Country Beside Itself: Photography and Politics in Late 20th-Century Sweden

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Throughout the history of photography, photographers have been concerned with social issues. This is true not only of photojournalists and documentary photographers, but of art photographers as well. One, perhaps obvious, explanation for this is the specific connection to a material reality that is inherent in the photography medium, rendering it favorable, or even natural, for many art photographers to work with social reality. In the text below, I will touch upon the relation between Swedish photography and politics throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. However, my emphasis will be on Lars Tunbjörk’s (1956–2015) photography book *Country Beside Itself*, published in 1993, and more specifically on how the book reflects Swedish society at a socio-political breaking point that would set the tone for Sweden's subsequent social development. *Country Beside Itself* is considered by many to be the most important portrayal of Swedish society ever made through photography. In the current essay I explore the explanation of its success.

*Fig. 1: Skara sommarland 1991 & Fig. 2: Hallandsåsen 1991*  
(Images are unavailable in this version due to copyright issues)

*Country Beside Itself* contains eighty-one photographs by the internationally renowned Swedish photographer Lars Tunbjörk. The photographs portray a variety of locations in Sweden during the late 1980s and early 1990s. In addition to those images, the book also contains two textual entries: ”Matter,” written by the Swedish author and poet Thomas Tidholm (b. 1943), and ”Good Is He Who Tastes Good,” by the Swedish public debater Göran Greider (b. 1959). Tidholm’s poetic text is constructed around the concept of ”materiality” and is a commentary on the increasing social and cultural focus on the material that Tunbjörk’s images may be said to depict. Greider’s text is intended to show how Tunbjörk’s photographs illustrate and document the political changes occurring in Sweden at the time of the book’s publication in 1993. Both texts can be seen as problematizing the concept of emptiness in an increasingly material culture.

The images in *Country Beside Itself* show people who seemingly have been placed into their surroundings. Those surroundings are often full of artificiality and consumerism, or of withered plastic objects once set there to amuse: a large plastic dinosaur or a giant Kalles Kaviar tube (see fig. 1).
Against this backdrop of excess and decadence, the people who inhabit the images seem a bit lost or confused. The effect is often absurd or exotic, or as Greider notes in his text, "carnevalesque." Materials in the images are often shiny, as Tidholm also points out in his poetic text. One explanation of that shininess lies in Tunbjörk’s use of the flashbulb. Unlike other photographers who work with light and darkness in order to bring out texture or mystic shadows from the objects depicted, Tunbjörk’s use of the flash makes the colors loud, the scenes flat, and everything in the images equally highlighted.

Tunbjörk has in interviews described the source of his inspiration in the American photo-documentary tradition, with examples such as Lee Friedlander (b. 1934), William Eggleston (b. 1939), and Garry Winogrand (1928-1984). He is frequently compared to the English documentary photographer Martin Parr (b. 1952), who like Tunbjörk often depicts through glaring colors modern consumer society and the middle class. But where, in Eggleston’s or Parr’s images, we find a certain distance to the scenes or people depicted, in Tunbjörk’s work we instead find an identification with seemingly confused, and somewhat trapped, humans. Greider poignantly describes in "Good Is He Who Tastes Good" this feeling of the depicted forlorn middle-class:

The middle-class stands there, confused. As if nothing, really, has made a difference. Halfway through the evening jog, a man or woman stops on a hill. When the heavy breathing slowly subsides, the tepid May evening filters through consciousness and tells of all that is missing. Humans, clad in brand-new tracksuits, but on the verge of tears, can look incredibly forlorn when one does not see them on televised sport shows.

Commentators have differed on whether Tunbjörk’s images entail a distancing of the people and scenes portrayed, or if such distancing is lacking. Tunbjörk himself noted this in an interview published in the magazine Publikt in 2007: "I’m often misunderstood. Some people have described me as ironic and distanced. I don’t recognize myself in that! It’s my contemplative approach that is misunderstood as distanced. And my point of departure is not to be ironic."

This purported lack of distance that Tunbjörk stresses above is, I believe, one of the reasons why Country Beside Itself achieved such success as a photographic depiction of Swedish society in the early 1990s. In his images, Tunbjörk seems to share the confusion of the humans he portrays. In a film made by Nyhetsbyrån TT in 2008, Tunbjörk describes his goal in photography as weaving together his "subjective vision with [his] mental state and an objective documentary depiction." When identifying with the people he is portraying, Tunbjörk photographically approaches what the French
sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) called a ”collective conscious,” which denotes the collective feelings and convictions of the members of a society or subgroup. The insight gained from such a psychological blending into the surroundings he portrays is an important factor in achieving the instantaneous quality of the images.

Social documentary photography, a subcategory of documentary photography, has a long history. It is, in essence, the recording of humans in their natural condition. It has traditionally arisen from a socially critical perspective from which the lives of underprivileged people and the social problems they face are depicted. As early as the second half of the nineteenth century, photographers such as Jacob Riis (1849-1914) and Lewis Hine (1874-1940) published images of city life in America in efforts to bring about social reform. Socially engaged photography continued to depict society’s lower classes into the 1960s and 1970s. During those decades, American social documentary photographers began turning their cameras on members of the middle class. Among the most influential examples of this development are the three photographers Tunbjörk credited with having influenced his own work: Friedlander, Winogrand, and Eggleston. Since the late 1970s, social documentary photography has increasingly been accorded a place in art galleries alongside fine art photography.

Swedish art photography has traditionally been closely connected to Swedish socio-political development. Peter Gullers points out how many Swedish photographers during the 1970s focused on the working class to elucidate their motives, producing documentary studies of Swedish industrial workers. *The Blacks* and *The Mine* were prototypical titles of photographic reports from the factory floor. Such ideals for art photography were clearly reflected in the political climate in Sweden during the 1970s, when the collective spirit was strong and identification with the working class was an important component of the dominant social ideology. When Niclas Östlind describes the Swedish photography scene of the 1970s through the 1990s, he argues that the political undertones of 1970s art photography disappeared during the 1980s, as photography was instead used to investigate the artist himself. Photography became increasingly staged in studios instead of being shot in the real world. Östlind goes on to describe how photographic reportage was not totally eradicated, but had shifted with respect to content. Work from the 1980s focused on how the artist-photographer, and the writer whose text accompanied the images, experienced what he or she depicted. Such reportage often chose as its subjects people on the margins of Swedish society such as those from orphanages or prisons. Accompanying the shift of narrator was the shift from black-and-white serenity to emotional and romantic color photography. The new narrative style and color photography
came together in the magazine *ETC*, which, from its establishment in 1978, presented an experimentally aesthetic, leftish take on popular culture and marginalized groups in Swedish society. In the 1980s, *ETC* published photography books by artists such as Anders Petersén and Christer Strömholm. Photographing members of marginalized groups has long been one of the most common motives of art photography around the world. Tunbjörk’s images in *Country Beside Itself* are, instead, depicting the mass rather than pointing out exceptions from it. Tunbjörk’s images thus take a step away from *ETC* and the Swedish reportage photography books of the 1980s and move toward the American photo-documentary tradition, as discussed above, where members of the middle classes rather than the working classes are depicted. But what kind of society do Tunbjörk’s images portray?

In the film made by *Nyhetsbyrån TT* from 2008, Tunbjörk remembers his work with *Country Beside Itself* in the following way: "It was very thrilling to travel around in Sweden at this time. It was almost as if I was traveling through the US at times. The colors were all new, and all the plastic and glitter that had shown up during the few years of economic boom in the 80s."

**Fig. 3, Rotebro 1990**

*(Images are unavailable in this version due to copyright issues)*

Tunbjörk alludes, in the quotation above, to developments in the stock market that led Sweden to its financial heights during the mid-1980s. During that time, Swedes saw their incomes rise and consumption reached record levels. The economic repercussions of the subsequent economic collapse left the Swedish people in the early 1990s with enormous debt and high interest rates. The financial crisis continued throughout the 1990s. In 1992, the Riksbanken raised the interest rate to 500 percent, and most foreign investors withdrew their funds. The economic crisis of the early 1990s was a watershed in Swedish history that had both short- and long-term consequences. Östberg & Andersson assert that those consequences include permanent changes in Swedish society such as increased poverty, health problems, and unemployment. A right-wing government was elected in 1991 for the first time in twenty years, and the elected parties were dependent for their governing power on the right-wing populist party, *Ny Demokrati* (New Democracy). A wave of xenophobia engulfed Sweden, which underwent a shift from sovereign autonomy to membership in the European Union (1995), stronger influence from the United States, and a freer market in a globalized economy. This
transition from a traditional Sweden where the welfare state dominated toward a modern export
country was criticized thoroughly, as described in Greider’s text in Tunbjörk’s book. As part of the
move toward free-market capitalism, television and radio commercials were allowed starting in
1991 and 1993, respectively. In Greider’s text, the market of early 1990s Sweden was characterized
as ”a jungle of offers” and as ”an aggressive paradise.” Tunbjörk’s images effectively show how the
new consumerism and material abundance reflected the social and financial shifts described above.
Tunbjörk’s images thus capture a Swedish society on the verge between economic boom and decli-
ne. In Tunbjörk’s obituary, published in the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, Malena Rydell
describes the period when the images of *Country Beside Itself* were taken as ”the morning light af-
fter the party, when the confetti remains scattered over the asphalt.” In the film by *Nyhetsbyrán TT*,
Tunbjörk reflects upon the prospect of authoring another book like *Country Beside Itself* at the time
of the interview (2008) in the following way: ”If I would do a project like *Country Beyond Itself*
today, it would be a much darker portrayal. Society has hardened. Marginalization has increased.
And I couldn’t have ignored that if I was to go on a similar trip today.”

We can, therefore, conclude that Tunbjörk fulfilled one of the most important recipes for successful
photography: finding the right places at the right times. But even if the images might appear spont-
naneous, there is a lot of work behind capturing that spontaneity. In some instances Tunbjörk return-
ed to certain places over the course of as many as three years in order to get a good picture. Such
patience, together with an ethnographic method of ”sinking-into-the-wall as a high school usher,” as
Pelle Kronestedt described Tunbjörk in an obituary published in the magazine *Fokus*, is revealed in
the timing of the images. Figure 2, for example, shows a motorway diner waitress standing squarely
beneath a television set that displays an image of Pretty Boy and the phrase ”Skäms!” (Shame!).
The strong, artificial light on her awakens associations to the bright lights of interrogation rooms
that, together with the displayed phrase, makes her appear to have been caught in an unseemly act --
perhaps simply the act of being in the material and consumerist culture.

So, finally, why can *Country Beside Itself* be considered a successful photographic portrayal of ear-
ly 1990s Swedish society? To the more obvious reasons of Tunbjörk being at the right places at the
right times, we can add a certain skill in finding situations that depicted contemporary Swedish life
especially well. That, in turn, may be explained by a certain ethnographic method used by Tunbjörk
whereby the photographer steps into a collective consciousness, but avoids full participation in what
happens. Instead, he captures the situations and the people within them by merging his subjective vision or experience, his mental state, and an objective documentary depiction of contemporary life and culture through his image composition. There is also a complementary factor that relates to the photography medium itself. The crisis point in Swedish society that Tunbjörk depicts is ideological, but one that expresses itself through the material, for example, new colors, ubiquitous plastic, and the explosion of visual advertisement. Art is well suited to represent this crossroad between ideology and the material turn it took in this case. Photography -- because of its connection to the real, the material, and the visual -- is among the forms best suited to this purpose. The flashbulb that renders the materials it illuminates shiny, and the richness of detail it reveals, is vital to the images. A few years after the new materials’ and colors’ first meeting with Swedish society and culture, Tunbjörk’s gaudy images of smoldering plastic and glitter depict with precision Sweden’s transformation from a distinctive welfare state to just another interchangeable component of the globalized free market.

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**Video**