academic quarter
akademisk kvarter
research from the humanities
AAU

Volume 25. Fall 2022 • on the web

Econarratology, the novel, and Anthropocene imagination

Jens Kramshøj Flinker *PhD, Part-time Lecturer at University of Copenhagen, Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics. Interests are ecocriticism, narratology, econarratology, Nordic contemporary literature, and cultural studies.*

Abstract

Can fiction provide forms of expression that offer an alternative to the discourse of science regarding the Anthropocene? This question is interesting to examine, as the widely accepted science of the Anthropocene seems to have a limited effect on the various public audiences they attempt to reach. Methodologically: I use econarratology to investigate how literature can affect the reader's understanding of the Anthropocene reality. More specifically, the article focuses on how Charlotte Weitze's novel *The Abominable* (*Den afskyelige*, 2016) immerses us into a storyworld and thereby engages the reader in ways that are rarely possible outside the world of fiction. The article demonstrates how the world-creating power of *The Abominable* involves, among other things, a disruption of the reader's storyworld.

Keywords: Anthropocene, econarratology, climate fiction, Anthropocene imagination, Charlotte Weitze.

The novel and Anthropocene imagination

The Anthropocene, a term coined by American biologist Eugene Stoermer and Dutch geochemist Paul Crutzen, describes a new geological epoch dominated by the "role of mankind in geology and ecology" lasting what in human terms may be felt as long periods (Stoermer and Crutzen 2000, 18). The recognition of this reality has catalyzed an ongoing discussion among cultural theorists, historians, and artists on how the humanities and art are expected to raise awareness and convey a sense of urgency regarding the Anthropocene. As Mike Hulme has pointed out, the Anthropocene is a "wicked problem". Wicked problems are difficult to recognize because of their fundamental complexity. More specifically, a solution to one aspect of a wicked problem often reveals or creates other, even more complex, problems demanding further solutions. Wicked problems, according to Hulme, are therefore "beyond the reach of mere technical knowledge and traditional forms of governance" (Hulme 2009, 334). That is why it is worth reflecting on the usefulness of how literature — in this context, the novel — can help us enrich our understanding of the Anthropocene. After all, a crucial claim in ecocriticism is that the environmental crisis is a crisis of imagination, and new ways of imagining humanity's relation to the physical world in literature can be at the vanguard of this (Buell 1995, 2).

I use Danish author Charlotte Weitze's novel *The Abominable* (*Den afskyelige*, 2016) as my case study. However, the scope of the article does not allow me to make an in-depth analysis, which is why I instead concentrate on a few examples that highlight how the novel can activate the reader's Anthropocene imagination. The following sections provide further context for understanding the perspectives and questions raised above.

Anthropocene challenges for the novel

Let me begin this inquiry by looking more closely at the problem of the concept of scaling as put forward by Timothy Clark, Richard Kerridge, and others. According to Clark, the Anthropocene blurs some crucial categories by which people have made sense of the world. The most prominent feature of the Anthropocene is that it cannot immediately be seen or localized. In other words, there is no simple or unitary object directly to confront, no simple object to

"fix" or to "tackle" (Clark 2015, 9–10). In representing the Anthropocene, in consonance with Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra, literature therefore must grapple with the problem of the relative unrepresentability of the phenomenon (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2019, 10). Richard Kerridge emphasizes a similar concern: The problem is that conventional plot structures require forms of solution and closure that seem absurdly evasive considering the global and complex scales in which climate change occurs (Kerridge 2002, 99). Furthermore, according to Roman Bartosch, we live in an Anthropocene world that is so technological and post-nature that neither apocalypse nor pastoral as current tropes are trustworthy (Bartosch 2012, 117). This is why Greg Garrard emphasizes that the global environmental crisis is also a crisis of representation (Garrard 2009, 709). Timothy Clark seems to be even more skeptical on behalf of the novel:

> The global context is now one of variously dangerous environmental tipping points, but in which changes are happening at scales that we do not perceive with ordinary human faculties, and with a complexity that may escape us, though we cannot escape it. This is a world whose 'unconformities' in a broad material sense may well elude the novel understood as a form which privileges the realm of personal human experience as the basic reality. (Clark 2019, 80–81)

According to Clark, it is an important task for contemporary literature to find ways of representing this new reality of elusive agencies and counterintuitive scales. However, in Clark's opinion, the Anthropocene cannot be represented, at least "not in the realist mode still dominant in the novel." Its modes of appearance as a totality are possible only in graphs, statistics, and computer projections and modelling — of CO2 emissions, population figures, waste generation, proportion of the Earth's land surface used, and so on (Clark 2015, 73).

I do not completely disagree with Clark on this diagnosis. However, what he seems to forget is that the novel's greatest advantage is not necessarily that it should represent the Anthropocene in its totality. It is instead the opposite; the hallmark of the novel is that it

represents different human (or human-like) experiences of environmental change, climate change, etc. Precisely because the novel is centered on the particular — a how-it-is-to-experience-perspective — it prompts its readers to activate a storyworld that is completely different from modes that seek to transcend the particular (for example graphs and statistics). I believe that Clark's skeptical attitude to the novel is rooted in the fact that he is more preoccupied with philosophy than narratology.

Econarratology: The novel, the reader, and the Anthropocene world

In *The Storyworld Accord: Econarratology and Postcolonial Narratives* (2015), Erin James coins the term 'econarratology' as she connects cognitive narratology with ecocriticism. To explore the interfaces between narratives and the reader, James draws on David Herman's concept of storyworld. Storyworlds can be defined as the worlds evoked by narratives, that is, how readers use textual cues to build up "mental representations" of the worlds evoked by stories. In other words, storyworld is about the "world-creating power" of narratives (Herman 2002, 14–17). Of key importance in this form of econarratology is the following: While structuralist narratologists failed to adequately investigate issues of narrative referentiality, storyworld, or the reader's world-modeling, cognitive narratology is about how readers in the reading process construct, reconstruct, or co-construct the narrative world. That is, the reader's reconstructions of narratives are based on spontaneous real-life frames of existence, grounded in linguistic and physical experiences. In other words, readers use their experiences of the world to bridge the gaps in narrative texts (Herman 2002, 17–22).

James's groundbreaking work is particularly preoccupied with how postcolonial texts catalyze an imaginative relocation of readers to a new and often unfamiliar world — an experience that enriches our understanding of how others in different spaces live in their ecological homes (James 2015, x–xiii). That is, she examines how the reconstructions of the narrative space provide sufficient information for the reader to participate in a transnational exchange of historical and ideological ideas and environmental assumptions. However, while spatiality remains a focal point in James's analysis, I am also preoccupied with the 'temporal dimension of storyworld'

and 'disruption of the storyworld'. This, in order to examine how these textual structures can stretch the reader's sense of the Anthropocene. I elaborate on this below in my analysis of *The Abominable*.

The Abominable is narrated by Heidi and takes place in a climate-changed future somewhere in Scandinavia; probably in Norway. The first-person narrator laments that there is almost — due to global warming — no snow left, that many children are born with genetic damage, and that most people do not seem to care, let alone bother to act, in relation to the dramatic climate changes. The state of sadness that characterizes Heidi when we meet her changes when she falls head over heels in love with the climate activist Kenneth. Kenneth is suffering from hyperhidrosis, which is excessive sweating related to the subtropical climate that has found its way into the Nordics. Heidi and the reader slowly find out that Kenneth is half human and half yeti and as such, it is a typical Weitze novel filled with fantastic elements in a realistic everyday life. According to Sissel Furuseth, ice and snow, in *The Abominable*, are associated with pleasure. Heidi longs for her childhood skiing holidays, the snow and the cold. In addition, Heidi is literally cold inside, which is why Kenneth cannot get enough of her coldness because of his severe perspiration problems (Furuseth 2021, 167-168).

The temporal dimension of storyworld

In this section, I am preoccupied with the temporal struct ure of stories. With reference to David Herman, I examine the following: How does the chosen narrational mode of temporal profiling affect the process (or experience) of the reader's co-constructing the narrative world? (Herman et al. 2012, 71). When a narrator tells his life story, for example, these stories are, among other things, an operation of segmentation, where the narrator marks a starting point in a temporal continuum. However, such a segmentation not only says something about the narrator's life but also indexes the world in a value-based way (Herman 2003b, 172–174). How is this mode to be seen in *The Abominable*?

As already described, *The Abominable* transports the reader into a climate-changed, near future somewhere in Scandinavia. The novel places something radically changed (the Gulf Stream is declining, there are extreme weather phenomena, and mountains without snow) in what, for the Scandinavian reader, is a very recognizable

social and geographical locality. In this way, according to Jørgen Bruhn, the novel incorporates various scientific predictions about climate change and makes these directly recognizable and understandable for readers who "either do not wish to or are not able to read scientific articles". This suggests that the reader of *The Abominable* is helped to experience what life might feel like in the future (Bruhn 2020, 140). However, by structuring narrative time in this way, the climate fiction does more than just stimulate the reader's imagination about potential future climate scenarios. By making use of flashbacks, the novel manipulates the narrative *order* in a way that explains what has triggered the climate changes that make lives difficult for the main characters Heidi and Kenneth:

> I remembered that Dad and Mom looked at each other, really long. Mom nodded, and Dad sighed. "We have talked about when you should know." He hesitated. "But you are old enough. One of the major ocean currents, the Gulf Stream, has changed. The climate is changing. That is why we replant" [in their garden]. Dad said that cars and planes pollute. That many of the things he and Mom bought were not good for the environment. It was most of the clothes, all the meat and some of the exotic fruits. The use of electricity and the heat we used in the winter was also a problem. All of this led to the emission of a gas, CO2, which heated the Earth. That is why the ice caps were melting, that is why the oceans were rising, and that is why the Gulf Stream was changing. Maybe this place, the parched fjord, would one day become the sea again. (Weitze 2016, 33, my parentheses)[1]

Heidi narrates this passage, which is filtered through her child's perspective. In the reader's cognitive mappings of the passage's temporal structure, he or she quickly notes that it is modern generations that are solely to blame for when things started to go wrong. In addition, it also becomes clear that climate change is a result of private consumer choice rather than an industrial or political problem. One may ask, what about nuclear tests conducted in the 20th century or the political system's lack of pervasive green impact? The ideological message this novel invites the reader to respond to

is that the fight against climate change is dependent upon the contemporary reader's consumer lifestyle. In other words, changes must occur at the level of the reader's everyday decisions.

Is this storyworld able to make the reader more receptive to the Anthropocene, or is it rather a simplification of its complexity? The fact is that numerous human actions such as heating a house, flying, and drinking coffee are altering the basic ecological systems on the planet. Furthermore, the scale effect and the ethical implications of these actions are invisible to the individual. Nevertheless, no matter what the answers to these questions are, the point is that the novel has the potential to initiate such a (critical) environmental dialogue with the reader. In other words, novels are not about solving problems; rather, they — in this case — complicate potential solutions by pluralizing our understanding of climate change. This suggests, too, that there may be some views of the world — views, especially, that emphasize the world's complexity — that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional scientific and philosophical prose but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars (Nussbaum 1992, 3).

Disruption of the Storyworld

The Abominable's dialogue with the reader is not just rooted in temporality but also in expectation, or rather in the violation of what is expected. I make use of Herman's concept of — with reference to Jerome Bruner — "canonicity and breach." To be worth telling, a tale must be about how a canonical script or frame has been breached, violated, or deviated from. Hence, Herman emphasizes that, to a greater or lesser degree, all types of narratives appeal to the interpreter's involvement, curiosity, or storyworld through disruption (Herman 2009, 134–35). Herman's premise is that norms, as well as narrative expectations, are rooted in the traditions and institutions of a culture or subculture. These expectations have developed through a process of negotiating what should or should not be done in particular domains of conduct, which also include narrative storytelling (Herman et al. 2012, 169). Most readers have narrative experiences of, for example, apocalypse narratives, magical realism, and unreliable narrators, experiences that are embedded through films, TV series, everyday conversations, children's and

adult literature. Furthermore, according to Herman, paratextual features, as well as narratives, in relation to a more or less dominant template, trope, or master narrative, can also activate the reader's expectations (Ibid. 169–71).

In *The Abominable,* Heidi and Kenneth want to be role models and put their environmental ethics into action by moving out into the wilderness and living a carbon-neutral life. They build their own house from recycled materials, eat only local and homegrown foods, keep a strict CO2 account, and only have electricity when there is sunshine. Thus, *The Abominable* makes use of a wilderness trope, which is very prevalent in traditional environmental thinking. Greg Garrard distinguishes between "old world wilderness" and "new world wilderness." The latter developed in narratives of the 19th century and was composed as a sublime wilderness, in which one can get "contact" with authentic and conservative values. In the wilderness, there is no material, moral, or bodily pollution (Garrard 2012, 66–75):

> Like the philosopher Henry Thoreau out in the woods in Walden, in the old days in the United States. He could also do without anything. In the end, there were not even chairs for the guests. Actual conversations were not needed either. The best thing was, and perhaps it was precisely the essence of life, to swim in the forest lake. Have I ever seen Kenneth enjoy anything? [. . .]. My stomach growls; is it because I am human? (Weitze 2016, 246).

Unlike Thoreau, Heidi and Kenneth's relationship slowly burns out in the wilderness due to hard labor and hunger, which is why life in the wilderness does not eradicate but reinforces a number of moral dilemmas from which the couple has sought escape.

This is a violation of what is expected based on a standard or canonical pattern in earlier environmental novels. Thus, the novel has the potential to position the reader within various environmental considerations, such as the following: Is the trope useless in contemporary environmental discourse? Why do many contemporary novels seem to be somewhat critical of it? How is this trope used in many other contexts such as advertising, politics, etc., and how are my own dreams involved in this fantasy? What is essential in this

'disruptive storyworld' is not that the novel tends to offer concrete solutions to Anthropocene challenges. Instead, with reference to Axel Goodbody, such narratives work with ideas from a reservoir of the collective imagination, representing and overcoming problems symbolically, and thus contribute, indirectly and over time, to changing how we think about nature, climate change, and culture (Goodbody 2012, 22-23).

Conclusion

As described in the introduction, the analysis above is by no means exhaustive. Instead, the purpose has been to identify two ways in which *The Abominable* has the potential to activate the reader's storyworld. Thus, I have so far primarily examined the novel-reader dynamics, where I conclude by explaining the reader-world dynamics. More specifically, this is about how the reader uses his or her storyworld to come to grips with a complex Anthropocene reality beyond the page. The premise of this argument is based on – in the words of two leading narratologists – the belief that narratives are sense-making strategies:

> But for almost all of us living and telling are inextricably connected: we make sense of our experiences through the stories we tell about them, even as those stories influence our future experiences. (Phelan 2005, iiii)

> As accounts of what happened to particular people in particular circumstances and with specific consequences, stories are found in every culture and subculture and can be viewed as a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change. (Herman 2003a, 2)

Despite the fact that James Phelan and David Herman are not preoccupied with environmental issues, the quotes are useful, as they show that people construct and use narratives to come to terms with real-world processes and developments in time and space – in this context, an Anthropocene world full of environmental change. When we tell, and when we read, listen, see, or actively interpret narratives, this activity becomes a "tool" that organizes and supports our experiences and thinking in such a way that we can gain

a foothold in reality. Expressed differently, the world-creative power of narrative is not a cognitive crutch for those who cannot manage to think in more rigorous ways; rather, it is a basic and general strategy for making sense of the world (Herman 2002, 24). The idea is not that the reader can get a more accurate image of life in the Anthropocene by reading Weitze's *The Abominable*. Instead, in the reader's storyworld or reconstructions of the novel, they build a model of causal, temporal, spatial, ethical, and environmental structures that can scaffold the reader's dialogue with a complex world in change.

References

Bartosch, Roman. 2012. "Literary Quality and the Ethics of Reading". In *Literature, Ecology, Ethics: Recent Trends in Ecocriticism*, edited by Timo Müller and Michael Sauter, 113-28. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.

Bruhn, Jørgen. 2020. "Towards an Intermedial Ecocriticism". In *Beyond Media Borders, Volume 2: Intermedial Relations among Multimodal Media*, edited by Lars Elleström, 117-48. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Clark, Timothy. 2015. *Ecocriticism on the Edge*: *The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.

Clark, Timothy. 2019. *The Value of Ecocriticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Furuseth, Sissel. 2021. "Nordic Contemporary Fiction Grieving the Loss of Snow". *NORDEUROPAforum*: 158-73.

Garrard, Greg. 2012. *Ecocriticism*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Garrard, Greg. 2009. "Ian McEwan's Next Novel and the Future of Ecocriticism".*Contemporary Literature* 50 (4): 695–20. https://doi.org/10.1353/cli.0.0090

Goodbody, Axel. "Frame analysis and the literature of climate change". *Literature, Ecology, Ethics: Recent Trends in Ecocriticism*, edited by Timo Müller og Michael Sauter, 15-33. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.

Herman, David. 2002. *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Herman, David. 2003a. "Introduction". In *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, edited by David Herman, 1–30. Stanford, CA: Center for the Study of Language and Information.

Herman, David. 2003b. "Stories as a tool for thinking". In *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, edited by David Herman, 163–92. Stanford, CA: Center for the Study of Language and Information.

Herman, David. 2009. *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Herman, David, James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz, Brian Richardson, and Robyn Warhol. 2012. *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Hulme, Mike. 2009. *Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

James, Erin. 2015. *The Storyworld Accord: Econarratology and Postcolonial Narratives*. Lincoln: UNP – Nebraska.

Kerridge, Richard. 2002. „Narratives of resignation: Environmentalism in Recent Fiction". In *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*, edited by John Parham, 87–99. Florence: Routledge.

Nussbaum, Martha C. 1992. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. Oxford: University Press.

Phelan, James. 2005. *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Weitze, Charlotte. 2016. *Den afskyelige*. Samleren.

Notes

1 I have translated all the quotes from Danish into English.