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Icelandic Nature and Global Evils – Concepts of Nature in Romantic Poetry and Nordic Noir TV Series from Iceland

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Abstract: This paper takes concepts from spatial theory and globalization discourse and uses them in order to analyze the narrative function of descriptions of nature in romantic Icelandic poetry from the beginning of the 19th century and an Icelandic TV-Series from 2015. In Iceland's romantic poetry of the early 19th century, especially in poems written by Bjarni Thorarensen, sublime nature is described as a form of guardian against foreign influences that threaten the way of living on the peripheral island. This romantic concept of Icelandic nature is closely connected to narrative patterns in the process of the Icelandic Nation-Building, as it characterizes Icelanders as simultaneously defined and protected by the harsh conditions on the island. The paper takes a comparative look at the underlying narrative concepts of nature in two of Bjarni Thorarensen's poems and a recent Icelandic TV series, Baltasar Kormákur's *Ófærð* (2015), that presents a different concept of Icelandic nature in its relation to a (threatening) global influence. The series depicts a globalized world in which crime does not only affect remote communities as an evil from the outside but as a local evil connected to forces on global scale. Nature as a narrative device in the TV series thus does not protect Icelanders from global forces, as it did in Bjarni Thorarensen's poems in the early 19th century, but instead functions a catalyst that reveals the evil from the outside and the evil from within.

The abstract knowledge that space is an important category for the understanding of Icelandic texts beginning with the saga-age is an insight that predates the so-called spatial-turn and its newfound interest in space as a category for the analysis of art and culture. Spatial thinking and spatial concepts, conveyed in particular by the description of nature, are central not only to Icelandic literature, but also to all other art forms created in Iceland.¹ They played a major role in the formation of

¹ In her monograph *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland* the Danish anthropologist, Kirsten Hastrup, analyzes old Norse spatial concepts and stresses their importance for the medieval Ice-

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the Icelandic nation in the 19th century and remained a core element of Icelandic national identity all the way into the present day. It is thus a promising analytical approach to look at concepts of space in aesthetic texts from Iceland, that were produced in different time periods. In accordance with the methodological framework of the cultural studies, aesthetic texts are conceptualized as symbolic practices that are reflecting, influencing and interacting with their cultural background. This concept of aesthetic texts and their role in analyzing the cultures and historical periods from which they originate, explains the choice of two primary sources that at first glance have not very much in common: Romantic poetry and a TV series.

I will take a closer look at concepts of nature in poetry from the early 19th century and compare them to the role nature plays in a TV series from 2015. The choice of these time periods is not coincidental, as Iceland was faced with strong inner turmoil during both. At the beginning of the 19th century, Icelanders were in a precarious position, depending on Danish support, fighting against waves of natural catastrophes and living in deep poverty; conditions that ultimately led to mass-migration to the USA in the second half of the 19th century. During these difficult times there was a growing struggle for a national identity and Icelanders increasingly expressed their desire for autonomy from Denmark.

For the historic context of the TV series from 2015, it is important to note that it was produced after the Icelandic economic crisis of 2008, but during a time in which the immediate aftermath of the financial collapse had been and gone. Many Icelanders, despite unsolved problems due to the crisis, still lead a very privileged life compared to a global standard of living. But before analyzing the primary sources, it is necessary to take a closer look at two central terms: space and globalization.

Spatial-Turn

There are many different approaches to space and literature, from narratological models that look at the way space is used within the narrative, to theories that either analyze spatial dynamics of power from a socio-critical point of view or look at space as a potent symbol for cultural dynamics. “[A] *whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers*”² is a

landic worldview. In *Island of Anthropology. Studies in past and present Iceland* she widens the focus and shows that the importance of spatial thinking goes well beyond medieval times.

2 Foucault, Michel 1980: *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Hassocks. p. 149.

popular quotation from French philosopher Michel Foucault, which states one of the driving forces behind the spatial turn: The history of space is always a history of power, so in order to analyze power relations in past or current societies, we need to critically examine their concepts of space.

Space is a historically dynamic concept, ideas and meanings of space change over time. When analyzing spatial concepts in Icelandic primary sources from different time periods, it is crucially important to consider Iceland's geographically extraordinary position as an island in the North-Atlantic, that throughout history has almost always been dependent on the circulation of goods and innovations from the European or American continent. Whilst in the early 19th century, the main source of imports was Denmark and winters, during which the much-awaited ships were unable to reach Iceland, caused starvation amongst the population, contemporary Iceland is well connected to the global flow of goods. These days, it is no longer a problem to consume Chilean wine or apples from New Zealand in the depths of the Icelandic winter. Taking Iceland's historic position at the periphery of global trade movements into consideration, a definition of the term Globalization is a necessary next step.

Globalization

The globalization discourse since the 90s has on the one hand focused on the term globalization as a relatively vague descriptor for current circumstances, and on the other hand tried to create a more precise definition of the term as an historic process that follows specific patterns, including the tendency to dissolve the limits of the nation state. Critical historians have long claimed that the term globalization, if only used to describe current experiences of a boundless global free market and the growing influence of trans-national companies and institutions, ignores historical realities. The point being that at several points in history, phenomena, which we ascribe to our current experience of globalization, were already taking place, for example, the formation of global trade networks, multilateral interdependencies and the interweaving of discourses. In order to take this criticism into account and suggesting a more process-oriented view of the term globalization, the historians Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels Petersson suggest the following:

If we conceive globalization as the development, concentration, and increasing importance of worldwide integration, then the concept loses its static character and its aspects of totality. The question is no longer whether the term "globalization" is an adequate description

for the present state of the world. Instead, it directs attention to the history of worldwide integration, its development and erosion, its intensity and effects.³

Globalization as a process that creates a more interconnected global space also contains the conflicting nature of globalized trade versus the defined borders of national states. Interestingly enough, an early phase of globalization from around 1750 to 1850, which saw the industrial revolution and the radical modernization of means of transport, coincides with new concepts of national identity. Already in the Enlightenment, the intellectual discourse started to develop a global consciousness, which is for example obvious in Immanuel Kant's writing on global peace (*Zum ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf*, 1795), the reflections on the growth of the global population by Thomas Robert Malthus (*An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 1798), or the development of economic models that span the globe (e. g. Adam Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1776). In the first half of the 19th century, the opening of global markets with a significant increase in the movement of goods and ideas caused not only enthusiasm, but also unease with respect to the forces of a free market. Consequently, romantic intellectuals, especially of the late romantic period, started idealizing the idea of religion or a nation state as a powerful counteragent to market-forces that they perceived as out of control. A lot of romantic discourse, especially late romanticism and national romanticism, is about the fear of a perceived dominance of economic categories as a parameter for establishing worthiness. Interestingly, at a time in which initial effects of globalization were becoming more and more noticeable, we also see a new interest in spatial thinking, finding its expression in a multitude of deterministic theories about the influence of spatial surroundings on the people inhabiting them.

In pursuance of a closer look at privileged and precarious groups in a globalized world and the socio-dynamic potential of those two groups meeting within the textual sphere of Nordic art and literature, a promising approach is to look at the way spatial concepts reflect those power dynamics. Concepts of Icelandic nature are a key, if not the most central, part of Icelandic national identity, so by taking a comparative look at those concepts at different points in time, it might be possible to gain further insight into the role that Icelanders envisage for themselves in a global network.

3 Osterhammel, Jürgen / Niels P. Petersson 2009: *Globalization. A short history*. Princeton. p. 26 f.

Bjarni Thorarensen's poetry in the first half of the 19th century

At the beginning of the 19th century, the Icelandic writer, Bjarni Thorarensen (1786–1841), published several poems, which are by some regarded as being the only genuinely romantic poems Iceland has ever produced. His poetry is in so far new and radical as the poems present a fascination with Icelandic sublimity and refuse to describe nature in pastoral terms. Instead, for example, he anthropomorphizes winter into a strong and threatening warrior personality in his poem *Veturinn* (1825), who together with mother earth, fathers new life that is born in the spring. Icelandic nature in Bjarni Thorarensen's poems is a strict mother that never spoils her children. Describing Icelandic nature as a maternal figure is a recurring theme in Bjarni Thorarensen's poetry:

Þú nafnkunna landið sem lífið oss veittir,
landið sem aldregi skemmdir þín börn,
hvert þinnar fjærstöðu hingað til neyttir,
hún sér þér ódugnaðs framvegis vörn.

Þó vellyst í skipsförmum völskunum meður
vafri að landi, eg skaða ei tel;
því út fyrir kaupstaði íslenskt í veður
ef hún sér vogar, þá frýs hún í hel.

(*Ísland*, verses 1 & 4, 1825)⁴

You land of renown, which gave us life,
a land that never harmed its children,
all your inaccessibility has until now been of use,
it is your future protection against iniquities.

Even if temptation in the shiploads of Welsh men
drifts onto the shore, no harm I can see;
for if away from Iceland's trading-places
into the weather she dares, to death she will freeze.

(provisional translation by Berit Glanz)

In the poem, *Ísland*, sublime Icelandic nature is described as a form of guardian against foreign influences that threaten the way of living on the peripheral island in the North Atlantic Ocean. Thorarensen writes that Icelandic glaciers and volcanoes will defend the nation from vices, reaching the island by ship, and thus protect a paradisaical nation of virtue and morals. Bjarni Thorarensen's most influ-

⁴ Thorarensen, Bjarni 1935: *Kvæði*. Kopenhagen. p. 118 ff.

ential poem is most probably the poem, *Íslands minni*, which was used as Iceland's national anthem for some time. In the poem, he coins the term *fjallkona* (Lady of the Mountain), for a woman who personifies Iceland:

Eldgamla Ísafold,
ástkæra fósturmold,
Fjallkonan fríð!

(*Íslands minni*, 1825)⁵

Ancient Iceland
beloved homeland
Free Lady of the Mountain

(provisional translation by Berit Glanz)

The Lady of the Mountain has become a very powerful symbol ever since the poem was published, not only in Icelandic literature, but also during national celebrations, where a young woman dresses up as Lady of the Mountain, symbolizing the country itself. Natural space in Thorarensen's poems is thus being semanticized with national importance.⁶ Kirsten Hastrup describes these spatial practices in Icelandic romanticism as follows: "*In the case of Romanticism, a metonymical relationship between the country (nature) and the people was established, in that a genealogical model was used to express the relation between the Icelanders and their country.*"⁷ In this metonymical relationship, the *Fjallkona* is a maternal figure descending from the mountain and protecting the national consciousness. This personification of Icelandic identity and nature not only protects her children, but also – as we have seen in Bjarni's poem, *Ísland* – does not spoil them with luxuries of an easy life. This concept of nature forms the basis for an important narrative pattern within the process of Icelandic nation-building, as it characterizes Icelanders as simultaneously defined and protected by the harsh conditions on the island. Nature protects Iceland from corrupting influences from the outside world, which in the case of Bjarni's poems are very clearly named as material temptations, global trade and consumption, that threaten to ruin the Icelandic identity. This romantic concept of a national space allegorizes the Icelandic nature into the role of the nation's defense against the outside, where evil forces

5 Thorarensen, Bjarni 1935: *Kvæði*. Copenhagen. p. 27 f.

6 Jürg Glauser investigates this in more detail with reference to one of the most important poems of Icelandic national romanticism, Gunnarshólmi, by Jónas Hallgrímsson, which, in contrary to Bjarni Thorarensen's poems, creates a more pastoral description of the landscape and connects nature and the *Njáls* saga, in one place. Glauser 2011: p. 54 ff.

7 Hastrup 1990 p. 120.

and bad influences are located. The island thus transforms into a safe haven, peripheral to the dealings of a globalized world but with enough natural shielding against the outside.

Nature in Icelandic film and the TV-Series *Ófærð*

The romantic concept of the Icelandic nature safeguarding its virtuous citizens evolved during a time where global trade started to reach Iceland in higher frequency and the exchange with the European discourse was constantly increasing, leading to an independency movement, that was heavily inspired by contemporary events in France, Norway and Poland. During this early phase of globalization Icelandic poetry described the island in the North Atlantic as being peripheral and even external to global influences, which were seen as negative and corrupting.

After the economic crisis of 2008 it became very clear to most Icelanders that Iceland was indeed connected to global capital movements and heavily interdependent. It is interesting to see, if this new reality of being linked to the global trade network, had any changing effect on the concepts of nature being employed in aesthetic texts. The TV series *Ófærð* will serve as an example for a post-crisis narrative, which successfully penetrated Iceland's domestic market and can also be seen as part of a current golden age of Icelandic film and TV. There is also another reason to comparatively analyze romantic poetry and Nordic Noir TV Series, given that the Danish scholar Anne Marit Waade has successfully argued, that the distinctive note of melancholy which heavily characterizes Scandinavian Nordic Noir productions can be traced back to Nordic romanticism.⁸

Nature has always played a central part in Iceland's film production from the early 20th century onwards. The first encounters with film were brought about by foreign film companies, who were using Icelandic nature as a scenic background for clips in their short films. When the first film projections arrived in Iceland in the early years of the 20th century, the population greeted them with huge enthusiasm. People were especially interested in short clips depicting Icelandic life and landscape.⁹ Those popular short documentaries about life in Iceland, mixed with scenic perspectives of the landscape, dominated the small domestic film produc-

⁸ Anne Marit Waade, Gunhild Agger: „Melancholy and Murder: Mood and Tone in Crime Series.“ In: Sue Turnbull; Steven Peacock; Kim Toft Hansen (ed.) *European Television Crime Drama and Beyond*. Basingstoke, 2018.

⁹ Astrid Söderbergh Widding: „Iceland“ In: Tytti Soila, Astrid Söderbergh Widding, Gunnar Iversen (eds.): *Nordic National Cinemas*. London, New York. 1998 p. 91 f.

tion well into the 1950s.¹⁰ Coincidentally, the first locally produced films, which received international interest and rewards at film festivals, were two documentaries about Icelandic volcanoes.¹¹

A regular film production circuit with films that are shown on a national and international level is a fairly recent phenomenon in Iceland, only dating back to the late 1970s, when the state started to financially support the domestic production of feature films. Since then, the Icelandic film industry has been met with increasing international acclaim, but also with a clear demand from international audiences to include scenic landscape shots of Icelandic nature.¹² Even though film is a relatively modern phenomenon in Iceland, it is now seen as being as equally important as books when it comes to cultural export. It is therefore not surprising that Icelandic film-makers also started to produce an increasing number of internationally acclaimed TV-Series in the 2000s, during a time that has been commonly referred to as the “Second Golden Age of TV.”¹³

In the following passages, I will take a closer look at Baltasar Kormákur’s *Ófærð* (2015).¹⁴ The TV series *Ófærð* is Iceland’s most successful TV export to date. After the rights were widely sold internationally, it was decided to produce a second season, which is currently in the making. The series uses nature as an im-

10 Agnes Schindler: „State-Funded Icelandic Film: National and/or Transnational Einem.“ Huw David Jones (ed.): *The Media in Europe’s Small Nations*. Cambridge, 2014. p. 72 f.

11 *Surtur fer Sunnan* (1964) and *Eldur í Heimaey* (1974). While film depictions of nature were a dominant trait of early Icelandic film productions, a few feature films were also being produced in Iceland in the 1920’s by the Danish Nordisk Film Kompagni and British Stoll Pictures. Whilst the majority of those films focused on texts written by Icelandic writers, the filming of Icelandic nature has always been an important feature.

12 Even in a movie that mainly depicts the life of an urban slacker in Reykjavík, there is a sequence of the main actor, covered in ice, on a glacier. This focus on Icelandic nature has been additionally supported by a vast amount of Hollywood blockbusters shooting scenes in the Icelandic nature in the last years. It is important to add that all huge Icelandic film successes of the recent past, like Grímur Hákonarson’s *Hrútar* (2015), Dagur Kári’s *Fúsi* (2015) and Benedikt Erlingsson’s *Hross í Oss* (2013), make strong use of landscape and weather-shots to convey emotions and atmosphere.

13 Scandinavian TV series have been internationally successful during the last decade, ranging from internationally acclaimed crime series from Denmark such as *Bron|Broen* (2011–2018) to the Swedish psychological thriller series *Modus* (2015). Iceland has taken part in this global success story with a number of works produced for TV that fall into the category Scandinavian Noir, such as the critically acclaimed *Ófærð* (2015), *Hraunið* (2014), the legal drama, *Réttur* (2009), and 2015’s spin-off crime drama with the same title, commonly known under its English title, *Case* (2015).

14 Similar concepts of nature can also be found in the less well received *Hraunið* (2014), directed by Reynir Lyngdal and written by Sveinbjörn I. Baldvinsson. In *Hraunið*, the title referring to a lava field, plays a crucial role as a dumping ground for bodies and as a location of individual and cultural memory, when the world of corrupt finance meets rural Iceland.

portant aesthetic feature and plot-device, when a globalized crime scene is confronted with a small rural community in the remote east of Iceland. Nature plays a decisive role in the series in the development of the plot and in the characterization of the crime scenes; even the intro shows close-up shots of body parts interwoven with nature close-ups, visually connecting the two.¹⁵

In *Ófærð*, a village in the East Fjords is locked off due to heavy snowfall, whilst a mutilated torso is washed up into the nets of a local fisherman. At the same time, the *Norræna* ferry, which connects Denmark, the Faroe Islands and Iceland, arrives with lots of passengers on board and is quarantined by local police chief, Andri, who is struggling with his divorce and his family-in-law, who are dealing with the emotional trauma of losing their daughter in a fire seven years before. Soon the remote village is blocked off from the outside world, because an avalanche covers the roads and bad weather renders the landing of helicopters impossible. This creates a setting, that is basically a modern variant of the “Closed Circle Mystery”, a narrative device made popular by Agatha Christie, in which only a small pool of suspects remains after a crime has occurred, forming a closed group and making investigations into outsiders unnecessary.

It is not important for the following argumentation to present all of the plot’s details. But, in order to analyze concepts of nature in the context of a confrontation between the precarious and the privileged in this TV series, it is necessary to take a closer look at the two depicted crimes: Firstly, we have a criminal network that consists of village inhabitants, who were collectively committing insurance fraud. The collective is bound together by their past crimes, as they made it possible for a rapist to disappear in exchange for him burning down a fish factory to create a false insurance claim. During this arson attack, the rapist accidentally kills a local girl. Secondly, we have a network of human traffickers, which uses the ferry as a vehicle and is closely connected to organized crime in Europe. Two trafficking victims from Africa are found and dropped off at a local police officer’s home. So, the TV series presents a very domestic crime, which is closely connected to the Icelandic financial crisis, as well as a global criminal network. During the series, these two different crime-spheres are interconnected.

There are only three characters that are presented as morally pure victims, as all the other main adult characters are either criminals themselves, have been accused of acting unethically in the past or present, or are behaving outside of the norms, in some way or other. Those three “pure” victims are all young and female

¹⁵ See also: Kim Toft Hansen, Anne Marit Waade (ed.): *Locating Nordic Noir. From Beck to The Bridge*. Basingstoke, 2017. p. 253.

and include the teenage girl that was burned to death in the fish factory and the two trafficked girls from Nigeria.¹⁶

There are villains among the foreigners and the Icelanders, there are foreign and Icelandic victims and there are Icelanders and non-Icelanders that inhabit a moral middle ground. So, this mirroring structure of the cast already implies that the choice of being criminal, or even downright evil has very little to do with the national background; also, victimhood is not defined by nationality, non-Icelandic and local people can become victims.

Alongside the mix of foreign and local people, there is one more plot element that plays a decisive narrative role and moves the story on significantly: Nature. Icelandic nature in *Ófærð* functions as a catalyst for pushing a conflict to the surface that has been sweltering for a long time in the seemingly innocent village. This pattern is already visible from the beginning, when the north Atlantic Ocean is the starting point of the story, when the mutilated torso is swept into a fishing net. The ocean also brings another body-part to the surface, just when the investigation is struggling for more clues. Using nature as a kind of deus-ex-machina is not a very innovative narrative technique, but nature in *Ófærð* seems to work less as a cheap trick to further the plot and more as a narrative force that pushes the darker aspects of people's lives to the surface over and over again. The ocean delivering dead bodies functions in a similar way to the snowy landscape, which also assists in revealing dark secrets and people's inner conflicts: There is a boy wandering out into the snow after an argument, a criminal drives on the icy road and dies in an accident, an old man triggers an avalanche due to his stubbornness, and the police is constantly struggling with their cars in the snowstorms. There are many night shots of the village houses in darkness, surrounded by flying snow, showing civilization's fragility in confrontation with the forces of nature and adding a sense of threat. The claustrophobic atmosphere of being locked in the Fjord during a polar night is increased when the avalanche cuts the power off. Countless wide-angle shots of the cold ocean, shots of snowy windshields and frozen landscapes underline the basic atmosphere of nature showing its dominance. Nature in *Ófærð* is not reduced to a scenic background but, thanks to its sublimity and magnitude of force, brings the villagers together until they solve their conflicts.

Interestingly, the depicted crimes are rooted in the small communities, but at the same time also connected to global crime. The series depicts a globalized

¹⁶ The series shows us the confrontation of international figures with Icelanders from the village, the Lithuanian criminal, the Danish ferry captain, the Faroese engineer and the two Nigerian girls, whose misery is made visually palpable when one of the girls wees herself in fear, after seeing her tormentors from her hiding place.

world in which crime does not only affect remote communities as an evil from the outside, but as a local evil that is intertwined with forces on a global scale. But, just as the world of crime transcends national borders, the inherent goodness of some of the main characters, even though they are portrayed as deeply flawed and troubled human beings (as typical of this genre), is not limited by nationality either. The Danish captain decides to assist the policemen, the trafficked girls find protection and the village can start over after it has been cleansed of its criminal members. But only the local conflicts can be fully solved within the TV-Series, addressing a certain feeling of helplessness towards the complexities of global crime. Of course the series hints at a prosecution of the international criminals as well, when the Danish ferry captain follows his conscience and enters witness protection, but ultimately, the viewer is not presented with any closure or satisfying convictions for these crimes, whose main perpetrators remain unknown. So, the Icelandic nature mostly facilitated the revelation of local criminals and initiates the healing process of the small community after it has been cleansed of its criminal members.

Conclusion

Bjarni Thorarensen's poems and the TV series, *Ófærð*, both come from separate periods in time in which the Icelandic society was experiencing the effects of globalization and struggling with its role in a global world-order. In the early 19th century, the fight for autonomy from Denmark started, whilst in 2015 the economic crisis of 2008 was still being felt. The poems and the TV series make use of depictions of nature to convey meaning, an established narrative pattern in Iceland. Following the theoretical reflections of the spatial turn, the hypothesis of this paper was that it is possible to deduce information about the role Icelanders see for themselves in a global network from the concepts of nature used in aesthetic texts from certain time periods.

During a time of great poverty and economic need in Iceland, nature is being semanticized as a female figure that protects Icelanders from evil outside influences. The figure itself is maternal in the sense of offering protection, but does not offer her children a life of plenty. Nature as a protective force, that defines Icelandic identity, also protects them from threats of becoming soft and spoilt, due to an increased circulation of wealth and luxurious goods.

In the TV-Series from 2015, nature, as an important factor of the plot development, does not protect Icelanders from "evil" global forces, as it did in Bjarni Thorarensen's poems in the early 19th century, but instead functions as a catalyst

that reveals the evil from the outside, as well as the evil from within. Whilst the Icelanders are living a more privileged existence than they did 200 years earlier, they have also started to participate in the exploitation of the less fortunate. This complicity is brought to light by natural forces. More could be said about the gender dynamics that are connected to these concepts of nature, given that Icelandic nature has been symbolized by femininity ever since *Fjallkona* was created as a powerful depiction of the National Identity. Furthermore, the role nature plays in Icelandic TV series seems to correspond with this gendered narrative of a female-connotated nature that reveals the dark sides of society and protects its victims. Analyzing the ways Icelanders have conceptualized nature in art and literature from the saga-age onwards, can give us information about their national self-perception and positioning in a global context, as this paper hopes to have shown.

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