

Special Issue:

Changing Concepts of Nature in Contemporary Scandinavian Literature and Photography

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»It's still a question of whether it's a kind of crime – reading so much human into nature. Whether it's our fate to do so.«¹ In these lines from her novel *Om mørke* (2013), the Danish author Josefine Klougart alludes to one of the most important questions of our time: how might a responsible relationship be shaped between humans and nature? Is it possible to correct and rethink anthropocentric points of view that subjugate other living beings and negate their inherent dynamics? And how do such reconceptions affect the images humans construct of themselves? Since the 1970s at the latest, and specifically since the publication of the Club of Rome's report *The Limits to Growth*² in 1972, an environmental crisis has come into plain sight and is currently growing ever more acute. This prompts the vehement demand to change the way we interact with nature – to reverse the exploitation of natural resources and to develop sustainable strategies.

Specifically in the humanities and in cultural studies, it is also contended that the

present environmental crisis is not just a material crisis, but also a crisis of thinking and imagination; overcoming it depends on whether and how the imaginative-epistemological relationship between human culture and nature is changed.³

Following the literary scholar Urs Büttner, this can be discussed as a crisis of the »natural imaginary«.

Drawing on Charles Taylor's concept of »social imaginaries«, which refer to the implicit common conceptual horizon and shared epistemic orientation of a society, a contextualizing background against which individual

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¹ Klougart 2017, pp. 46–47; »Det er stadigvæk et spørgsmål, om det er en slags forbrydelse: at læse så meget menneske ind i naturen. Om det er vores bestemmelse at gøre det.« (Klougart 2013, p. 56).

² <https://www.clubofrome.org/publication/the-limits-to-growth/> (6.4.2021).

³ »gegenwärtige Umweltkrise nicht nur eine materielle Krise ist, sondern auch eine Krise des Denkens und der Imagination, deren Bewältigung davon abhängt, ob und wie das imaginativ-epistemologische Verhältnis zwischen menschlicher Kultur und Natur verändert wird«. Gersdorf & Meyer 2005, p. 13.

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cultural acts play out, Büttner sees »natural imaginaries« as sub-form, which »specifically relate to nature-culture imaginaries«. ⁴ Normally the »natural imaginary« is presupposed as tacit knowledge; it is, however, made explicit when events such as the environmental crisis flag it as problematic. ⁵ Clearly, then, relations with nature are by no means a given: rather, especially in a time of upheaval like the present, they are a matter of constant negotiation within a society. We are also shown that attitudes to nature are highly diverse: an ecological approach calling for a new interconnectedness and inclusion of humans in natural contexts is radically different from research in the so-called life sciences, which pursue ever more comprehensive mastery of natural phenomena, and different again from the marketing of nature in the context of tourism and advertising. This diversity, which undoubtedly has its share of paradoxes and contradictions, makes the contemporary study of human-nature relations a highly exciting and dynamic field of research, and one in which a multitude of new approaches are evolving.

We recognize this in the context of literary studies where, especially since the 1990s, new directions in research such as ecocriticism have become established. ⁶ According to a basic definition, ecocriticism deals »with literary as well as broader cultural and scientific manifestations and historical transformations of the environment from methodological and theoretical perspectives of the utmost diversity«. ⁷ In this respect, it honours the fact that art and literature are particularly important fields for the negotiation of cultural constructions of nature. They allow the implicit social imaginary, i.e. Büttner's »natural imaginary«, to be made explicit and to be constructed anew. ⁸ Next, we can tie in reflections on »cultural ecology« by the literary scholar and Americanist Hubert Zapf. Within this concept, he defines the operative mechanisms of literature and art by analogy with ecological processes, the interrelationships between nature and living beings that are studied and described in biology. Here, Zapf presupposes processes of productive renewal, in which literature not only criticizes existing culture but also creates alternative approaches and reactivates what has been culturally repressed. Zapf outlines a triadic model of literature as a culturally critical meta-discourse that critiques existing mentalities, an imaginative counter-discourse that reactivates the culturally excluded, and a reintegrative inter-discourse that brings otherwise separate discourses together.

At the same time, he underlines the »potential of imaginative literature for ecocultural self-reflection«. ⁹ In other words, literature can contribute to forging a new consciousness with regard to human-nature relations, and thus in the long term, potentially help to establish new ways of interacting with natural phenomena. As a seismograph of sweeping changes wrought on the landscape and nature by industrialization, the role of literature has been vital

⁴ »spezifisch auf die Natur-Kultur-Vorstellungen beziehen.« Büttner 2017, p. 102.

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*

⁶ Heinrich Detering recently pointed out that the term »ecocriticism« has been in existence ever since 1978, cf. Detering 2020, p. 23.

⁷ »mit [...] literarischen, aber auch generell kulturellen und wissenschaftlichen Erscheinungsformen sowie historischen Transformationen von Umwelt aus unterschiedlichsten methodischen und theoretischen Perspektiven.« Bühler 2016, p. 32.

⁸ Cf. Büttner 2017, pp. 101–105.

⁹ »Potenzial imaginativer Literatur für eine ökologische Selbstreflexion der Kultur.« Cf. Zapf 2015, p. 172f.

since at least the eighteenth century.¹⁰ The timeliness of an aesthetic examination of the relationship between humans and nature is more than clear from current tendencies in literature, which is sincerely engaged in negotiating the human-induced and increasingly palpable phenomenon of climate change.¹¹ Caused by global processes, changes in the climate are undeniably embedded in higher-order dynamic and systemic nexuses. Even so, it is worthwhile when considering literature to pay attention to specific cultures and regional conditions.¹² The literary scholars Reinhard Hennig, Anna-Karin Jonasson, and Peter Degerman take this local perspective to heart; in the introduction to their recently published anthology on environmental references in Scandinavian literature, they write:

Cultural, social, and historical contexts as well as intertextual relations therefore strongly influence how images and narratives of nature and the environment are constructed. This means that there is a need for culture-related and language-related diversification and for comparative approaches within the environmental humanities in general and in ecocriticism in particular.¹³

Since the discursive negotiation of human-nature relations is always historically and culturally conditioned and influenced, it makes sense to consider art and literature in their specific context in order to expose the aesthetic construction of environmental references in its many nuances. Contemporary Scandinavian literature offers especially promising terrain for such an undertaking, given its prominent treatment of environmental and ecological concepts that also resonate internationally. One pertinent example is the successful novel *Bienes historie* (2016) by the Norwegian author Maja Lunde, which has been translated into a number of languages and received a broad reception.¹⁴

Now we, too, embark on the route indicated by Hennig, Jonasson, and Degerman with our special issue, in which we broaden the perspective with some additional and hitherto less familiar examples from contemporary Scandinavian literature and art. As the brainchild of a German-Norwegian conference held in January 2019 at the Nordeuropa-Institut of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, this volume brings together some of the outcomes of that event, which was dedicated to investigating the present-day traces of ecological discourses and discussions of human-nature relations in selected works of Scandinavian literature and (photo) art.

An influential concept within the current discussion on human-nature relations is that of the Anthropocene. The term »Anthropocene« was coined in the year 2000 by the natural scientists Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, and

¹⁰ Cf. Detering 2020, pp. 12–18.

¹¹ Cf. for example the programme of the Climate Fiction Festival, which took place in Berlin from 4–6 December 2020: <https://www.climate-fiction-festival.de/> (6.4.2021).

¹² On the relationship between a global and a local perspective, cf. Heise 2008.

¹³ Hennig, Jonasson & Degerman 2018, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Bienes historie* was Germany's best-selling book of 2017. For a survey of international literary critiques of M. Lunde's novels, cf. <http://www.majalunde.com/media/> (28.12.2021).

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signifies »the dominant influence of humans on geological and physical systems on the planetary scale.«¹⁵ Microplastic particles intermingling with sand on a beach are just one example of how human activity is radically transforming natural contexts, and how humans are becoming a geophysical force.¹⁶ The effect of this is to break down dualistic concepts which permitted a view of nature as independent of human beings, revealing, instead, the tight interweaving of nature and culture, humans and nature, as well as the destructive potential that can be inherent in human activity. Unsurprisingly, the responses to these new insights vary greatly: they range from posthumanist approaches that seek to rethink the human within nature's interconnected contexts, to approaches that see humans as creators and managers of a new Earth, taking responsibility for better and more sustainable management of the environment, possibly also assisted by new technologies for putative geo-engineering.¹⁷

The concept of the Anthropocene is increasingly discussed in the humanities and cultural studies as a »reflective term to address the complex ethical, social and cultural issues raised by the new geoscientific perspective, to search for a posthuman model of human self-determination, and to explore the aesthetic and creative opportunities in dealing with the Anthropocene.«¹⁸ For instance, as Amitav Ghosh points out, phenomena such as climate change make entirely new demands of literary techniques.¹⁹ This aspect is taken up in **Reinhard Hennig's** essay. Referring to examples from four Norwegian texts, he analyzes which innovative narrative techniques they use to bring the complex connections and key problems of the Anthropocene within the reader's grasp. He also establishes that texts of this nature require highly literate readers, to the extent that the texts' innovative potential may be an impediment to their widespread reception.

The Anthropocene is a powerfully influential concept at present, as outlined above, but one that can also be seen in a critical light. We note Donna Haraway's lament that in the Anthropocene, humankind is being reassembled as a species – impelled by the crisis and exhorted to opt for more austerity or even smarter technology. Haraway puts it pithily: »Bad actors need a story, but not the whole story«²⁰ and thus resists the covert continuation of the Enlightenment project – a progressive domination of nature by humankind – that can be seen in such a viewpoint.²¹ An added problem here is an undifferentiated view of the human species as such; historically and culturally, its contribution to phenomena such as climate change has been far more heterogeneous than the concept of the Anthropocene acknowledges. Against this backdrop, the thinkers of posthumanist theory turn their attention to the

¹⁵ »den dominanten Einfluss des Menschen auf die geologischen und physikalischen Systeme im planetaren Maßstab«. Dürbeck 2015, p. 107.

¹⁶ Cf. Lenz 2014.

¹⁷ Cf. Dürbeck 2016, pp. 11–15.

¹⁸ »Reflexionsbegriff, um die durch die neue geowissenschaftliche Perspektive aufgeworfenen komplexen ethischen, sozialen und kulturellen Fragen anzugehen, nach einer posthumanen Selbstbestimmung des Menschen zu suchen und die ästhetischen und kreativen Möglichkeiten im Umgang mit dem Anthropozän auszuloten.« Dürbeck 2015, p. 107. For an extensive discussion of the Anthropocene, cf. also Horn & Bergthaller 2020.

¹⁹ Ghosh 2017, p. 51.

²⁰ Haraway 2016, p. 49.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 47.

multiplicity of stories co-created by different actors in a world of complex interconnectedness. A point of view focused on the self-contained and sovereign subject of the Enlightenment is supplanted by the subject-as-event, which emerges in the midst of multifarious relationalities and entanglements. The essay by **Dörte Linke** analyses two of these conceptions, those of Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti, and compares them with each other. The third text she refers to is *Om mørke* by the Danish author Josefine Klougart, a novel that takes up some of the ideas in the theoretical texts, but also throws them into contrast. In the process, it becomes apparent that questioning anthropocentric views is by no means easy or self-evident.

Sissel Furuseth's essay revolves around losses. She refers to a phenomenon that is increasingly observed due to the warming climate: ice melt and the absence of snow. The concept of »ecological grief«, taken up in a special issue of the psychological journal *American Imago* in spring 2020, describes how the human psyche reacts to such changes in its own environment. Interest is not confined merely to phenomena like species extinction but increasingly extends to material phenomena like the loss of snow. In the Nordic countries more than most, the cryosphere²² is also crucial to the formation of one's own identity: its influence ranges from the pursuit of winter sports for the joy of *friluftsliv* to specific lifestyles and linguistic expressions born of withstanding particular weather phenomena. Furuseth speaks of a »snowhow« that exists in the Nordic countries, demonstrating once again that imaginaries and ways of interacting with nature are also regionally specific, while emphasizing the closeness of the interplay between material conditions and (human) cognition and imagination. Referring in her essay to two Scandinavian texts, Charlotte Weitze's *Den afskyelige* and Christian Valeur's *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret*, she inquires into how identities change when environments transform, and how Scandinavian literature functions as a »cultural laboratory« for articulating and dealing with »ecological grief«. A virulent image in both texts is that of the snowman as a species on the brink of extinction. This image in particular shows that not only are human environments changing, but with them certain traditions, which may never again be passed on to succeeding generations. It is another keen reminder of the far-reaching consequences and influences of climate change on human cultural worlds and on cultural memory.

Also dedicated to an extraordinarily icy world, namely the Arctic, **Maike Teubner's** essay discusses the photo series *Svalbard* by the Norwegian photographer Mette Tronvoll, a collection of portrait and landscape photographs taken in Ny-Ålesund on Spitsbergen. For all its remoteness at the northernmost periphery, this place commands global relevance as an important geopolitical outpost and international research base. Teubner describes how the photographer Mette Tronvoll scouts out the activities of researchers in these extreme conditions and, in doing so, sheds light on an unusual interplay between humans and nature, their mindful and circumspect movement within this nature – and its supremacy over them. Teubner calls this an »appreciative concentration that characterizes the' researchers' interaction with the natural environment.« Even though climate change is not the central issue here, it

²² The cryosphere describes the part of the climate system where water is found in its frozen state as ice or snow.

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can still lead the way towards new relationships with nature which admit a sense of one's own fragility and that of natural environments.

The issue concludes with an essay by **Anna Christina Harms** on the novel *Zeichen der Zerstörung* by the successful Finnish-Sámi author Kirsti Paltto, first published in Sámi in 1991; the German translation appeared in 1997. In a detailed analysis, Harms traces the complexity and fragility of Sámi identity in Finland during and after the Second World War, and challenges stereotypical Western conceptions that define a Sámi identity in terms of a supposedly special closeness to nature, the specifics of which are not usually described. Referring to particular characters in the novel and selected motifs – which include traditional Sámi singing in the *joik* style, or the importance of reindeer husbandry – Harms traces the complexity of the novel's portrayal of Sámi identity, or search for identity, in the second half of the twentieth century. Paltto's work, too, presents the relationship with nature as fundamental to the Sámi self-concept, but simultaneously shows the extent to which processes of indigenous identity assertion are heterogeneous, contextual, and culturally influenced.

The relation between nature and culture and the position of the human being in nature are portrayed and reflected in a nuanced way in contemporary Scandinavian literature and photography, as the present essays show. Returning to Klougart's question, quoted in our opening lines, as to how much human can be read into nature, we find that the answer is polyphonic.

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