



VISUAL

# Megastructures and nostalgia for the future.

A CONVERSATION WITH

**Simon Stålenhag**

## BIOGRAPHY

Simon Stålenhag (b. 1984) is a Swedish concept artist. His work combines his childhood with science fiction visions resulting in a typical Swedish country landscape with retrofuturistic elements. "Tales from the Loop" was ranked one of the "10 Best Dystopias" by The Guardian, along with such works as Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and Andrew Niccol's *Gattaca*. Stålenhag also illustrates prehistorical landscapes and dinosaurs for the Swedish Museum of Natural History and the pictures of hypothetical results of a rising ocean under climate change for Stockholm University's Resilience Centre.

## ESSENTIAL REFERENCES

Stålenhag Simon, *Tales from the Loop*, Free League Publishing, Stockholm, 2015  
Stålenhag Simon, *Things from the Loop*, Free League Publishing, Stockholm, 2016  
Stålenhag Simon, *The Electric State*, Free League Publishing, 2017

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<https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0075/9124>

ISSN 2611-0075

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## KEYWORDS

*megastructures, dystopia, fictional landscape*

### Where does the inspiration for your visual universe come from?

My biggest influences and inspirations for making *The Electric State* was listening to early 90s alternative rock and grunge, especially Nirvana. I was also watching a lot of early *X-Files* and mid 90s horror films like *The Langoliers*<sup>1</sup> and *In The Mouth Of Madness*<sup>2</sup>. I wanted to capture something of that era in terms of mood and culture, in particular the youth counter culture of the 90s. I often start with looking for the right music for the project.

Right now I am listening to a lot of quite scary sounding music, with modern composers like Morton Feldman, Bernard Parmegiani and Tod Dockstader. But for *The Electric State*, and to find the character of Michelle, I listened to a lot of American alternative rock from the early to mid 90s. In my early notes of the story I actually called Michelle “Negative Creep”, after the Nirvana song.

**You often cite the influence on your work by Syd Mead<sup>3</sup> and Ralph McQuarrie<sup>4</sup>. What is the aspect of their work that has struck you most? They are two artists that had a unique impact on contemporary imagery but may be different from each other. would you like to tell us which is the specific work of each of them that most impressed you?**

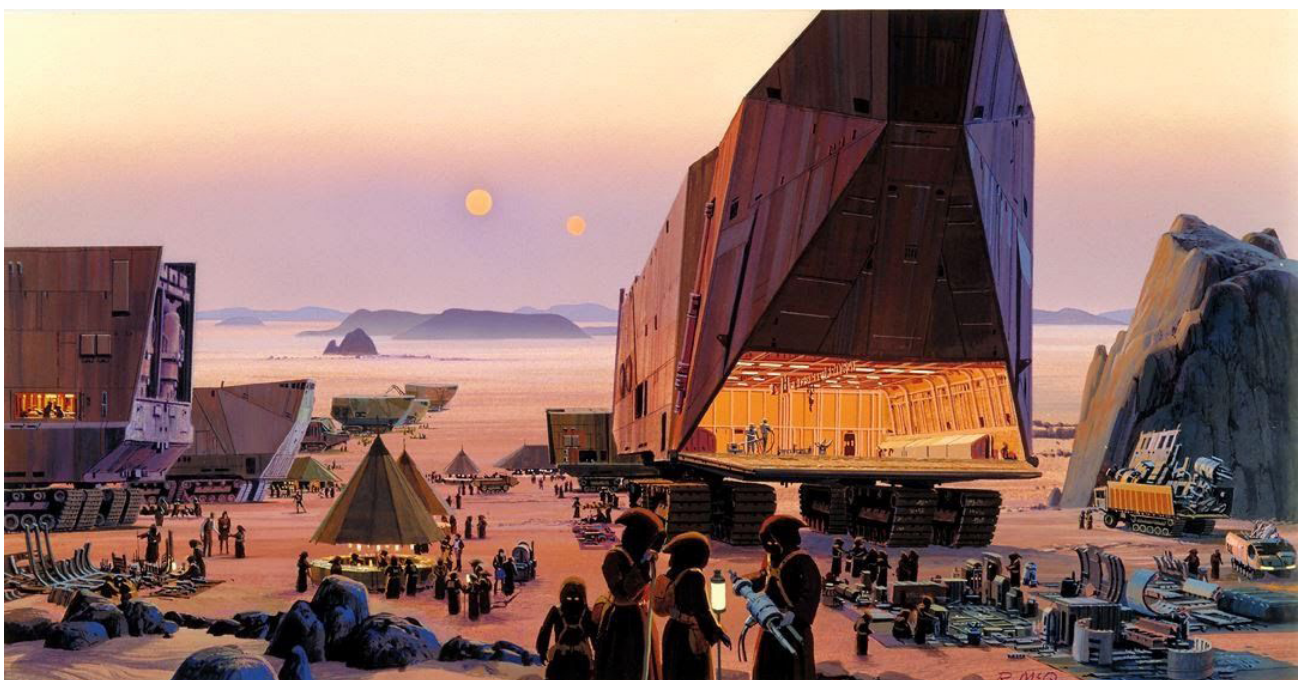
I don't really agree that they are very different from each other, I think they are quite similar actually. Both working in opaque gouche mediums, and excelling in doing hard detailed renderings of hard surface designs. If I had to chose one important piece for each, I would say something of McQuarries from Tatooine, that one where the sandpeople are unloading the Sandcrawlers at dawn in the desert [Fig. 1].

1. *The Langoliers* is a horror miniseries based on a novel by Stephen King (1995, ABC) network.

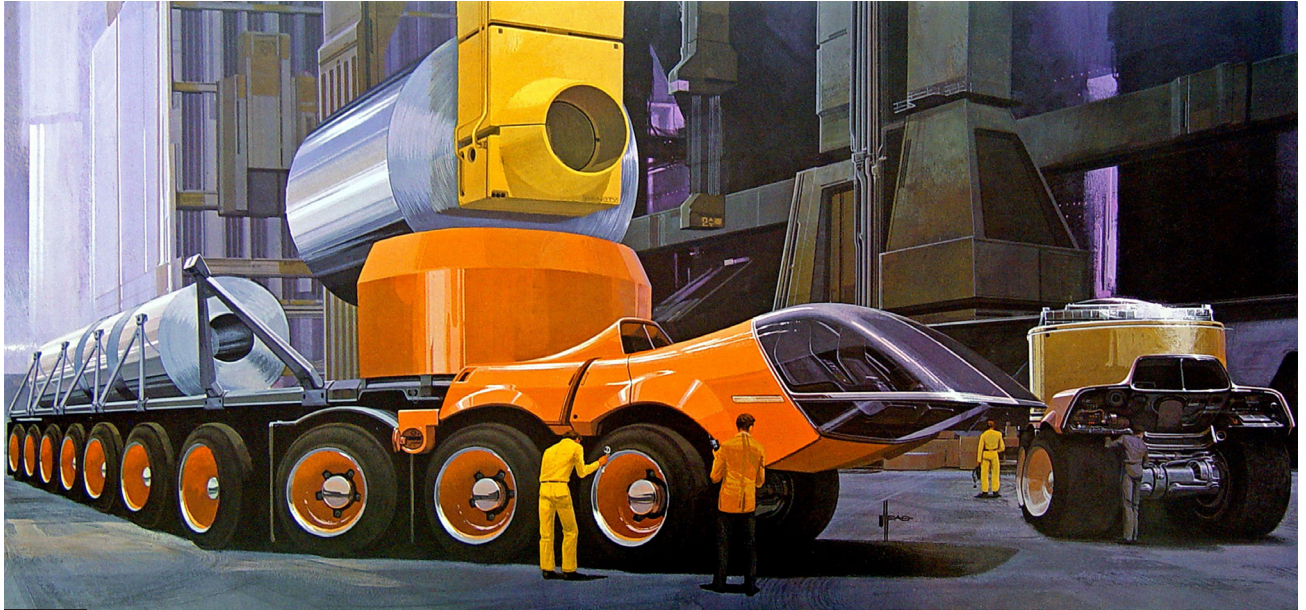
2. *In the Mouth of Madness* (1994) is a horror film directed and scored by John Carpenter.

3. Sydney Jay Mead is an American industrial designer and neofuturistic concept artist, known for his designs for science-fiction movies such as *Blade Runner* (1982, Ridley Scott), *Aliens* (1986, James Cameron) and *Tron* (1982, Steven Lisberger).

4. Ralph Angus McQuarrie (June 13, 1929 – March 3, 2012) was an American conceptual designer and illustrator. He worked on the original *Star Wars* trilogy, *Battlestar Galactica* television series, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982, Steven Spielberg), and *Cocoon* (1985, Ron Howard), for which he won an Academy Award.



**FIG. 1** Ralph McQuarrie, Welcome to Tatooine, concept artwork for *Star Wars* (1977) © 1977 Ralph McQuarrie



**FIG. 2** Syd Mead, *US Steel*, 1961 © 1961 Syd Mead

For Mead, it would probably be the big orange truck from the US steel ad campaign from the 60s [Fig.2].

Their work (and their contemporary peers' work) influenced me in my discovery of Sci-fi art in my mid 20s. but my biggest influences earlier in life was definitely Swedish wild-life artists Gunnar Brusewitz<sup>5</sup> and Lars Jonsson<sup>6</sup> [Fig. 3]. I discovered their work as a little nature-loving kid, and without their influence I wouldn't even have been drawn to art at all. And then in my teens I discovered the amazing album art of Storm Thorgerson<sup>7</sup> and Hipgnosis [Fig. 4] which had a huge impact on my artistic devolpment in my mid to late teens as well.

5. Kurt Gunnar Brusewitz (1924 - 2004) was a Swedish author, artist and cartoonist.

6. Lars Jonsson (1952) is Swedish naturalistic painter. He has been included in *Birds In Art* at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum since 1982, and he was named Master Wildlife Artist there in 1987.

7. Storm Elvin Thorgerson (1944 - 2013) as an English graphic designer and director. He created work for artists including Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, Peter Gabriel, Genesis and Yes.



**FIG. 3** Lars Jonsson, *Winterdawn in Ussuriland*



FIG. 4 Storm Thorgerson, The big groove, cover for "Synrise" album by Goose, 2010 © 2010 Storm Thorgerson

### Which is the first image you visualized of the Loop cycle?

The first image I made was actually a dinosaur in an orchard. I did it in 2011 and it was the piece that let me think of ways to write a story where robots and dinosaurs could exist in the same place while also being set in my childhood. So I started writing about a very strong secret particle accelerator deep underground the small town that I grew up in, and I tried to imagine how it would have been if that facility really had existed when I was a kid and what memories I would have had from that time.



FIG. 5 "The arch towers at Klövsjö", Simon Stålenhag, *Tales from the Loop*, p. 15, 2015 © 2015 Simon Stålenhag



**FIG. 6** "The sky was vaguely bluish, and out there in the morning light we passed a never-ending stream of small towns and suburbs", Simon Stålenhag, *The Electric State*, p. 46, 2017 © 2017 Simon Stålenhag

**Which technique do you use? Where does your creative process start from?**

All my color art is digital. I do the occasional ink drawings, but the bulk of my work is digital. I take a lot of photos of things around me. I go for long walks with my camera, and I think a lot of the ideas start there - outside somewhere, probably in the countryside.

**The characters of your works are often children. Why?**

I think I feel most confident writing about the experience of being a child or a young person [Fig. 5]. I'm 35 now, and I don't have any kids of my own, so in a way I still feel like my teenage years aren't that far behind me. The experience of being in that age is still very clear in my memory and I wouldn't dare writing about any other age yet. I don't feel I have the life experience.

**Why are technological or architectural structures of your images gigantic and ruined?**

All my books are set between the late 80s to the late 90s, and the architecture and mechanical designs are mainly a way for me to play around with the aesthetics of that era, or of science

fiction of that era. I'm not really concerned with speculating about the future, I think my work is more of a twisted echo of the past. Most of the man-made stuff we see around us is old and used. I mean, in the lifecycle of a man-made structure there are many more years that they are going to look old and used rather than shiny and new. It just makes more sense that you would encounter it when it has blended in with its environment. And in terms of the "ruin" bit - I think it has to do with the mystery of ruins. It's just a mood that I love to explore. It raises questions, it gets your brain working. In the end the landscapes of *Electric State* are much more about consumerism, not industrialism. I'm hugely inspired by the architecture of post-war Sweden. That is what you see in my art - most of it are real houses and buildings that exist in Sweden. I just proposed hypothetical architecture a few times in my artistic work and it's oftentimes based on that era of Swedish architecture -50s-60s-70s.

**For what concerns your works, the adjectives hauntingly and dystopic are often used. What do you think about this?**

I think it's accurate to some degree. With my first two books I didn't really imagine that world to be very dystopian. It's more a reflection of my own childhood, so to me it's also a quite well functioning society, and also a very free society, just as Sweden is and was when I grew up. As for "hauntingly" I think it has to do with my preference for twilight and gloominess, which concerns the weather in Sweden I guess. That's how I grew up. *The Electric State* is definitely dystopian. It's almost post-apocalyptic even [Fig. 6]. Unlike *The Loop*-books, something has gone really bad with society as a whole, whereas in the *Loop* books, it's just the one facility and a small town.

# Megastructures and nostalgia for the future.

GALLERY



**FIG. 1**

"The three cooling towers at Bona were a constant presence in the landscape on Mälardalen. They rose from the fields far out on northern Munsö, in the small community of Bona. The main function of the towers was to release heat from the Gravitron, the core of the Loop that provided the facility with the enormous amounts of energy it required. The middle tower was an impressive 253 meters in height, and the towers were a characteristic landmark visible from all of Mälardalen.", Simon Stålenhag, *Tales from the Loop*, p. 11, 2015 © 2015 Simon Stålenhag



**FIG. II** *Things from the Loop*, pp. 12-13, 2015 © 2016 Simon Stålenhag





**FIG. III** "The apartment was at the bottom of the Hågerstalund's Diving Tower, one of the twelve vertical cities in Mälardalen. They were built between 1965 and 1970 as a part of a major public housing program, and Hågerstalund alone consisted of about 1,500 apartments. The ground level held a subway station, library, school, daycare, and shops. The tower was crowned with the characteristic water tower." Simon Stålenhag, *Things from the Loop*, pp. 16-17, 2015 © 2016 Simon Stålenhag



**FIG. IV** *Things from the Loop*, pp. 22-23, 2015 © 2016 Simon Ståhlenhag



**FIG. V** Simon Stålenhag, *Things from the Loop*, pp. 48-49,, 2016 © 2016 Simon Stålenhag



**FIG. VI** "Whole apartment complex that looked like they were getting their energy from salvaged suspension engines had sprung up there", Simon Stålenhag, *The Electric State*, p. 41, 2017, © 2017 Simon Stålenhag



**FIG. VII** Simon Stålenhag, *The Electric State*, pp. 78-79, 2017 © 2017 Simon Stålenhag



**FIG. VII** Simon Ståhlenhag, *The Electric State*, p. 92, 2017, © 2017 Simon Ståhlenhag