

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Resilient forces of public amusement: the negotiation of ‘urban modernity’ in a peripheral port city (1880s–1930s)

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Abstract

This article studies public amusement in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Gothenburg, Sweden, and argues that historians of urban and popular culture need to take the hybrid character of modernity more seriously. The case of the small peripheral port city of Gothenburg, more clearly than large metropolises or rapidly growing urban centres, showcases how turn-of-the-century urban culture was negotiated through the confrontation of traditional and innovative forms of popular amusement. Hence, insights from Gothenburg can prompt a more critical, nuanced view of ‘urban modernity’, marked not only by the emergence of commercial mass entertainment but also by the resilience of itinerant performers, for example. The article draws on different types of source material that from different perspectives embrace the co-constitutive character of practices and representations of pleasure through which people in Gothenburg negotiated urban change.

This article studies public amusement in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Gothenburg, Sweden, and argues that historians of urban and popular culture need to take the hybrid character of modernity more seriously. The case of the small peripheral port city of Gothenburg, more clearly than large metropolises or rapidly growing urban centres, showcases how turn-of-the-century urban culture was negotiated through the confrontation of traditional and innovative forms of popular amusement.¹ Hence, insights from Gothenburg can prompt a more critical, nuanced view of ‘urban modernity’, marked not only by the emergence of commercial mass entertainment but also by the resilience of itinerant performers, for example.

By way of an introduction, here we cite the personal memories of two working-class women from Gothenburg, Anna S. and Mathilda B., whom we will meet again several times in the course of the article. While these two women may appear to be marginal to the making of ‘urban modernity’ as historians usually perceive it, this article seeks to show that, on the contrary, their experiences are at the core of

¹In this article, the terms ‘popular amusement’, ‘entertainment’ and ‘pleasures’ are used interchangeably.

turn-of-the-century urban culture. When asked about her amusement habits in young adulthood, Anna S., born in Gothenburg in 1869, replied, ‘I earned a penny a day and was so tired when I got home that I never had the energy to go out except on Sundays.’² Another native of the city, Mathilda B., born in 1894, remembers her free time in similar terms, stating that ‘We didn’t have so many amusements in my youth, but many had fun dancing; myself, I’ve never danced on a floor in my whole life, but in the winter times my ice skates were in frequent use.’³

Around the turn of the twentieth century, however, advertisements for public amusements such as popular theatre and other shows, concerts of different types of music and dancing events abounded in the local newspapers and in Gothenburg’s annual business almanac (*Göteborgs address- och industrikalender*). The city authorities and the socio-economic elite strove to give the growing port city a ‘modern’ outlook, not least by investing extensively in its pleasure infrastructures. This relatively small centre of trade and industry took inspiration from abroad to shape its cultural life: a university was founded in 1891, a concert house opened in 1905 and a municipally sponsored theatre in 1916. In 1915, the city council started to plan for a large-scale international exhibition to celebrate Gothenburg’s 300th anniversary, and on this occasion, in 1923, the municipally run Liseberg amusement park, which set international technical standards, was inaugurated, aligning Gothenburg with the state of the art in ‘modern urbanity’.

The discrepancy between Anna’s and Mathilda’s personal memories on the one hand, and official discourse and the endeavours of the elite on the other, should not necessarily surprise urban historians. Clearly, and for a whole range of reasons, not all of a city’s residents used its amusement facilities. Anna’s and Mathilda’s experiences are representative of many urban inhabitants, especially working-class women, who did not have the time and/or money to spend on entertainment.⁴ Historical narratives of ‘urban modernity’ centred on the flourishing of pleasure culture tend to have middle-class and gender biases.⁵ However, this study of Gothenburg’s turn-of-the-century public amusement suggests that there is more to the discrepancy than can be explained by the anecdotal character of personal memories or by class and gender inequalities. Instead, I argue that we may arrive at a more accurate account of how ‘urban modernity’ was produced by taking practices and memories of ice-skating or the sheer absence of amusement more seriously. The case of small-scale, peripheral Gothenburg urges historians to stress the way in which traditional cultural practices like association-sponsored dancing or watching itinerant performers not only co-existed with emerging commercial entertainment facilities, but that such resilient

²Institutet för språk och folkminnen (ISOF), IFGH 6345, interview, 1958: ‘Jag tjänade en kron om dagen och var så trött då jag kom hem, så att jag aldrig orkade gå ut annat än på söndagarna.’

³ISOF, IFGH 6357, interview, 1970: ‘Vi hade inte så många nöjen just i min ungdom men många var roade av dans. Själv har jag icke dansat ett golvrundt hela mitt liv, men om vintern var skridskorna flitigt i bruk.’ All translations by myself.

⁴This is a well-established topos. See for example C.M. Parratt, *More than Mere Amusement: Working-Class Women’s Leisure in England: 1750–1914* (Boston, MA, 2001); M. Kessel, *Zwischen Abwasch und Verlangen: Zeiterfahrungen von Frauen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1995).

⁵C. Charle and G. Capitelli, *Les temps des capitales culturelles: XVIIIe–XXe siècles* (Seyssel, 2009); P. Nolte (ed.), *Die Vergnügungskultur der Großstadt: Orte – Inszenierungen – Netzwerke (1880–1930)* (Cologne, 2016); J. Wietschorke *Wien-Berlin. Wo die Moderne erfunden wurde* (Frankfurt, 2023).

traditional amusement and its confrontation with (metropolitan) inventions was constitutive of 'urban modernity'.

Historians of urban culture have demonstrated that the burgeoning public entertainment industry was a core element in the making of metropolitan urban modernity, which also spurred the transformation of smaller cities around the turn of the twentieth century.⁶ Scholars have shown, however, that traditional, in particular working-class, amusement mixed with technical inventions at funfairs (for example), and that established venues such as variety and vaudeville theatres accommodated new genres like film.⁷ Nevertheless, these insights into the merging of the 'old' and 'new' have not shaped historians' view of 'urban modernity', usually focused on studies of rapid transformation processes in the metropolises. As for smaller or less centrally located cities, these are often studied in terms of their integration into and contribution to transnational flows of innovative entertainment practices.⁸ This article seeks to reverse this perspective by arguing that when studying a peripheral port city, we see mechanisms of change and resilience that are less apparent – but most certainly also present – in the metropolitan centres. Here, I analyse how different actors in Gothenburg negotiated what historians have come to call 'urban modernity': how they engaged with cultural shifts such as the rise of cinema, the changing character of itinerant entertainment and the opening of institutions such as dance halls. Thus, the study delves into processes of the renegotiation and reappropriation of traditional forms of amusement in the face of changing urban culture to show that the confrontation of 'old' and 'new' was constitutive of early twentieth-century pleasure culture, and hence, of 'urban modernity' as a whole.

Public amusement and narratives of 'urban modernity'

Progressive narratives of urbanization have long since been replaced by analyses of urban change that emphasize disjuncture and complexity.⁹ The notion of 'urban modernity' has also received critical attention over recent decades, especially from transnational and post-colonial perspectives.¹⁰ Scholars criticize views of historical change seen through the lens of 'urban modernity' for representing late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European capitals as *the* places of dynamic change, where social and gender relations and modern lifestyles were transformed. With their

⁶See for example L.A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890–1930* (Chicago, 1994); T. Becker, A. Littmann and J. Niedbalski (eds.), *Die tausend Freuden der Metropole: Vergnügungskultur um 1900* (Bielefeld, 2011); G. Dietze and D. Dornhof (eds.), *Metropolenzäuber: Sexuelle Moderne und urbaner Wahn (1870–1930)* (Cologne, 2014); P. Nolte, 'Verdoppelte Modernität: Metropolen und Netzwerke der Vergnügungskultur um 1900. Eine Einführung', in Nolte (ed.), *Die Vergnügungskultur der Großstadt*, 1–11, at 3; Wietschorke, *Wien-Berlin*.

⁷R.C. Allen, *Vaudeville and Film 1895–1915: A Study in Media Interaction* (New York, 1980); C. Müller, *Frühe deutsche Kinematographie* (Stuttgart, 1994).

⁸A. Dietze and A. Vari (eds.), *Urban Popular Culture: Experiences from Northern, East-Central, and Southern Europe, 1870s to 1930s* (London and New York, 2023).

⁹S. Gunn, 'The spatial turn: changing histories of space and place', in S. Gunn and R.J. Morris (eds.), *Identities in Space: Contested Terrains in the Western City since 1850* (Aldershot, 2001), 1–14.

¹⁰N. Kenny and R. Madgin (eds.), *Cities beyond Borders: Comparative and Transnational Approaches to Urban History* (London and New York, 2015); N. Kwak and A.K. Sandoval-Strausz (eds.), *Making Cities Global: The Transnational Turn in Urban History* (Philadelphia, 2017).

expanding infrastructure, rising professional classes accompanying new peaks of industrial growth, proliferating state apparatuses, soaring demographic growth and massive physical changes – and with their entertainment industries – these urban centres both embodied and represented the emergence of ‘modernity’.¹¹ Post-colonial critics and advocates of global urban history, however, have criticized ‘urban modernity’ as Eurocentric and set out to go beyond the concept’s Western bias, which tends to create both a value system and notions of hierarchies among cities.¹² This article draws on such post-colonial critiques, starting from the premise that adopting the concept of ‘urban modernity’ generally entails the risk of omitting urban variation and actual experience.¹³ City districts seen as marginal to the ‘modern’ centre are prone to be turned into ‘neighbourhoods without “real history”’.¹⁴ Socio-cultural practices that are at odds with the dominant representations of ‘urban modernity’ are easily seen as expressions of deviation or even deviance, or as simply existing ‘along with’ modern forms, instead of being analysed as inherent and active parts of urban change.

Historians of smaller and more peripheral European cities have joined the critique of the prevailing tendency in urban history to posit ‘a Western European core connected with the advances of industrialization and the rise of modernity as the standard for the analysis of the rest of the continent’.¹⁵ Drawing on these approaches, which redefine and relocate ‘urban modernity’, this article engages critically with the view that ‘urban modernity’ in Europe was underpinned by the emergence of popular mass entertainment.¹⁶ Most historians agree that it was in the decades from 1870 to 1930 that urban entertainment fundamentally changed its character through the city’s developing mass commercial institutions.¹⁷ Scholars often argue that the rise of commercial mass culture, with its technical and performative impetus, opened experimental and democratizing spaces that allowed city dwellers to encounter and get used to fast-paced urban lifestyles.¹⁸ This article sets out to nuance this account and to stress the significantly hybrid character of turn-of-the-century urban culture.¹⁹

¹¹J. Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 2014), 320.

¹²J. Robinson, *Ordinary Cities* (London and New York, 2013), 4; P. Dibazar *et al.*, ‘Questioning urban modernity’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16 (2013), 643–58.

¹³M. Hjertman, *Afloat and Aflame: Deconstructing the Long 19th Century Port City: Gothenburg through Newspaper Archaeology* (Lund, 2022), 19.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵A. Dietze and A. Vari, ‘Introduction: transnational and transregional histories of urban popular culture in Europe’, in Dietze and Vari (eds.), *Urban Popular Culture*, 1–25, at 2.

¹⁶Nolte (ed.), *Die Vergnügungskultur der Großstadt*; Becker, Littmann and Niedbalski (eds.), *Die tausend Freuden der Metropole*; D. Morat *et al.* (eds.), *Weltstadtvergnügen: Berlin 1880–1930* (Göttingen, 2016); Dietze and Dornhof (eds.), *Metropolenzauber*; F. Lenger, *Metropolen der Moderne: Eine europäische Stadtgeschichte seit 1850* (Munich, 2014).

¹⁷Y. Robel and A.L. Just, ‘Stadt und Vergnügen: Einführung’, *MSG Moderne Stadtgeschichte* (2019), 5–13.

¹⁸T. Becker, ‘Vergnügungsviertel: Heterotopischer Raum in den Metropolen der Jahrhundertwende’, in Becker, Littmann and Niedbalski (eds.), *Die tausend Freuden der Metropole*, 137–67, at 166. Historians of the body have criticized the notion of ‘inner urbanization’ because it does not render the co-constitutive relationship between cities and ‘their’ bodies. P. Eitler and J.B. Prestel, ‘Body Polis – Körpergeschichte und Stadtgeschichte’, *Body Politics*, 4 (2016), 5–20, at 10.

¹⁹B. Aschmann (ed.), *Durchbruch der Moderne? Neue Perspektiven auf das 19. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt, 2019).

The way and extent to which cultural pleasure practices changed in the course of turn-of-the-century urbanization have been subject to historical debate. Leisure historians Peter Borsay and Jan Hein Fumée have relativized the focus on dramatic change in pleasure culture around 1900, arguing that the urban leisure activities we may see as intrinsically modern, like going to the theatre, opera or art exhibitions, did not stem from industrialization and urbanization, but had already become established, at least in Britain, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.²⁰ Cultural scholar Kaspar Maase contends that in the context of socio-cultural and political change in the German empire around 1900, a new urban public came to dispose of the necessary spare time and money to spend on amusement and distraction.²¹ Technical innovations qualitatively changed theatre and musical performances, and a new professional group of cultural entrepreneurs developed around these.²² Yet, Maase concedes, early twentieth-century urban culture also involved the simple commercialization or technical transformation of traditional forms of amusement, such as funfairs or public houses.²³ Likewise, Lynn Abrams shows that in Germany, modern commercial entertainment did not sweep away established forms of particularly working-class amusement such as festivals, drinking and dancing. Instead, this type of amusement co-existed with more commercialized entertainment. There, according to Abrams, social classes mixed and the working classes integrated into the urban mainstream.²⁴

Research into less central urban districts and their pleasure sites and practices, like Berlin's Friedrichshain or Hamburg's Vettel, has complemented the usual focus on urban centres at Berlin's Friedrichstraße or Hamburg's St Pauli, with their often cosmopolitan aura.²⁵ Here, I argue that in order to adequately describe turn-of-the-century urban culture and to overcome one-dimensional metropolitan-centred accounts of 'urban modernity', it is necessary not only to acknowledge the co-existence of traditional practices with commercial entertainment, but also to stress their mutual interferences and confrontations. These are particularly salient in a peripheral port city such as Gothenburg.

Gothenburg, a peripheral port city

This section presents Gothenburg as a small, peripheral port city. It does so by situating Sweden's second-largest city on Europe's turn-of-the-century urban map,

²⁰P. Borsay and J.H. Furnée (eds.), *Leisure Cultures in Urban Europe, c.1700–1870: A Transnational Perspective* (Manchester, 2016).

²¹J. Kocka, *Arbeiten an der Geschichte: Gesellschaftlicher Wandel im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 2012), 212–19.

²²K. Maase, *Grenzenloses Vergnügen: Der Aufstieg der Massenkultur 1850–1970* (Frankfurt, 2007); Dietze and Vari (eds.), *Urban Popular Culture*.

²³Maase, *Grenzenloses Vergnügen*, 53–8.

²⁴L. Abrams, 'From control to commercialization: the triumphs of mass entertainment in Germany 1900–25', *German History*, 8 (1990), 278–93.

²⁵H. Hochmuth and J. Niedbalski, 'Kiezvergnügen in der Metropole: Zur sozialen Topographie des Vergnügens im Berliner Osten', in Becker, Littmann and Niedbalski (eds.), *Die tausend Freuden der Metropole*, 105–36; A.L. Just, 'Forgotten fun: recollecting the working-class pleasurescape of Hamburg's east end, 1880s–1950s', *Journal of Urban History*, 48 (2022), 1281–303.

and by situating it in relation to other port cities, to other smaller peripheral cities and to its Nordic neighbours.

During the 1890s, Gothenburg's trade and industrial development accelerated and the city saw its greatest population growth. By 1910, the population had increased by almost two-thirds within two decades to 168,000.²⁶ As in other European port cities, extensive immigration, primarily from the surrounding countryside, was behind this population increase.²⁷ However, Gothenburg remained relatively small; the port cities of Rotterdam and Antwerp, in contrast, had approximately 300,000 inhabitants around 1900.²⁸ As Sweden's portal to the Atlantic and despite its close, long-established connections with the British Isles, Gothenburg remained at the periphery of the European continent, where international mobility was spurred by steam-driven transportation. Contrary to continental port cities such as Hamburg, Antwerp or Rotterdam, or inland metropolises such as Paris, Berlin or Vienna, Gothenburg was not a destination or transit station for internationally mobile people arriving by train from different European regions and beyond. The travelling distance from Copenhagen or Hamburg to Gothenburg was not too far, however, and international artists did venture to the Swedish port city, although only a very few performers came from further away than northern Germany.²⁹ Historian of Habsburg Central Europe Susanne Korbel has stated that northern-bound performers from Austria-Hungary would usually reach as far as Hamburg.³⁰ Hence, given its relatively small size and its distance from urban centres, cultural (ex)change in Gothenburg was less strong than it was in larger and more central cities on the European continent.

Furthermore, Gothenburg was not strategically situated on any route from one metropole to another, as was the case, for example, of the small city of Vyborg. Located between the Russian capital Saint Petersburg and the Nordic cities of Helsinki, Turku and Stockholm, artists from all over Europe stayed there *en route* to these other more important cities, turning early twentieth-century Vyborg into a cosmopolitan musical centre.³¹ Nor was Gothenburg situated in a border region, where cultural, political and social frontiers overlapped and fostered cultural diversity and exchange. Eighteenth-century Stralsund and Reval, for example, in the peripheral borderlands of the Swedish and Russian empires, hosted representatives from the two imperial centres who met local and regional elites to shape an inter-cultural sociability and leisure culture in these two small cities.³² Athens, to take another example, was further from Paris (seen as Europe's nineteenth-century cultural capital) than Gothenburg, but it lay on a trading route that had linked the

²⁶M. Fritz and J. Ling, *Musiken på Heden: Konserthus och orkesterförening i Göteborg 1905* (Sävedalen, 2014), 19.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸J. Kruithof, 'De demografische ontwikkeling in de XIXe eeuw', in Genootschap voor Antwerpse Geschiedenis (ed.), *Bouwstoffen voor de geschiedenis van Antwerpen in de XIXe eeuw. Instellingen, economie, kultuur* (Antwerp, 1964), 509–10; P.J. Bouman and W.H. Bouman, *De groei van de grote werkstad. Een studie over de bevolking van Rotterdam* (Assen, 1952), 115–17.

²⁹Landsarkivet Göteborg (LG), SE/GLA/12703 Arkiv Göteborgs Poliskammaren före 1900D IV c.

³⁰S. Korbel, 'Mobilities and national indifference: popular entertainment in Habsburg Central Europe around 1900', in Dietze and Vari (eds.), *Urban Popular Culture*, 29–52, at 41.

³¹N. Koivisto-Kaasik and S. Rantanen, 'A cosmopolitan music city: early twentieth-century transnational networks in Vyborg', in Dietze and Vari (eds.), *Urban Popular Culture*, 53–80.

³²M. Müller, *Das Entstehen neuer Freiräume: Vergnügen und Geselligkeit in Stralsund und Reval im 18. Jahrhundert* (Vienna, 2019).

region with Central Europe and the West since ancient times – and via which the cinematograph arrived in the Greek city as early as 1896. Athens was also, unlike Gothenburg, the capital city of a relatively recent nation-state and a place where the encounter between the Hellenistic past, the Ottoman experience and pro-Western Greek nationalism fomented cultural diversity.³³

Moreover, unlike Stockholm, Gothenburg was not part of the ‘Baltic orbit’, where travel and cultural exchange had been taking place since the Middle Ages.³⁴ Neither was Gothenburg at the intersection of different cultures within multiethnic empires, like the port cities of the eastern Mediterranean;³⁵ and, contrary to its British counterparts, it was not an imperial port.³⁶ And yet Gothenburg was an important Atlantic port that hosted a cosmopolitan business elite with significant international networks underpinning the city’s rapid industrialization. These trading and shipping networks allowed Gothenburg to become Sweden’s first ‘film city’ as technical equipment and film workers streamed into the country through its western port.³⁷ In the small, peripheral but *port* city of Gothenburg, cultural (ex)change took place in the years around 1900, but at a slower pace and in a less densely populated area than in the metropolitan urban centres. This, then, gives us a more distinct insight into the ambiguous processes of urban change.

Research methods and sources

As elsewhere in industrializing European cities, the Gothenburg authorities and socio-cultural elites debated how to contain social deviance, especially alcohol consumption.³⁸ For the city council, the control of public entertainment formed an intrinsic part of its disciplining and modernizing project, which aimed to represent the city as both liberal and an industrial site where social order duly prevailed among the working classes.³⁹ To this end, urban amusement was to be institutionalized, spatially contained and preferably situated at a safe distance from the disreputable port area.⁴⁰ It was no coincidence that the Lorensberg pleasure garden, with its

³³E.A. Delveroudi, ‘Transnational factors in the shaping of the early Greek cinema business’, in Dietze and Vari (eds.), *Urban Popular Culture*, 81–108.

³⁴S. Nauman, W. Jezierski, C. Reimann and L. Runefelt (eds.), *Baltic Hospitality from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* (Cham, 2022).

³⁵M. Fuhrmann, *Port Cities of the Eastern Mediterranean. Urban Culture in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge, 2020).

³⁶B. Beaven, ‘Foreign sailors and working-class communities: race, crime, and moral panics in London’s sailortown, 1880–1914’, in C. Reimann and M. Öhman (eds.), *Migrants and the Making of the Urban-Maritime World: Agency and Mobility in Port Cities, c. 1570–1940* (London and New York, 2020), 86–106.

³⁷M. Jönsson, L. Wolthers and N. Östlind (eds.), *Thresholds: Interwar Lens Media Cultures 1919–1939* (Cologne, 2021), 11.

³⁸Göteborgs Stadsfullmäktiges Handlingar (GSH) 1910, no. 64: Poliskammarens skriftelse med årsberättelse för år 1909 af tillsyningsmannen öfver stadens ölutskänkningsställen; GSH 1910, no. 39: Beredningsbetänkande öfver förslag om brännvinshandelns ordnande inom staden från och med år 1911.

³⁹GSH 1920, no. 325: Motion av herr Mellgren m.fl. om aktieteckning för stadens räkning i ett aktiebolag för ett folkknöjesetablissemang å Liseberg m.m.; GSH 1920 no. 362: Yttrande av samfälliga drätselkammaren öfver motion av herr Mellgren m.fl. om aktieteckning för stadens räkning i ett aktiebolag för ett folkknöjesetablissemang å Liseberg.

⁴⁰C. Reimann, ‘Amusement leaves the port: pleasure institutions and the reshaping of Gothenburg’s material and nonmaterial borders, 1860s–1923’, *Journal of Urban History*, 48 (2022), 1211–29.

restaurant and many performance stages, and the Liseberg amusement park were both located in the emerging western districts on the opposite side of the city.

The middle-class pleasure culture that developed at Lorensberg's variety and other theatres, the concert house, the Trädgårdsföreningen garden restaurant and the Liseberg amusement park, in addition to officially organized classical concerts for working people, were all advertised in newspapers, magazines, leaflets, city guides and the annual business almanac. Representations of pleasure practices, including those of allegedly outdated ones, had an important place in the negotiation of the city's 'urban modernity'. These well-advertised middle-class entertainments and the authorities' disciplinary endeavours testify to the intrinsic link between pleasure practices, their representations and the imaginaries they created. Especially in terms of amusement, the urban historian's task consists of attending to, as Nicolas Kenny and Rebecca Madgin put it, 'not just the fundamentals of urban life, the way cities are occupied and organized on a daily basis, but also the urban mindscape, the way cities are imagined and represented'.⁴¹ Methodologically, therefore, this article approaches urban pleasure through both its practices and its representations, since they are mutually constitutive, as the living urban world is constructed through the interplay between social practices and their representations.

Analogously to historian of emotions Margrit Pernau, who argues that a feeling and its expression take place in a single movement,⁴² this article approaches its sources via their twofold capacity to give insight into what people did in their spare time and how they and others represented these practices. Anna S. and Mathilda B. not only remembered that they took part in few pleasure activities, but their testimonies also reflect how their habits compared to those of others, and on what the social norm might have been. Similarly to personal memories, and although they belong to very different source categories, newspaper reports, city guides, police records, municipal council decisions and ethnographic studies all account both for things that actually happened and for their discursive framing.

This article, then, consciously draws on an eclectic corpus of sources composed of different types of material that embrace, from different perspectives, the co-constitutive character of the practices and representations of pleasure through which people in Gothenburg composed and negotiated 'urban modernity': personal memories, newspaper reports, city guides, police records, municipal council decisions and ethnographic studies. These varying source types are of equal value, therefore none will be given priority when accounting for the urban life of the past. I researched newspaper articles and city council decisions via key-words in digitized archives. As for the memory material, I use personal records collected between the 1960s and 1990s by the Swedish Institute for Language and Folk Memory (Institutet för språk och folkminnen, ISOF), some as interviews and some as written accounts, combined with published ethnographic studies. With the caution required when using memory materials to reconstruct urban experiences, it can be stated that personal memories are essentially the product of people's imaginaries, created around things done in the past.⁴³ Albeit on different levels, the other sources can be seen in a similar manner:

⁴¹N. Kenny and R. Madgin, "Every time I describe a city": urban history as comparative and transnational practice', in Kenny and Madgin (eds.), *Cities beyond Borders*, 3–23, at 5.

⁴²M. Pernau, 'Mapping emotions, constructing feelings: Delhi in the 1840s', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 58 (2015), 634–67, at 635.

⁴³P. Thompson, *Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, 2000), 129.

when announcing or reporting on a funfair market, for example, the writers of press articles or police records also shaped the representation of the market and the social practices it embraced.

The remainder of the article is divided into two parts. In the next section, it engages with cinema-going and dancing to demonstrate the extent to which, well into the twentieth century, people's appropriation of commercialized entertainment was deeply imbricated with traditional forms and places of amusement. Finally, the article shows how itinerant entertainment was negotiated in the context of a changing range of cultural products and the changing political regulation of public amusement, and how it was turned into modern entertainment's pre-modern 'other'. The article concludes by reconnecting to Anna S.'s and Mathilda B.'s memories of their lack of amusement habits.

'Farmer comedians' in cinema halls and dancing at community gardens

Modern urban entertainment is often associated with the triad of film, variety theatre and dancing, combined with their respective locales.⁴⁴ The music hall and the cinema in particular have been described as 'sites of modernity'.⁴⁵ Theatre, too, saw a trend toward large-scale, often transnational business. In Sweden, in the 1890s, the theatre director and businessman Albert Ranft, who owned numerous theatres in Stockholm and Gothenburg, became known nationwide through commercial productions of plays.⁴⁶ Cinema, however, still most clearly represents the important ways in which technical innovations could change people's amusement habits.⁴⁷ The film business encapsulates the institutionalization, commercialization and industrialization of popular entertainment, which took shape in the early twentieth century with profit-driven companies, some of which turned into genuinely big businesses.⁴⁸ Accounts of (urban) modernity often posit an intrinsic relationship between the development of metropolises and the new medium of film, which was captured in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and seminally analysed by Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966) and Walter Benjamin (1892–1940).⁴⁹ As for the dance hall, it also serves to represent modern urban culture, and the adaptation of new dances from overseas is often seen as a catalyst for changing gender relations and new bodily practices in changing urban contexts.⁵⁰

⁴⁴T. Becker, 'Der Körper des Varietés. Theater, Großstadt und Sexualität um 1900', in Dietze and Dornhof (eds.), *Metropolenzauber*, 57–80.

⁴⁵A. Geisthövel and H. Knoch (eds.), *Orte der Moderne: Erfahrungswelten des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt and New York, 2016).

⁴⁶R. Hoogland, 'The rise and fall of a theater king: Albert Ranft and the commercialization of the Swedish theater field between the 1890s and 1920s', in Dietze and Vari (eds.), *Urban Popular Culture*, 109–36.

⁴⁷Jönsson, Wolthers and Östlind (eds.), *Thresholds*; C. Sjöholm, *Gå på bio: Rum för drömmar i folkhemets Sverige* (Stockholm, 2003).

⁴⁸A. Dietze and M. Möhring, 'Einleitung: Produktionswelten der Massenkultur', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 46 (2020), 5–24.

⁴⁹A. Haller, 'Frühes Kino zwischen Stadt und Land: Einige Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Kinoprogrammgestaltung, Kinopublikum und moderner Stadterfahrung vor 1914', in Becker, Littmann and Niedbalski (eds.), *Die tausend Freuden der Metropole*, 229–58, at 230.

⁵⁰F. Ritzel, 'Synkopen-Tänze: Über Importe populärer Musik aus Amerika in der Zeit vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg', in K. Maase and W. Kaschuba (eds.), *Schund und Schönheit: Populäre Kultur um 1900* (Cologne, 2001), 161–83; K. Lange, "'Les Danses Nouvelles" in der alten Welt: Transatlantische Tänze in Paris und Berlin um 1900', in Nolte (ed.), *Die Vergnügungskultur der Großstadt*, 65–79.

Watching films in the city

While there is no doubt that cinema-going and new dance styles had significant potential for innovation, both are also symptomatic of the persistence of long-established cultural practices and their intertwining with modern inventions. Historians of early cinema have shown how film projections were integrated into the existing cultural infrastructures, not only in cities but also in the countryside. Before 1910, as cinema historian Andrea Haller has shown, the connection between film and urbanity was very loose indeed; at its beginnings, film screenings were introduced as much into rural as into urban settings.⁵¹ Itinerant funfair and circus operators added movie shows as a new attraction on their programmes; vaudeville and variety theatres hosted film projections and popularized this new cultural medium in both metropolitan and small-city contexts.⁵² In Gothenburg, it was Lorensberg, the city's major pleasure site, which offered movie screenings by itinerant artists in the context of its variety theatre.⁵³ At the more ephemeral Vintertivoli, situated in the city's seafaring district, cinematography also featured on the programme alongside panorama shows, theatre and, at times, performances of 'the world's strongest woman'.⁵⁴ As elsewhere in Europe, before the 1902 opening of Gothenburg's first cinema, film projections were merged with the existing amusement repertoire and took place in already existing popular entertainment venues.⁵⁵

A number of personal memories stored at the ISOF reflect how cinema-going became a widespread popular practice in the first decades of the twentieth century, especially among the lower social classes.⁵⁶ However, people did not necessarily experience cinema and film as a modern invention that would change their leisure habits. Eric B. J., born in Gothenburg in 1903, remembers that he would follow his elder sister to the Göteborgs Kinematograph movie house, where three short films would be shown. In between the films, he recalls, a so-called *bondkomiker* (peasant comedian) entertained the public by singing and telling funny stories.⁵⁷ According to Eric's account, not only the performances but also the management of Gothenburg's cinemas were similar to nineteenth-century itinerant entertainment businesses, usually run by a family.⁵⁸ Another cinema that Eric frequented, the Svea-Biografen, was, as he remembers, a family business: the father operated the cinematograph, the mother sold the tickets and their daughter of around 30 accompanied the films on the piano.⁵⁹ Rather than the movies as such or the technical

⁵¹Haller, 'Frühes Kino zwischen Stadt und Land'.

⁵²Allen, *Vaudeville and Film*; Müller, *Frühe deutsche Kinematographie*.

⁵³B. Petersen, *Det var på Lorensberg: Landeriets, värdshusets och restaurangens historia* (Gothenburg, 1978).

⁵⁴G. Bjelkental, *Göteborgs alla biografier. En resa i 100 år* (Gothenburg, 2009), 36.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*; C. Müller and H. Segeberg, 'Öffentliche Räume für Filme: Zur Etablierung der Kinos in Deutschland', in H. Segeberg and C. Müller (eds.), *Kinoöffentlichkeit (1895–1920): Entstehung – Etablierung – Differenzierung* (Marburg, 2008), 7–31; Delveroudi, 'Transnational factors'.

⁵⁶Sjöholm, *Gå på bio*, 42.

⁵⁷ISOF, IFGH 6449. 'Där visades 3 korta filmer och mellan varje film uppträdde en bondkomiker och underhöll publiken med att sjunga och berätta roliga historier.'

⁵⁸L. Runefelt, *Några ögonblicks förundran: Marknaden för ambulerande underhållning i Sverige 1760–1880* (Lund, 2023).

⁵⁹ISOF, IFGH 6449. '...fadern skötte apparaturen, modern sålde biljetter och dottern (som var i 30 års åldern) spelade piano under föreställningarna'.

equipment, it was these aspects of his early cinema experience evoking familiarity rather than innovation that mark Eric's experience of cinema-going as he recalled it decades later.

When, from the early 1900s, film projections were rehoused in cinemas, watching movies in Gothenburg did not remain restricted to these specific settings. From the 1930s, as the necessary technical equipment became affordable for associations and other institutions such as hotels, restaurants and museums, film screenings became widespread. They took place in various contexts and were partly used for political purposes. In the police records, applications for permission to project films abound, requested by political associations such as Soviet vänner ('Soviet friends') and on a regular basis by the Seafaring Museum.⁶⁰ As also shown in Gothenburg's police records, in Sweden, where alcohol consumption and the restaurant business were highly regulated, screenings were less likely to take place in pubs or taverns. That public (alcohol) policy affected the way in which film took root in cities is confirmed by the cases of Brussels and Amsterdam. In the Belgian capital, early films were shown in a growing number of alcohol-serving *café-cinés*, whereas in Amsterdam, the blending of alcohol consumption with other forms of pleasure was, as in Gothenburg, forbidden by the authorities.⁶¹

In Gothenburg, like the rest of Europe, film and cinema entered urban pleasure culture through well-established forms and forums of sociability and was channelled by state policy, especially on alcohol. Even after the introductory phase, the emerging commercial cinemas were only one way of distributing films, and even these could combine movies with traditional forms of amusement like the *bondkomiker*. In Gothenburg, it was mainly political associations and cultural institutions that staged film projections. In Athens, in contrast, as cinema historian Eliza Anna Delveroudi has shown, movies were popularized by local theatre managers and coffee-shop owners who organized outdoor screenings in the public squares of the city. As commercial cinemas started to emerge, these local entrepreneurs were reluctant to give up their lucrative businesses,⁶² and it is very likely that the popular outdoor screenings in street cafés continued after 1908, when Pathé opened its first movie theatre in the Greek capital.⁶³ The cases of peripheral Gothenburg and Athens urge us to relativize the role of cinema and films as agents of 'urban modernity' pushing for the establishment of commercial structures and shiny new cinemas.⁶⁴ When seen from the periphery, watching movies appears more clearly as a social practice that was in continuation with and well adapted to local traditions that were only partly disrupted by the opening of cinemas. What becomes more apparent at the European periphery may also be seen as relevant for the rapidly transforming urban centres, namely that cinema and film were sites where innovation continuously interacted with traditional cultural practices.

⁶⁰LG, SE/GLA/11675 Poliskammaren i Göteborg. Centralpolisens arkiv, efter 1900, D II a Centralpolisens Dagböcker 1922–40.

⁶¹G. Convents and K. Dibbets, 'Verschiedene Welten: Kinokultur in Brüssel und in Amsterdam 1905–1930', in Segeberg and Müller (eds.), *Kinoöffentlichkeit (1895–1920)*, 150–6, at 153.

⁶²Delveroudi, 'Transnational factors', 94–5.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 98.

⁶⁴C. Müller, 'Kinoöffentlichkeit in Hamburg um 1913', in Segeberg and Müller (eds.), *Kinoöffentlichkeit (1895–1920)*, 105–25.

Where to dance

Dance as a socio-cultural practice and its institutions, the music hall, dance hall and dance floor, were significant in the transformation of urban culture around the turn of the century.⁶⁵ However, our notion of ‘urban modernity’ needs to take closer account of the fact that dancing was resilient toward changes in the urban landscape, in the sense that it was not in any way dependent on specific commercial sites. Tracing practices and representations of dancing in early twentieth-century Gothenburg with the help of personal memories, police records and city guides, it emerges that, rather than commercial settings, long-established, often class-specific dancing places together with private and semi-commercial venues were significant for the appropriation of dancing into urban lives.

Traditionally, dancing had a profoundly rural connotation. In Berlin, before dancing moved to the urban centre at Friedrichstraße to become institutionalized and commercialized, it took place as a leisure pursuit on the rural outskirts of the capital.⁶⁶ In smaller industrializing cities that attracted migrant workers from rural regions, dancing styles typical of the countryside were carried into the cities and often proved to be significantly long-lasting in their new urban context.⁶⁷ While dancing was developing into an activity that was representative of cultural modernization,⁶⁸ it also remained one that involved identification with local and traditional values in urban districts housing working-class people, many of them with rural backgrounds, such as Veddel, Hamburg’s eastern harbour district.⁶⁹ In non-metropolitan, especially working-class, contexts, the importance of associations for the organization of dancing events, continuing well into the twentieth century, can hardly be overestimated.⁷⁰ ‘Exclusive’ working-class dancing sociabilities were maintained alongside the allegedly democratic dance hall.⁷¹ Taking peripheral Gothenburg as a case in point, I would argue that the rural, associational and class-specific character of early twentieth-century dancing needs to be more closely integrated into accounts of ‘urban modernity’, rather than seen as persisting ‘despite’ or ‘alongside’ the dance hall and its emancipatory promises.

In interviews collected by the ethnologist Vilgot Nilsson, people of the lower and working classes growing up in Gothenburg around the turn of the century remember that they habitually went dancing on outdoor dance floors in the Slottsskogen and Krokäng public parks.⁷² While Krokäng on Hisingen Island was run by the workers’ association, the much larger and more centrally located Slottsskogen was laid out in the 1870s with the aim of hosting leisure activities for all social classes. However,

⁶⁵Becker, ‘Der Körper des Varietés’; Ritzel, ‘Synkopen-Tänze’; K. Lange, ‘Tanzvergnügen’, in Morat *et al.* (eds.), *Weltstadtvergnügen*, 74–108.

⁶⁶Lange, ‘Tanzvergnügen’.

⁶⁷S. Friedreich, ‘Vergnügen in der “Emporkömmlingsstadt”: Soziale Scheidelinien in der populären Kultur Plauens im frühen 20 Jahrhundert’, *MSG Moderne Stadtgeschichte* (2019), 36–46.

⁶⁸Lange, ‘Tanzvergnügen’.

⁶⁹Just, ‘Forgotten fun’, 1291.

⁷⁰Lisa Kosok, ‘Die Reglementierung des Vergnügens: Konzessionspraxis und Tanzbeschränkungen im Ruhrgebiet (1879–1914)’, in D. Kift (ed.), *Kirmes – Kneipe – Kino* (Paderborn, 1992), 60–82.

⁷¹On a critique of the supposedly democratic character of early twentieth-century dance halls, see K. Nathaus, ‘Gesichtswahrung, Statuskämpfe und soziale Grenzziehung. Interaktion im urbanen Vergnügen des frühen 20. Jahrhunderts’, *MSG Moderne Stadtgeschichte* (2019), 47–58.

⁷²V. Nilsson, *Vårt rika fattiga liv* (Stockholm, 1979), 48–9.

Slottsskogen in general and its dance floors in particular were mostly frequented by working-class people and represented as working people's spaces.⁷³ Also, the workers' association frequently arranged dance evenings, or *danssoarées*, at its headquarters, and the police immediately approved all requests in this regard.⁷⁴ The authorities viewed the *danssoarées* positively because they complied with temperance principles. The same holds true for a number of other associations and fraternal orders requesting dance evenings, such as the Frihetsbröderna humanist order. Alma H., remembering her youth in early twentieth-century Gothenburg, recalls that she would go dancing at the Frihetsbröderna's events after her shift in a pub in the port district.⁷⁵

The significance of class-specific and association-sponsored dancing in Gothenburg supports historian Klaus Nathaus' thesis that modern mass entertainment did not necessarily blur class distinctions. Instead, amusement practices like dancing were often a means to reaffirm or even to shape class belonging. While members of the working and middle classes may have engaged in the same activities, they did so in separate settings – and often in quasi-natural surroundings rather than in urban dance halls.⁷⁶ Public authorities conceived urban nature zones, like parks, botanical and zoological gardens, as the necessary means for working people to relax from the accelerating pace of city life. Urban historians see these cultivated green areas, with their compensatory functions, as inherent parts of spatially differentiating 'urban modernity'.⁷⁷ However, many dance venues that Gothenburg residents remember as their habitual locales for going out were situated outside these officially authorized green spaces. Through people's memories and police records, it emerges that much dancing took place at alternative sites, especially community gardens.⁷⁸ Sture Ingvar A., born in 1920, remembers that, in the early 1940s, he used to go to the 'modern dance floor' at Liseberg (although he never visited another popular dancing venue there, the Polketten). However, he recalls that he took his first dance steps at the community garden of the Änggårdens,⁷⁹ an association that regularly organized dance evenings.

Sture Ingvar's individual experience should not be overinterpreted, but it reminds us to consider the significance of familiar surroundings and spaces of sociability embracing new cultural techniques that may later be practised elsewhere. Whatever the case, the importance of the dance hall in the appropriation of new dances by Gothenburg residents should not be overestimated, either in relation to people's personal representations of their dancing experiences or to the urban pleasure culture in general. In Gothenburg, there was a myriad of different, mostly non-commercial formats and settings where people went to dance, and which they associated with this leisure activity; dancing classes could even take place in former fire stations, for example.⁸⁰ This wide variety of venues urges us to relativize not only the importance

⁷³G. Bellander, *Illustrerad vägvisare för Göteborg* (Gothenburg, 1891), 53–4; ISOF, IFGH 02993, 28; ISOF, IFGH 6457, 2.

⁷⁴LG, SE/GLA/12703, Arkiv Göteborgs Poliskammaren före 1900, D XII g Dagböcker angående offentliga tillställningar.

⁷⁵ISOF, IFGH 6345, 7.

⁷⁶Nathaus, 'Gesichtswahrung, Statuskämpfe und soziale Grenzziehung'.

⁷⁷Nolte, 'Verdoppelte Modernität', 5.

⁷⁸N. Engelbrektsson, *Landala: Stadsdel och livsform som försvann* (Gothenburg, 1982), 88.

⁷⁹ISOF, EI 175f, 18.

⁸⁰ISOF, IFGH Acc. 6450, 14.

of dancing halls in city dwellers' pleasure habits and imaginaries, but also the transformative dynamics that dancing as a socio-cultural practice brought about. Leaving aside the focus on European metropolises and their music halls, and zooming into a small peripheral city, we can identify dancing as a cultural practice that sustained well-established forms of sociability, particularly the associations, which embraced public dancing as an expanding urban phenomenon and gave it a familiar forum. As in Sture Ingvar's case, semi-commercial and rural dance settings, even those that were not class-specific, were certainly more inclusive for people with a modest background than the dance floors at the Liseberg amusement park.

Organ grinders and travelling markets: the reappropriation of itinerant entertainment

This section argues that the making of 'urban modernity' involved a complex negotiation around (traditional) forms of itinerant entertainment. In its most common characterization, modern urban entertainment is not only commercial, but also institutionalized and sedentary.⁸¹ It is the large-scale entertainment palaces of Paris, London and Berlin that are the most important signifiers of turn-of-the-century urban pleasure culture. In Gothenburg, too, certain institutions became symbols for the city's modernizing range of cultural offerings. It was the innovative Nya Teatern (New Theatre) opened in 1909, and from 1916 the modernist Lorensbergsteatern (Lorensberg Theatre), which staged Scandinavian state-of-the-art drama, that came to symbolize Gothenburg's changing and more sedentary theatre culture.⁸² Continuous efforts by the city's economic and cultural elite, with Jewish donors as main funders, culminated in the inauguration in 1905 of a concert house with its own symphony orchestra.⁸³ Operating on the blurred boundary between popular and bourgeois pleasures, with performances ranging from variety and circus to popular theatre, Lorensberg became Gothenburg's main entertainment site. At the same time, while anchored in institutions like Lorensberg or the Berlin Metropoltheater, modern urban entertainment gave rise to a class of internationally hyper-mobile performers.⁸⁴ These touring ensembles and individual artists, who often travelled between continents, emerged in the context of the late nineteenth-century transport revolution. The 1860–1920 period was also the heyday of agents, impresarios and managers in the performing arts, accompanying the rise and professionalization of the international theatre industry.⁸⁵

These globally mobile performance-industry actors bore no resemblance to the traditional business of itinerant entertainment. With the exception of the circus,

⁸¹Dietze and Möhring, 'Einleitung'.

⁸²C. Reimann, 'Theatre and the making of the welfare city. Gothenburg's performance stages, 1880s–1934', in M. Linnarsson and M. Hallenberg (eds.), *Nordic Welfare Cities. Negotiating Urban Citizenship since 1850* (London and New York, 2024), 60–82.

⁸³Fritz and Ling, *Musiken på Heden*.

⁸⁴S. Korbel, *Auf die Tour! Jüdinnen und Juden in Singspielhalle, Variété und Kabarett – Habsburgermonarchie bis Amerika* (Vienna, 2020); M. Rempe, 'Grenzgänger: Dirigenten als Entrepreneur in Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 46 (2020), 25–53.

⁸⁵N. Leonhardt and S. Scholz-Cionica, 'Circulation: theatrical mobility and its professionalization in the nineteenth century', in P.W. Marx (ed.), *A Cultural History of Theatre in the Age of Empire* (London and New York, 2022), 113–33, at 121.

which was integrated into middle-class entertainment, traditional itinerant entertainers such as acrobats, magicians, musicians, animal tamers and panorama owners became marginalized from the late nineteenth century; they are also absent from current accounts of ‘urban modernity’. While traditional itinerant entertainment continued to exist in the wake of the modern entertainment business,⁸⁶ the way it was perceived and managed by city dwellers has not been integrated into our view of turn-of-the-century urban change. In contrast, focusing on a small peripheral city like Gothenburg, where itinerant entertainers had catered to the residents’ pleasure needs for centuries, brings to light the changing perception of itinerant entertainment and its reappropriation by ‘modern’ amusement offerings.

Itinerant entertainment and ‘the modern city’

Research has it that ‘modern’ cultural practices constituted themselves through constructing and interacting with an ‘unmodern other’. In circuses, amusement parks and industrial expositions celebrating technical progress, exhibitions of ‘the unmodern and exotic other’ were widespread. The confrontation with the supposedly unmodern and exotic was an accepted form of amusement that made north-western European spectators become and feel ‘modern’.⁸⁷ The renegotiation of itinerant entertainment fulfilled very similar social functions in Gothenburg. The authorities and the local press used ‘the organ grinder’ and the Larmsmässe travelling market as metaphorical counterparts to institutionalized urban pleasures. The ‘modern’ character of the Lorensberg Theatre and other such institutions took shape through the confrontation with supposedly ‘outdated’ itinerant entertainers in a context of changing social practices and (political) regulation.⁸⁸

In his recent book on itinerant entertainers in Sweden, historian Leif Runefelt argues that itinerant entertainers’ reputation among the bourgeoisie started to decline in the 1870s. He attributes the travelling entertainers’ shrinking status to the expansion, diversification and commercialization of urban pleasures, which allowed the urban upper-middle classes to distinguish themselves from the lower classes through the consumption of more distinctive forms of entertainment.⁸⁹ Until the mid-nineteenth century, itinerant entertainers were well received by local authorities, who gave them permission to perform, and the local press offered them a forum for their announcements and advertisements. At least from the perspective of contemporary newspapers, itinerant performers were not treated with contempt or persecuted in any way by the majority society.⁹⁰ In Gothenburg as elsewhere, this relatively positive reception of travelling entertainers began to change in the late nineteenth century. Itinerant artists and entertainers, especially when of (alleged) foreign origin, were no longer as readily accepted by the authorities, and their presence and activities in the city came under increasingly critical scrutiny. At the

⁸⁶Runefelt, *Några ögonblicks förundran*; E. Andersen, ‘Unfairness at the funfair: the French syndicate for travelling showpeople in the long nineteenth century’, *Cultural and Social History*, 21 (2024), 65–86.

⁸⁷C. Fernstål and C. Hyltén-Cavallius, *Ett lapptäcke av källor: Kunskapsproduktion om romer och resande vid arkiv och museer* (Lund, 2020), 138–42.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*

⁸⁹Runefelt, *Några ögonblicks förundran*.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 20.

same time, what ‘modern’ amusement was to look like was defined through its confrontation with the persistent presence of itinerant entertainment in the port city.

From the end of the nineteenth century, policy toward small street performers became more repressive in most European countries. Since itinerant entertainers usually lived in caravans, they became marginalized as highly stigmatized ‘Gypsies’.⁹¹ In order to portray themselves as different from other caravan dwellers, itinerant showpeople in France and the Netherlands started to form guilds to protect their interests and social status.⁹² In Sweden, itinerant performers were also resilient. In Gothenburg, while their number had been falling appreciably since the early 1900s, police records testify that itinerant entertainers were still part of early twentieth-century urban life.⁹³ In 1904, Gothenburg city council seconded a motion that proposed higher taxes for foreign artists, in order to support Swedish performers.⁹⁴ The municipality of Kungsbacka, a small town south of Gothenburg, started to withhold permission to itinerant entertainers such as circus companies, animal tamers and merry-go-round performers. As a consequence, itinerant entertainers performed outside the city boundaries because no legal code regulated public performances in the countryside. The authorities increasingly perceived these unregulated performances as a problem and the local press noted, in 1914, that ‘We stand without any legal resources opposed to such performers. Repeated disturbances and inconveniences have occurred.’⁹⁵

As Runefelt shows, throughout the nineteenth century, itinerant entertainers had routinely advertised their performances in local newspapers. This practice is not mirrored in early twentieth-century *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning* (*GHT*), the main Gothenburg newspaper, with a liberal orientation and strong cultural focus. In this major medium, which featured advertisements for all the Gothenburg pleasure institutions, from the Lorensberg and the Trädgårdsföreningen park to the Henriksberg restaurant, and intensively reported the city’s developing theatre scene, itinerant entertainment was almost entirely invisible.

At around the same time, local newspapers started to turn travelling entertainment, with organ grinders as its metonymic expression, into the ‘other’ of modern amusement practices. In the Gothenburg press, from at least the 1880s, itinerant entertainment came to be associated with the distant past of urban life, often with romanticized visions of medieval towns and exoticized foreign artists. In October 1898, for example, a *GHT* article noted that ‘by train from Gothenburg came an Italian organ grinder who under his frayed coat had a small monkey pressed to his

⁹¹L. Lucassen, ‘The clink of the hammer was heard from daybreak till dawn: gypsy occupations in Western Europe (nineteenth–twentieth centuries)’, in A. Cottaar, L. Lucassen and W. Willems (eds.), *Gypsies and Other Itinerant Groups: A Socio-Historical Approach* (Basingstoke, 2001) 153–73, at 167.

⁹²A. Cottaar, ‘The making of a minority: the case of Dutch travellers’, in Cottaar, Lucassen and Willems (eds.), *Gypsies and other itinerant groups*, 114–32; Andersen, ‘Unfairness at the funfair’.

⁹³LG, SE/GLA/12703, Arkiv Göteborgs Poliskammaren före 1900, D IV c; SE/GLA/11676 Poliskammaren Kriminalpolisens utlänningsavdelningsarkiv, D II Register över anmälda resande 1900–14; GSH 1904, no. 16, Yttranden af drättselkammaren och poliskammaren öfver förslag till förändrade bestämmelser för beskattning af utlänningar för konserter och dramatiska eller andra föreställningar, 9.

⁹⁴GSH 1904, no. 16: Yttranden af drättselkammaren och poliskammaren öfver förslag till förändrade bestämmelser för beskattning af utlänningar för konserter och dramatiska eller andra föreställningar.

⁹⁵GHT, 7 Jul. 1914, ‘...står man nästan rättslös gent emot sådana föreställningsgivare. Upprepade ordningar och olägenheter hava förekommit.’

chest glowing with warm southern feelings'.⁹⁶ The *GHT*'s middle-class readership could feel 'modern' by reading about supposedly exotic lifestyles that were personified in 'the organ grinder'. In 1885, the newspaper noted that organ grinders performed alongside bear tamers and other street performers at 'a genuine popular fair' in the small town of Alingsås.⁹⁷ Organ grinders and other street musicians were romanticized when visiting non-urban settings, which 'in summer, are crowded with itinerant organ grinders with birdcages on their backs'.⁹⁸ While considered as appropriate in rural and small-town popular culture, from the late nineteenth century onward, organ grinders were increasingly perceived and presented as a nuisance and at odds with middle-class urban life.⁹⁹ In April 1898, *GHT* reminded its readers that 'music in courtyards and the like within the city may not be performed without permission from the police chamber', and that 'an organ grinder was liable for such unauthorized music'.¹⁰⁰

The organ grinder's allegedly inappropriate yet persistent appearance in Gothenburg's transforming city centre was captured by a joke published in the *GHT* in 1913. This depicted an old organ grinder whose daily habit of playing his instrument at a street corner was disrupted by the construction of a big hotel, the very symbol of physical urban change. When asked to leave the site, the musician claimed that his accustomed place was there.¹⁰¹ Perhaps *GHT* and the joke's author sought to appeal to the nostalgic feelings of Gothenburg residents who also wished the organ grinder to stay, instead of a new hotel being built.

The othering of itinerant musicians and their undesirability were often predicated on their alleged foreign origin, many being designated Italians.¹⁰² The changing perception of itinerant entertainers in Sweden, driven by the local press, was underpinned by often xenophobic rhetoric.¹⁰³ In the Gothenburg *GHT*, as the twentieth century progressed, the depiction of allegedly 'Italian organ grinders' changed from an exoticizing discourse into one that increasingly associated them with organized criminality, claiming in an article on 24 December 1935 that 'organ playing was a well-organized business'.¹⁰⁴ While the commercialization and institutionalization of public entertainment implicitly built on its counter-image of itinerant entertainment, music by organ grinders became integrated into 'modern' urban pleasures. Whether the sound of organ grinders was perceived as a nuisance or a pleasure, as bad old-fashioned music or as endowing a place with a romantic atmosphere, was highly

⁹⁶*GHT*, 29 Oct. 1898, '...kom med tåget från Göteborg en italiensk positivspelare, som under den luggslitna rocken hade en liten apa tryckt till sitt af sydlänst varma känslor glödande bröst'.

⁹⁷*GHT*, 12 Jan. 1885, 'En folkfest i ordets fulla bemärkelse.'

⁹⁸*GHT*, 17 Jun. 1898, '...att gränslandskapen synnerligen sommardag äro öfverfyllda af kringvandrande positivspelare med fågelburen på ryggen och generalstabskartan och hemliga anteckningar i positivets lönlåda'.

⁹⁹L. Runefelt, 'Threat or nuisance? Foreign street entertainers in the Swedish press, 1800–1880', in Nauman, Jezierski, Reimann and Runefelt (eds.), *Baltic Hospitality*, 303–28.

¹⁰⁰*GHT*, 18 Apr. 1898, 'Musik å gårdar o. d. inom staden får ej utföras utan tillstånd från poliskammaren. En positivspelare pliktade för dylikt olofligt musicerande.'

¹⁰¹*GHT*, 13 Apr. 1913.

¹⁰²*GHT*, 11 Dec. 1935, 'som ryska sågfilare och italienska positivspelare, som danska possessionater...'

¹⁰³Runefelt, 'Threat or nuisance?', 309–13.

¹⁰⁴*GHT*, 13 Jun. 1913, 1 Jul. 1913, 8 Dec. 1924, 24 Dec. 1935, 'Positivspelandet är ett väl organiserat geschäft.'

dependent on context. In the memories of Maja D., born in 1909, organ grinders provided the music to the merry-go-round at Lorensberg's garden restaurant.¹⁰⁵ With its eclectic range of entertainment, which merged allegedly old-fashioned practices with innovations, Lorensberg exemplifies the hybrid character of Gothenburg's early twentieth-century urban pleasure culture, imbued with references to and literally built on traditional forms of (itinerant) entertainment.

Negotiating early modern market traditions

The renegotiation and reappropriation of itinerant entertainment is encapsulated in the transforming representations of the Larmsmässemärknad market. Originally, the Larmsmässe had been a market for food and other products, held since early modern times around Larsdagen (10 August) in Gothenburg and other Swedish towns. From the 1860s on, as increasingly fewer urban dwellers depended on the market as an economic institution, its carnival character, which had always been implicit in the Larmsmässe event, started to take the upper hand.¹⁰⁶ Throughout the nineteenth century, during the Larmsmässe market week, farmers with their servants, fishermen and peddlers from the surrounding countryside streamed into the city, along with itinerant entertainers, to put up their stalls at the central square, Gustav-Adolfs-Torg.¹⁰⁷ Performers of all kinds, including travelling theatre groups, jugglers, acrobats, panorama owners and simple comedians were present at the market.¹⁰⁸ Gothenburg-born Augusta J. remembers that once the market had closed for the day, the farmers and their servants went to dance in the Slotsskogen public park, where they bought and drank a lot of alcohol, which they slept off at the cheap hotels in the port district – if they had not already been arrested for drunkenness. Augusta also recalls that travelling people belonging to the Roma ethnic minority came to sell horses at the Larmsmässemärknad, using, according to her, tricks to make old animals appear fitter than they really were.¹⁰⁹

It was the travelling people arriving in the city in connection with the market that aroused Augusta's misgivings and, in the case of the Roma, her outright suspicion of deviant behaviour. To the city authorities, it was both the market's carnival character and its itinerant participants that became a concern. In their view, not only the square outside the city hall but the entire city centre became populated and literally occupied by people who did not belong there. Not least, it was the predominance of women in the urban space during the market week that filled the city council with unease.¹¹⁰

In 1903, the funfair that the Larmsmässemärknad had turned into was banned from the city centre, while some of its markets – of agricultural produce, textiles and other

¹⁰⁵ISO, IFGH 6418.

¹⁰⁶B. Skarin Frykman, *Larmsmässemärknaden: En folklig karneval i 1800-talets Göteborg* (Gothenburg, 1993), 55.

¹⁰⁷B. Skarin Frykman, 'Larmsmässe Märknad i Göteborg: Festen för kalaset', *Göteborg Förr och Nu, Göteborgs Hembygdsförbunds Skriftserie*, 31 (2006), 97–114, at 102.

¹⁰⁸A. Cederblad, *Göteborg: skisserade skildringar af Sveriges andra stad i våra dagar jämte en återblick på dess minnen: för såväl turister som hemmavarande* (Gothenburg, 1884), 54.

¹⁰⁹ISO, IFGH 02993. 'Det kom tattare till Larmsmässemärknad för att handla hästar och lura bönderna. Tattarna brukade ge sina gamla hästkrakar brännvin, för att de skulle se raska ut och de brukade även måla dem.'

¹¹⁰Skarin Frykman, 'Larmsmässe Märknad i Göteborg', 102.

products – were allowed to continue in less central parts of the city.¹¹¹ However, the Larsmässemärknad as a popular pleasure event rooted in early modern practices of itinerant entertainment was reappropriated in different ways by various urban actors in the early twentieth century. The workers' association adopted its funfair aspect and organized, until 1910, Larsmässemärknad fairs in the Krokäng park, turning it into a workers' festival and adding a political message.¹¹² In the inter-war years, some businesspeople appealed to elderly city dwellers' memories with references to the Larsmässemärknad and its itinerant peddlers to advertise their sales.¹¹³ From the 1920s, the Liseberg amusement park, a city-owned company, merged both the funfair and the market in a nostalgic remake of the Larsmässa that featured peddlers telling their stories (*historiebarättare knallar*) and farmers playing music (*bondspeleman*) – exactly those forms of itinerant entertainment that the authorities had banned from the city some 20 years earlier.¹¹⁴ But now, the entertainers performed in a clearly delineated and controlled space. The multifarious representations of the Larsmässemärknad and the way that this itinerant form of entertainment made its mark on early twentieth-century urban culture urge us to acknowledge the non-linear transformation of pleasure practices and the extent to which modern pleasure institutions were intertwined with traditional practices and the imaginaries of itinerant entertainers.

Conclusion: 'urban modernity' and the absence of spare time

Both the approach and the source corpus chosen for this article are deliberately eclectic. This eclecticism is congruent with the urban phenomenon itself, which is incoherent and translated via a myriad of sources. Taken together, these different sources point to the fundamental way in which the emergence of 'urban modernity' in the peripheral city of Gothenburg was built by intertwining with, reappropriating and confronting traditional forms of amusement, many of which were of itinerant character. Travelling comedians were included in cinema programmes well into the twentieth century, alongside dancing, which was preferably practised at community gardens. While organ grinders were constructed as the 'unmodern other' to middle-class urban pleasures, institutions like the Liseberg amusement park relied on imaginaries of ambulant markets when conceiving their leisure offerings. In this fundamentally ambivalent transformation of urban culture, practices of pleasure and their representations were interwoven with one another. Modern pleasure culture did not only mirror itself in the supposedly 'unmodern', but representations and reappropriations of traditional amusement practices were constitutive to the hybrid that was 'urban modernity' – not only but particularly so in peripheral port cities. It appears that the continuous significance of non-commercial and itinerant public entertainment in ordinary people's urban pleasures can hardly be overestimated, and that we miss out on a large range of urban culture if we focus too strongly on emerging commercial pleasure institutions, such as the music halls and film theatres that were

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, 106.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, 108–10; Göteborgs-Posten, 17 Aug. 1907, 'Larsmässemärknaden Krokäng.'

¹¹³GHT, 7 Aug. 1924, 'Larsmässa-Märknad, Ferd. Lundqvist; GHT, 8 Aug. 1934, 'Larsmässa Märknad i Lundquists Ljushall.'

¹¹⁴GHT, 13 Aug. 1927, 'Liseberg. Stor Larsmässa Märknad'; GHT, 14 Aug. 1933, 'Liseberg har haft 36,000 dagsbesökare på Larsmässa Märknaden.'

inspired by metropolitan examples. In the face of technical innovation, many traditional forms of entertainment proved resilient.

To reconnect to Anna S.'s and Mathilda B.'s remembered experiences, cited at the outset of this article, I would like to conclude by emphasizing the need to take seriously the absence of spare time, mainly for working women, when applying notions of 'urban modernity'. Narratives of the rise of commercial mass culture build on the assumption that, toward the end of the nineteenth century, free time and money to spend on entertainment became more easily available to an increasing share of the urban population.¹¹⁵ In Gothenburg, the success of the *Folkteatern* popular theatre at Lorensberg and later Liseberg certainly support this thesis.¹¹⁶ However, the share of the population that did not take part in any amusement at all, working mothers in particular, was significant, and their non-existent spare-time activities need to be firmly integrated into accounts of early twentieth-century urban culture.

In 1923, as Gothenburg celebrated its 300th anniversary with a modernist international exhibition around Götaplatsen, the emblematic, newly built square, people one kilometre away in the Landala district of the city were still living in another world. This area was largely non-urbanized and many people lived on small farms, owned animals and grew crops for their subsistence.¹¹⁷ Just before the demolition of old Landala in 1968, ethnologist Nanne Engelbrechtsson interviewed Landala dwellers on their past lives in the district. Her interviewees remembered that they most frequently spent their scarce leisure time picnicking in Landala's natural environment, on its hills and meadows.¹¹⁸ However, women who had to take care of families stated that they basically did not have any free time at all.¹¹⁹ Gothenburg's 'urban modernity', then, like that of many other cities, was a highly incoherent construction.

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¹¹⁵D. Morat, 'Einleitung', in Morat *et al.* (eds.), *Weltstadtvergnügen*, 9–27, at 14.

¹¹⁶Reimann, 'Theatre and the making of the welfare city'.

¹¹⁷Engelbrechtsson, *Landala*, 24.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, 86.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 87.

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