

Chasing Shadows

An Anthropological Expedition of the Hunt for Olle Högbom



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Abstract

This essay explores the mysterious disappearance of Olle Högbom from an anthropological perspective. It uses theories of hauntology, ruinology, and simulacra to examine how Olle's absence continues to affect society. The study involves a thematic analysis of online forums and qualitative interviews with Olle's sister, contrasting public speculation with family narratives, and highlights the enduring presence of Olle in collective memory, illustrating how unresolved disappearances influence society, memory, and everyday life. This anthropological investigation into missing persons provides insights into how spectral presences shape cultural and social dynamics. Employing a blend of ethnographic interviews, content analysis, pictures, and autoethnography, this study paints an intimate portrait of relationships with the absent and examines the liminality of Olle's existence. Autoethnography in combination with multimodality carries the potential to unearth the unknown and paint an intimate understanding of absence. Olle's absence is depicted in the first chapter and partially in the third chapter, by presenting an autoethnographic account of the experience of forming relationships with the absent.

Keywords: Disappearance, Missingness, Hauntology, Ruinology, Simulacra, Liminality, Ethnography, Anthropology

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1. Introducing the story of Olle Högbom

The uncle I never met

When my grandfather wrote the book “Har du sett Olle?” he began by pondering where to start: “It did start a few years ago, but nothing is concluded, the plot unfolds as I write...” (Högbom 1989, 1). This reflects the reality for relatives of missing persons. In this brief autoethnographic section, I reflect on the subtle yet profound impact Olle Högbom has had on my life and identity. Olle was more than a topic of conversation, he evolved from an imaginary friend to a role model, embodying qualities I admired. This journey underscores my inclination to explore Olle's mysterious disappearance and its societal impact. As a child, I was fixated on the serial killer Thomas Quick, who confessed to my uncle's murder, a disturbing yet captivating narrative I shared with my class during school snack time. In hindsight, it was an absurd story to share, but my enthusiasm stemmed from the belief that the case was finally solved. I thought my family could find some peace now that the mystery of Olle's disappearance was resolved. This mirrors the tragic reality of living with missing persons, experiencing excitement upon hearing someone confess to the murder of a relative.

I chose to begin autoethnographically, not only to provide a personal narrative but also to offer a methodological approach. In short works like this, creative solutions are required to overcome time constraints. Carole McGranahan's work *An Anthropology as Theoretical Storytelling* offers insight into how crucial narratives are for the ethnographer. Using storytelling as a method should include characters and rhetoric, to breathe life into the ethnography (McGranahan 2020). Autoethnographic insight carries the potential to engage audiences beyond the academy (Kazubowski-Houston & Auslander 2021, 10). It is both a highly reflexive process and a style of representation that draws from the ethnographer's own life story (Kazubowski-Houston & Auslander 2021, 9). Dealing with the complexities of social life, anthropology requires different angles of vision, to deal with the knowledge gap of the unknown and absent, autoethnography and multimodality can serve as a bridge. (Kazubowski-Houston & Auslander 2021, 14)

Olle, who disappeared exactly 40 years ago, is part of a global phenomenon. Annually, around 30 people remain missing in Sweden alone, pointing to a societal issue that demands

in-depth investigation (Kramsjö 2019). This reality demonstrates the need for anthropological work within the lived experience and social consequences of disappearances.

By intertwining existing anthropological literature on living in the absence of a missing person with my fieldwork, this paper offers a deeper understanding of these complex experiences. By analyzing Olle's story, something particular can be made into something general, about how societal hauntings are manifested and dynamically shape the present.

Maria still searches for her brother even now, 40 years later. After her father's passing, it is now she who leads the pursuit for answers, being the face outwards in media, and following up on tips. But much has changed over 40 years, Olle's disappearance has become dramatized, and his memory has evolved into something different. This essay explores Maria's lived experience through qualitative interviews and contrasts this against the public figure that Olle's memory has evolved into. The burden of keeping Olle's memory alive has been passed down to Maria from her father, then the legacy will be passed down to me from my mother. An intergenerational haunting of an absent presence and the uncle I never met.



(Picture 1, Olle on a fishing trip)



(Picture 2, Olle working with his father)



(Picture 3, Olle lying on the grass)

Background

About Olle

My uncle, Karl Olov “Olle” Högbom, vanished under mysterious circumstances on September 7, 1983, leaving a significant impact on both his family and the community at large. On the night of his disappearance, 18-year-old Olle was at a party in Sundsvall. He walked with a group of friends towards a nightclub around 10 PM but chose to stop at a railway crossing to wait for another group of friends who were lagging. During this brief moment, Olle disappeared forever. The circumstances surrounding Olle’s disappearance are shrouded in mystery, especially since there was a high police presence in the area due to a burglary on the same street as Olle’s last seen location. Despite 11 officers patrolling the nearby area, Olle vanished without a trace. The plot thickens, with the discovery of Olle’s bicycle keys and glasses in the vicinity. According to Olle's sister, he always wore his glasses, being virtually blind without them, and had frames specially designed to not fall off. The lack of concrete evidence about what might have happened to Olle has led to widespread speculations over 40 years, but regardless, Olle’s disappearance remains as enigmatic today as it was at the time of his vanishing. A mystery that haunts those who knew him, and which continues to linger in Sweden's collective memory.



(Map 1. (Flygbild 1975, Lantmäteriet) **Red:** Olle's last seen location. **Pink:** The direction his friends went. **Blue:** Bike keys and glasses were found here. **Yellow:** Location of the break-in. **Green:** "Bünsowska tjärnen", a pond the police drained in search for Olle)



(Picture 4, some of Ruben Högbom's saved news articles)

The Family's Search for Olle

Thomas Quick, born Sture Ragnar Bergwall, is the central figure in perhaps Sweden's most controversial legal case. During the 1990s, Bergwall claimed to have killed, dismembered, and returned home with body parts of Olle as trophies (Ezpeleta 2020, Part 3). Olle's mother, Kerstin, expressed in an interview on Kanal 5, that Quick's confession provided some form of hope as they would finally learn what happened to Olle (Ibid). In 2008, journalist Hannes Råstam released a documentary on SVT (Swedish Television), where Bergwall confessed to the journalist that he had lied about everything (Råstam 2012, 40). Dan Larsson, who first exposed Bergwall's lies, claims that it was Olle's father, Ruben, through a thorough investigation, who pointed out the inconsistencies that later made it possible to expose him (Ezpeleta 2020, Part 3). Bergwall has since been acquitted of all the murders, a relief for some but an additional grief for the relatives. His false confessions hindered proper police work and may well have prevented the truth from ever emerging.

When Olle's family realized he was missing, they began a search that continues to this day, 40 years later. They knocked on doors, put up posters, and followed up on leads. When Olle's father, Ruben Högbom, lost his trust in the police and their theory that Olle was staying away of his own volition, Ruben began his own investigation. It was he who found Olle's bicycle key, connected the glasses in the police's lost and found to Olle, and spoke with witnesses.

Over the years, countless tips about Olle have surfaced, people claiming to have seen him alive, alleging to know the murderer, seeing or hearing what happened to him, and those wanting to vent their own theories. Ruben explored nearly every tip, even flying to Paris after someone claimed to have seen Olle there. Even now, new leads emerge, and just two months ago, a new witness came forward and spoke to the police. Maria read the testimony out loud and we spent the rest of the day contemplating about Olle. Her search has never ended, and I have followed her on many journeys throughout my life, just following up on tips. Olle has been constantly present all my life, he has lingered somewhere in the background. My own search for Olle is defined by helping Maria with hers.



(Picture 5, posters from 1983)

Media Representations of Olle

There has been significant media attention on Olle over the years, with him featuring on the front page again just a few months ago. Olle's father, Ruben Högbom, has played a prominent role in keeping the public's interest in the Olle case. Driven to find answers, he published a book¹ about his son's disappearance, maintained a website² where he shared news and theories about the case, and created a blog³ that he updated daily. His media presence has made him a public figure and a crucial element of Olle's story.

Local journalists have also contributed significantly to keeping Olle's memory alive. Journalist Dag Ståhle produced a short documentary on the disappearance, critically examining the investigation and offering a familial insight into the case (Ståhle 2010). Patric Sellén, a reporter for SVT, has extensively covered not only Olle's disappearance but also the disappearance of Johan Asplund, referring to these as open wounds in Swedish society. Moreover, journalist Martin Ezpeleta's audiobook on Storytel 2020 has given the Olle case a renaissance. The popularity of the audiobook led to its dramatization at the Kulturhuset Stadsteatern, Stockholm in 2022, where Lennart Jähkel plays Olle's father, Ruben, demonstrating both the case's relevance and resonance within Swedish culture.

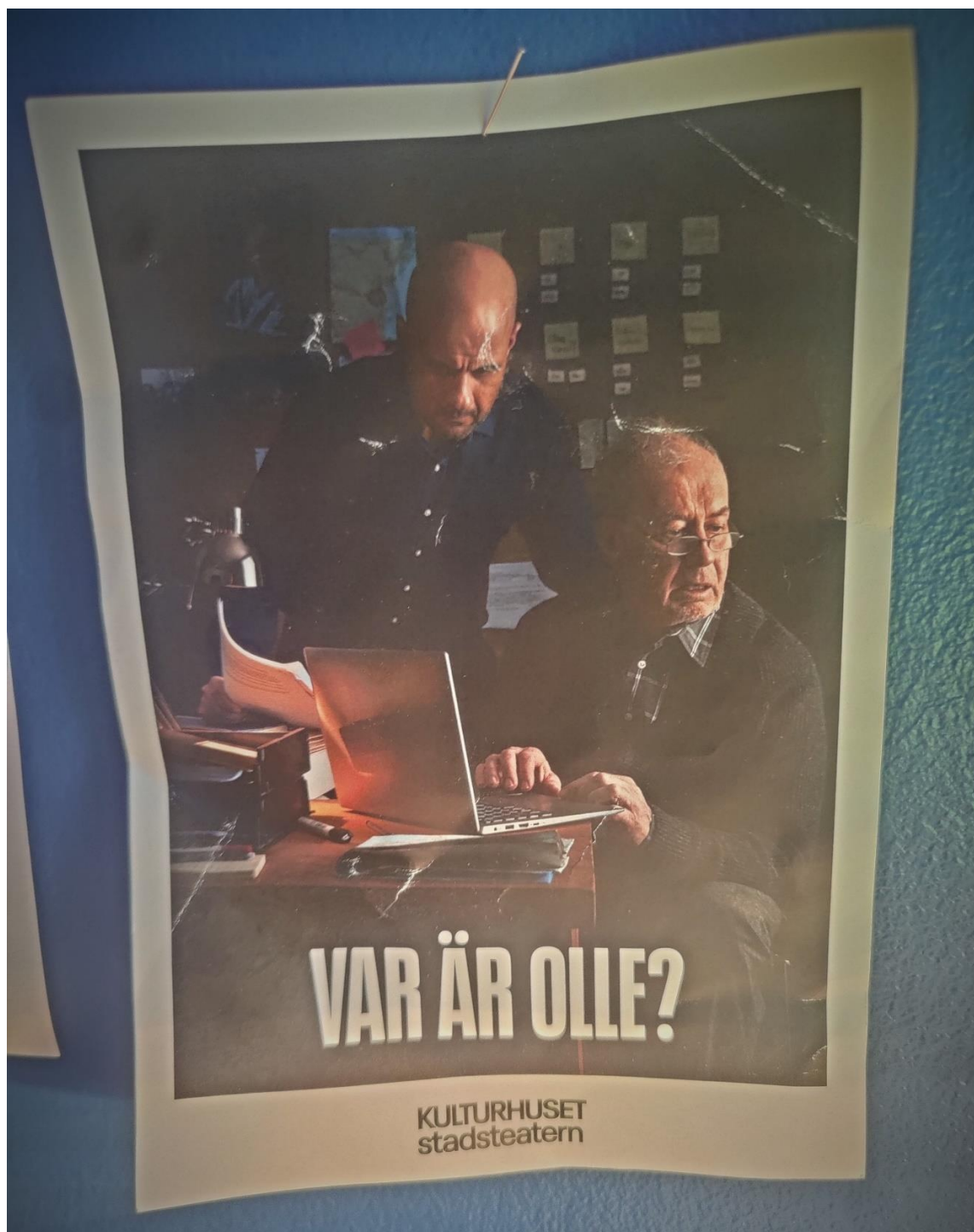
¹ (*Har du sett Olle?* 1989)

² (<https://Olle-sidan.se> [No longer active])

³ (<https://rubenhogbom.blogspot.com/>)



(Picture 6, bus stop in Stockholm 2020, photograph by Love Berglund)



(Picture 7, poster pinned to the wall in Ruben Högbom's old room)



(Picture 8, Stureplan Stockholm 2020. Posted on *Instagram* by @sara_hogbom)

2. Anthropology of Missing Persons

2.1 Previous Research and Theory

The phenomenon of missing persons is a noted subject in anthropology. However, Ori Katz, Doctor of Philosophy and affiliated with the Behavioral Sciences Department at Netanya Academic College, argues for a shifted understanding of the topic, proposing that the act of searching and *missingness* are intertwined (Katz 2023, 88). He explains that missingness is an uncommon word and argues for its social recognition (Katz 2023, 76). While searching is directed at tracing the missing, it also evolves into attempts to manage the unknown (Katz 2023, 81). The term *disappearance* is linked to an event in the past, a change in state, where the person went from being here to no longer being here, whereas *missingness* refers to the current stage of both the individual and those left behind (Katz 2023, 76). Katz emphasizes that missingness carries the potential to entrench missing persons as a social category, a category defined not by disappearance but by searching (ibid). Anthropologist Laura Huttunen argues that the search reflects “...the disturbing nature of the liminality of the missing in social terms” (Huttunen 2023, 214). Deriving from the Latin “limen” meaning “threshold” liminality was initially coined by Arnold van Gennep in *Les Rites de Passage* (1909) and underwent a renaissance under the anthropologist Victor Turner, in *The Ritual Process*, liminality addresses the transitional phases in social structure and identity (Turner 1995). In Huttunen’s study of family experiences, she claims that the absence of the missing has become normalized in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina (Huttunen 2023, 206). For her, the absence and liminal state of the missing are tied to the lack of proper burial rituals (ibid). The liminality arising in the search for missing persons reflects a painful unresolved process (Huttunen 2023, 214). Huttunen proposes the creation of dedicated online memorial spaces, serving as virtual monuments for the missing, a concept particularly relevant to the focus of this study (Huttunen 2023, 210).

Even though these examples primarily discussed disappearances in conflict regions, there are similarities in the families’ searches. Olle Högbom's absence mirrors a liminal existence, his absence is reflected in the search, and Ruben Högbom's goal until his death was to bury his son. Internet-based “memorial spaces” for Olle have emerged on forums such as Reddit, Flashback, and Blogspot, where the liminality and ongoing search surrounding his absence are central themes. This essay contributes previous research, as the disappearance occurred in Sweden, a nation at peace for over 200 years. There are no reasonable

assumptions to be made about Olle's disappearance. Instead of focusing on searching and liminality as already done, this essay focuses on how a missing person continues to echo in Sweden's memory and how broader discussions about him relate to the family's search and liminal existence.

The narrative about Olle Högbom's disappearance not only reflects a person's vanishing but also intertwines with the fabric of culture, something this paper explores through theories like hauntology, ruinology, and simulacra. The combination of these theories culminates in my proposed theoretical framework: spectral ruinology. Jacques Derrida's hauntology, coined in *Specters of Marx*, explores how Europe is affected by Marx, his ideologies, and ideas from beyond the grave (Derrida 2006, 27). This perspective suggests that the present is continually haunted by the past and futures that failed to materialize (Fisher 2017, 104).

Mark Fisher, PhD in philosophy at the University of Warwick, builds upon this concept, exploring how contemporary culture is also haunted by "lost futures" or paths not taken, he explains Derrida's hauntology to be "the agency of the virtual", with the specter understood not as supernatural but as something that acts without physical existence (Fisher 2017, 27). Olle's case echoes this concept, his disappearance is a phenomenon that lacks physical existence and acts on its own accord. Not a supernatural phenomenon, Olle's disappearance is a concrete example of a future that failed to materialize. Anthropologist Andrew Johnson complements Derrida's ideas. For him, Derrida's hauntology involves discerning the instability of what is assumed to be taken for granted, establishing that certainty about what is taken for granted is impossible, and that what was assumed to be taken for granted will continue to haunt (Johnson 2014, 6). This ties together with the story of Olle since there is no consensus regarding his disappearance, the only thing assumed to be taken for granted is that no one knows what happened to Olle, which suddenly makes unfounded speculations from strangers valid. In *Ghosts of the New City* Johnson proves that Chiang Mai, Thailand, is haunted, not by the past, nor by lost futures, but by the present (Johnson 2014, 156). Presenting an anthropological narrative illustrating the pursuit of the future from a haunted and ruinous present as a vantage point (Johnson 2014, 152). The present is partially constructed by ruins, and partially haunted, in pursuit of a future where Olle's case is solved, speculations are grounded in a ruinous present.

Ruinology is defined as the speculative reconstruction of ruins, indexes of something that once was, providing narratives to the remains of past civilizations or cultural events

(Parry 2019, 1081). Misinterpretations are common in such reconstructions, especially due to missing ruins (Parry 2019, 1088), reminiscent of laying a puzzle without knowing how many pieces are required to create a somewhat truthful image. Speculative reconstructions aim to restore lost worlds within this world, which continues to affect the future by evoking new visions (Parry 2019, 1090). This concept is reflected in the ongoing discussions about Olle, 40 years after his disappearance, where internet forums and media publications continuously reconstruct and reinterpret his story. This enduring public interest and collective engagement with Olle's case aligns with the theory of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. Halbwachs, a student of Émile Durkheim, proposed that memory functions within a collective context and can be revived in connection with events like socially significant anniversaries (Halbwachs 1994, 110). Halbwachs argued that these collective memories are revealed through the physical environment, as space is the only reality that persists (Halbwachs 1994, 76). It would be reasonable to assume then, that the case of Olle Högbom lingers in collective memory and affects the inhabitants of Sundsvall. The speculative reconstruction of Olle Högbom's mystery taking place on theater stages, internet forums, and other contexts, undoubtedly builds on ruins stored in collective memory, which I will henceforth refer to as *cultural ruins*.

To reveal these *cultural ruins* and their consequences on society, Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra can provide another insightful perspective, the third component of spectral ruinology. Sociologist Baudrillard uses the term simulacra, referring to a simulation of a simulation, where the boundaries between reality and what is represented blur, "models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard 1994, 2). Disneyworld is an example of a simulacrum, portraying entities like Mickey Mouse, familiar from collective memory yet non-existent, not simulating reality but another simulation (Baudrillard 1994, 12). Another example of simulacra might be celebrities or social media profiles that may represent an idealized image of their lives and identity, which does not necessarily reflect their daily reality. Olle Högbom and his story have evolved into a simulacrum after all the time and attention that has passed. The cultural ruins that underlie the speculative reconstruction no longer represent reality. New visions have been evoked and haunt the collective memory. My proposed theoretical approach of spectral ruinology is an amalgamation of these three existing theories, hauntology, ruinology, and simulacra. The theoretical framework for this essay thus contrasts the public image of Olle Högbom with the familial experience of *missingness*.

2.2 Purpose and research question

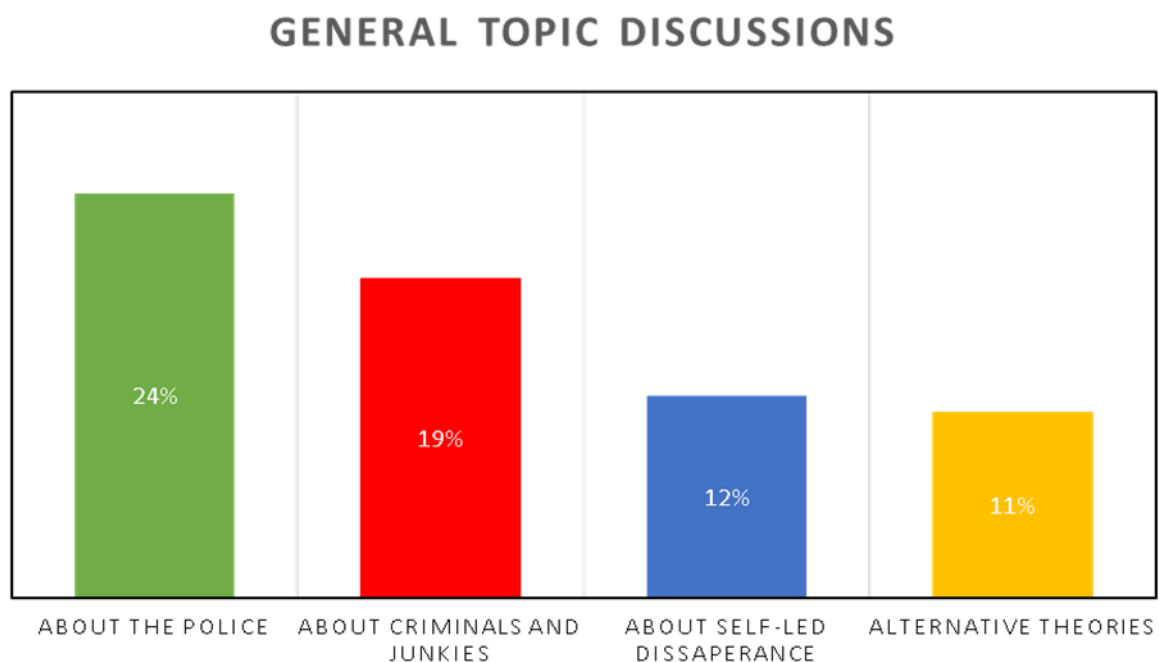
The primary aim of this study is to explore how Olle Högbom's disappearance has led to cultural ruins and speculative reconstructions, interwoven with collective memory, and manifesting societal hauntings. This exploration is conducted by analyzing discussions on internet forums and contrasting them with familial perspectives presented by Olle's relatives. The application of the theoretical framework will dissect and understand how these societal hauntings are constructed and perpetuated.

How do the speculative reconstructions and discussions about Olle Högbom's disappearance on internet forums, as contrasted with familial narratives, contribute to the formation of cultural ruins and societal hauntings? How do these manifestations align with the theoretical framework of spectral ruinology, and what implications do they have for understanding the impact of unresolved disappearances on collective memory?

2.3 Method and Material

Due to my prior knowledge of the subject, I have been careful not to draw premature conclusions influenced by personal bias. I conducted a detailed and thorough thematic analysis of 791 posts discussing Olle's disappearance in a Flashback forum thread. This approach reflects the understanding that rigorous research requires an openness to diverse methodologies. As Greg Guest et al. argues, researchers tend to choose a method and stick to it throughout their careers, and a robust analysis of data should combine elements and methods from different disciplines to avoid the pitfalls of a singular perspective (Guest et al. 2012, 3). They further argue for the necessity of a way for readers to gain insight into the process to clarify how conclusions were drawn (Guest et al. 2012, 4). This quantitative method was conducted in two stages, to get an overview and to navigate the 791 posts based on common denominators.

In the first phase, the posts were sorted into four categories. It is apparent to anyone familiar with the case that three main theories are circulating about Olle's disappearance. However, a quantitative analysis was required to get an overview of which theories were most prevalent on the thread. A fourth category “alternative theories” was created for easier navigation and analysis of these possibilities. The categories for the first analysis were “police”, “crime and (others) drug abuse”, “self-led disappearance”, and “alternative”.



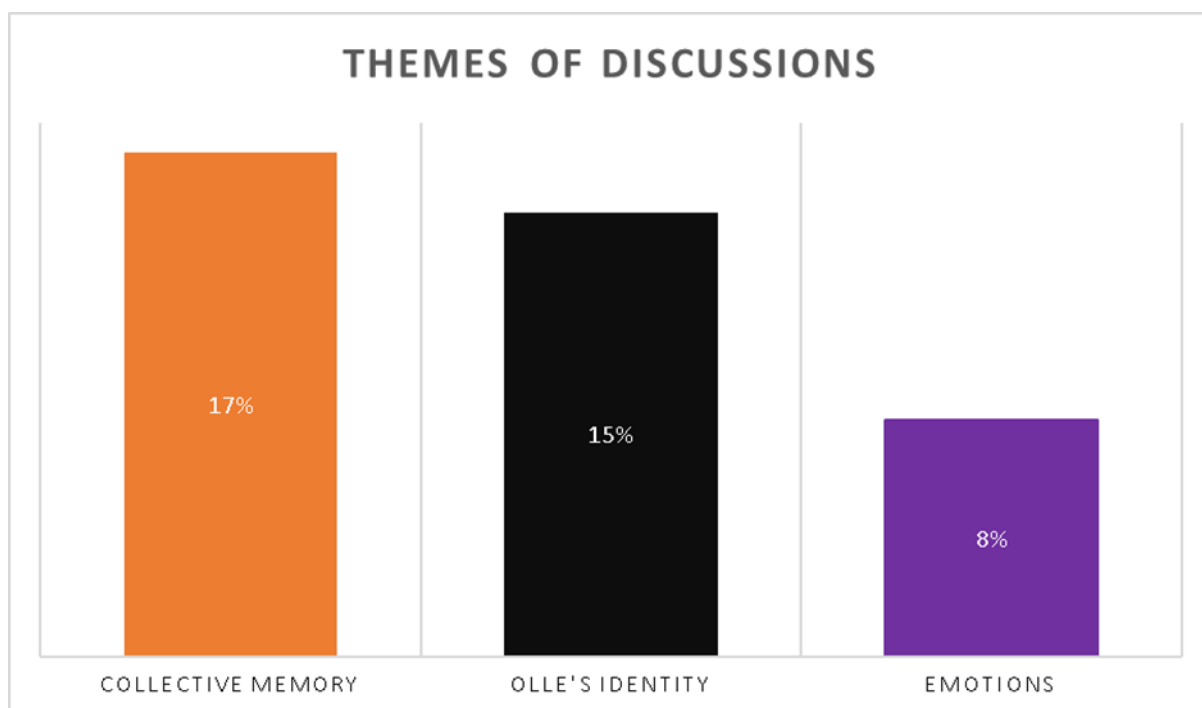
(Diagram 1, a diagram illustrating the results from the first thematic analysis)

The primary informant was Olle's sister Maria, who was more than willing to share her story, as she felt that staying silent and slowly watching the memory of her brother fade away was painful. Being a relative of Olle myself and since Maria is my mother, I tried to understand her *lifeworld*. As Jackson explained, lifeworlds cannot be understood in the same way as texts or objects, they are complex and open, and an anthropologist stepping into a lifeworld is both a participant and an observer (Jackson 2017, XI). I moved back to my childhood home for a few weeks to discuss and explore memories of Olle respectfully, together with Maria. Through 7 formal semi-structured interviews combined with informal interviews in between, I learned things previously unknown to me. As Jenny Hockey and Martin Forsey argue, anthropology differs from ethnography and participant observation, as an anthropologist sharpens their senses to understand the world, whereas an ethnographer often writes about how historically or geographically positioned people understand the world (Hockey & Forsey 2012, 71-72). They also argue that interviews in anthropological fieldwork are meant to locate the knowledge that informants carry, their beliefs and values, which guide their actions (ibid). To understand why people do what they do, we interview them. For this reason, I have chosen to use my interviews, not as evidence of a subjective reality, but as an insight into someone else's lifeworld. As Hockey and Forsey argue, the interview is a form of participant observation and should be considered as anthropological as other forms of participation (Hockey & Forsey 2012, 85). Interviewing my mother was different, yet familiar. Getting closer to her lifeworld affected me emotionally, especially hearing her tales of coping with uncertainty.

Apart from Maria, another formal semi-structured interview was conducted with journalist Patric Sellén from SVT, as he has made many written publications about Olle and is knowledgeable about the case, lives in Sundsvall, and went to school on the same street where Olle disappeared. The interview with him consisted of few open questions and much silence on my part, to observe which themes he would raise about Olle. In this way, I did not steer the conversation more than to start with an open question about Olle, followed by elaborating questions. Contrasting these interviews and observations with data from the first thematic analysis gave rise to additional questions, apart from topics of discussion, more in-depth themes of discussion emerged. Neither Maria nor Patric speculated about Olle's disappearance but rather focused on individual experiences.

In the second stage, the purpose was to discern something that came forth during the first thematic analysis. The insight was that most comments on the forum did not discuss Olle

Högbom, and when they did, the language differed from the family's. In addition, certain prominent themes appeared, discussions about the past in the form of nostalgia, such as the lack of streetlights in the 80s and criminals lurking in the dark. It was also clear that most comments lacked prominent emotional expression, few acknowledged the fact that Olle's relatives could read what was written and expressed sympathy, but in terms of emotions, mostly anger or frustration were expressed. To get a clearer overview and to navigate the posts for a more theoretical and qualitative analysis, new categories were created: "Collective Memory", "Olle's Identity", and "Emotions".



(Diagram 2, a diagram illustrating the results from the second thematic analysis)

This quantitative method proved to be helpful during the initial phase, as it became much easier to refer to what was written on the forum when these discussions were compared with stories from my informants. This took several days, while each comment was read thoroughly and thereafter marked with colored pens, and all comments were also double-checked.

Thematic analysis goes beyond counting words or phrases, it is a method that relies more on the researcher's ability to discern themes from the data (Guest et al 2012, 10). During the more qualitative phase, each theme was analyzed with the theoretical framework, and public discussions were contrasted against familiar ones.

The past will always haunt the present, voices remain even after death and this essay explores how these hauntings affect us. During the writing process, I noticed that addressing hauntings in a traditional way was challenging. Catherine Besteman faced a similar issue while writing about the unknown, but she solved it by portraying the unknown without attempting to resolve it (Besteman 2020). There are tangible examples of successful and deeply informative fictional ethnographies. For instance, Waterston's "Light in Dark Times" (2020) employs existential anthropology with a focus on phenomenology and intersubjectivity. Her work is not just an academic exercise but an effort to illuminate the obscure areas of human experience. By invoking spirits from the past through books, she creates a rich tapestry that makes sense of the intricate world we inhabit. She achieves this by complementing her texts with illustrations and giving faces to all characters in the story (Waterston 2020).

Inspired by this, I chose to begin my essay with an autoethnographic approach, to provide a narrative early on as a way to engage with all the information circulating disappearances. Photographs have been used in interviews with Maria and the essay. As Sarah Pink and Jennie Morgan argue, audiovisual methods are excellent for ensuring that the time aspect does not limit short-term ethnography (Pink & Morgan 2013, 358). Old photo albums of Olle, maps of the street where he disappeared, and pictures of other elements relevant to Olle's case, communicate something beyond words. Magdalena Kazubowski-Houston writes: "Absence is a strange thing; it has a magical worldmaking capacity. In my case, absence found the past that never was and a future that could ever be." (Kazubowski-Houston & Auslander 2021, 274). Autoethnographic approaches have been used in anthropology since at least the 1990s, such approaches carry the potential to be more than a window into the ethnographer's personal experiences, they can also provide an intimate connection between lived experiences and contingent history (Kazubowski-Houston & Auslander 2021, 219). In combination with multimodal approaches, the autoethnographic genre has the power to become a bridge between the known and the unknown, not limited to traditional approaches of cultural critique (Kazubowski-Houston & Auslander 2021, 220).

2.4 Ethical Considerations

The most crucial aspect of this essay, given that it is a bachelor's thesis without an ethical council, is that many ethical considerations have been made internally by Uppsala University. Due to the sensitive nature of the theme and personal narratives, adherence to the guidelines of the ASA and AAA has been especially important (ASA 2021. AAA 2009). The university granted me the right to write about my own family's legacy, albeit under certain restrictions. My main informant, my mother Maria, initially encouraged me to write about her brother and emphasized that she did not want to be portrayed as traumatized. Her openness in news articles, her voice in an audiobook, and her character's portrayal in theater only reinforce this stance. As she puts it, most people assume discussing her brother is painful, whereas living in silence as his memory fades is more distressing. Utilizing quotes from my grandfather Ruben's texts are justified similarly. He was adamant that keeping Olle's memory alive was the most important aspect of the case. For ethical reasons, I chose not to interview any additional family members, even if they might share similar views, as they have not made public appearances like Maria and Ruben. Although Maria wanted this essay to be published, there were many ethical considerations along the way. Ensuring I did not pressure her and portrayed her truthfully was a significant challenge. The hours spent researching Olle's disappearance have been undoubtedly painful, as I tried to empathize with losing a younger sibling or child.

What is written about Olle Högbom on the Flashback Internet forum is publicly available, and the page ranks among the top 10 search results when googling his name. Users do not post under their real names but use aliases. Therefore, I consider it ethical to analyze the content posted there. To further protect the users, their posts have been converted into numbers and mixed with other similar posts to illustrate recurring themes.

Certain limitations had to be implemented to meet the criteria for a bachelor's thesis. For example, I chose not to focus on what might have happened to Olle to distinguish which speculations are credible. Instead, I focused on what these speculations indicated based on my theoretical framework. For this reason, I did not interview the police, witnesses, or people who have written stories about Olle Högbom. Portraying Maria's lifeworld and contrasting it with discussions on Flashback was enough.

2.5 Disposition

Chapter one introduced the disappearance of Olle, initially providing an autoethnographic narrative to contextualize the information, followed by detailed background information regarding the disappearance, the search, and the media coverage.

Chapter two initially presents previous anthropological research regarding missing persons and then explores more in-depth theoretical approaches of this essay. After this, the research question was presented. Then the methodological approach and ethical considerations were argued for.

Chapter three starts with an analytical journey, providing insight into how the knowledge was produced. It reflects on the analysis conducted on the Flashback Internet forum, discusses the themes categorizing the posts, and delves into a more qualitative analysis of each category. This is followed by the analytical process of the interviews and observations, where personal narratives are examined.

Chapter four presents the results, arguing their relevance within the theoretical framework. It unveils findings from the internet forum analysis and then explores insights from interviews and observations with Olle's sister. The chapter culminates in an argument contrasting these two perspectives, highlighting the detachment of Olle's personae in public forums and the liminal state experienced by Olle's relatives.

Chapter five provides a summary of the thesis, clearly outlining its contribution to anthropology. This chapter not only encapsulates the main findings but also identifies future research opportunities, emphasizing the importance of missing persons as a social category within the anthropological field.

3. Analysis

Virtual Voices

For this analysis, I read and categorized the 791 posts on the Flashback forum with colored pens based on the themes discussed. Posts could discuss more than one theme and were therefore marked with multiple colors. The thematic analysis was conducted in two stages, with the first analysis categorizing posts into “police”, “crime and (others) drug abuse”, “self-inflicted”, and “alternative”. The process of exploring the Flashback forum is followed by *A sister's search*, where I transition to the examination of the interviews conducted with Maria.

The police, represented by 190 posts, were one of the most prominent topics in the thread, revealed a spectrum of opinions. Some criticized the police's actions during the search for Olle Högbom, others accused the police of being behind the disappearance and intentionally hindering the truth from emerging, while some defended law enforcement. In discussions about why people choose to become police officers, some argued it was about maintaining justice, while others suggested it was to channel aggression. These polarized views reflected broader societal attitudes towards the police, enclosing issues like trust, security, and accountability.

Another prominent topic was *crime and others drug abuse*, represented by 148 posts. Many speculated on various scenarios that could have led to Olle Högbom's disappearance, but these debates often developed into more generalized discussions about the criminal landscape in Sundsvall during the 1980s. Some painted pictures of a society haunted by criminal gangs after sundown, a kind of communal lore about specific notorious figures, general “addicts”, and organized crime. There were posts claiming that certain figures confessed to them about murdering Olle Högbom, and others who were critical and argued against the speculation that criminals were behind the disappearance. This reflected the extensive impact of crime on society's inhabitants and fears of what lurks in the dark.

In the *self-led disappearance* category, represented by 97 posts, the discussion, primarily revolved around the notion of Olle being responsible for his own fate. Participants frequently focused on mental health issues and the river in Sundsvall, referred to as a “death trap”. While some speculated that Olle went to urinate in the river and fell in, others argued that he actively chose to commit suicide. Such arguments were based on media information about Olle's background, including that his parents were free-religious, that he was “peculiar”,

and that he was a teenager at a party. However, some based their arguments on information not available in the media, without explaining their source, claiming that Olle was depressed, felt trapped by his family, and was heavily intoxicated. Media information, such as Olle being generally happy, was used to strengthen their thesis, arguing that someone suicidal would be good at hiding their true feelings from those around them. Some posts emphasized that the river has claimed many lives, portraying the river as a symbol for suicide victims and accidental deaths, depicting existential questions and traumas stored in collective memory.

The fourth *alternative theories category*, represented by 88 posts, placed all speculations about Olle's disappearance that did not fit into other categories. These alternative speculations had some common denominators. Some argued that Olle chose to flee from his free-religious parents to other countries, such as Japan or Mexico, to start a family. Some argued that Olle's free-religious father couldn't stand his son drinking alcohol and therefore killed him. Some drew parallels to other missing persons, speculating about a serial killer. Although these alternative speculations were not particularly prominent, they did show the prominent role of imagination in mysteries and the “enigmatic” surrounding missing persons.

After all posts were sorted into these four categories based on overarching theories about what might have happened to Olle, it became apparent that this initial classification captured the explicit content but potentially overlooked more subtle, underlying themes. Insight from my interviews with Maria influenced this realization since her narratives did not include speculations about Olle's disappearance. This realization led to a deeper exploration of the Internet forum, illuminated by the theoretical framework, to uncover the less evident aspects of the forum discussions.

During the second thematic analysis, I revisited all posts with both the theoretical framework and Maria's influence in mind, to explore more hidden themes that emerged after the first analysis. In discussions about police, crime, and suicide, emotional expressions occurred, so to capture the scope of these posts, they were sorted under *emotions*. In addition to *emotions*, many posts included broader discussions about society in general during the 1980s, these were sorted under *collective memory*. To my surprise, few included Olle in their posts despite the thread being dedicated to him. Those who wrote about Olle portrayed him in a way that was different from Maria's description. To further explore this divergence, these posts were sorted under *Olle's identity*. These nuanced themes align more clearly with the theoretical framework. They not only illustrated the lingering echoes of the past in present discussions and that the speculations drew upon specific cultural ruins but also mirrored the

fragmented representation of Olle, contrasted against the vivid and personal memories shared by his sister.

The emotional landscape on the forum was varied and telling, even though *emotions* was the smallest category represented by 67 posts. Sympathy for the family coexisted with fear of both police and crime, portraying both intersubjectivity and attitudes toward everyday life. Many strongly believed in their theories and took offense when questioned, reflected in insulting language about other users. The lack of emotional expressions about Olle illustrated his detachment from the conversation, more of a simulacrum than a representation of reality.

The category *collective memory* was broad, represented by 131 posts, ranging from particularly heavy rainstorms to the absence of streetlights. Especially prominent were specific criminal figures and gangs active in Sundsvall at the time, as well as specific police officers spoken of as particularly brutal or incompetent. Lives lost to the river, newspaper headlines, and other medial presentations. A broad category that framed cultural ruins that seem to have been stored collectively and awakened in relation to the story of Olle Högbom. Ruinology and hauntology provided a framework for understanding these references as ruins and spectral remains.

In reconstructing *Olle's identity*, represented by 116 posts, which often happened in conjunction with strengthening their theories and speculations, Olle was depicted based on information circulating within the Flashback thread, from Ruben's blog and news articles. This category was particularly influenced by the concept of simulacra. Certain information about Olle was particularly prominent: that he stuttered, was a teenager, had free-religious parents, was vision impaired, was "peculiar", and tall. These characteristics appeared to be significant in the forum for reconstructing the person who disappeared. When someone in the thread wrote that Olle was depressed, others took this as a fact and based their speculations on this. Illustrating which cultural ruins served as the basis for the reconstruction of Olle Högbom's identity. Discussions on the internet forum proved to be more than speculations about his disappearance, they were also a process that shaped and recreated his memory in a public sphere. Concrete facts about him were merged with fantasy, circulating information, and assumptions about what is taken for granted, such as that a partying teenager would be heavily intoxicated.

Through this detailed analysis, posts were divided into thematic categories in two stages and then analyzed separately, it became possible to conclude that it was more than a platform for discussions, it was also a reflection of the community's effort to make sense of a

disappearance. A microcosm of societal responses, where collective memory, personal assumptions, emotional narratives, and concrete facts interacted. It was shedding light on facets arising from a community's engagement with an enduring mystery.

A Sister's Search

During my childhood, I was shielded from the tragic search for Olle Högbom, leaving much unknown to me about Maria's world. To gain a more holistic understanding, I chose to do more than just a few interviews. I moved back home and spent time with Maria, in combination with formal interviews. The house echoed Olle's presence, with pictures of him on shelves, his mahogany country guitar in the living room, and his photo album next to all copies of "Har du sett Olle?" which Maria continues to distribute to those interested in the case. After Ruben's death, she felt more obligated to hand out these books. The task of keeping the memory of Olle alive has become hers to shoulder, illustrating an intergenerational haunting. While going through Olle's photo albums, the fact that Olle disappeared exactly 40 years ago echoes. His memory is usually more pronounced during anniversaries, but this one is special. Maria reads parts of the new testimony submitted to the police just a few weeks earlier. When she talked about Olle, she did so with melancholy. To present all the information from these days spent with Maria would be an impossible task, so I recorded interviews, took field notes, and photographed as a basis for analysis. I then reflected upon my data from my personal experience of the search for Olle.

Maria seldom spoke about speculations surrounding Olle's disappearance. Instead, her narrative revolved around the loss of her younger brother. The most prominent theme during the interviews revolved around uncertainty and the grief process that could not take place due to said uncertainty. The narrative started the day Olle's classmates called to ask why he was not in school and evolved into a chase that has permeated every day of her life since. About strategies for dealing with uncertainty and the palpable stress that were with her all these years. Another prominent theme from the interviews is that she often highlighted comments she or the family have received over the years, such as "understand that he is dead and move on". Such comments seem to have affected her to the extent that she now feels the need to defend the search for her younger brother.

When she talks about the person Olle Högbom was, memories of situations where Olle acted emerged. She explained that there were only two years between them and that they were best friends during the 18 years they had together. She recounts his intellectual depth and poetic mind, the theatrical humor they developed. According to her, Olle was a responsible and wise person who studied chemistry. Someone with dreams and ambitions, who made observations and wrote poetry. Apart from saying grace before meals and treating others with

care, there were no religious demands or expectations from their parents. She claims that Sundsvall was a center for the spread of the Baptist movement in northern Sweden, their parents being Baptists was not considered odd by others until Olle disappeared. In contrast to the Flashback posts where the family's religious background was of importance in the sections *Olle's identity* and *self-led disappearance*.

Certain objects, or ruins, were of particular importance to Maria as they reflected the memory of Olle, more than mere objects, rather materiality of grief. The acoustic country guitar was one. It stood out in the living room since she appreciated it when people would play on it. Sometimes she would sit by herself and play. During these moments, she expresses a feeling of nostalgia. As a bridge to the past, she would think about all the songs she and Olle used to sing together. The USB stick, that journalist Martin Ezpeleta gave the family after producing his audiobook about Olle in 2020, contained audio files from an old tape that he restored. This USB is of special importance to her as it contains duets with Olle and Maria. When she listens to it, she remembers the moments before the disappearance, the calm and safety that never returned. The books "Har du sett Olle?" written by her father and lined up on the bookshelf are among the most important things she has. As she explains, it is a story that captured both Olle, the search, and her father's devotion to finding his son. Ruben, who spent all his money on printing these books and distributing them, who retired early to search for Olle and who lived over 90, kept checking his blog daily and participated in interviews for Martin Ezpeleta's audiobook.

During the time I spent with Maria, something I had not previously understood the importance of came forth, another ruin, namely keeping the lamp by the front porch lit during the nights. My previous thought was that it was a common practice to signal to potential burglars that one was home. For Maria, it was much more important than that. She explained that they had a tradition growing up, that the last child to return home would turn off the lamp by the front porch. When Olle disappeared, the family kept the lamp on at night. A tradition that Maria still practices today. She says she double-checks that the lamp is on before going to bed and always thinks of Olle when she sees the lamp shining out there in the dark.

Through the analysis of the time spent with Maria and the interviews conducted with her, I had to select information. Although the interviews and observations covered more themes than these, the search, the reconstruction of Olle, especially important ruins, and the ritual of keeping the lamp lit, were the most prominent. This information could also

concretely reflect the experience of living with a missing family member and summarize the family's missingness.



(Picture 9, a framed picture of Olle on a bookshelf in the living room)



(Picture 10, Olle's guitar in the living room)



(Picture 11, Boxes filled with Olle's documents)



(Picture 12, Olle's documents)

Kjörningskolan <small>Kommun</small> Härnösand		SLUTBETYG <small>Datum</small> 1981-06-12	Grundskolan, årskurs 9
Elevens namn Olof Högbom		Personnr (år, mån, dag, nr) 650512-	

Obligatoriska ämnen		Betyg 1)					Obligatoriska ämnen		Betyg 1)				
		1	2	3	4	5			1	2	3	4	5
Svenska					4								
Matematik	allmän kurs												
	särskild kurs				4								
Engelska	allmän kurs												
	särskild kurs				4								
Musik					4								
Tekning				3									
Slöjd	Trä och metall		2										
	Textil			3									
Hemkunskap					4								
Beräkningskunskap				3									
Gymnastik					4								
Religionskunskap 7)					4								
Samhällskunskap						5							
Historia						5							
Geografi					4								
Biologi						5							
Kemi						5							
Fysik						5							

Tillvalsämnen		Av 7)		Betyg 1)				
		7	8	1	2	3	4	5
Franska	allmän kurs							
	särskild kurs							
Tyska	allmän kurs							
	särskild kurs	X	X			3		
Ekonomi								
Konst								
Teknik								

Hemspråk (ange vilket språk)		Betyg 1)				
		1	2	3	4	5

Frivilligt ämne		Betyg 1)				
		1	2	3	4	5

(Picture 13. Olle's grades from elementary school.)

HAR DU SETT OLLE?



Namn: Olov Högbom

Längd: 192 cm. Spensligt byggd.

Glasögon i rund modell. Långt hår till axlarna.

Hårfärg: Mörk cendré. Stammar ibland.

Var vid försvinnandet iklädd mörk kavaj och mörka byxor.

Olle försvann 83-09-07 efter klassfest i Sundsvall och påstas sedd i Härnösand fredagen 83-09-09.

Meddela: Härnösandspolisen 0611/19510, närmaste polismyndighet eller **Hemmet** 0611/721 76.



(Picture 14, Ruben Högbom's Book "Har du sett Olle?")

4. Findings

4.1 Life in a Haunted World

The discussions on the Flashback forum illustrated how Olle Högbom's disappearance has transformed into a symbol and a spectral presence within the public sphere. This transformation was marked by several haunting aspects resonating on the forum. The themes that haunted were the unsettling thought that anyone could disappear. The dangers associated with leaving an intoxicated teenager alone. The police's monopoly on violence and potential abuse of power. The fear associated with overarching criminality and people changed by drug abuse, as dwelling specters after sunset. Existential questions and all those who have fallen victim to suicide.

Through spectral ruinology, the posts were analyzed in search of cultural ruins used to reconstruct Olle's story, and then to discern associations linked to the social ruins. These associations revealed that the story of Olle Högbom functioned as a catalyst for broader discussions about hauntings. Over the 15 years that the discussion on Flashback has taken place, memories of Olle Högbom have continued to change, to the extent that he becomes detached from the conversations. This transformation from an individual to a symbol captures Baudrillard's simulacrum, as the representation of Olle replaces the original and creates a new form of hyperreality (Baudrillard 1994, 11-16). He has become a simulacrum, and his identity is constructed to fit users proposed theories. For example, a post from 2022 suggested Olle suffered from undiagnosed bipolar disorder. A post from 2014 claimed to have read somewhere that Olle is alive and lives in Japan. A post from 2012 suggested that he disappeared voluntarily and changed his name to "Dan Park". Olle has become not merely an individual who disappeared, but also a nodal point for various forms of societal anxiety. For example, a post from 2023 suggested that the police killed him and used his corpse for sexual purposes. The public discourses about Olle did not reflect him as a person, but instead focused on what his disappearance symbolized for collective memory. Like a canvas where users could project fears, speculations, and ideas.

The themes uncovered from the Flashback discussions reflect what haunts and strengthens the argument that Olle Högbom has evolved into a simulacrum on the forum. Each theme transcends his disappearance and reflects other narratives. The detachment from his actual personae exemplifies the process of how a simulacrum is created. The results of the

Flashback analysis revealed nuanced representations of Olle's disappearance and illustrated how personal tragedies can embody societal hauntings. A demonstration of the power of public discussions, which can transform the memory of individuals into collective phenomena.

That the latest post was made on 25-10-2023 shows that discussions on the forum continue. The present haunts and keeps shaping the memory of Olle through these posts on Flashback. The interview with Patric Sellén⁴ revealed that he was present the day Olle's glasses were recovered before there were any news articles about him. As both a reporter and a resident of Sundsvall he claims that Olle Högbom is still topical and relevant in conversations. He gave an example from a month earlier, of some ladies who initiated a conversation about Olle with him.

The results from the interviews and observations with Maria, illustrated the clear contrasts between familial and public narratives. Unlike the detached simulacrum on the internet forum, Maria bears witness to a personal and tangible reality shaped by her younger brother's disappearance. Her narrative does not depict Olle as a symbol, but as a real person, based on memories and shared experiences. Her detailed description of the lived experience, illustrating missingness, underscores that Olle Högbom is part of the family's ongoing story. When Maria plays the guitar in the living room, turns on the lamp switch in the hallway, or reads a book that they both loved, these actions reflect engagement with Olle's continued presence in her life. Her actions revealed that Olle is constantly present, interwoven into the fabric of her everyday experiences. The ongoing search that Maria testifies to, characterized by clues that continue to emerge, illustrates her quest for closure. More than a search for answers, it is also an embodiment of the hope that keeps Olle's memory alive.

Contrasting the public against the familiar sphere of discussions about Olle Högbom, he has evolved into a simulacrum on the internet forum, while Maria's grieving presents a deeply attached figure filled with personal memories and emotional connections that make him present in her everyday life. In the public sphere, his story is a conduit for broader societal discussions, extending beyond the person he was. In this context, he symbolizes communal fears and speculative narratives, becoming an abstract figure in a complex web of social anxieties. In stark contrast, for Maria and her family, Olle is not an abstract symbol but a cherished individual whose absence left a void.

⁴ 14-12-23 (11:30-12:15).

The emotional engagement of the forum mostly exhibited emotions reflecting societal issues. In contrast, Maria's emotional landscape is characterized by coping with uncertainty. The public's construction of his identity pieced together fragmented information or cultural ruins. For Maria, Olle's identity was detailed and nuanced, grounded in shared experience. Comparing these two perspectives highlighted the multifaceted nature of how Olle's disappearance is processed and remembered. Becoming a detached simulacrum representing haunting elements of society on Flashback, while being an integral part of an ongoing story for the family.

4.2 Warped in Liminal Space

Closure and Continuance

The analysis of public and familial narratives about Olle Högbom's disappearance illustrated the liminal state he is in, trapped between life and death. From an anthropological standpoint, death is more than a biological event but also a social process, marked by rituals that acknowledge and bring attention to the transition between life and death. Olle's case defies conventional processes, his body has not been found, and no evidence confirming his death is available. This lack of closure places Olle in a liminal state, a tear in the social fabric, something that disrupts the natural order of things (Huttunen 2023, 206-214).

This liminality gives rise to a kind of chaos that draws attention and speculation from the public. On Flashback, this has led to an abundance of discussions where Olle is more of a simulacrum than a real person. For the family, liminality translates into an ongoing emotional struggle and a grieving process that cannot take place as it is blocked by the liminality. An anthropological perspective on death highlights the importance of societal rituals that “make” someone dead. This death process, which has not been able to take place, illustrates that deaths and disappearances are two separate phenomena. Olle Högbom's case exemplifies the complex reality that arises because of unresolved disappearances. The analysis reveals how society, in contrast to relatives, navigates the uncertain terrain of unresolved loss and missingness. I argue that Olle becomes a vehicle for exploration on the internet and a void for the relatives.



(Picture 15, the family grave with Olle's name engraved)

Weight of Waiting

Maria's narrative testifies to an emotional landscape dominated by a deep and tangible sense of waiting. As Katz suggested, searching and missingness are intertwined (Katz 2023, 88). It is a reality that forces attempt to manage the unknown (Katz 2023, 81). Huttunen argues that the missing person is the liminal personae of the social drama, but also that the families of the missing are in a liminal position until the missing are found and properly buried (Huttunen 2023, 214). Maria's liminal existence, marked by searching but primarily by waiting, was illustrated in the analysis.

Ethnologist Rikard Engblom's doctoral thesis on asylum seekers categorizes waiting into “anxiety”, “endurance”, “patience”, “impatience”, and “longing” (Engblom 2023, 99-116). He argues that the waiting of asylum seekers is different from others' waiting as it is defined by legal, economic, and social structures that produce and shape refugees' experience of waiting, a form of waiting that warps the perception of time (Engblom 2023, 138). The reality experienced by asylum seekers is different from what Maria experiences, however, there is a similarity in the liminal state they are in and the waiting for the liminality to end. Engblom suggests that waiting is a form of precarity that warps time (Engblom 2023, 152). I do not wish to argue that the waiting Maria must endure is the same as that for refugees. However, Engblom's research offers insight into the complexities of waiting.

Maria has waited for 40 years, longing for the mystery of her disappeared brother to be resolved, enduring the anxiety through certain rituals, such as playing his guitar or leaving the front porch light lit. She is impatient for answers but powerless as the trail of her brother has gone cold. Forced to wait patiently, hoping the Sundsvall police will make a breakthrough after having reopened the case in 2020. Her wait is precarious, as her hope of resolving the mystery constantly contends with the reality that Olle may remain missing forever. She has seen both her parents pass away without answers, their last words about Olle. The bitter thought that she too may pass away without answers only strengthens the anxiety of her waiting. Her life has been suspended in a liminal space where time is twisted and turned by the uncertainty of Olle's fate. Her reality has been irrevocably altered by the constant presence of an absent brother. Each day is a reminder of the unresolved, haunted by what might have been, a life lived chasing shadows.



(Picture 16, the lamp on the porch, a light in dark times)

5. Final Thoughts

This thesis explored the complex case surrounding Olle Högbom's disappearance and shed light on how the phenomenon continues to resonate within both the public sphere and the familial realm. I have shown how Olle evolved into a simulacrum in public discourses, detached from his real identity. His story has become a catalyst for broader discourses, a nodal point for various aspects that haunt society. In a sharp contrast to the family's personal and emotional narrative, where Olle, his memory, and absence remain a part of everyday life.

The study also emphasizes the liminality enveloping the case, neither dead nor alive, creating a tear in the social fabric that draws attention. Olle's disappearance has created an ongoing state of waiting, a family also in liminality. The wait is not passive, it is an active and relentless pursuit filled with hope, despair, and methods to cope with uncertainty.

The thesis expanded anthropological insight and contrasts between death and disappearances by illustrating the consequences that arise from the power of unresolved mysteries. It further strengthened Katz's suggestion to make missing persons into a social category defined by the search rather than the disappearance.

Future exploration in this field could build upon spectral ruinology, applying this theory to different cultural settings to illuminate invisible presences that shape societal and individual lifeworlds. There is potential for a more thorough investigation of how this theoretical framework can be applied to other forms of loss and memory, to enrich the understanding of the human condition. Leaving the notion of white sheet-wearing ghosts behind, the spectral presences that haunt society can be uncovered by systematically analyzing cultural ruins circulating in discourses. Contrasting the spectral presences against families' lived experience of missingness further solidifies spectrals as simulacra in the public sphere. While in the lifeworld of the families living with disappearances, it is about chasing shadows.

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