plan for the lottery as a way to find public and financial support for the reactivation of a space program that has a decidedly military character. It perspires that the earlier space mission in the seventies discovered mysterious beings on the moon who turned out to be *Doppelgängers* of the astronauts; extremely fast and strong and not composed of organic material, the *Doppelgängers* appear intent on the destruction of humankind. Reactivating the space program is an attempt to neutralize this threat; read in conjunction with *Buzz Aldrin*, it also bespeaks an inability to leave nonhuman forces alone – to let the moon be the “magnificent desolation” that Buzz Aldrin called it (Harstad 2011: 160) – and read in light of *Hasselby*, it is unsurprising that this failure will lead to the wholesale destruction of the species.

In *172 Hours on the Moon*’s generational imaginary, the very generation that transformed the dream of a better world into a program of social and military control sacrifices a younger generation for the perpetuation of the regime it inaugurated. That continued control rather than genuine innovation and discovery is the main ambition is clear from the lack of new material – “Everything on this whole expedition is so goddamn antiquated” (Harstad 2012: 241) – and by the telling detail that space debris orbiting the earth has made it very hard to time an escape from the Earth, as if fall-out of the economic dispensation we live in is keeping the species tied to the Earth, foreclosing larger horizons (ib.: 258). Transforming the moon from a site of human aspiration to

a site of military control keeps human life riveted to a diminished condition that does not satisfy it; it condemns it to shame, if we recall, with Timothy Bewes, that “[s]hame is an event of incommensurability: a profound disorientation of the subject” (Bewes 2011: 3). Shame, for Bewes, “appears when the obligation to inhabit a subject position coexists with the void, the lack, of subjectivity itself” (ib.: 23).

In the novel, this void inhabiting the shamed subject takes shape in the figure of the *Doppelgänger* – “[a]n evil twin that’s out to take your life without anyone noticing” (Harstad 2012: 307). This figure emblemizes the destructive logic that underlies the reduction of life; we learn that the DARLAH space station was constructed “to annihilate the entire moon if that became necessary. As a final solution” (ib.: 223). In what seems like a momentous emotional relief for the reader after all the other astronauts (including the teenagers) are killed on the moon, the novel lets one of the travelers, Mia, make it back alive, after an intense struggle with her own *Doppelgänger*. Yet the very last chapter of the novel makes clear that it is, in fact, the *Doppelgänger* who has made it to the earth, and will end up destroying first her family, then New York, and then the rest of humankind.

The novel does not even attempt consolation as it describes a world dying of shame. The awkward and embarrassed teenage love between Mia and Antoine presents the novel’s only example of a positive sense of shame – of decency, *pudeur*, and modesty (Deonna et al. 2011: 16). Yet when Mia finds Antoine’s corpse, his scorched face is described without mercy: “His eyes were wide open and bloody and halfway out of his head. The dust had dried up his eyeballs” (Harstad 2012: 317). In the novel’s last scene, readers only belatedly realize that the scene is focalized through the *Doppelgänger* rather than through Mia, and that they have been seeing the world through the *Doppelgänger*’s eyes; the result is an eerie

sensation of being estranged from oneself, of being invaded by one's own *Doppelgänger*, and a sense that it is too late to resist this usurpation. Throughout the novel, the omniscient narrator – a marked difference from *Hasselby* and *Buzz Aldrin* – conveys a sense of inevitability. If *172 Hours on the Moon* is an exceptionally shocking and scary book for young adults, it is not only so because of the generic horror elements, but also because of the generational logic it presents to its young target audience: for all their aspirations to decency and purpose, the novel shows that they are bound to remain caught up in the fall-out of the shame of earlier generations. These generations' shameful memories condemn the younger generation to a futurelessness in which the only large-scale imaginary is that of an apocalyptic endgame.

*First as horror, then as farce:
Space and social security*

The space program may not be as dead today as it was when Harstad wrote his three novels, about a decade ago. Today, we know that Elon Musk's SpaceX company (founded in 2002, but increasingly visible only in the last few years) wants to colonize Mars – an enterprise of such ambition that, when the launch of a cargo ship bound for the International Space Station had to be postponed, Musk blamed the moon: he tweeted that the “moon was in the way” (Assis 2015). The object of past ambitions is here an obstacle for an even more spectacular design. In *172 Hours*, it was human debris orbiting the Earth that prevented space flight, and the fantasy of destroying the moon was part of a sinister plot; in Musk's very different imaginary, there is no memory of human depravity, and no debris or design to be ashamed of.

Indeed, Musk sees his revamped space program as a humanitarian initiative: “I think there is a strong humanitarian

argument for making life multi-planetary [...] in order to safeguard the existence of humanity in the event that something catastrophic were to happen, in which case being poor or having a disease would be irrelevant, because humanity would be extinct". In a way that quite spectacularly misremembers the history of the welfare state, and suggests that we have entered an altogether different cultural imaginary than the shameful one that organizes Harstad's work, the colonization of space would then be a form of social security for the whole species – it would be, in the felicitous phrase of one journalist, "Mars colonization as extinction insurance" (Andersen 2015). When thinking on such a grand scale, poverty and disease are only trivial concerns; after all, individuals, or even whole communities, don't go extinct, they just die, as so much collateral damage. Musk has announced that a trip to Mars could become as cheap as \$500,000 – not immediately, as the costs are bound to be a lot higher at the beginning, but within a decade after trips begin (Dickson 2015). With such a price tag, it becomes hard to see whether SpaceX's talk of "safeguard[ing] the existence of humanity" wants to insure the species, or only provide the richest members of that species with an alibi to let the rest of the species rot. Here, we have a cultural imaginary that positions itself beyond the different shades of shame that organize Harstad's work; here, finally, is true shamelessness.

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