

## Special Issue:

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### Changing Concepts of Nature in Contemporary Scandinavian Literature and Photography

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## **Anthropocene Aesthetics**

### **Norwegian Literature in a New Geological Epoch**

#### **Zusammenfassung**

Die Auffassung, dass die Erde durch menschliche Aktivität in eine neue geologische Epoche eingetreten ist – das Anthropozän – ist in Forschung und Öffentlichkeit zunehmend akzeptiert. Dieser Artikel untersucht, mit welchen ästhetischen Mitteln literarische Texte vor dem Hintergrund dieses Übergangs zu einem Neudenken der Beziehung zwischen nicht-menschlicher Natur und menschlicher Kultur, menschlich-biologischer und geologischer Zeit, dem Individuum und der menschlichen Art, sowie zwischen rationalem Denken und biologischer Natur beitragen. Ein *close reading* von vier norwegischen Romanen zeigt, wie diese innovative Erzähltechniken nutzen, um ein Niveau von Textkomplexität zu erzeugen, das ein tieferes Verständnis von Schlüsselproblemen des Anthropozäns ermöglichen kann. Dieses Komplexitätsniveau erfordert aber zugleich eine erhebliche Beteiligung des Lesers und verhindert damit eventuell eine Rezeption solcher Texte durch breitere Zielgruppen.

#### **Abstract**

The notion that through human activity, the earth has entered a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, is increasingly recognized in science and the public sphere. This article asks by what aesthetic means literary fiction, against the backdrop of this transition, contributes to a rethinking of the relations between non-human nature and human culture, human biological and geological time, the human individual and the human species, and rational thought and human biological nature. A close reading of four Norwegian novels reveals how they deploy innovative narrative techniques to create a level of textual complexity that can contribute to a deeper understanding of key issues of the Anthropocene, but that also demands considerable reader involvement and thus potentially precludes larger audiences for such texts.

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### Introduction

»Nature is back in contemporary literature, after having been almost absent for several decades«<sup>1</sup> the literary critic Marta Norheim writes in an overview of recent trends in Norwegian literature. Environmental issues and especially anthropogenic climate change have indeed become very frequent motifs in literature from all over the world during the past two decades. Also, while literature addressing environmental issues was for a long time read mainly by an audience with a particular interest in this field, some such texts now seem to be reaching very broad readerships. Perhaps the best example is Norwegian writer Maja Lunde's novel *Bienes historie* (*The History of Bees*, 2015), which addresses the topic of species extinction and its possible consequences for humans, and which has become one of the best-selling Norwegian novels of the past two decades, both nationally and internationally.<sup>2</sup>

The background to this greater prominence of the environment in contemporary literature includes not only the ongoing and worsening environmental crisis, but also the increasing recognition in science and the public sphere that, as a result of human activity, the planet has entered a new geological epoch: the Anthropocene. This transition has far-reaching implications, including with regard to literature's potential role in how we understand and handle the Anthropocene's causes and consequences, which is the focus of this article. My aim is on the one hand to analyze how literary texts relate to some of the key issues of the Anthropocene, and on the other hand to critically assess some of the claims scholars and writers have made concerning literature's role in the new geological epoch.

The literary examples analyzed in the following are all Norwegian, for even though the recent environmental trend in literature is an international phenomenon, it seems to be especially pronounced in Norway. An indicator of this is not only the enormous success of Lunde's novel, but also the fact that Norway is so far the only country with an organization of writers explicitly dedicated to climate action – *Forfatternes klimaaksjon* (Norwegian Writers' Climate Campaign), founded in 2013.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary Norwegian literature therefore offers a good point of departure for answering the question of what characterizes the literary aesthetics of the Anthropocene. Another reason for my choice of material is that earlier research on literature and the Anthropocene – which has usually been connected to the field of ecocriticism – has mainly focused on the Anglophone sphere.<sup>4</sup> The study of texts written in smaller languages, such as Norwegian, therefore contributes to a much-needed cultural and linguistic diversification of ecocritical research and can open up possibilities for comparative approaches.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> »Naturen er tilbake i samtidslitteraturen, etter å ha vore så godt som fråverande i fleire tiår«. Norheim 2017, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> According to Even Råkil from Oslo Literary Agency, translation rights have been sold to 37 countries. In Germany alone, the book has so far sold 1.2 million copies; in Norway, 200,000 copies have been sold (personal e-mail correspondence, 10.09.2020).

<sup>3</sup> *Forfatternes klimaaksjon* has since published a considerable number of literary texts on their website that address environmental questions, and especially climate change (cf. <https://forfatternesklimaaksjon.no/>, accessed 10.09.2020).

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Clark 2015, Trexler 2015 and the contributions in Menely & Taylor 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Hennig, Jonasson & Degerman 2018, p. 3.

## The Anthropocene and Literature's Role in It

Anatomically modern humans have been living on this planet for at least the last 300,000 years. That means that by far the largest part of our species' history unfolded during the geological epoch of the Pleistocene. However, the development of agriculture, which in turn created the conditions for the gradual emergence of human civilizations, is entirely a phenomenon of the Holocene, the geological epoch that began at the end of the last Ice Age roughly 11,700 years ago. It seems that this radical change in human living conditions and cultural development was only possible under the relatively favorable environmental and climatic conditions of the Holocene epoch.

However, in the year 2000, the atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and the biologist Eugene F. Stoermer stated that »the impact of human activities on earth and atmosphere« justifies using »the term ›anthropocene‹ for the current geological epoch«. <sup>6</sup> They reasoned that, among other things, the enormous growth in human population over the past three centuries, the rapid exhaustion of fossil fuels that had accumulated over the course of hundreds of millions of years, the substantial increase of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, and massive species extinction all provide evidence for humanity having become »a major geological force« <sup>7</sup> whose current impact will continue to change the planet for thousands or even millions of years to come.

The notion that humanity has acquired geological agency is not new. Crutzen and Stoermer themselves refer to similar propositions, some from as early as the 19th century. <sup>8</sup> A strong awareness of global environmental change through human activities was already emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, marked, among many other things, by the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, which took place in Stockholm in 1972. However, the idea that anthropogenic environmental and climatic change has indeed taken on a geological dimension only began to gain considerable acceptance, as well as relatively widespread public awareness, after the year 2000. In 2016, the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) of the International Commission on Stratigraphy's Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy came to the conclusion that anthropogenic changes to the earth system »mark the proposed Anthropocene as being sufficiently different from the Holocene to constitute a new unit of geological time«. <sup>9</sup> The AWG is currently working on a proposal to formalize the Anthropocene officially as a geological epoch, which, if successful and ratified by the executive committee of the International Union of Geological Sciences, will mean that the Holocene will be officially declared to have ended as a result of human activity. <sup>10</sup>

Considering the enormous consequences anthropogenic change on a geological scale can have both for humans and for other species, it is not surprising that the Anthropocene has incited considerable interest among researchers. In the natural sciences and especially within geology, discussion has so far focused predominantly on the identification

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<sup>6</sup> Crutzen & Stoermer 2000, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Zalasiewicz et al. 2017, p. 59.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the working group's website at <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene/> (accessed 08.09.2020).

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of a »golden spike« that would be sufficiently strong and durable to mark the beginning of the new geological epoch. The AWG argues for the middle of the 20th century as the beginning of the new epoch, using the »bomb spike« (plutonium and radiocarbon from nuclear bombs) as a marker. This coincides with the start of the »Great Acceleration« – a period marked by exponential growth in many areas, such as the global human population, the consumption of resources, the transformation of terrestrial ecosystems, and greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>11</sup>

The Anthropocene, however, is not discussed only in the natural sciences, but also in the social sciences and the humanities. In the humanities, one focus is on identifying the historical causes behind the transition to a new geological epoch,<sup>12</sup> while another is the question of how the Anthropocene challenges, and requires a rethinking of, common notions concerning the relations between humans, nature, time, and the planet against the background of human-induced change on a geological scale. A central question from a literary studies point of view concerns the ways in which literary texts can contribute to this rethinking process.

This question has directed attention in recent years to how literary texts address global environmental change. Anthropogenic global warming has received particular interest as a topic in much contemporary literature, and there have even been attempts to define »climate change fiction« (often abbreviated as »cli-fi«) as a new literary genre.<sup>13</sup> This prevailing focus on the thematic use of climate change and other aspects of environmental change has also been criticized, however, for ignoring the importance of literary form. According to Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller, a »genuine aesthetics for the Anthropocene [...] cannot be satisfied with thematic references and the rhetoric of political mobilization. It must ask what it means to confront a deeper understanding of the Anthropocene, not in the content but in the form of aesthetic representation«.<sup>14</sup>

A common assumption among scholars and writers is that this »deeper understanding« cannot be accomplished using conventional literary forms, but only through formal innovation. Adam Trexler, for example, claims in his book *Anthropocene Fictions* that the new conditions of the Anthropocene are »forcing formal and narrative innovation«<sup>15</sup> in the works of literature that address them. The novelist Amitav Ghosh deems that the Anthropocene cannot be sufficiently addressed within the tradition of the bourgeois realist novel, and that it has to »find expression in a transformed and renewed art and literature«.<sup>16</sup> Horn and Bergthaller assume in a similar way that »the challenge for literature lies first of all in the development of poetic and narrative forms which are adequate to the problems

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Zalasiewicz et al. 2017, pp. 57–59. Different proposals for the beginning of the Anthropocene have been made by, for example, Crutzen & Stoermer 2000, Ruddiman 2003, and Lewis & Maslin 2015.

<sup>12</sup> For a brief overview, see Lorimer 2017, pp. 123–125.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Johns-Putra 2016. In a recent anthology on the topic, »cli-fi« is described as a »body of narrative work broadly defined by its thematic focus on climate change, and the political, social, psychological and ethical issues associated with it«. Goodbody & Johns-Putra 2019, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Horn & Bergthaller 2020, p. 97.

<sup>15</sup> Trexler 2015, p. 10. Despite the book's title, the focus of Trexler's study is limited to texts that in one way or the other address anthropogenic climate change, while other aspects of the Anthropocene do not receive much attention.

<sup>16</sup> Ghosh 2016, p. 162.

[...] that the Anthropocene confronts us with«. <sup>17</sup> They even go so far as to claim that literature in the modernist and postmodern tradition, with its attempts at formal innovation and hence its relatively high degree of complexity, would be best suited to addressing the new conditions of the Anthropocene:

The formal inventiveness of modern and postmodern literature – the many self-imposed interdictions, the experiments with focalization and narrative time, the intertextual and metafictional games, and the programmatic distrust of narrative – testifies to a desire for forms of representation that can stand up to the complexity of the world we find ourselves in. <sup>18</sup>

Proceeding from such assumptions, the question I will try to answer in this article is whether and how works of contemporary Norwegian literature that address central issues of the Anthropocene on a thematic level also do this in the formally complex and innovative ways considered necessary by Horn and Bergthaller. I will focus on four areas where the Anthropocene, according to many humanities scholars, has important implications: the relations between (1) non-human nature and human culture, (2) human biological and geological time, (3) the human individual and the human species as an entirety, and (4) rational thought and human biological nature. For each of these areas, I will provide a close reading of one Norwegian novel with a focus on how the text's literary form contributes to the framing of the respective thematic aspects.

### **Non-Human Nature and Human Culture: Bing & Bringsværd's *Oslo 2084***

According to the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, humanity's recently acquired geological agency means that the conventional distinction between human history and natural history can no longer be maintained: geological processes are now no longer things that happen on a scale that is almost indistinguishably large and long-term and independent of human action, but can occur very rapidly and be caused, or at least considerably influenced, by humans. <sup>19</sup> In a somewhat simplified way, this thesis can be understood, as Horn and Bergthaller express it, such that the Anthropocene »puts an end to this distinction between nature and culture. If humankind has itself become a force of nature and is changing the Earth system in its entirety, then the distinction between nature and culture no longer makes sense«. <sup>20</sup> The same thought was expressed by American writer and environmental activist Bill McKibben in 1989. In his book *The End of Nature*, he states that through anthropogenic climate change, »we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial« and that humans therefore »*have ended the thing that has, at least in modern times, defined nature for us – its separation from human society*«. <sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Horn & Bergthaller 2020, p. 107.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Chakrabarty 2009, pp. 201–207.

<sup>20</sup> Horn & Bergthaller 2020, p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> McKibben 1989, pp. 55 and 64 (emphasis in the original).

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Yet it has also been pointed out that, even though in the Anthropocene it is no longer possible to draw a clear dividing line between non-human nature and human culture, this does not mean that humans – despite having acquired geological agency – have managed to achieve better control over what formerly used to be regarded as »nature«. As ecocritic Timothy Clark points out:

The major irony of the Anthropocene is that, though named as that era in the planet's natural history in which humanity becomes a decisive geological and climatological force, it manifests itself to us primarily through the domain of the »natural« becoming, as it were, dangerously out of bounds, in extreme or unprecedented weather events, ecosystems becoming simplified or trashed, die-back or collapse.<sup>22</sup>

Large-scale human interference with the environment and climate of the Anthropocene thus involves considerable risks and a broad spectrum of uncertainty, or »unknown unknowns«, as Horn and Bergthaller express it.<sup>23</sup>

This also has implications for how literary texts can address the relation between human culture and the »nature« of the Anthropocene. This question is often discussed in terms of which literary genres would be best suited for this purpose. Ghosh argues that the realist novel in the tradition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is not capable of integrating and making credible the increasingly extreme environmental conditions of the Anthropocene (such as extreme weather events), since these would seem »wildly unlikely«<sup>24</sup> within the frames of a realist narrative. Ghosh laments that, by and large, anthropogenic climate change has not therefore been addressed thus far in what he calls »serious fiction«, but only in »genre fiction« such as science fiction, horror and fantasy.<sup>25</sup> It may therefore be worth analyzing a novel which, on the surface, appears to belong to Ghosh's category of »genre fiction«, but asking how far it nevertheless fulfills the criteria of complexity and innovativeness posited by Horn and Bergthaller.

Arguably, one of the earliest Norwegian »Anthropocene novels« is *Oslo 2084. Fire fortellinger om fremtidige forbrytelser* (*Oslo 2084. Four Stories about Future Crimes*) by Jon Bing and Tor Åge Bringsværd, published under the pen name of Bing & Bringsværd in 2004. The two authors are known as prolific writers, particularly of science fiction, and, as the title indicates, this novel has a future setting: the Norwegian capital in the year 2084. In this time, the lower-lying parts of Oslo are under water due to rising sea levels caused by anthropogenic global warming. The depleted ozone layer, extreme storms, and air pollution make it dangerous to be outside, many species have gone extinct, plant-based resources such as vegetables and paper are scarce, and snow is a thing of the past. One of the novel's characters calls Oslo »a single polluted dust city«.<sup>26</sup> Scattered remarks throughout the novel indicate that other countries have been hit even worse by environmental and climatic change: Denmark and the Netherlands, for example, seem to be entirely flooded.

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<sup>22</sup> Clark 2015, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> Horn & Bergthaller 2020, p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> Ghosh 2016, p. 23.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> »en eneste skitten støvby«. Bing & Bringsværd 2004, p. 11.

Through motifs such as anthropogenic climate change, pollution, and species extinction, the novel leaves little doubt that in its future setting, no part of nature remains that is unaffected by human changes to the environment, either on a local or on a global level. However, it is not only the projection of current worries about problematic environmental and climatic change into the future that creates the impression of a »nature« that is no longer distinguishable from the human sphere. The society of the year 2084 also uses advanced future technology that further blurs the boundaries between human culture and »nature«, in particular regarding humans' (and other animals') bodies: moving tattoos, digital technology integrated into the body, and genetically modified pets are only some of many examples from the novel. The food of the year 2084 is also no longer based on »naturally« grown ingredients, but either synthetically produced or genetically modified. The novel's protagonist, the 54-year-old private detective Robert Altermann, is repeatedly described as consuming future variants of foods known from our own time: »He slurped the foam from the big coffee cup. He tried to remember the taste of milk – when he was young, one could get coffee with milk foam. Now it only looked like milk foam. It tasted different – he believed.«<sup>27</sup>

While the future setting and advanced technology are typical elements of science fiction, and the motif of environmental and climatic change of the particular »cli-fi« variant of this genre, the last two words of the above quote indicate a different quality of *Oslo 2084*: a parodic relationship towards the genres to which the novel ostensibly seems to belong. For just as Altermann is not really sure about the difference between »natural« and synthetic milk foam, the (rather dramatic) environmental issues noted above are, in the novel, mentioned in passing and rather light-heartedly, as if – while lamentable – they do not seriously affect the quality of life in the Oslo of the future. Most of the novel's characters seem to have adapted rather well to the new conditions – there are even people living in hippyish communities in the flooded subway tunnels. Catastrophic climate change even serves as the basis for political satire, such as when, in a reader's letter included in the novel, an inhabitant of Oslo complains about the many foreigners on Frogner, who have babies all the time and speak in an incomprehensible way. Frogner currently has Norway's most expensive housing market, and the letter reads like a typical *contemporary* complaint by wealthy inhabitants worrying about the presence of non-Western immigrants – until it turns out that the foreigners are actually Danes who have come to Norway since their country was submerged by rising sea levels.<sup>28</sup> The sincere atmosphere typical of many other novels depicting a catastrophic, climate-changed future is thus absent from *Oslo 2084*. And although the title creates the expectation of a dystopia in the style of George Orwell's classic *1984*, even the horrors of a totalitarian surveillance society do not pose a major problem in Bing & Bringsværd's novel: Altermann simply dresses himself up in a different way every time he leaves his apartment to fool the omnipresent monitoring cameras – a motif which adds to the many other carnivalesque traits in the novel.

*Oslo 2084* parodies not only the genres of science fiction and (environmental) dystopia, however, but even the popular *Nordic noir* genre. Many of the detectives in novels from this latter genre are experiencing a sort of midlife

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<sup>27</sup> »Han [...] slurpet skummet fra den store kaffekoppen. Han forsøkte å huske smaken av melk – da han var ung, kunne man få kaffe med melkeskum. Nå bare så det ut som melkeskum. Det smakte annerledes – trodde han«. Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 87.



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crisis and struggling to organize their private lives, and to understand a complex and risk-filled contemporary world in which they find it increasingly hard to orientate themselves.<sup>29</sup> Like a typical *Nordic noir* detective, Altermann is described as »decayed«,<sup>30</sup> is prone to melancholy, and seems to have an alcohol problem. Yet unlike his Nordic predecessors, who typically illuminate the abysses of the Scandinavian welfare state, Altermann must solve crimes related to problematic environmental change and highly advanced biotechnology.

Another element that adds to the text's comical potential and creates a challenge to the reader to discern a potential deeper, underlying meaning is the fact that the subtitle *Fire fortellinger om fremtidige forbrytelser* (*Four Stories about Future Crimes*) is an intertextual reference to Knut Hamsun's pioneering early modernist novel *Sult* from 1890.<sup>31</sup> At the beginning of *Sult*, the hungry and rather confused main character briefly considers writing »an article about the crimes of the future«<sup>32</sup> to earn some money for food, and *Oslo 2084* is thus implicitly presented as the outcome of what this »nervous brain«<sup>33</sup> produced 200 years earlier. There are also obvious parallels between the two novels: both have the same setting (although in different times), and like *Sult*, *Oslo 2084* is structured in four episodic parts, all with the same male protagonist wandering the streets of the Norwegian capital.

In terms of its narrative form, *Oslo 2084* appears rather variable. While the story is mainly told by an external narrator and in the third person, the narrative voice is often delegated to Altermann's clients, amongst other things in the form of e-mails, letters, and recorded messages that they send to the private detective (and vice versa). In the parts told by the external narrator, which are mainly in indirect and free indirect discourse, Altermann is usually the focalizer. In the first episode, however, Altermann's client functions as a first-person narrator, presenting his reflections in the form of interior monologue, at times interspersed with direct discourse. There are frequently ellipses of several days between these shifts in the narration, which often are not, or only partially, filled in later through completive analepses. In addition to these shifts of focalization and narrative voice, the novel is interspersed with fragments from other »texts«, such as advertisements, newspaper articles, interviews, extracts from websites and books, weather reports, and readers' letters. These fragments are not part of the story, but are demarcated with black frames and placed in the text at places where they connect to what has just been narrated, providing various sorts of background information on the Oslo of the year 2084.

While none of these formal traits, seen individually, can count as highly innovative today, in combination with the novel's manner of parodying the genres of science-fiction, environmental dystopia and Nordic noir, they foreclose a straightforward reading of the novel and make *Oslo 2084* a rather unconventional and much more complex text

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Olsson 2017, p. 372.

<sup>30</sup> »forfalt«. Bing & Bringsværd 2004, p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Furuseth et al. 2020, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> »en artikkel om fremtidens forbrytelser« (Hamsun 2007, p. 11). *Sult* is also directly referred to in *Oslo 2084*, cf. Bing & Bringsværd 2004, p. 19.

<sup>33</sup> »urolige hjerne«. Hamsun 2007, p. 9.

than one might expect from typical »genre fiction«. Moreover, when the novel was published in 2004, it was certainly one of the first novels, even from an international perspective, that approached the environmental crisis and climate change in a comical way.<sup>34</sup> It can therefore certainly be argued that, even though Ghosh might reject it as »genre fiction«, *Oslo 2084* shows the literary experimentation and formal innovativeness that Horn and Bergthaller deem to be necessary to successfully express the complex relation between non-human nature and human culture in the Anthropocene.

### Deep Time: Jan Kjærstad's *Slekters gang*

The Anthropocene requires a rethinking not only of the relation between nature and culture, but also of the human relation towards time, as it links the huge timescales of geology to the much shorter timeframes of the human present. According to Horn and Bergthaller, »[m]ediating between geological and human timescales is one of the fundamental challenges of the Anthropocene«.<sup>35</sup> Chakrabarty proposes, therefore, to interconnect the historiography of modern and pre-modern human civilizations with the »deep history« of the human species.<sup>36</sup> While historiography is usually based on written sources – which, of course, have only been available since the Holocene – this deep history would interpret such texts in the light of other sources that allow insights into the development of human cultural practices throughout at least the last few hundred thousand years or even longer.<sup>37</sup> But, as Horn and Bergthaller emphasize, the Anthropocene not only requires a new interpretation of the recent and distant past; it »also projects a deep future which explodes the temporal horizon of all established forms of prognostication and planning«.<sup>38</sup> Such a long view of the future – spanning at least several thousand years – goes far beyond the usual timeframes not only of conventional political planning but even of sustainability thinking (which rarely tends to exceed a few human generations).

Returning to literature, then, an important question is how it can contribute to making the deep time of both the past and the future imaginable. Ghosh argues that the contemporary (realist) novel, unlike epics, fails to relate to the geological timescales required by the Anthropocene: because of its dependency on human characters, the narration cannot usually exceed more than a few human generations.<sup>39</sup> Ghosh notes that science fiction (to which he counts »cli-fi«) may on the surface seem to be in a better position to address the Anthropocene narratively. However, due to science fiction's genre-typical use of future settings, according to Ghosh it is not apt to relate to the new epoch's

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Branch 2014, who notes a marked absence of humor in what he calls »environmental writing«, since »the genre has evolved as a vehicle for expression of piety and reverence« (p. 380), despite »the potential environmental efficacy of satire« (p. 386).

<sup>35</sup> Horn & Bergthaller 2020, p. 165.

<sup>36</sup> Chakrabarty 2009, pp. 212f.

<sup>37</sup> Horn & Bergthaller 2020, p. 153.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>39</sup> Ghosh 2016, p. 59.

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present and past dimensions, although »the future is but one aspect of the Anthropocene.«<sup>40</sup> Therefore, one challenge for »serious fiction«, as Ghosh sees it, is the need to relate to »forces of unthinkable magnitude that create unbearably intimate connections over vast gaps in time and space«,<sup>41</sup> but to do so in innovative ways and without reverting to the genre conventions of science fiction. Ursula Heise, however, rejects Ghosh's claim of science fiction's restriction to future issues: according to her, science fiction is actually »always about the here and now, through the detour of the imagination of the future.«<sup>42</sup> In her view, »the problem of deep-time storytelling is one of »anisochrony« and thus of »the difference between the duration of the narrated events and the duration of the narration itself.«<sup>43</sup> Heise argues that the genre of science fiction »has developed a variety of techniques over the last century for addressing the anisochrony that deep-time narrative entails«,<sup>44</sup> and that these have increasingly also been adapted in other sorts of fiction and non-fiction in recent years.

An example of a novel that seems to be partially inspired by such approaches from science fiction, but that nevertheless can hardly be categorized as the »genre fiction« Ghosh opposes, is Jan Kjørstad's *Slekters gang. Fortellinger fra et glemt land* (*The Path of Kins. Stories from a Forgotten Country*), published in 2015. This novel starts with a kind of prologue that introduces an unusual narrative situation: three female Chinese historians, living more than 2,000 years in the future, declare their intention to reconstruct the history of a Norwegian family during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, motivated by genealogical connections between this family and one of the leading dynasties of the Chinese Federation of their own time. They indicate that an immense socioecological catastrophe almost wiped out humanity in the past, and that this »marks the end of Holocene, yes, of the entire Quaternary.«<sup>45</sup> In this way, they rather obviously refer to the notion of the Anthropocene. By calling what has happened »the collapse of Western civilization«,<sup>46</sup> the narrators additionally make (implicit) use of an intertextual reference to a book of the same title by the historians Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, published in 2014 and thus only one year before Kjørstad's novel. Like *Slekters gang*, *The Collapse of Western Civilization* presents a future historian's fictional retrospection into the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, trying to explain the reasons for the catastrophic developments of the past. The narrative situation, as well as a number of central motifs in the novel, are thus clearly inspired by Oreskes and Conway's book, but, as Horn and Bergthaller point out, this sort of »heuristic fiction« is inherent to the notion of the Anthropocene itself: »To speak of the present as the Anthropocene is to look at it *in retrospect*, as it were, from

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>42</sup> Heise 2019, p. 282.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 283f.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 299.

<sup>45</sup> »markerer slutten på holocen, ja, hele kvartærtiden«. Kjørstad 2015, p. 6.

<sup>46</sup> »den vesterlandske sivilisasjonens sammenbrudd«. Ibid., p. 5.

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the vantage point of an imagined future in which the present will have become nothing but a thin layer in the rock«.47

This retrospection is also what distinguishes *Slekters gang* from most science fiction novels. While the narrators' distant future certainly is reminiscent of the latter genre, the narrators' interest lies neither in a description of their own present nor in the time of the »collapse«, the course of which is more hinted at than actually described. What follows the prologue is a chronicle of the (fictional) Norwegian Bohre family that stretches from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.48 This chronicle is divided into three major parts, consisting of four, ten, and seven chapters respectively. Focalization switches in every chapter to another member of the Bohre family, but all the chapters are interconnected through the central role of Rita Bohre, whose life spans most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and who in various ways influences the lives of all the other members of the Bohre family. Also, while most of the other characters function as focalizers only once, Rita's perspective is adopted in no fewer than six of the novel's chapters.

While the narrators' location in time can be said to bring a deep future perspective into the novel, Rita frequently invokes reflections on the deep past. This is due to her being a paleontologist, who researches the fossil remains of extinct species from earlier geological periods, such as the Devonian. This work provides Rita with an evolutionary view of life, in which humans are descendants of much earlier life forms, and share characteristics with these.49 In the same vein, the motif of a trilobite from the Ordovician period frequently serves in the novel to invoke the question of whether humans will also one day become extinct as a species.50

However, the deep past is not invoked on the motif level alone. The future narrators also claim that, in their time, it has become known that stories have

narrative parallels in the geological processes. Therefore, attempts emerged to show how stories – and especially those about families – can rise themselves and be broken down, shift and collide, how they can scatter and be welded together. On the narrative level, faults and rifts can also emerge, also narratives can be heavily deformed and folded.51

The narrators thus suggest that such »geological processes« are at work even in the stories they themselves tell about Norway in the past. These processes manifest themselves on the one hand in the way the stories illustrate

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<sup>47</sup> Horn & Bergthaller 2020, p. 166 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>48</sup> Heise mentions examples of »deep-time accounts of the future« from several science fiction novels in which more distant time periods are likewise narrated in less detail than periods closer to the reader's present (2019, p. 293). *Slekters gang*, however, takes this to an extreme by only providing very short and fragmented glimpses of the future, while narrating its 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> century story (or rather, stories) in great detail.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. e.g. Kjærstad 2015, pp. 458 and 592.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. e.g. *ibid.*, pp. 46 and 442 and elsewhere.

<sup>51</sup> »narrative paralleller i de geologiske prosessene. Slik fødtes forsøkene på vise [sic!] hvordan historier – og spesielt de om slekter – kan reise seg og brytes ned, forskyve seg og kolliderere, hvordan de kan splittes og sveises sammen. Også på fortellingens plan kan det oppstå forkastninger og riftdannelser, også beretninger kan bli kraftig omdannet og foldet«. *Ibid.*, p. 261.

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»triangular relations, horizontal glides and the more or less concealed distant connections«<sup>52</sup> that link the members of the Bohre family to each other across what is, from a human biological perspective, a long period of time. On the other hand, they manifest themselves through »the host of coincidences that was present not only in every human life, but just as much in world history, which was the sum of human lives«.<sup>53</sup> This is an aspect that becomes evident in the many »unpredictable turning points of existence«<sup>54</sup> which often abruptly terminate or change the lives of many of the novel's characters.

The narrators also use this »geologically influenced narratology«<sup>55</sup> as an explanation for the non-chronological structure of the novel: the chapters and larger parts do not follow on from each other in chronological order, and even individual chapters are characterized by many analepses and prolepses. The stories about the Bohre family are told in a highly associative style, where one story seamlessly glides into another, irrespective of chronology or outward causality. In this way, different times and even timescales (human biological and geological timescales) appear as interconnected and intertwined, and it can be argued that the novel thus succeeds in solving the problem of anisochrony and making deep time imaginable.

Another effect of this style of narration (and of the very large number of characters) is a considerable level of complexity. This complexity is further increased through a high degree of intertextuality (with many references to artworks, film, literature, and music, amongst other things). In addition, *Slekters gang* connects to the tradition of the postmodern meta-novel, as it exposes its own fictionality. This is achieved by making narration a theme of the work itself, such as when the three narrators present their method as »fictionalized history«<sup>56</sup>, building upon the tradition of the novel from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and »a conviction that narratives, at their best, contain something indispensable: a power to be able to explain that which otherwise cannot be understood«.<sup>57</sup> Another marker of fictionality is the obvious use of irony in many of the narrators' comments on the stories they tell, such as when they end an explanatory comment on the (contemporary) Norwegian obsession with skiing with a reference to a Chinese scholarly work from the future on precisely this topic, titled »The Snow as Delusion and Psychosis«.<sup>58</sup> One could also argue that the future narrative situation is further unveiled as fictional through apparent inconsistencies in the narrators' comments on their 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century material. While the narrators, for example, deem it necessary to explain to their contemporary Chinese readers what Christianity was,<sup>59</sup> they seem to presuppose that

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<sup>52</sup> »triangulære sammenhenger, horisontale glidninger og de mer eller mindre skjulte fjernforbindelser«. Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>53</sup> »den hærske av tilfeldigheter som ikke bare var til stede i ethvert menneskes liv, men like mye i verdenshistorien som jo var summen av menneskeliv«. Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>54</sup> »tilværelsens uforutsigelige vendepunkter«. Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>55</sup> »geologisk influerte narratologi«. Ibid., p. 336.

<sup>56</sup> »fiksjonisert historie«. Ibid., p. 7 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>57</sup> »en overbevisning om at fortellinger, på sitt beste, rommer noe umistelig: en kraft til å kunne forklare det som ellers ikke kan forstås«. Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>58</sup> »Snøen som blendverk og psykose«. Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. ibid., p. 230.

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these same readers are intimately familiar with Thorbjørn Egner's children's book *Folk og røvere i Kardemomme by* from 1955 (translated into English by Anthony Barnett as *When the Robbers Came to Cardamom Town*).<sup>60</sup> Such aspects make it obvious that the novel's implied reader is not a future Chinese person, but a contemporary Norwegian.

Moreover, like the postmodern meta-novel, *Slekters gang* heavily involves the reader – as the narrators express it, their »fictionalized history« is »focused on co-composition, real brainwork invested by the reader«,<sup>61</sup> who is expected »to create larger coherent arches in what have so far only been fragments – both fragments that are far distanced from each other in time and fragments that seem to stand in no real relation to each other.«<sup>62</sup> Kjærstad's novel therefore certainly meets the criteria of complexity and of formal inventiveness in its attempt to make the deep time of the Anthropocene imaginable.

### Species Thinking: Mette Karlsvik's *Den beste hausten er etter monsun*

The Anthropocene raises complex questions about scale, not only regarding time, but also concerning the relation between the human individual and the entire human species. According to Clark, the Anthropocene »represents, for the first time, the demand made upon a species consciously to consider its impact as a totality upon the whole planet, the advent of a kind of new reflexivity as a species.«<sup>63</sup> However, such »species thinking«,<sup>64</sup> as Chakrabarty calls it, has also been criticized as concealing considerable differences amongst humans (and between groups of humans) regarding responsibility for the transition to the Anthropocene and the environmental and climatic crisis it entails.<sup>65</sup> Even aside from such social and historical differences, questions connected to scale are highly complex: »To speak of humans as a geophysical force implies a passage between incompatible scales – from individual actions to collective or cumulative behavior, and from collective behavior to a kind of agency that is effective on a global level.«<sup>66</sup> The relation between these scales can certainly be understood rationally, but it is not an intuitive one. As Clark emphasizes, »human perception and thinking are bound to the »normal« scale of embodied experience on the Earth's surface«,<sup>67</sup> and humans therefore do not have a »natural« sense of how their individual actions, which may seem irrelevant when considered in isolation, can combine with the actions of billions of other humans to create »scale effects« that have the power to change the geological conditions of the planet. As Horn and Bergthaller emphasize, »[s]cales make themselves felt only when we pass from one to another, at the point of transition – i.e.,

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 558.

<sup>61</sup> »innstilt på meddikning, reelt tankearbeid nedlagt av leseren«. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>62</sup> »å skape større sammenhengende buer i noe som så langt har vært fragmenter – både fragmenter som ligger langt fra hverandre i tid og fragmenter som synes å ha lite med hverandre å gjøre«. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>63</sup> Clark 2015, p. 16.

<sup>64</sup> Chakrabarty 2009, p. 213.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Horn & Bergthaller 2020, p. 69.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>67</sup> Clark 2015, p. 12.

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as scale variation in the process of upscaling or downscaling.<sup>68</sup> Such scale transitions between the individual and the species, the local and the planetary, are therefore »a central epistemological challenge of the Anthropocene.«<sup>69</sup>

A question regarding literature is, then, how it can contribute to making such transitions between scales imaginable in ways that are more appropriate to the »normal«, embodied experience of humans as individuals, and that nevertheless make understandable the counter-intuitive scale effects coming into force on the species level. Ghosh argues that the contemporary (realist) novel's preconditions regarding »species thinking« are rather bad, since it »has become ever more radically centered on the individual psyche while the collective [...] has receded, both in the cultural and the fictional imagination.«<sup>70</sup> There are, however, literary texts that try to address the problem of scale in creative ways, and not necessarily with recourse to the genre characteristics of science fiction or fantasy. An example from Norwegian literature is Mette Karlsen's *Den beste hausten er etter monsun* (*The Best Harvest Is after Monsoon*, 2014).

This novel has a contemporary setting. It is split into two parts that present two juxtaposed but interconnected stories, told by two different first-person narrators. The first spans roughly two thirds of the novel's text and is told by a female Norwegian fighter pilot, who calls herself Venor. At the beginning of the story, she flies from Norway to a NATO base in Sikkim in the Himalaya region in north-eastern India. The other story is told by the tea farmer Pasi, who together with his wife Anushka operates a tea plantation in that same region.

In her role as the pilot of a F-16 fighter aircraft, Venor experiences constant scale transitions, both in an immediate, bodily way and mediated through technology. The latter is especially the case when she is flying and thus gains an aerial perspective on the areas below. This perspective is twofold: on the one hand, what she sees (or could see) when looking out of the cockpit window, and on the other hand, the screen display inside the cockpit. The latter is by far her dominant view. With its geographical information on national borders that she crosses at supersonic speed, it lets Venor experience the world as »a patchwork rug«,<sup>71</sup> and gives her the feeling that she has »the world in the hand«. <sup>72</sup> The screen allows her to gain an even more superior view than the actual height of the aircraft would allow for. For Venor this creates a feeling that »the world gets smaller the more I see of her. I look at the earth. The earth looks at me. [...] I zoom out and see Nepal, China in the same picture. [...] Zoom in to the Lhasa region.«<sup>73</sup> She can even switch to a satellite image on which she herself appears as »a small insect on my own screen«. <sup>74</sup> This process of zooming in and out is a form of scale transition that Venor is seemingly at ease with; the screen provides

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<sup>68</sup> Horn & Bergthaller 2020, p. 144.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ghosh 2016, p. 78.

<sup>71</sup> »et teppe av lappar«. Karlsen 2014, p. 7.

<sup>72</sup> »verda i handa«. Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>73</sup> »Verda blir mindre jo meir eg ser av henne. Eg ser på jorda. Jorda ser på meg. [...] Eg zoomar heilt ut og ser Nepal, Kina i det same bildet. [...] Zoomar inn til region Lhasa«. Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>74</sup> »eit lite insekt på min eigen skjerm«. Ibid., p. 13.

a feeling of »safety«<sup>75</sup> for her. This changes when she happens to »look from the instruments to the view, the real one«.<sup>76</sup> She feels in danger of letting herself be »deceive[d] by the optical«,<sup>77</sup> which may make high mountains appear as small hills. Nevertheless, she cannot resist the temptation to look at such sights as the glaciers below the aircraft, which appear to her as »ecological art snapped by my eyes«,<sup>78</sup> and thus, paradoxically, as more artificial than the digital screen.

When Venor leaves the large-scale perspective of the cockpit, she suffers from what could be called scale confusion: when she lands, she »zooms out, to see where in the world I actually am«.<sup>79</sup> However, landing in Sikkim »feels like landing in Norway«,<sup>80</sup> and she experiences the NATO base as a non-place, where food from all parts of the world and from all seasons is served – even Lipton tea, although »the world's best tea«<sup>81</sup> is grown in the region. As a colleague explains to her: »You are not in Himalaya now. You are in NATO«.<sup>82</sup> The fact that her body still feels the strain from resisting »the power of the planet«<sup>83</sup> during the flight amplifies her experience of not being located in a specific place, but rather, remaining in the process of (scale) transition. In her mind, she continues to upscale or downscale even when she is not in the cockpit, such as when she observes a spider jumping what she thinks must be a hundred times its own length: »How would it have been if I had jumped 150 meters?«<sup>84</sup>

This scale confusion also seems intimately connected to Venor's consciousness of the environmental and climatic impact of her military aircraft: »The machine I'm flying changes the sun and the air. Every liter of jet fuel that I emit changes the climate a little. The numbers are depressing.«<sup>85</sup> Her view from high above certainly makes the pollution much more visible for her than for humans on the ground: Venor observes black stripes on the glaciers, while the local people of Sikkim can only see the jet trail in the sky.<sup>86</sup> Venor is, however, painfully conscious of the consequences global warming has for the local population, in the form of destroyed infrastructure, for example, and feels personal responsibility for it.<sup>87</sup> Her coping strategies show her actual helplessness in being confronted with the incommensurateness of the individual and the species level regarding emissions and their effects: on the

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<sup>75</sup> »tryggleik«. Ibid., p. 7 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>76</sup> »Ser frå instrumenta til utsikta, den verkelege«. Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>77</sup> »lure av det optiske«. Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>78</sup> »Økologikunst knipsa med auga mine«. Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>79</sup> »Zoome ut, sjå kor i verda eg eigentleg er«. Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>80</sup> »kjennes som å lande i Noreg«. Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> »Verdas beste te«. Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>82</sup> »Du er ikkje i Himalaya no. Du er i NATO«. Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> »krafta av kloden«. Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>84</sup> »Korleis skulle det ha vore om eg hoppa 150 meter?«. Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>85</sup> »Maskina som eg flyg, endrar sola og lufta. Kvar liter jøtfuel eg slepper ut, endrar klimaet litt. Tala er nedslåande«. Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. ibid., pp. 38f. and 64.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. ibid., pp. 65 and 72.



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one hand, she tries to justify her flying as unavoidable »peacekeeping work«;<sup>88</sup> on the other hand, she tries »to spread out the flying over the area«<sup>89</sup> so as to distribute the emissions evenly. Both strategies are, of course, utterly futile and irrational, since they will not diminish the effect the emitted greenhouse gases have on the climate.

Venor's repeated scale transitions and her scale confusion are in the novel juxtaposed with Pasi's embeddedness in his local and regional environment. He and Anushka have an intimate knowledge of the ecological interdependencies in their immediate environment; they are almost self-sufficient in food,<sup>90</sup> and even increase this self-sufficiency in the course of the story by taking up beekeeping so as to ensure pollination on their farm. Like Venor, Pasi also experiences mental scale transitions, such as when he reflects on the chemical processes in nature that occur over long timescales and have provisioned his farm with »the best soil in the region«.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, motifs in Pasi's story are parallelized with motifs from Venor's story. Pasi uses a gondola cable to cross the valley where his farm is located, which like the jet plane in Venor's case, allows him to get a view from above.<sup>92</sup> Pasi calls the newly acquired bees »a thousand perfect flying machines«<sup>93</sup> and thus links them metaphorically to Venor's airplane. However, he and Anushka show no signs of the scale confusion that troubles Venor so much: throughout Pasi's narration, it is apparent that they operate on appropriate scales, while Venor as a representative of NATO (and possibly for Western culture in general) fails in this endeavor. This is made very clear when Pasi meets Venor, who – on her first trip into the surroundings of the NATO base not undertaken by airplane – gets her jeep (which, according to Pasi, is »far too heavy for our roads«<sup>94</sup>) stuck in the mud. The irony here is not only that Venor has again failed to transition to the right scale, but also that she herself, in encountering the vulnerable local infrastructure, experiences the consequences of the climate change for which she feels responsible due to her flying.

Instead of resorting to science fiction's possibilities for showing the planet from space (an image that has been prominent in environmental discourse for a long time),<sup>95</sup> *Den beste hausten er etter monsun* depicts the transition between very small and extremely large scales within the frames of a realist present-day setting. Neither does it abandon the realist novel's focus on the human individual in an attempt to describe some kind of human collective experience; on the contrary: through its two first-person narrators, the narrative perspective is indeed highly subjective and limited to the individual level. It is, however, possible to read Venor as a representative of a globalized Western culture that has lost any attachment to the local scale, and Pasi as representing the formerly colonized parts of humanity that bear no (or considerably less) responsibility for the problematic environmental and climatic change

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<sup>88</sup> »fredsstyrkande arbeid«. Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>89</sup> »å fordele flyginga på området«. Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. ibid., pp. 124f.

<sup>91</sup> »Beste jorda i området«. Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. ibid., p. 113.

<sup>93</sup> »tusen perfekte flygemaskiner«. Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>94</sup> »altfor tung for vegane våre«. Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Heise 2008, p. 22.

of the Anthropocene. The novel invites such a reading through the contrasting of the two narrators' stories and the interconnections between them. Although both stories are told in the form of interior monologue (interspersed with occasional direct discourse), the narrative form underpins the differences between Venor and Pasi.

These differences are further emphasized in that Venor appears as a split personality who is permanently torn between the technologically mediated environment of the aircraft and her own bodily experience. Moreover, her inner monologue often shows internal contradictions. For example, she claims at one point that she does not need more than a tablet, a pillow, a bed, and jogging shoes to feel at home (thus appearing independent of an actual place and fitting into the »non-place« the NATO base represents).<sup>96</sup> However, only a little while later she discloses that what makes her feel at home are things connected to her memories from Norway, such as »sap-heavy pinewood, [a] woodstove, warm milk, cinnamon«,<sup>97</sup> and that thus indeed are place-specific and not available everywhere on the planet. Venor appears in this way as an unreliable narrator, whose story the reader cannot trust.

In contrast, Pasi's story is free from any internal contradictions, and from the irony that Venor often resorts to. While this makes him appear as a more reliable narrator than Venor, there are also aspects of his story that demand reflection from the reader. While Venor's story is not directed at any particular listener or reader (and may be understood as only rendering her inner stream of consciousness), Pasi repeatedly addresses a »you«, without it being clear who that audience is.<sup>98</sup> Since Venor's narration ends with her encounter with Pasi and before his narration sets in, a possible interpretation might be that Pasi is telling his story to Venor. However, this interpretation is hampered by the fact that the encounter with Venor is also part of his story, yet occurs later chronologically than the point in time at which his narration commences. The fact that Pasi at one point says »you've got the money to buy my tea«<sup>99</sup> indicates, instead, that he is talking to an (imagined) Western customer. The lack of specification suggests that the reader is expected both to apply this term of address to her- or himself and to perform an upscaling from the individual to »the West« as a whole – with Pasi, by implication, becoming representative of the inhabitants of former Western colonies. The novel's narrative form thus mirrors the motif level's up- and downscaling between an individual and a species perspective in a way that even takes differences within humanity into account.

Regarding genre, *Den beste hausten er etter monsun* certainly does not fall into Ghosh's category of »genre fiction«. However, the impression of a contemporary realist narrative that the novel may convey on the surface is disrupted both in Venor's and in Pasi's story: both of them have a tendency not only to use rather poetic language with many metaphors, but also to move unexpectedly from prose narration to something resembling poetry, which is even emphasized visually in that the text is broken into lines of verse.<sup>100</sup> That these »lyrical« parts of the text also contain lists of technical terms and numbers, as well as chemical formulas, brings them into even starker contrast with the

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<sup>96</sup> Cf. Karlsvik 2014, p. 25.

<sup>97</sup> »sevjetung furuved, vedomn, varm mjølk, kanel«. Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. ibid., pp. 119 and 127.

<sup>99</sup> »Du har råd til å kjøpe teen min«. Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. ibid., pp. 65f. and 139.

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prose narrative. This creates an estrangement effect that counteracts any possibility for readers to immersively identify themselves in the narrative, and thus the impression of realism. Such traits create a link not to the realist, but to the modernist and postmodern literary tradition. Combined with the aforementioned characteristics of Karlsvik's text, they generate a narrative complexity that may well fulfill Horn and Bergthaller's criteria for the Anthropocene novel.

### Rational Thought vs. Human Nature: Christian Valeur's *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret*

While the Anthropocene is an epoch brought about and dominated by a humanity acting as a geological force, it raises the question of how far humans are indeed able to direct their collective power in a conscious and rational way. After all, most of the changes characterizing the Anthropocene, such as mass species extinction, ecosystem degradation, and anthropogenic climate change, have not been brought about on purpose, but as unintended consequences and side-effects of human action. Ultimately, as Clark emphasizes, this also means asking if – as is often assumed – cultural changes could indeed produce more sustainable ways of living on the planet, or if one needs »to think environmental destruction at some sort of species level, as latent in the sort of thing humanity is.«<sup>101</sup> Horn and Bergthaller propose a differentiation between *homo* as a cultural being that has the »ability to think rationally and act morally«, and *anthropos* as »a natural being and force within nature«<sup>102</sup> that is subject to the physical needs and drives resulting from its biological nature. While *homo* is able to consciously grasp and reflect on the effects of human behavior, *anthropos* acts on the species level as a force that is »just as »blind« and aimless as other geological forces.«<sup>103</sup> Humanity perceived as *anthropos* thus calls into question, as Ghosh puts it, »the idea of human freedom«:<sup>104</sup> Are humans able to exert agency based on knowledge and rational thought, or does their own nature prevent them from acting in an appropriate way? While Chakrabarty rejects the latter possibility and argues that »for humans any thought of the way out of our current predicament cannot but refer to the idea of deploying reason in global, collective life«,<sup>105</sup> Clark points out that consciousness of the Anthropocene confronts the human individual with an immense number of complex issues in everyday life.<sup>106</sup> According to Clark, it is therefore legitimate to ask: »how far does a change in knowledge and imagination entail a change in environmentally destructive modes of life?«<sup>107</sup>

This is the question that the first-person narrator and main character in Christian Valeur's novel *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret* (*Steffen Takes His Share of the Responsibility*, 2009) also faces. The novel's setting is contemporary

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<sup>101</sup> Clark 2015, pp. 59f. (emphasis in the original).

<sup>102</sup> Horn & Bergthaller 2020, p. 70.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>104</sup> Ghosh 2016, p. 119.

<sup>105</sup> Chakrabarty 2009, p. 210.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Clark 2015, p. 14.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 18 (emphasis in the original).

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Norway, and it starts on 17 December 2007, with 23-year-old Steffen Schiøtz arriving at his family's cabin in Buskerud. Steffen studies law at the University of Oslo, where a few months earlier he met Kjersti, a fellow student three years younger than him. Kjersti is a member of an environmental youth organization. She conveys a lot of information on environmental problems and climate change to Steffen and inspires him to do something about these issues himself. Steffen's stay at the cabin is thus motivated by his plan to »break with consumer life« and to produce »no pollution, no litter«. <sup>108</sup> It can thus be said that Steffen posits himself firmly as *homo* in Horn and Bergthaller's terms: he knows about the problems of the Anthropocene, and tries to act rationally in response to them – in his own words, he »takes his share of the responsibility«. <sup>109</sup>

However, Steffen's attempt to act in the best way for the environment is greatly impaired by his bodily needs right from the beginning: he has to eat food and get warmth and light into the cabin, and he needs clothes and a place to defecate, all of which turn out to be difficult to obtain without using the non-environmentally friendly options available in the cabin – which is not a primitive shelter, but an »environmental sinner's Mecca«, <sup>110</sup> equipped not only with electricity and running water, but even with luxuries such as a jacuzzi. Steffen's attempt to live without the comforts of contemporary Norwegian society is further hampered by his lack of skills that could provide him with more »natural« alternatives: he does not know how to make a fire, how to cut wood, how to catch fish, or how to defecate outside – even opening a can is a serious challenge for Steffen.

Although it adds to his ever-present and frequently mentioned »bad conscience«, <sup>111</sup> Steffen compromises his ambitions more and more and sees himself forced to find excuses, such as when he uses electricity and justifies this based on the fact that in Norway electricity is produced from hydropower. After only two days, Steffen therefore must concede that »the core values have melted down, like the summer ice at the north pole.« <sup>112</sup>

The most prominent aspect of Steffen's bodily nature – and the one that most complicates his aim of living in an environmentally friendly way – is his sexual desire. It emerges gradually through analepses (both in the form of separate chapters with their own chapter headings and in what Steffen relates in his narrative present) that Steffen has for the past few months been torn between two women: his girlfriend Isabell, with whom he has been together for the last six and a half years, and his new acquaintance Kjersti. In the foreground, what makes Kjersti appealing to Steffen is her environmental commitment, while Isabell expresses that she is »so tired of such environmental babble« <sup>113</sup> and refuses to take part in the lifestyle changes that Steffen suggests. However, during his stay at the cabin, Steffen's thoughts circle as least as much around sex as around environmental issues, and towards the end of the novel, it turns out that he has felt sexually rejected by Isabell for some time, while Kjersti clearly demonstrates

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<sup>108</sup> »Bryte med forbrukerlivet«; »Ingen forurensing, ingen forsøpling«. Valeur 2009, p. 60.

<sup>109</sup> »tar sin del av ansvaret«. Ibid., p. 187 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>110</sup> »miljøsynders mekka«. Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>111</sup> »dårlig samvittighet«. Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>112</sup> »Kjerneverdiene har smeltet bort, som sommerisen på Nordpolen«. Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>113</sup> »så lei av sånt miljøsnakk«. Ibid., p. 262 (emphasis in the original).

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that she is sexually interested in him.<sup>114</sup> When both Kjersti and Isabell appear at the cabin, it therefore seems for a while that Steffen will decide to abandon Isabell in favor of Kjersti. However, Isabell still knows how to arouse »the primal force in the pubic region«<sup>115</sup> in Steffen. What is more, when she gives him a Christmas present of a water-saving showerhead that she had previously resisted buying for their apartment,<sup>116</sup> this »changes everything, in a wonderful, bizarre way«,<sup>117</sup> according to Steffen. He seems to interpret this gift as demonstrating his girlfriend's willingness to take seriously his environmental commitment. Consequently, he rejects Kjersti and decides to stay together with Isabell.

One could say that Steffen suffers from cognitive dissonance, since he constantly strives (and fails) to reconcile his environmental ambitions with his human, bodily nature. He thus experiences an inner conflict between the *homo* and the *anthropos* which he finally resolves by choosing the simplest path – which is remaining in the well-known and safe structures of his old life by continuing the relationship with his girlfriend, and reducing his environmental commitment to a minimum. The technical solution of the showerhead serves as a welcome excuse for Steffen to go back to »business as usual« and to evade the complex challenges connected to the attempt to live sustainably.

On the surface, Steffen's story could thus be interpreted as a confirmation of Clark's suspicion that environmental destruction is inscribed in human nature. As Steffen's best friend Markus expresses it: »It is the humans that there's something wrong with. Not what we do or don't do.«<sup>118</sup> However, such a reading would overlook how Steffen in fact functions as a rather unreliable narrator. He repeatedly lies to both Isabell and Kjersti, and provides important information that retrospectively changes the interpretation of his entire story only at the end of the very last chapter – namely, that he had already kissed Kjersti during one of their first meetings.<sup>119</sup> Steffen moreover, although on the surface appearing as a rather naïve person, expresses himself in a very ironic (and not least self-ironic) way, something which, again according to Markus, has led to people not taking anything he says seriously any more.<sup>120</sup> This means that the reader cannot trust Steffen's highly subjective account of his own experiences and thoughts. Moreover, his statements about other people are often at odds with how these same people appear in the scenic narration that dominates many of the analepses. Although the direct discourse in these passages is augmented with Steffen's own thoughts and short comments (often resembling stage directions in a play), it often presents a different picture than the one given by Steffen as first-person narrator.

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<sup>114</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>115</sup> »urkraften i underlivet«. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 41 and 250.

<sup>117</sup> »forandrer det alt på en vidunderlig, bisarr måte«. *Ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>118</sup> »Det er menneskene det er noe galt med. Ikke hva vi gjør eller ikke gjør«. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>119</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 261.

<sup>120</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 148.

It further increases the complexity of the narration that the novel is interspersed with other »texts« (such as graphically marked renderings of text messages from Steffen's mobile phone, hand-written notes and lists, forms, advertisements, and drawings) as well as a large number of intertextual references (to films, TV series, songs, books, websites, and social media, among other things).

These narrative traits indicate that the novel connects to the modernist and postmodern tradition, and that it does not necessarily contain a clear message concerning the relation between *homo* and *anthropos* in the Anthropocene. If there is a message to be read from the novel, it may indeed be the exact opposite of what Steffen does when he chooses the »simple way«, for, as he thinks in the analepsis forming the very last chapter, »change is possible«.<sup>121</sup> Seen in isolation, the novel's formal characteristics may not be highly innovative, but in their specific combination they generate a textual complexity that may well fulfill Horn and Berghaller's criteria for literature that aspires to address the challenges that the Anthropocene poses to humanity.

### Conclusion

In the four novels analyzed above, the use of extensive intertextuality (as in Bing & Bringsværd's, Kjærstad's and Valeur's novels) and of irony and satire (to a variable extent in all four texts), in combination with narrative techniques such as shifting focalization and non-chronological narration, create a level of textual complexity that forecloses any simple answers to the difficult questions the Anthropocene raises. The formal characteristics of these novels demand considerable mental engagement on the part of the reader, who is expected not only to recognize the implicit and explicit intertextual references and to grasp an underlying meaning – for example, where irony is employed – but also to fill in narrative gaps, perceive textual connections that are only hinted at, and deal with considerable ambiguity in how these novels »answer« (or rather refuse to answer) the questions raised.

While one can assume that a small group of readers (for example, professional literary critics) takes delight in immersing themselves in this textual complexity, it stands to reason that the potential audience for such demanding literary texts is quite a small one. An indication of this may be that, so far, apart from a recent German translation of *Slekters gang*, none of the four novels dealt with above has been translated into other languages.

This is different in the case of what is arguably the most successful Norwegian Anthropocene novel so far: Maja Lunde's *Bienes historie* (*The History of Bees*). This is a text with no fewer than three first-person narrators – one situated in England in 1852, one in the USA in 2007, and one in China in 2098. Nevertheless, in its narrative form, the novel is considerably less complex than the examples discussed above. Even though the narrator in *Bienes historie* shifts with every single chapter, and the stories contain quite a few completive analepses, the three narrators' individual stories are structured in such a way that they largely follow a chronological order. While there are interconnections between these stories, these are mainly restricted to the motif level and usually easy to discern, since the respective chapters tend to follow on from each other. Also, while the three first-person narrators are highly

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<sup>121</sup> »forandring er mulig«. Ibid., p. 262.

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subjective and have limited insight, unlike Steffen in Valeur's novel or Venor in Karlsvik's, they never appear as unreliable narrators. Moreover, there is basically no irony and very little intertextuality in *Bienes historie*. The end of the novel even contains a rather simple, unambiguous message (humans should take care of non-human nature and not exploit it).<sup>122</sup> All in all, the level of formal complexity comes nowhere near that of Bing & Bringsværd's, Kjærstad's, Karlsvik's, and Valeur's novels, and, as a consequence, the three interconnected stories in *Bienes historie* are easy to follow and comprehend: they pose no major challenge to the reader.

One could additionally argue that even the most advanced formal feature of *Bienes historie* – the juxtaposition of stories told from different points of time – is hardly innovative. T. C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth* from 2000, probably one of the internationally best-known novels with an environmental theme, is based on the same principle. Even the central idea the plot of *Bienes historie* is based upon – namely, the idea that bees become extinct, but reappear through someone being stung in the future – is not new: it may well be borrowed from Douglas Coupland's novel *Generation A* from 2009, in which this unlikely incident happens to no fewer than five first-person narrators, who, like those in *Bienes historie*, are located in places very distant from each other.

Thus, *Bienes historie* certainly does not meet Horn and Bergthaller's criteria of innovation and complexity for novels addressing key issues of the Anthropocene. It is nevertheless reasonable to assume that it has influenced many more readers' minds (and potentially actions) than Bing & Bringsværd's, Kjærstad's, Karlsvik's, and Valeur's novels. In Germany, where it was the best-selling book of 2017, it is even likely to have contributed to inspiring a large percentage of voters in the large federal state of Bavaria to sign a petition supporting the protection of biodiversity under the motto »save the bees«, forcing the state parliament to make the petition's demands into law.<sup>123</sup>

According to Clark, if the literature of the Anthropocene indeed aims to create engagement in its readers, it needs to be of interest »not just for a small number of critical specialists, but for most human beings – for art and literature are nothing without a significant audience.«<sup>124</sup> If one accepts this premise, Horn and Bergthaller's assumption – that literature's prime function in the Anthropocene is to convey a »deeper understanding« of the new geological epoch's key issues, in formally innovative and complex ways – must be called into question. If literature really is to play an important role in the Anthropocene, maybe there is actually more need for texts such as *Bienes historie*, which address these issues in a readily understandable way and provide simple answers to what are in fact highly complex questions – and which for precisely that reason are able to engage large audiences.

However, the existing disagreements among scholars and writers concerning the appropriate aesthetic form of literary fiction in the Anthropocene suggest that this conclusion, too, needs to be treated with caution. Ghosh favors what he calls »serious fiction«, i.e. literature in the tradition of the realist novel (a tradition in which much of his own oeuvre stands) and obviously looks down on »genre fiction«, among which he counts science fiction, including

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<sup>122</sup> Cf. Lunde 2015, p. 452.

<sup>123</sup> Cf. Eisele 2019.

<sup>124</sup> Clark 2015, p. 176.

its »cli-fi« variants. Heise defends science fiction as a genre that offered solutions to the narrative challenges of the Anthropocene even long before the notion of a new geological epoch gained currency. She emphasizes, moreover, that science fiction tends to appeal to »a large popular audience«,<sup>125</sup> which, she seems to imply, should give it a privileged position for addressing the Anthropocene. Horn and Bergthaller prefer complex and aesthetically innovative fiction in the modernist and postmodern tradition but fail to problematize who would be the likely audience for such fiction, and how the »deep« insights into the Anthropocene's complexity gained through such reading might affect this audience's thoughts and behavior. These controversies indicate that scholars and writers tend to base their answers to the question of literature's appropriate form in the Anthropocene on personal aesthetic preferences (and aversions) rather than on substantiated knowledge as to the effect that certain forms of literary fiction may have on particular groups of readers.

Clark is therefore probably right in arguing that ecocritics, to really become able to assess the potential effects of literary fiction on readers concerning key issues of the Anthropocene, »would need to take up broader questions such as the social-political functions of literature and its reception, its imbrication in education systems and the entertainment industries and the dominant valorization of the reading experience as a kind of consumer commodity.«<sup>126</sup> Within ecocriticism, there is now an emerging sub-field called empirical ecocriticism, which is based on »an empirically grounded, interdisciplinary approach to environmental humanities«.<sup>127</sup> Through its use of methodologies from the social sciences, empirical ecocriticism aspires to assess questions about the influence of literary (and other) fiction in a more profound way than »traditional« ecocriticism and thus to substantiate, reject or complicate earlier assumptions about this influence. Empirical ecocriticism promises, among other things, to provide »information about who readers are and the way that their identities influence their responses« as well as to empirically examine »common claims about specific genres and texts.«<sup>128</sup> It remains to be seen to what extent these promises can indeed be fulfilled. For the time being at least, any claims concerning the most appropriate aesthetics for the Anthropocene are inevitably based on assumptions that, at least to some degree, remain speculative.

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<sup>125</sup> Heise 2019, p. 281.

<sup>126</sup> Clark 2015, p. 190.

<sup>127</sup> Schneider-Mayerson, Weik von Mossner & Małecki 2020, p. 2.

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