Cora Sandel: *Alberte og friheten*. [Alberta and Freedom]
Per Thomas Andersen

One of the most elegant prose stylists in Norwegian literature from the 20th century is Cora Sandel, who lived from 1880 to 1974. Her artistic language was sober, precise and musical well sounding, yet at the same time nuanced, colorful and mood inducing in such a way that one tends to remember her stories as visual experiences. In a way Sandel wrote impressionistic paintings, she created a literary pallet, which one is unable to find anywhere else in Scandinavian literature. Her oeuvre is not very large 5 novels and 5 collections of short stories, but she is one of the premiere writers in the canon of Norwegian literature from the 20th century. Her main work is a trilogy about a young woman, Alberte Selmer, her adolescence and her development as woman and as a writer.

Cora Sandel's real name was Sara Cecilia Görvell Fabricius. She was born in the capital of Norway, at the time called Kristiania, in 1880, but her family moved to Tromsø in the northern part of Norway when she was 12. Tromsø was at the time a small village of 7000 inhabitants. She had to live a sad life without prospects in the province. She dreamt of becoming a painter, and in 1905 she moved to Paris, where she lived more or less permanent for 15 years. She married a Swedish sculptor, Anders Jönsson, and they had a son together. She was divorced some years later, and lived in Sweden from 1921 until her death in 1974.

The trilogy is a bildungsroman about a woman growing up in the declining family of a senior government official in Tromsø, just like Sara Fabritius herself. There is no future for her in this province, and she dreams of a different life, moves to Paris and becomes part of a bohemian group of young artists trying to make a living on the edge of survival by painting pictures or writing stories for the newspapers. She marries a Norwegian sculptor, Sivert, and they have a son together. But the marriage is not happy, and she leaves her husband and child, and moves back to Scandinavia to become a writer. As you can tell, essential parts of the trilogy are based on autobiographical elements. The first book in the trilogy, *Alberte og Jakob*, was published in 1926, the second one, *Alberte og friheten*, of which I will be speaking here today, in 1931, and the

third one, *Bare Alberte*, in 1939. All three volumes were translated into English by Elizabeth Rokkan in the 1960's.

Quite a number of researchers have studied the Alberte-trilogy. During the 1970's the approaches were mostly feministic. Lately, however, the perspectives have been more space oriented, based either on Michail Bahktin's theories of chronotopic analysis or on different contemporary theories of urban space. Gender is often en element in studies of Sandel's works regardless of the chosen perspective, most explicitly demonstrated by Ellen Rees in her book *Figurative Space in the Novels of Cora Sandel* from 2010. My own approach has been mostly based on inspiration from humanistic geography and the theories of Walter Benjamin and David Harvey. As her stories are often undramatically told, not driven by exciting epic events, the different locations and the careful codification of spaces are the more important for her narrative style. She removes esthetic importance from time to space. That which does *not* happen in time in form of events happens in another way in the novels *spatially*. In this way the author comes close to what architects do when they construct houses or urban spaces. I will try to connect two notions from the field of urban planning to the techniques of aesthetic codification and apply such an interdisciplinary method in my reading of Cora Sandel's *Alberte og friheten*. An architect must carefully plan the different *zones* in a family house and ensure that the *transportation* from the kitchen to the dining room is appropriate. Likewise; the urban planner must organize the different zones in which we work, live and sleep, do our shopping or go out for dinner or entertainment, and make sure the transportation between zones is effective so that large numbers of people can move quickly from one zone to another. In my view *zone* and *transportation* are useful notions also when analyzing the Alberte trilogy. Alberte is a wanderer, a nomadic wayfarer even in the urban landscape, just as she was in the magnificent natural landscapes surrounding her home village Tromsø. In the case of a highly existentially charged novel the zones and transportation distances are of course not only a question of practical behavior. The different zones are carefully codified emotionally, socially, and existentially, most of them are also gendered or sexually codified. Alberte does not feel any affiliation in any zone, instead she "finds her asylum in the crowd", as Walter Benjamin put it,

wandering and walking in the streets with no other company than her loneliness. She prefers to be in motion, in transportation between zones. This behavior is in accordance with what one could call her individual *life script*. Her basic affect is ambivalence. What is most important to her is her freedom, which she defends intensely – and which makes her extremely shy and lonely. So at the same time she feels an "encompassing hunger for compassion", and she is afraid of any relation to other people because she thinks all togetherness implies a loss of freedom. She lives on the edge of the community, avoiding all kinds of attachment. The expression of this life script in the spatial dimension is a no-zone existence, remaining in motion between places, always on the run. Alberte wanders around in the space of homelessness, always in between freedom and flight. She lacks all traditional attachments and relationships, like family, home and regular employment. She lives in randomly chosen hotel rooms, rented attic rooms or borrowed artist ateliers, and moves from place to place as her economy gets worse. Her only comfort zones are the no-zones, the public spaces where she can be a stranger among strangers, the streets and the metro stations. She has no regular income. She only meets with people of her own kind, that is lonely people in the periphery of society, wannabe artists and immigrants. They can share a temporal affinity at a café or in a atelier for a while, but most of them have no regular home or a permanent residence.

The first zone in which we meet Alberte in *Alberte og friheten* is an artist's atelier where she is about to take her clothes off in front of the painter, Mr. Digby. She poses as a nude model to earn some much needed money to survive. The room is cold, her skin gets pale blue, and as the author states: "it is not only (body) heat the pores drop off. It is life itself they slowly let sift out". Alberte experiences an "anxiety of the skin", and when she throws her clothes away, it feels like throwing oneself into the sea" – which in fact Alberte did towards the end of the first volume of the trilogy, trying to commit suicide. In this way the author makes a connection between the volumes. But the opening scene also makes a connection to the beginning of the first volume. In both scenes Alberte is blue with cold and feels vulnerable. However, the connection is paradoxical. In the first volume the opening scene depicts Alberte as she wakes up in the morning in

her own room in the family residence in Tromsø. The fact is that she feels even more vulnerable in her own family house under the gaze of her mother than she does naked in front of Mr. Digby. The zones in the family residence in Tromsø were in the first volume consequently depicted in military metaphors. Her home was no protecting nest, but a war zone. In Mr. Digby's atelier she is indeed having a hard time, but as she states: "Mr. Digby is no executioner", his eyes are "harmless". Maybe a bit surprisingly Mr. Digby's atelier, where Alberte poses naked in front of a man's intense observation, is *not* a very sexually coded space. The relationship between a male artist and his model is of course gendered, and Alberte feels shy and vulnerable, but not threatened. Mr. Digby's atelier is instead socially coded. Digby is not a bohemian artist. He is well off, and lives a bourgeois life in a wealthy district. Alberte has to cross the town by metro to get to his place. Both Mr. and Mrs. Digby are friendly and polite towards Alberte. The atelier is more like a class-coded zone where Alberte is depicted as a person at the bottom of the social hierarchy. She has to defy humiliation and put herself at the vulnerable disposal for the upper class to make a living.

As soon as she has received her money Alberte gets on the metro and feels relieved as she is in transportation between zones. This is how it is depicted in the novel:

> The train rattles on through the Grenelle quarter, up along broad avenues with planted medians in the middle. The buildings are in part obsoletely low, a little poor, a little moldy from the damp, in part brand new in the Jugend style, glowing like butter in the sun. Suddenly it's all gone. White tiled, dimly lit walls and vaults glide past, multicolored posters. A persistent odor of cellar and disinfectant fills the carriage. And tiredness again fills Alberte's limbs. She is extinguished underground.

The journey takes her to the other side of the Seine-river, where the metro disappears underground, and quite a different zone appears. Alberte and the reader arrive at the "sad working class quarters beyond Avenye de Main". The

arriving zone, Rue de l'Arrivée, is the bohemians', artists', and migrants' zone. Here are the cheapest hotels, located in the greyest and most dusty district. Alberte's miserable hotel is a far more sexually coded zone than Mr Digby's atelier. When she enters the building she will have to pass by several lonely and longing residents constantly making her different kinds of offers and inviting her to their rooms. Most persistent are a lesbian lady from Poland and a Russian opera singer. More innocent and less offending is the marriage proposal by Jean, the hotel janitor. When she finally enters her room, after climbing quite a number of stairs, it turns out to be "a small, stuffy attic room, smelling of mice. It had a sloping roof with a square skylight which was left open day and night, but it made no difference". The mice batther her at night and she finds them swimming in her washbasin in the morning. She has to call upon Jean to remove them, and he blames her in a friendly way for feeding them with bread crumbs. The standard of her neighborhood, the hotel, and her room adds a social codification to the clearly sexually coded zone of her residence. And it gets even worse as she moves downwards along the social hierarchy to new hotels. In summertime the heat gets intolerable.

Because of the heat as well as her nomadic wandering instinct she often leaves the hotel to seek the asylum of the crowd in the streets. Professor Tone Selboe has called her a female vagrant. When she walks in the streets she is in transport between zones, which is her prefered condition. But at the time public space, and especially the streets, were highly gendered. As Selboe states the male vagrant is a common figure in modern literature, Eliot in London, Rilke in Paris, Lorca in New York. The promenading flaneur is a common urban subject, carrying the modern urban experience. Women are the objects of his gaze, the urban street is a hunting ground. Women promenading alone in the streets were at the time not only vulnerable; if they had no male company or no female friend at their side, it was inappropriate behavior to promenade in the streets. Time and again Alberte is addressed as a prostitute by men asking for the price of her body. Nevertheless, the streets are where Alberte feels a distant community with strangers, with other homeless and lonely people. She "seeks refuge in the crowd":

Later in the evening, Alberte goes out, wanders the streets –

It is the refuge of many at this time, the homeless, the lonely, the prostitutes – the confused, those who don't know what to do with themselves. No one is so impossibly situated that she doesn't dare to feel at home here –

She walks down Rue de Rennes, the most gray, most rock hard, most desert-like of all streets. There one meets no one one knows, there one is the anonymous one, who walks past the factory girl on her way home, the street walker on her way out, a straw in the stream –

Down, up, down again, first on one sidewalk, then on the other. The traffic subsides. After a while the street takes on the air of an empty stage, where a complex play has been performed. Dust and paper, banana peels and cigarette butts remain in the gutters, take on, as the evening progresses, the characteristics of a kind of revolting theater decoration. All the shutters are closed up in the houses –

But then, exactly in the middle of the novel, in fact in the middle of the whole trilogy, something happens. The Danish mathematician Nils Veigaard shows up among the Scandinavian migrants. He is better off than the wannabe artists, and he falls in love with Alberte. He notices her miserable condition and tries to convince her to go with him and get a better life. Alberte is hesitant. In spite of her feelings for Veigaard, she is afraid of losing her precious freedom. The most interesting thing in a space-perspective is the new and quite different zone Cora Sandel creates while depicting Alberte's experiences in the meeting with Veigaard. He takes her to Versailles, and suddenly they experience something that resembles a pastoral idyll. However two peculiar events must be noticed:

The idyll is suddenly broken when they discover that they are locked in inside the park. Is has been closed for the night. They have to sleep outdoors in the park. The situation becomes emblematic for Alberte's life script and her dilemma. This is exactly what she is afraid of, this is a picture of her fear of intimacy: She is afraid that intimacy might become a prison-condition, something that will lock her in, something that will take away "the only thing she has got",

her freedom. This must be why she suddenly feels "arrested" when Veigaard takes her hand and leads her to a place where they can find shelter.

The other event to be noticed is the making of a place to spend the night. "Miserable in mood she waits while he tears and shakes some hay and prepares a kind of nest which she is to be put into. If only he could say something. But no. Thank you, she mumbles when he puts a big piece of hay over her and roughly stuffs it together." In spite of the uneasy tension and the uncomfortable condition something very rare happens to Alberte this night. She feels a unity with nature combined with an annihilation of individuality, and she has never slept so well in all her life.

> The night is like a soft cloth around one, impregnated with extracts of everything that grows. A cricket almost screams someplace nearby.
>
> A sudden notion that she perhaps is dead and gone glides momentarily through Alberte's mind. No – she is on earth, more on earth than ever before, strangely deeply and beautifully united with all of its life.

A distant memory from her childhood reaches her, something about being taken care of and feeling secure. Next morning she refuses to wake up. "She wants to go back to that dreamless sleep, the best she has ever experienced, she wants to go down again into that sheltered abyss of forgetfulness."

This very peculiar zone, the nest in the park, resembles an almost classical psychological nesting-incident. The British psychiatrist, John Bowlby, has in his main work Attachment and Loss I-III, developed a theory of attachment. His basic concept is that every one needs a secure base for his or her life orientation. The secure base is for most people granted by a basic attachment figure, usually a mother or a family. In opposition to the classical psychoanalytical theory of personal autonomy, Bowlby states that every individual is better prepared for mastering life challenges if there is a secure base to ensure support. If the secure base for different reasons is not stable, individuals tend to develop behavioral deviations, usually either anxious and

clinging behavior or anxious and elusive behavior. Alberte is a classical example of an anxious and elusive behavior. She never had a stable attachment figure when she grew up, she never knew whether she had someone to support her or not. As an adult she always reacts with anxiety and avoidance when people come close to her. But she has an insatiable longing for affiliation and belonging, "en umettelig hunger efter varme". The incident in the Versailles park is the closest Alberte gets to the feeling of having a secure base. But she doesn't dare to give up her freedom. Veigaard is insistent: "What kind of freedom is it you walk around here and have? You are not free, you are like an outlaw." [Fri – fredløs] He thinks she is longing for a home, as every outlaw does. "You walk around here and destroy yourself," he says, "of lack of everything, food, fresh air, proper clothes, goodness and care." But Alberte feels like she is a pawn in his game. She has him in her blood, as she states, she is longing for him every time he is away, but she doesn't want to follow him when he leaves. She feels anxiety and sweetness at the same time, as she says. Ambivalence dominates her feelings more clearly than ever before. Veigaard has to leave Paris without her, and she never hears from him again. He dies in a car accident.

Later she moves in with Sivert Næss, another wannabe artist, a wooden man, she calls him. Here she finds a person with whom she can stay together without any dangerous feelings of affiliation or belonging. They get a child together. But the relationship cannot last very long. She moves out, leaving husband and child, and goes to Norway, to her last zone, an isolated cottage where she can write the book she has dreamt of, probably the trilogy we are actually reading.

Conclution

As a concluding remark I would suggest that the Alberte-trilogy among other topics is concerned with the philosophical problem of connections between what we *do* and who we feel we *are*. All of us have some experience with coping with discrepancies between identity and activity. Nearly everyone feels that our identity includes much more than we get the opportunity to express through our daily activities. However if the discrepancies increase in such a way that we feel there is no connection at all between what we do and who we are, we will

probably be brought to a serious crisis in life. Some of us would come to a point where our self-identity is crushed. We more or less become what we do. Others would keep their self-identity intact, but develop an intolerable loathing towards their own life, and regard it as false, meaningless or worthless, and perhaps in the end lose the will to stay alive. I regard Alberte as a human being brought very close to a total crisis because of such a discrepancy between being and doing, and having to live in this crisis for years. The enigma of her existence is how she is able to survive with her self-respect and self-identity intact – until she at last gets the chance to establish some existential compliance in the zone of writing. Her identity both as a writer and as a woman can be expressed through the activity of writing.

And the way of writing we find in the Cora Sandel-trilogy is a highly original modernist discourse where the narrative development of episodes in the time dimension is brought almost to a minimum. The art of telling a story is removed from time to space. Sandel is composing her moving story about Alberte by depicting her in a great number of zones in which she never feels at home, always taking to the streets, that is to the transporting motion between zones where she can find her asylum in the crowd and in a persistent in-betweenness.