

Research Article



Chess and the City – Reflections on Chess, Urban Space, and Audiovisual Culture

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Mikael Askander

In this essay, chess will be in focus. Understanding many different manifestations and representations of, and discourses on, chess, the emphasis is on proposed strong links between chess and urban space. Is it so? And if, then why? Here, chess is understood in terms of an intermedially constructed expression (a game to be played, a sport, an artform) and an audiovisual representation, underlining themes and motifs, etc., in the story or work in question. Here, media such as films, music videos, and TV series are examined. Also, chess in the real (IRL) urban space will be highlighted via a few examples. The questions to hover around in the following are: how, when, and why is chess to be related to the city?

To examine chess in different forms is important to any history of culture, since it is: a) a very popular game in the world. There are more than 600.000.000 chess-playing people in the world, and 8.000.000 players registered in chess clubs (Chess.com 2024). Moreover, b) chess is a so called “cultural icon”, or something that is rewritten, reshaped, and mediated in many different media and art contexts. To know about chess gives one some extra tools to understand and interpret chess occurring in life, as well as in different kinds of stories, art, media, etc.

Many articles and books in all languages and cultures have been written and published during the centuries, both scientific, academic works, and popular forms of handbooks (how to play and win in chess, etc.). Not much of all this chess literature has focused on the potential connections between the game and urban space/the city. In this article, I intend to do that.

D2–D4: Introduction

When thinking of chess, many most likely think of leisurely playing a game, killing some time, etc. Others might think of chess in terms of mathematics, logic, and intelligence. Chess has become a standard, a symbol in history, from the invention of it in India c. fifteen hundred years ago (Averbakh, 2012, p. 8), to our days of digitized and online forms of playing the game. Chess has become a worldwide-recognized symbol of many different things, also when depicted in fiction and poetry, films, TV-series, music videos, and many other forms of art and media.

Real chess is for both amateurs and professionals. There are many, many chess clubs in the world, and competitions and tournaments are arranged for teams as well as for individual players. As for many cultural industries and entertainment businesses (including sports), there is also a kind of star system in the chess universe. The greatest star is always the world champion. When you have won enough games against enough skilled opponents, you are labelled “Grand Master” (GM), the highest title to have in the chess world.

Chess is, more than anything else, a game. A board game, as well as – nowadays – a digital game. Two players play against each other. One of them will win (and then gain one point, the loser none) – or they play “a draw” (undecided; none of them wins, and they gain half a point each). One side plays the white pieces, the other side the black pieces. The same amount and the same kind of pieces are there to start with. In the beginning, the only

unequal aspect is seen in the fact that white always begins. Another important dimension in chess is to be found in time. Professional chess games always include a chess clock. Different kinds of chess have different kinds of time limits. The usual for traditional chess is two hours per player and then some extra time after that. You can lose on time, even though your position and your material (how many pieces, etc.) on the board is of better status (for the rules of the game, see for instance Priestly, 2020).

With all of this inherent in chess, it is not difficult to see why the game has become so popular when also using it in aesthetic contexts: in audiovisual storytelling, it can symbolize the battle for power, the battle between races, conflicts between classes (pawns, bishops, king, queen ... etc.), the battle between the sexes (the queen is the strongest piece in chess, the king more or less the weakest).

Real chess is also mediated through chess literature of all sorts: chess theory (for learning about how to play a certain chess opening, or how to operate in end games, and chess for beginners), or chess history, biographies on chess stars, and more. Further on, there are chess journals in all languages: *Tidskrift för schack* (Sweden), *Schach Magazin 64* (Germany), and *New in Chess* (Netherlands), to mention a few. Also, in fiction and poetry, chess is to be found as a theme. Today, there are many chess sites online to play chess on, as well as to get information and news from: Chess.com, Chessbase.com and Lichess.com are some of the most popular today (See the table of references for more information).

D7–D5: Chess, the city, and modern life

As mentioned above, in this rather explorative essay, I will relate chess to different city settings. Here, chess, both IRL and represented in audiovisual culture, will be in focus, related to questions about phenomena like the city, space, materiality, and representation/semiotics/media.

When it comes to real chess, it has always, both historically and in contemporary times, been played by many people all over the world, in both the cities and in the countryside. From the late 19th century, the modernity and the modern society is flowering, developing: big cities, mass production of all kinds, and urbanization, technological inventions, and globalization. Mass production of media and advertising, the rise of radio and TV, and so on, have often been set in the cities.

C2–C4: Intermedialities of the city and chess

Chess is a game to be played, but at the same time an intermedial and multimodal construction, when a) played at the board, b) online (via chess.com, for instance), and c) in different mediations focusing chess: news, chess TV, chess theory books, web pages for and about chess, etc. In the following, I will take a closer look at a few examples of audiovisual and intermedial expressions in which chess, in different ways, is being represented – in relation to different surroundings, different environments, and cityscapes not the least. Here, I make use of the idea of intermediality saying that there are two main forms of intermediality: a) different combinations of media, and b) different transformations of media content (see Elleström, 2010, p. 36; Askander, 2017, p. 94). Intermediality can be identified in relations between *technical media* (book, cinema

theatre, computer screen), *basic media* (words, images, sounds) and *qualified media* (artforms, genres) (Elleström, p. 12).

When it comes to chess as part of intermedial works, like films and TV-programs, chess becomes part of the combinations of different basic media: oral and typed words (and figures), sounds (including the qualified medium of music), and images (including moving images). The most common ways to communicate – and make use of – chess in audiovisual culture are: 1) showing a chessboard (maybe on a table in the background of the scene in question); 2) showing a game of chess being played, in the foreground of the scene; 3) not *shown* at all, but made use of in verbal language, most often in the metaphorical function (“we need a pawn sacrifice”, “what’s his next move?”, etc.). In category 3, it is obvious how widespread chess has become, even as metaphors understood by many, even the ones who know nothing about playing real chess.

So, when it comes to intermedial dimensions in the mediations of chess and the city, one can sort things out as in the following model:

Media of chess and of the city			
	Chess in literature	Chess on film/TV	Chess in music/music videos
Basic media:	Words (images)	Words, images, sounds	Words, images, sounds
Examples:	King, queen, gambit	Chess pieces, boards Sounds: pieces clicking, clock ticking, music	Chess pieces, boards Sounds: pieces clicking, clock ticking, music
	The city in literature	The city on film/TV	The city in music/music videos
Basic media:	Words (images)	Words, images, sounds	Words, images, sounds
Examples:	Town, city, streets, square, park	Buildings, traffic, crowds, bars, cafés Sounds: traffic, people, music	Buildings, traffic, crowds, bars, cafés, dance Sounds: traffic, people, music

Picture 1. A structure for some forms of basic media in representations of chess and the city.

In audiovisual culture, chess and the city are represented in different intermedial combinations of words, images, and sounds. Most commonly, chess is shown in different ways in indoor surroundings, like homes, schools, and chess clubs, and in city halls of different kinds, where tournaments and competitions are being played.

In terms of intermediality, one can also speak of chess as a “cultural icon”. A cultural icon is something that becomes popular, used, and spread in many different media and contexts. A cultural icon is also re-written, changed, and reshaped in different ways. Cultural icons are not only manifest in artifacts, but can also take the form of buildings, music, logotypes, rituals, and more (see: Lund 2012, p. 8–22, and Brooker 2001). Chess is used in many, many different ways, to be depicted itself as a game, but is also aimed to symbolize things, for underlining, supporting, and adding to a message in the work in question (no matter which medium it is).

E7–E6: From the sea to the roof: chess and Death

I begin with my first example, a music video. The music video as an art form, a qualified medium, is a very obvious example of intermedial communication: it is shaped by the collaboration of words, moving images, and sounds/music. It is also intermedial in being an adaptation, from a song to a video.

In 2023, the British band Depeche Mode released their latest full-length album, *Memento Mori* (2023). The first song to be released as a single and simultaneously as a music video, was *Ghosts Again*. Here, I shall focus on the video, since there are no connections to chess in the song's lyrics. The music video is visually a virtual homage to Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal* (*Det sjunde inseglet*, 1957). In this video, Depeche Mode especially refers to the Bergman scene in which the knight, Antonius Block, plays a game of chess against Death. The video is set in black and white, just like the film. Also, there is a game of chess being played. In the video there are two men, visually resembling Death, as it/he is depicted in the film. In the video it is the band members Dave Gahan and Martin Gore at the chess board. They are sitting there, outdoors on a roof, in a big city with a landscape of skyscrapers surrounding them.



Picture 2. A free, visual interpretation of a scene in the Depeche Mode music video to the song *Ghosts Again* (2023). Drawing/sketch: Mikael Askander, 2024.

It is easy to see that there is a resemblance between the shapes of the many skyscrapers in the background and the shapes of the chess pieces shown in profile on the table. This is strengthened by the black and white chess pieces, and the play of sunlight and the shadows on the skyscrapers (see picture 2). Here, chess mirrors and relates to life, reality, etc. One could say that Depeche Mode is transforming a chess game from a very old seaside landscape (the film) to a modern urban cityscape (the video). Hereby they show the viewer and the listener the feeling of eternity and the timeless dimension of chess, but this also points to the inevitable fact, that no matter which time you live in, or no matter which place you are in, we are all going to face death (Death) in this game of chess we call

life. Another interpretation to put forward would be the contrasting function: by referring as explicitly as they do to Bergman's film, Depeche Mode makes their urban version even more urban, in contrast to the case in the film, once again underlining the timelessness of both chess and death.

More is to be said about this video. Not all the imagery in the video is from the roof; in some scenes we see Gore and Gahan in the dark night, in a cemetery, sitting, standing, crawling, and walking around among the gravestones. Not the least because everything is shot in black and white, the skyscrapers, the gravestones, and the chess pieces show similarities in shape and color (black and white). They all also form a similarly shaped "landscape" (many buildings, many pieces, and many gravestones lined up, from the ground and up towards the sky). Here, the death/life complex is once more elaborated on. The video then continues with a look back at the still ongoing game being played, on that roof, now during the night time. It's dark, and the pieces are now not easy to differ from each other: they all look quite dark, even the white pieces. At the end of the video, Gahan tips his king and lets it fall – a common symbol also in real chess for losing/being check-mated/giving up. Exit: Life.

There is also another context to take into account. The band member Andrew Fletcher died in 2022, the year before the song and the video were released. It is said that he liked playing chess very much, and wasn't bad at it either. The video then can be seen also as a homage to the friend and colleague of the band. And the theme of life/death is obviously present here, both referring to and being varied a bit compared to the Bergman film scene. In the film, only two persons, two men, are seen in the nature. In the video, two men are also present playing chess. There are obvious traces leading from the rocky coastal chess game through the history, to our days shown in the music video. The video and its references to the Bergman movie thus become the history of chess: the game is moving into the city, into the modern life, and in our times, chess becomes a part of the high-tech society and the big city urban situation. But it is not only a part of it, it is also a question of mirroring the city life, in that many people in a city move around and will experience different conflicts, different battles, cheating, crime, and terror; so, in the city and on the chess board are conflicts and fights.

Visual material from this music video was also used in the visual show that was shown on video screens on stage in the live concerts during the world tour following the band's new album in 2023. One can notice that this tour was the first time when the band did not have Andy Fletcher on stage. Gahan and Gore, with extra musicians, toured from city to city, and also in this IRL setting, the music video (scenes from it) became a part of video screens, stages, and concert halls in cities all over the world.

NB1–C3: From the basement to the city – *The Queen's Gambit*

Let us move on from music video and film, to novel and TV-series. One of the most talked about moments in recent chess in the 2020s must be the Netflix TV series *The Queen's Gambit* (2020). This is an adaptation of the American author (and chess player) Walter Tevis' novel from 1983 with the same title. The story, told in seven episodes, is about the young Beth Harmon who is placed in an orphanage after her mother's death in a car crash.

There, the caretaker starts teaching Beth how to play chess. She learns fast, and soon she beats the caretaker, and thereafter everyone at the local chess club, who are, of course, only older boys and men. Slowly, or rather rapidly, she paves her way through chess matches and tournaments, up to the very world elite segment.

Here, the chess scenes are more or less entirely shown in urban settings, inside buildings as well as outdoors, in a park or somewhere else. Well, the orphanage in the beginning of the story, where Beth starts her career as a chess player might be a bit off city, outside of it, or at least in the outer areas of the city. But still, Beth is doing her journey, and she travels literally and metaphorically: from the basement of that orphanage in a smaller American city in the very beginning of the series, to the park area in the big city abroad, and its old men playing in chess in the very final scene of the final episode. This is the story of a star being born, moving not only through geography, but also from unhealth (trauma, drugs) to health (self-fulfillment, control), from an outsider position to success and popularity. One can add the travelling from being a small girl, lost in the world dominated by men, to a grown-up woman, successfully navigating the world, winning against men in (at that time) a “men’s sport”, and in a world that is in so many ways dominated by the man as the norm. Beth goes from the locked-up girl situation in the outskirts of an American city, to the open urban space of the Russian big city, dominated by men. And the men playing chess in the park are cheering and applauding when they recognize her coming their way. There, in the final scene of the story, Beth is all dressed in white, resembling a white queen on the board among the dark pieces: the men dressed in black (or at least dark clothes). The men cheer for the woman, and the Russians cheer for the American in the open air of the city space in the Soviet Union. This could of course be interpreted in terms of a critique of an ideology and a society system; the story takes place in the late 1960’s/early 1970’s, when the cold war was a reality, and chess games played outdoors has through the years become a commonly used motif in films about/set in the Cold War period.

NG8–F6: Chess in the (real) city

In cities all over the world, chess is making a mark in the cityscapes. Indoors, one will of course find chess clubs, but also chess pubs and chess cafés (for Swedish examples, in Malmö and Stockholm, see: Falk 2024 and Svarta hästen 2024). Outdoors, one might find chess tables, and/or big chess boards on the ground in strategically situated places. In the following, I show some photos as examples of this.

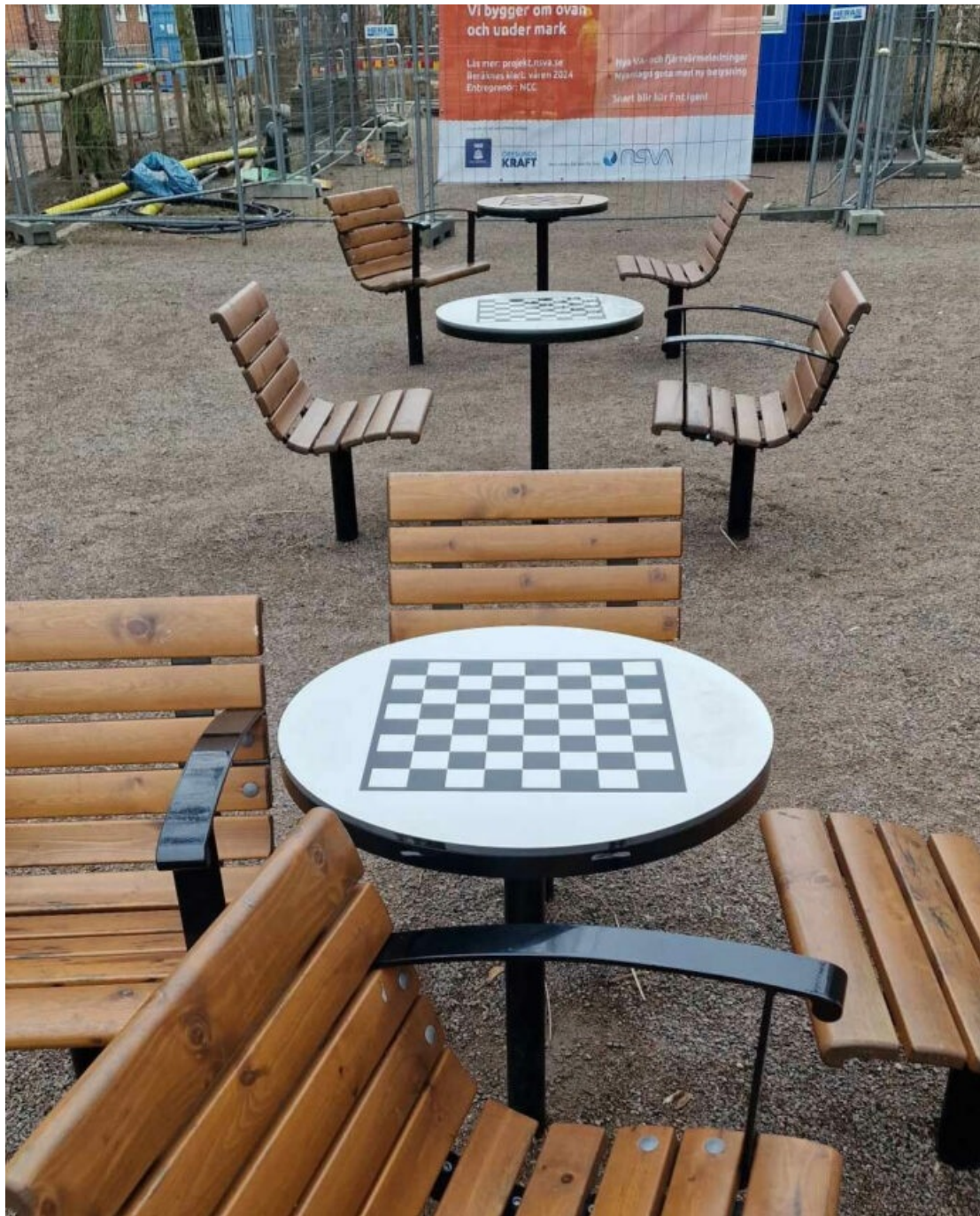


Picture 3. A street cabinet at Ingmar Bergmans plats, in the city of Helsingborg, Sweden. Artwork by artist Cecilia Lundgren. Photo: Tommy Modin, 2024.

A rare example of chess being represented in a city is to be found in Helsingborg, where Bergman lived a few years in the 1940's, when he was the director of Helsingborg City Theatre. A street cabinet is placed at "Ingmar Bergmans plats" (Ingmar Bergman's Place) in the city (see picture 3). This is more than a chess reference and is also a reference to Ingmar Bergman and his cultural legacy in film history, as well as to Helsingborg and its cultural and artistic life. A street cabinet is a perfect and often empty place or surface for creating and adding art, such as posters or paintings, to the urban scenery for the sake of aesthetics, information, or political messages. Here, a painting by the Swedish artist Cecilia Lundgren is the work of visual art, referring intermedially to the art of film.

Outside of the artistic idea and message, this is at the same time the city's politicians aiming for signaling a local cultural capital, connected to the world through the name of Bergman and through a representation of one of the most famous film scenes ever (actually shot close to Helsingborg, in the rocky coastal area named Hovs Hallar).

In the city of Helsingborg, Sweden, there are also numerous chess tables placed in different parts of town. As can be seen in Picture 4, there are stationary tables with chess boards placed, completed with two chairs each (for two players). One only needs to bring pieces, and maybe a chess clock, to play. This is a way of creating and indicating many things: a democracy, a game/a sport, inviting everyone to play. This is maybe not only thought of for the competition aspect, but also for fun, and for the social aspects of it. By inviting everyone to play, the town's authorities and politicians responsible for deciding about placing the chess tables in the city most likely want to signal all of these positive values.



Picture 4. Some of the many chess tables placed in the city of Helsingborg, Sweden. Photo: Joacim Sprung, 2024.

In the city where I have my occupation, Lund, Sweden, you can find a huge (3×3 m) chessboard with big pieces (c. 50 cm high). It is situated on the ground just outside of the City Library (Picture 5, below). Everyone can go there and, as long as you know the rules, play a game of chess.



Picture 5. Check mate on the ground floor ... A big outdoors chess board, at the entrance of the City Library in Lund, Sweden. Photo: Andreas Gruvhammar, 2024.

This also is, and has been, a common sight in many cities all over the world. In the city of Lund, the place in front of the City Library is interesting: it links the idea of a library to ideas of chess: learning, reading, knowledge, democracy, intelligence, and social time. It's all there, in the chess-library combination.

Endgame: Concluding remarks

Chess is about playing the game. It is an ongoing process (from preparation to afterward analysis), and part of the everyday life processes to many of us. Chess is about change and movement, from the starting point in the opening to the checkmate (birth to life to death). This processuality can also be seen in the examples discussed in my text: from the medieval ocean shoreline to the roof in the big city, from the suburban orphanage basement to the chess clubs in the big cities, from indoors halls to parks out there, and further on.

So, in this text, I have tried to argue that chess, within the modernity, especially in the 20th and 21st centuries, can be understood as something closely associated with urban life, concerning both real chess and chess represented in different cultural manifestations (TV, film, music videos). I have also tried to show how chess often has been used to indicate dimensions like cultural capital, knowledge, intelligence, death/life, battle/conflict, gender issues, social life aspects, and democracy aspects.

Chess is also mediated and intermedially communicated, both IRL and in films/TV-series, etc. In aesthetic expressions, chess is mediated in combinations of media, such as moving images, sounds of different sorts (including music), and words. When real chess is being played, there is the physical medium of the wooden pieces and the board, and there might be comments whispered between the players, signs, and protocols (if a real competition or

tournament). The pieces themselves are pictures, for instance of a horse, a castle (the “rook”), etc., representing battle/war between two tribes/forces/nations. In the case of outdoor chess, it’s much like indoor chess, though the ground floor chess version is bigger in size and you might get an audience, whether you like it or not. As a player, you have to keep up with the sounds of the city (church bells, traffic, music, soaring crowds, phones ringing, yelling children, etc.). Language mixes with other audible and visual media and phenomena, making chess an intermedial and integrated part of the city. And if the city is considered to be a complex medium itself, then we could regard the combination of the city and chess as a total work of art.

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- Ghosts Again* (music video, Depeche Mode, 2023)
- The Queen's Gambit* (TV-series, 2020)

Authors



Mikael Askander

Associate Professor » Lund University

Mikael Askander is an Associate Professor of Intermedia Studies, at Lund University, Sweden. His research is mainly focused on literature, popular culture, intermediality, and digital cultures.