

Climate Change in Literature, Television and Film from Norway

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Abstract

Environmental and climatic change has become a frequent motif in contemporary Norwegian literature, television and film, and Norway has the worldwide first organization of writers committed to climate action (The Norwegian Writers' Climate Campaign, founded in 2013). In this article, we argue that Norwegian climate change fiction and related works draw on elements that relate to specific national and/or Nordic cultural, societal and historical features, and that these elements give these works their distinct identity. We focus on four such features: (1) notions of "Nordicity"; (2) an (imagined) intimate connection between Norwegianness and nature, often seen as a typical element of Norwegian national identity; (3) references to Norwegian petroculture (since the Norwegian economy is largely based on the export of fossil fuels), and (4) an atmosphere of gloom and melancholia in many of the works, which draws on a Nordic tradition of painting and literature, and which also often characterises the genre of Nordic noir.

Keywords: Climate change, Norway, literature, film, television

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Resumen

El cambio climático y medioambiental se han convertido en un tema frecuente en la literatura, televisión y cine contemporáneos noruego, siendo Noruega el primer país con una organización de escritores comprometidos con la acción climática (“The Norwegian Writers' Climate Campaign,” fundada en 2013). En este artículo argumentamos que las obras de ficción noruegas sobre el cambio climático se basan en aspectos culturales e históricos específicos de la nación y/o de la cultura nórdica, dándoles una identidad particular. Nos centramos principalmente en cuatro de estos aspectos: (1) nociones de “lo nórdico”; (2) una conexión íntima (imaginada) entre lo noruego y la naturaleza, y por lo tanto, lo que a menudo es visto como elementos típicos de la identidad nacional noruega; (3) referencias a la “petro-cultura” noruega (dado que la economía noruega se basa en gran medida en la exportación de combustibles fósiles) y (4) una atmósfera de penumbra y melancolía en muchas de las obras, basada en las tradiciones de pintura y literatura nórdicas, y por lo general, característica del género de cine negro nórdico.

Palabras clave: Cambio climático, Noruega, literatura, película, televisión

In Norway, ecocriticism is still an emerging field and it is therefore rather early to determine any prevailing theoretical or thematic directions. However, in contemporary literature, television and film, we can see certain trends that in various ways differentiate Norwegian works from climate change-related texts originating in other cultural contexts. Climate change is a frequently encountered motif in Norwegian literature, and to a lesser extent also in television and film. Most of the respective works are not available in English translation, but some examples of Norwegian climate fiction have had considerable success internationally, notably Maja Lunde’s novel *Bienes historie* (*The History of Bees*) and the TV-series *Okkupert* (*Occupied*), both from 2015. Norway is also home to the world’s first formal organization of writers committed to climate action: *Forfatternes klimaaksjon* (The Norwegian Writers’ Climate Campaign), which was founded in 2013.

We have identified four features which are frequently present in Norwegian climate change-related works, and which can only be understood against the national (and Nordic) historical, social and cultural background: notions of Nordicity, an (imagined) intimate connection between Norwegianness and nature, references to Norwegian petroculture, and an atmosphere of Nordic gloom and melancholia. We include in our discussion works in which climate change is not explicitly mentioned, or not explicitly characterized as anthropogenic, yet where it stands to reason that readers or viewers will interpret the respective work against the background of anthropogenic climate change.

Nordicity

Many of these works feature settings that seem to display specifically “northern” characteristics.¹ The Canadian geographer and linguist Louis-Edmond Hamelin has proposed the idea of “North” as a circumpolar entity, a geographical region defined by parameters such as latitude, annual cold, type of ice, natural vegetation, accessibility,

¹ Cf. *Ecozon@* 5.2 (2014) on the topic of “Northern Nature.”

resident population, and degree of economic activity. This means that “rather than being simply a physical fact, or indeed simply a climatic one, the North becomes a region reflecting both natural and man-controlled [sic] characteristics” (18). In order to grasp the North in all its complexity, Hamelin coined the term “nordicité” (or “nordicity”), which has entered the vocabulary of many researchers working on Arctic topics. In literary and cultural studies, Daniel Chartier has adopted Hamelin’s multidisciplinary approach when investigating representations of the North in films and literary texts, focusing on different figures, elements, and narrative schemata which have been used to “northify” works, such as for example, “the impossibility of inaction” or “the journey changes by climatic phenomenon” (45). Chartier stresses that “North” is first and foremost a discursive system, inviting scholars to interrogate the relationship between geography and discourse, between the real and the imaginary.

Relating the concept of nordicity to climate change, we argue that in contemporary Norwegian literature there is no recourse to nature as untouched or unspoilt without referencing anthropogenic climate change, no way to write about snow or ice without implicitly drawing on knowledge of global warming, no way of mentioning tides or insects or wild animals without raising the spectre of habitat loss and threats to biodiversity. Contemporary texts that engage with specifically Nordic landscapes are always implicitly concerned with these landscapes as they are now, overshadowed by threats from a warming world.

Kjersti Vik’s debut novel *Mandø* (2009) falls into this category, in that it is set in a place that is necessarily embedded in the reality of climate change. It tells the story of six young adults on holiday on the Danish territory of Mandø, a small, tidal island encircled by dikes and only accessible at low tide by means of a causeway from mainland Jutland. The urban teenagers befriend a local youth, and the town-meets-country plot is revitalised by the new paradigm of climate change. With the seawater rising fast, Mandø is threatened. The islander Claus’ sophisticated knowledge of nature incorporates a deep-time perspective that can fathom the scale of the disaster, whereas the urbanites have no real sense of the fleetingness and contingency of their own “civilisation.” The juxtaposition of these two temporalities, deep-time and geological versus the short moment of human progressiveness, shows a rich awareness of climate change, but the plot hinges on the character development. Anthropogenic climate change is part of the setting, rather than part of the story.

In the realm of television, Norway is renowned for its innovative “slow TV,” developed by state broadcaster NRK starting in 2009 with a seven-hour train journey, followed by subsequent series that track the progress of building a fire, knitting a sweater, and taking the coastal ferry along the Norwegian coast, with viewers tuning in for hours at a time and participating in simultaneous Twitter and Facebook comments. *Minutt for minutt* programs feature uniquely Norwegian landscapes and cultural traditions. In a recent example, NRK’s Sami reporters documented the traditions and contemporary way of life of a Sami family as they herded their reindeer in the 168-hour December 2017 *Reinflytting minutt for minutt* (*Reindeer Migration Minute by Minute*). The stunning winter landscapes and natural beauty competed with unplanned but entertaining challenges, as

drone cameras malfunctioned and the lead reindeer inexplicably halted the migration for several days, leaving audiences watching the animals sitting and standing around doing nothing. Climate change is an unspoken element of the setting, feeding interest in the TV phenomenon through the sense that these landscape traditions are precious and under threat.

The Nation of Nature

There is a widespread notion that Norwegians are closer to nature than the citizens of other nations. This view can be traced back to the Norwegian nation-building of the nineteenth century, which idealized traditional rural life. Polar explorer and national hero Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930), for example, advocated a simple life and outdoor activities as a counterbalance to what he saw as the evils of urban modernity. Such traditional Norwegian pursuits as skiing, hiking, fishing, collecting mushrooms, and picking berries are usually subsumed under the term *friluftsliv* (“outdoor life”) and are still seen as a central element of Norwegian national identity.

Bjørn Vatne’s dystopian novel *Nullingen af Paul Abel* (*The Deletion of Paul Abel*, 2018) parodies Norwegian closeness to nature and supposedly ‘green’ variants of capitalism. In the climate-changed future of the novel, a radical green party advocating a return to the “state of nature” (90) seizes power in Norway and establishes a totalitarian regime, which makes nature-related activities obligatory for the entire population. However, despite its promises, the regime doesn’t abolish capitalism, but turns virtual experiences of (still relatively intact) Norwegian nature into the country’s major export, superseding oil and natural gas.

Another central aspect in Norwegian *friluftsliv* is the cabin (*hytte*). Norwegian cabins were originally shielings, part of traditional agriculture. Already in nineteenth-century literature they symbolized a utopian closeness to both an idyllic, pastoral nature and the (imagined) simplicity of traditional rural life. In many ways, the cabin has come to symbolize Norwegianness *per se* (cf. Rees). Thus, when in Brit Bildøen’s novel *Sju dagar i august* (*Seven Days in August*, 2014) the main characters’ cabin is partially destroyed by an extreme storm (100-101), this signifies not only how climate change threatens material property, but also Norwegian national identity.

Protecting nature can be taken very seriously, but it is also a topic permeated by self-irony and satire. In Bildøen’s previous novel, *Adam Hiorths veg* (*Adam Hiorth’s Journey*, 2011), the protagonist Jon Utskot is portrayed as a famous environmentalist of the old school, a womanizer touring westwards from Oslo with his rusty bike and well-worn tent. As a modern Don Quixote he is literally tilting at windmills. Published only two years after Arne Næss passed away, Bildøen’s novel can be interpreted as a playful tribute to activists of Næss’ kind. The philosopher was not only an influential contributor to environmental discourse worldwide, as the man who coined the concept of “deep ecology,” but also a tireless activist, with a physical and practical relationship with nature. The protagonist Signe in Maja Lunde’s *Blå* (translated as *The End of the Ocean*, 2017) is a

similar type of activist, resorting to civil disobedience in the 1970s in order to protect vital natural resources in western Norway.

The wave of popular Norwegian horror movies after the turn of the millennium has also more often than not located stories in rural settings or in the wilderness. Here, the Norwegian idea of outdoor life does not primarily offer relaxation through activities such as hiking or skiing; instead, nature is experienced as an evil force, whether in the woods in *Villmark (Wilderness, 2003)* or in the mountains in *Fritt Vilt (Cold Prey, 2006)*. Norwegian film historian Gunnar Iversen has described how the new horror movies treat landscape and nature as something “un-Norwegian,” claiming that Norwegians have an almost erotic relationship with being outdoors.

However, in contemporary cinema, nature can still serve as a place for contemplation and healing, for instance in Ole Giæver’s films *Fjellet (The Mountain, 2011)* and *Mot naturen (Towards Nature, 2013)*. When it comes to environmentally critical fiction films, these are few and far between in Norway, with the horror-comedy *Trolljegeren (Trollhunter, dir. Andre Øvredal, 2010)* a notable exception. Taking the “mockumentary” *Blair Witch Project* as an inspiration, the film follows students making a documentary about a mysterious state worker who turns out to be a troll hunter. Although primarily for entertainment, the film combines Norwegian folklore with criticism of modern predator management. Another entertainment vehicle mobilizes Nordic mythology in the service of the representation of national nature: the Netflix cli-fi series *Ragnarok (2020)* places a teenage avatar of the Norse god Thor (complete with control over the weather) in a high school drama set amid the stunning fjord landscapes of a fictional Norwegian town, Edda.

It is also likely that, while explicit references to climate change have been rare in Norwegian cinema, there will be more in coming years. A beginning trend in this direction is indicated by recent big-budget disaster films such as *Bølgen (The Wave, dir. Roar Uthaug, 2015)* and its sequel *Skjelvet (The Quake, dir. John Andreas Andersen, 2018)* which have been interpreted in the context of climate change fiction. The same is to be expected from the disaster film *Nordsjøen (North Sea, dir. John Andreas Andersen, announced for 2021)*, in which Norwegian oil platforms serve as the setting for an unfolding catastrophe, and the historical drama *La elva leve (Let the river live, dir. Ole Giæver, announced for 2022)* about Norway’s hitherto most intense environmental conflict, the Alta controversy of the 1970s and 1980s over the damming of a river for hydroelectric power. This trend will increase possibilities for researching representations of climate change in Norwegian film and television studies to catch up with the work already taking place in literary studies.

Petroculture

Norway began to extract oil and natural gas from its continental shelf in the 1970s. Today, the extraction and export of oil and gas constitutes Norway’s most important economic sector, with many jobs being directly or indirectly dependent on it. The fossil fuel industry has contributed substantially to making Norway one of the world’s most

prosperous countries, with a very high rate of employment, high wages (and consequently high levels of consumption), a well-developed social sector, and considerable financial reserves deposited in the state-owned “petroleum fund” (Schiefløe 159-162). This is the unremarked-upon background for many works of contemporary Norwegian literature and screen productions. The TV series *Lykkeland* (2018-), a historical drama set in Stavanger centring on the discovery of oil in 1969 and following its effects on a group of people there, was the first screen dramatization of that pivotal discovery and its impact on the nation.

Oil remained an absent signifier through much of the twentieth century: this fact has been thematized retrospectively across genres, for instance in the 2008 thriller *Lindemann & Sachs* by Kjell Ola Dahl and the autobiographical essay “Oljeunge” by the socialist writer Aslak Sira Myhre (2010), in which Norway is likened to a junkie, with oil instead of heroin as its invisible, addictive drug. The commissioning by the Petroleum Museum in Stavanger, which was built in 1999 with architecture that is reminiscent of an oil rig, of the short film *Oljeunge* based on Myhre’s essay in 2016 points to a new willingness within Norway to confront the entanglement of the nation with its fossil fuel, personified in a father-son generational drama of reconciliation.

Øyvind Rimbereid’s long poem “Solaris korrigert” (2004), set four hundred years into the future, already explored this entanglement of Norwegian society with oil through imagination of a hybrid society of robots and cyborg-humans living in a dystopian world that is largely empty of wildlife. “DU human, so greasen / ven du born!” (24) exclaims the narrator from across the centuries in Rimbereid’s invented (and untranslatable) petro-language; the humanity that remains in the year 2480 has co-evolved with oil extractivism.

Criticism of Norwegian petroculture features prominently not only in many recent climate change-related novels for adults, such as Jan Kjærstad’s *Slekters gang* (*The Path of Kins*, 2015) and Bård Isdahl’s *Havari* (*Accident*, 2013), but also in contemporary young adult novels, such as Jostein Gaarder’s *Anna: En fabel om klodens klima og miljø* (2013, translated as *The World According to Anna*) and Lars Mæhle’s *Bouvetøya 2052* (2015). It has even found its way into picture books for children: Agnar Lirhus’ book *Gutten og det glødende treet* (*The Boy and the Glowing Tree*, 2017) can be read as an allegory of both Norwegian oil extraction and overconsumption, and the detrimental environmental and climatic consequences.

With the exception of the soap *Offshore* (1996-99) in which oil extraction was primarily a backdrop providing novelty to the otherwise familiar genre, Norway’s *oljeeventyr* (“oil fairy tale”) escaped the notice of the domestic film and television industry until well into the twenty-first century. Finally beginning to come to terms with the sea-change that oil precipitated in Norway’s society, economy, and national identity, the airwaves erupted in an oil boom of their own with one documentary series, a film, and three fiction series: *Olje!* (2009), a five-part documentary series from public broadcaster NRK; the corporate coverup thriller *Pionér* (*Pioneer*, dir. Erik Skjoldbjærg, 2013); *Okkupert* (2015-2019), a near-future political thriller that posits a Norwegian government shutdown of the oil industry that leads to a Russian occupation of Norway;

the aforementioned *Lykkeland* (2018-); and *Oljefondet* (2019-), a contemporary sitcom set in the offices of the state investment fund. As seen from these examples, despite its crucial role in shaping the nation's economy and society since the last third of the twentieth century, cultural representations of the fossil fuel industry appear rather late in Norwegian literature and film.

Norwegian Gloom

An element of Norwegian literary and cultural history that is often related to nature (and especially landscape) is the melancholy and gloom that is considered typically Nordic. In Norway, this tradition goes back to the art and literature of the 1890s, with themes such as decay, pessimism, disillusion, anxiety, and loneliness (cf. Nettum 11-12). The most prominent literary example is Knut Hamsun's early modernist novel *Sult* (*Hunger*, 1890), in which the disoriented and lonely first-person narrator roams the streets of the Norwegian capital. An even better-known expression of Nordic melancholy has been canonized by the work of Norwegian painter Edvard Munch (1863-1944).

It is this tradition that Brit Bildøen's aforementioned novel *Sju dagar i august* draws upon. Published in 2014, it is set in Oslo in the year 2019, and focuses on a married couple, Sofie and Otto. Sofie's daughter has been murdered in the terror attacks of right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik in 2011, and Sofie has never overcome the sorrow caused by this loss. The melancholia that, as a consequence, characterizes Sofie's personality is intensified by a sense of decay in the urban surroundings where Sofie and Otto live, and also by the increasing effects of climate change, with extreme storms and disease-carrying insects (such as ticks) becoming more and more frequent.

The novel's gloom is not only generated by descriptions of characters and settings, but at least as much by the many references to the works of Munch and other representatives of the *fin de siècle*. Sofie has a management position at the Munch Museum in Oslo, which hosts exhibitions with titles such as "Melancholy in our time" and "GLOOMY NORWAY" (13). The characters also associate the extreme storms caused by climate change, which they experience more and more frequently, with Munch's work. Having heard of an approaching storm, Sofie's thoughts go to a painting by Munch which depicts Oslo's Karl Johans Street in rainy weather (126). During the storm, a colleague sends Sofie a text message that quotes a passage from one of Munch's diaries, which describes how the sky suddenly turned blood-red (202). The latter passage is usually interpreted as describing the strange weather that forms the background to Munch's famous painting, *Skrik* (*The Scream*, 1893). In this way, *Sju dagar i august* draws upon the cultural tradition of Nordic melancholy from the late nineteenth century to frame contemporary discourses on climate change and socio-ecological decline.

The best-known contemporary expression of Nordic melancholy is probably the popular transmedial genre of "Nordic noir." Melancholy is not only connected to the characters in such novels, films, and television series, but also to their settings, with Nordic landscapes and urban surroundings being portrayed as "bleak, gloomy and dark" (Waade 388) and shot in gritty locations using desaturated colour palettes.

Jon Bing and Tor Åge Bringsværd's science fiction novel *Oslo 2084* (2004) uses these genre conventions and at the same time parodies them. In 2084, the lower-lying parts of Oslo are under water due to rising sea levels caused by global warming, the air is heavily polluted, and most animal and plant species have become extinct. Looking back at what nature was like before these alterations, many people feel longing and sorrow over what has been lost (73). This is also true of the main character, the 54-year-old detective Robert Altermann. Altermann yearns for the cleaner and more intact environment of the past, and expresses this longing through his choice of screensavers depicting wild animals (such as the elk, 30) and melancholic romantic paintings that correspond to his own mood (189).

In its parodic description of a climate-changed future, *Oslo 2084* not only draws upon the "gloomy" genre conventions of Nordic noir, but like Bildøen's novel also contains frequent references to the melancholic art and literature of the 1890s. Altermann visits, for example, the future version of the Munch museum in the Tøyen district in Oslo (67), and the novel's subtitle, *Fire fortellinger om fremtidige forbrytelser* (*Four stories about future crimes*), constitutes an implicit reference to Hamsun's *Sult*, in which the protagonist briefly considers writing an article about the crimes of the future (cf. Hamsun 11). The intertextuality created through references to older works of Norwegian art and literature as well as through the use of recognizably Nordic genre conventions make such works of climate-change fiction specifically "Norwegian."

Future Perspectives

"Nordicity," the notion of Norway as a nation of nature, petroculture, and Nordic gloom create a culture-specific framing of climate change in the works discussed above. A further aspect to explore is how works that engage with climate change question the contemporary reality and future of the "Nordic model." The latter term describes Nordic countries characterized by functioning democracies, egalitarianism, strong welfare states, high levels of education and civic engagement, and commitment to global and environmental justice. In Norway there is widespread awareness of the discrepancy between the ideals of the Nordic model and the oil industry's disproportionate contributions to global warming (cf. Norgaard 2011). This awareness is also reflected in Norwegian literature, television and film, sometimes in ways that are subtle, flippant, or ironic. One example is Christian Valeur's novel *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret* (*Steffen Takes His Share of the Responsibility*, 2009), which addresses the loneliness of an environmental lifestyle in the modern welfare state, but also double standards within the Norwegian environmental movement. A further step for future ecocritical research is to explore both commonalities and differences in framings of climate change in Norwegian literature, television and film and in works from elsewhere, particularly those originating from other Nordic countries.

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