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Nordic Ecohorror

Naturecultures and Feminine Monstrosity in Contemporary Nordic Literature and Film

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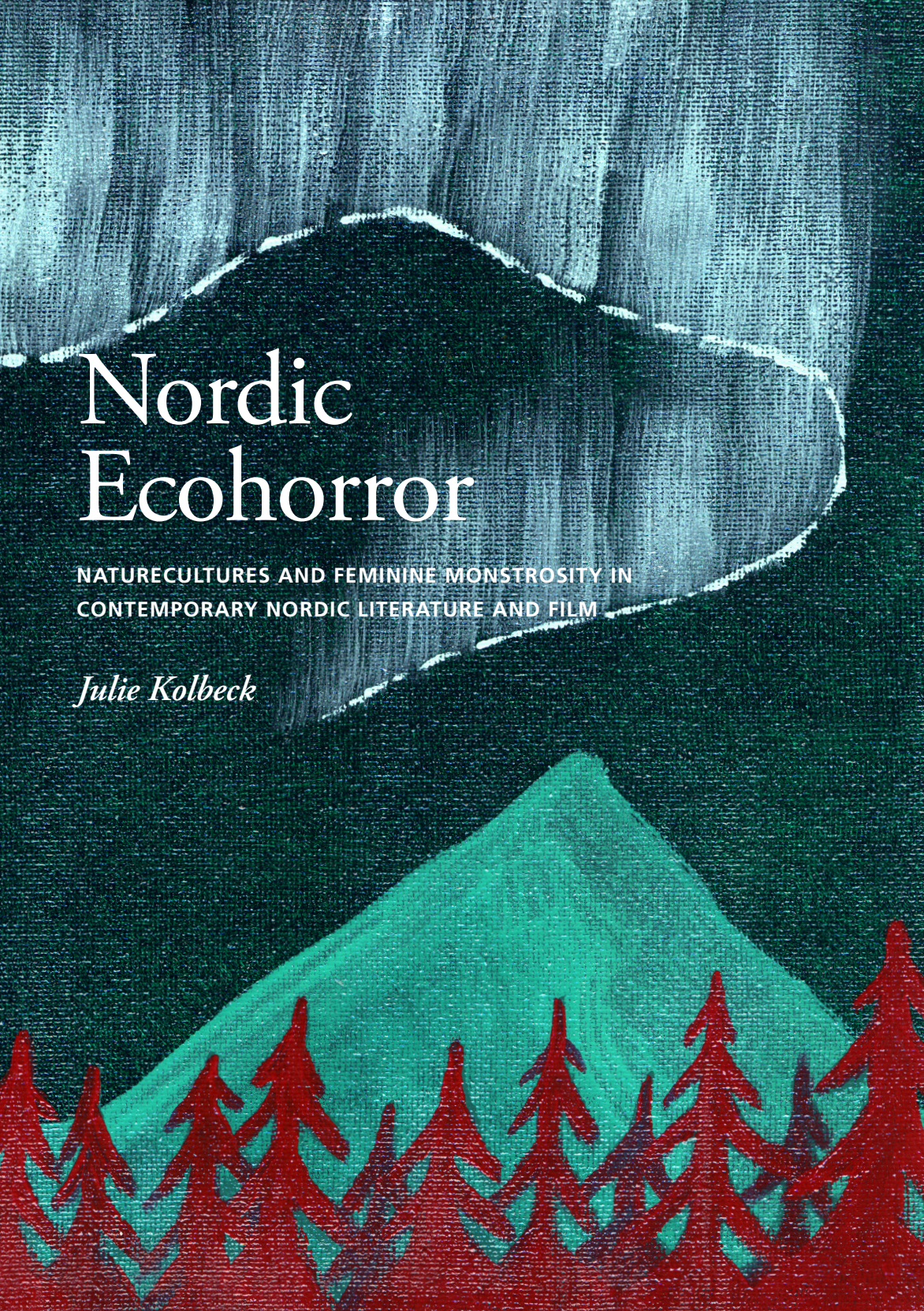
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Nordic Ecohorror

NATURECULTURES AND FEMININE MONSTROSITY IN
CONTEMPORARY NORDIC LITERATURE AND FILM

Julie Kolbeck

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Contemporary Nordic Literature and Film

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Til Mads

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Note to the Reader

The primary literary works analysed in this book have been consulted in published English translations where available. Where no published English translation exists for Scandinavian-language works, translations of quoted material are my own, and the original-language quotation is provided in a note. The same applies to Scandinavian scholarship and reviews. Icelandic and Finnish works have been consulted exclusively in published English or Scandinavian translations. While translation inevitably involves shifts in linguistic and cultural nuance, these translations nevertheless provide access to the narrative concerns and ecological imaginaries that are central to my study, and allow for a broader representation of Nordic ecohorror from across the region.

Translations of dialogue from non-English films and television series, as well as translations of reader responses from the empirical study, are my own. In these cases, no original-language version is provided in the notes.

Titles of novels, films, television series, and other artworks are presented in their original language, followed by an English translation in *italics*. Where there is no official English title, the translation is my own.

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Since monstrosity is all about breaking the rules, I begin this thesis with a brief acknowledgement, otherwise unc customary to the Literature Department at Lund University. And since ‘monster’ derives from the Latin *monstrum* meaning ‘omen’, why not start with a warning: This is a monstrous thesis. In corpus, theme, and content. It approaches its research questions from various angles and perspectives, draws on a great deal of theory and examines cross-aesthetic works. To navigate this undertaking, I have been fortunate to receive the support and guidance of many people.

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Det er nemt at fare vild i skoven
vi glemmer hvorfor vi gik derind

Anne Vestberg, *Katastrofen, byen og skoven* (2016: 51)

Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration.

Timothy Morton (2007: 5)

I. Uncanny Naturecultures: An Introduction

Life on Earth is ecohorrific. On the beaches of Chattogram in Bangladesh, scrapped container ships lie stranded, their rusting hulls leaching toxins into the sea.¹ In the Amazon, ‘the planet’s lungs’, over 4.44 million hectares were lost to deforestation in 2024 alone.² In Siberia, methane explosions have torn open the earth, leaving behind yawning permafrost craters.³ And Greenland, the global barometer for climate change, is melting at an alarming rate, shedding 12.5 billion tons of ice in a single day in August 2019.⁴ Meanwhile, global fertility has fallen to 2.2 births per woman as of 2023, raising urgent questions about demographic sustainability.⁵ These crises are not unfolding in isolation, but as a continual escalation of climatic instability manifesting in strange events such as unseasonal snow blanketing the Egyptian resort city of Hurghada, deadly monsoon floods swamping Pakistan, and raging wildfires in California, Australia, and South America – so vast they are visible from outer space.

Each natural disaster compounds the next, producing unpredictable chain reactions and escalating into further extreme climate events, widening social and political inequalities, refugee flows, epidemic outbreaks, warfare, and a looming sixth mass extinction, all caught up in a spiralling feedback loop in which the past reappears in haunting new shapes and forms. What surfaces is not only ecological collapse or the frail illusion of human mastery, but the return of what modernity sought to suppress: the deep entanglement of human and nonhuman life. The Danish poet Theis Ørntoft captures this interconnectedness in his reflections on the vast rafts of microplastics drifting through the oceans that have become their own ecosystem where algae absorb plastic, seabirds weave it into their nests, and fish ingest it only for it to return to our dinner plates. A process Ørntoft calls ‘a

bizarre monstrous ecological loop or cycle that ultimately makes it impossible to talk about how something is called nature and something is called culture' (2018: 34).⁶ As the boundaries between nature and culture unravel, the world takes on an increasingly horrific cast, where borders break, the familiar turns hostile, and the once-contained or discarded comes surging back with relentless, uncontrollable force.

In light of these uncanny realities, there is a mounting wave of ecological horror narratives, giving artistic form to the environmental dread and uncertainty that define the present. This is not to suggest that writing about nature (or its collapse) is without precedent, but rather that the horror literature and film of the twenty-first century are undergoing a transformation. As Sarah Dillon has observed, there has been a shift from a tradition of 'cosmic fear' to 'planetary fear', which is profoundly shaped by a growing '*self-consciousness* that we are living in the Anthropocene' (2018: 8, original emphasis) – the geological epoch defined by human impact. This shift has reoriented the dominant registers of contemporary horror storytelling, engaging a different set of scales and anxieties that arise not from external cosmic forces but from the volatile planetary conditions humans themselves have set in motion.

While this artistic shift towards 'planetary fear' helps explain the current proliferation of ecological horror, critics have also pointed to the troubling ambivalence that accompanies the genre. Simon Estok has been influential in highlighting ecohorror's potential to reinforce *ecophobia*, which he defines as 'an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism' (2009: 208). According to Estok, ecohorror exemplifies that dynamic by its 'representations of nature as an opponent that hurts, hinders, threatens, or kills us', which he identifies as inherently *ecophobic* (209). From this perspective, ecohorror risks amplifying fearful or adversarial responses to the nonhuman at a time when ecological interdependence demands new modes of care. Drawing on Gothic theory, Estok argues that ecohorror's dread arises when nature can no longer be kept in check – a framing that may inadvertently reproduce destructive attitudes to the environment rather than challenge them. At stake is a central tension in the genre. Does ecohorror warn against ecological destruction, or does it deepen the cultural fear of

nature on which such destruction depends? These questions become even more pointed when ecohorror is examined in regional, cultural contexts. For the genre does not manifest uniformly; it adapts to local histories and environmental imaginaries, producing forms of ecological fear that are culturally specific as well as globally resonant.

Against this global backdrop, the Nordic region has developed its own distinct imaginary of ecological horror. Here, environmental agency intersects with a cultural landscape long shaped by local mythologies, secular modernity, welfare state models, perceptions of nature, and enduring notions of regional ecological and social exceptionalism. Since 2000, the imagery in literature, film, television, and computer games has been increasingly haunted by environments and figures that are at once ecological and feminine, uncanny and romanticised, metaphorical and material, giving monstrous form to localised anxieties of the Anthropocene, refracted through Nordic landscapes and mythologies.⁷ Collectively, these works, which I term *Nordic ecohorror*, dramatise the collapse of familiar categories by staging the unsettling entanglement of nature and culture, human and nonhuman, body and environment.

What gives Nordic ecohorror its distinctive register is the way its *naturecultural* entanglements collide with the region's long-standing, romanticised belief in its own harmonious and exceptional relationship with nature. Central to this thesis is thus Donna Haraway's concept of 'natureculture', which rejects any clean separation between nature and culture, and instead looks to the relational, co-constitutive processes by which human and nonhuman worlds are continually made with and by one another (2003: 12). As Morton argues: 'To write about ecology is to write about society', not simply because ecological ideas are socially constructed, but because ecological crisis reveals the impossibility of separating nature from cultural life (2007: 17). Viewed in this light, there is no pristine nature untouched by human history, nor any culture existing outside material ecologies. Nordic ecohorror stages precisely these unstable entanglements to challenge dominant Nordic understandings of nature, while simultaneously mobilising a cultural critique of the ideologies underpinning such imaginaries.

In the Nordic countries, whose landscapes are woven into national mythologies and everyday practices, nature occupies a privileged place in national self-

understanding.⁸ It is not merely imagined as a scenic backdrop, but as a source of physical renewal, spiritual grounding, and collective belonging. This cultural imagination is articulated with striking clarity in a branding report from the Nordic Council of Ministers.

There is plenty of space in the Nordic region. There are vast plains, high mountains, dense forests, and large oceans, and people are free to spend a lot of their recreational time there, because of a labor market model that allows time for both work and leisure. (Nordic Council of Ministers 2019: 21)

Though intended to promote the region internationally, their statement also reveals something fundamental about the Nordic people's view of nature as both a site of spiritual and physical rejuvenation and a key component of a healthy work–life balance. A similar narrative is showcased on official tourist websites of the Scandinavian countries, where outdoor life features prominently as a key element of national and regional branding. Here, the term *friluftsliv* (lit. open-air life), first invented by the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen in his 1859 poem 'On the Heights', reflects the value of spending time out in the country for people's physical and spiritual well-being. The Norwegian tourist board explains that '*friluftsliv* is something quite special. It's a whole philosophy. A way of life', while Bente Lier, the secretary-general of Norsk Friluftsliv, further connects it to an existential Nordic sense of being one with nature: 'For Norwegians, the word has a deeper meaning. It is about "taking a break from daily stress" and being part of the cultural "we" that binds us together as human beings through our relationship with nature' (VisitNorway 2025).⁹ Similarly, the Danish tourist board writes that 'For Danes, *friluftsliv* is a form of disconnecting from our hectic lives and reconnecting with the nature around us' (VisitDenmark 2026).

Closely related is the Nordic principle of *the right to roam*, which enshrines public access to forests, lakes, and uncultivated land as a near-sacred civic freedom, grounding regional ideals of environmental stewardship and democracy in the landscape itself.¹⁰ Significantly, the Nordic Council of Ministers' branding narrative frames this access not simply as a natural privilege, but as something enabled by 'a labor market model that allows time for both work and leisure' (2019: 21). As such, the freedom to roam rests on the welfare state infrastructure of the

folkhem (lit. people's home) – the political ideal that imagines society as an orderly, egalitarian household in which environmental stewardship and collective well-being formed part of the same moral project, and whose labour market policies, social benefits, public infrastructure, and emphasis on work–life balance ensure that citizens not only may legally roam the countryside, but have the time and socioeconomic support to do so.¹¹

In this sense, the Nordic relationship with the environment has become increasingly inseparable from the social-democratic project where nature itself is woven into the promise of solidarity and egalitarianism that defines the region's political ideology. Over the decades, it has fuelled an international narrative of *Nordic exceptionalism*: a belief that the region exemplifies the pinnacle of sustainable, gender-equal, and socially progressive modernity. High rankings in the World Happiness Report and the global fascination with cultural keywords such as *hygge*, *lagom*, and *kos* have helped consolidate an external perception of the Nordics as quietly utopian.¹² Yet this idealised image often obscures the embedded exclusions and inequalities, as well as the region's entanglement in imperialist histories that, too, form part of its past and present. The rise of Nordic noir has brought this shadow side of the welfare state into view, revealing how its orderly surface conceals gendered violence and racialised marginalisation that belie the myth of untroubled harmony.

Nordic ecohorror extends this critical impulse, expanding its gaze beyond the social sphere to include the environment in ways that expose the fractures in the region's self-image of ecological virtue. In these works, nature is no longer the recreational landscape of national romanticism, nor the orderly green space of state-managed sustainability. Instead, nature erupts with unruly agency, unsettling the cultural narratives that once anchored Nordic identity. Here, natureculture is not a harmonious fusion but a volatile zone of contact where suppressed histories and ecological forces return with uncanny ferocity. Nordic ecohorror, by disturbing the boundary between the human and the nonhuman, the modern and the mythic, reveals how deeply ecological collapse is intertwined with cultural memory and sociopolitical ideology. In other words, the fault lines in the Nordic narrative of environmental and social exceptionalism are laid bare, illustrating that ecological

crises reveal – and are amplified by – any precarity along the axes of gender, class, indigeneity, and national belonging.

As part of this broader sociocultural critique, Nordic ecohorror frequently explores the intersection of Anthropocene anxieties and gendered conditions, with femininity emerging as a crucial analytical framework for negotiating ecological crisis and inherited cultural imaginaries. It is in this framework that the genre often returns to the fraught association between women and nature, invoking – and unsettling – their long-standing alignment as analogous objects of domination and idealisation in exploitative power structures. For this reason, I also argue that Nordic ecohorror exposes the co-constitutive relationship between the Anthropocene and the patriarchy.

One recent Nordic ecohorror film crystallises these convergences in its opening sequence, where a girl and a deer are staged as equally prey to heteropatriarchal violence. In its very first scenes, a young girl and her father cross a frozen lake, their small figures framed in an extreme long shot against a vast winter landscape. The horizon ripples with dark forest; the sun is extinguished beyond the trees. A close-up of the girl reveals her downwards gaze: through the glassy ice, fish glide just beneath her, indifferent to the thin, transparent boundary that holds her above them. An underwater shot reverses the gaze, offering a fish's-eye view through the ice: her face distorted yet clear through the same brittle layer. When they reach the far shore, the father unslings his rifle from his back. In the stillness of the snowy forest a deer steps into view, seemingly unaware of the humans nearby. Transfixed, doe-like, the girl stares wide-eyed at the animal as her father raises his weapon, sighting on the deer. Then the barrel shifts. His aim slides away from the deer and settles, with deliberate steadiness, on the back of his daughter's head. It is a shocking reversal. For a moment, the hunted deer and the girl are interchangeable targets, equally vulnerable to the same patriarchal trigger. Only when he lowers the rifle does the tension break. The deer bolts, and the girl, still unaware of how close she was to being a target, looks up at her father.



Figure 1. Thelma's father aiming his rifle at her during a hunting trip (*Thelma* 2017, 00:03:16).

This unsettling prologue introduces Norwegian director Joachim von Trier's feature film *Thelma* (2017), an ecohorrific reimagining of Stephen King's coming-of-age horror debut *Carrie* (1974), in which a young woman's queer awakening and emancipation from her authoritarian, fundamentalist Christian father erupt into telekinetic powers inseparable from the natural environment. As a modern-day witch, Thelma embodies a destructive elemental force: flocks of birds crash from the sky and the forest quivers at the swell of her emotions; her infant brother is transported from the bathtub to beneath the lake ice, drowned by a surge of jealousy she cannot control; and her father bursts into flames when her desire for vengeance flares. In these eruptions, Thelma's powers radiate through a dense material entanglement in which suppressed emotion and sexuality merge with fire, water, and air, rendering monstrous femininity and ecological horror not as separate motifs, but as resonant forces that amplify one another.

Thelma is not alone. In contemporary Nordic ecohorror, the feminine repeatedly emerges as a site where ecological disturbance and monstrous transformation converge. Folkloric figures in particular resurface with renewed urgency, not as nostalgic relics, but as haunting embodiments of past trauma and the wild forces of the nonhuman. In the Danish author Rasmus Daugbjerg's *Trold* (2023, 'Troll'), a female troll erupts from the forest, born of soil and climate grief, and is forced into an 'executioner's dress' that drives her to enact nature's vengeance on humanity. Similarly, the Swedish writer John Ajvide Lindqvist's short story

Gräns (2006, *The Border* 2013) questions the established demarcation of species, femininity, and sexuality in the figure of a female troll customs officer, who passes as human yet destabilises the very borders she polices. The tension between environment and embodiment extends into Netflix's Icelandic series *Katla* (2021), which revisits the Nordic changeling myth with uncanny births from volcanic ash, as female figures emerge from the earth as eerie doppelgangers who force a confrontation with grief, unresolved trauma, and the fragile boundaries of the human body and temporality. In a more speculative register, Siri Ranva Hjelm Jacobsen's *Dafnesyndromet* (2020, 'The Daphne Syndrome') reworks the Greek myth of the nymph Daphne, turning her metamorphic escape from Apollo into a meditation on gender and ecology, while Finnish author Emmi Itäranta's *Teemestarin kirja* (2012, *Memory of Water* 2014) situates a young woman's precarious guardianship of water in a landscape of drought and authoritarian control. In all these works, femininity becomes a threshold where myth, nature, and monstrosity meet in ways that illuminate ecohorror's broader naturecultural tensions.

This recurring association of feminine monstrosity with ecological disruption is not a notion plucked from thin air. As mentioned, Western cultural history has long viewed women and nature through the same lens – idealised as altruistic, nurturing, and life-giving while simultaneously feared as excessive or destructive. This suppressive dualism, as the ecofeminist Val Plumwood argues, operates through a set of hierarchical logics that position both women and nature as either passive or threatening, unlike the rational masculine subject. Central to this structure are practices of 'backgrounding', whereby the labour and agency of both women and the environment are rendered invisible either by hyperseparation, which exaggerates difference or otherness in order to justify domination, or by instrumentalisation, which treats both as resources to be managed or exploited (1993: 21). Either way, feminine monstrosity is fundamentally embedded in the ecohorror genre because women have historically been monsterised through their perceived proximity to nature.

Yet this does not mean that Nordic ecohorror either uncritically reaffirms or outright rejects this logic. Rather, the genre both inherits and unsettles this paired positioning of woman and nature. While feminine monstrosity and ecological

horror reflect the anxieties of the Anthropocene and the patriarchal systems that structure them, Nordic ecohorror mobilises their entanglement not to reiterate this dualism, but to expose the logics of domination that sustain it. Instead of retreating into the background, both woman and nature erupt with an unruly agency that forces into view the violence and exclusions inherent in the Nordic fantasies of harmony, ecological virtue, and social progress. In this way, the genre turns the woman–nature association against itself, revealing the forms of oppression and erasure on which these ideals depend.

In addressing these tensions, the works of Nordic ecohorror resonate far beyond the fictional worlds they envision, mirroring broader cultural, politicised negotiations of how gender and nature are imagined, contested, and lived in a time of accelerating planetary change. In other words, Nordic ecohorror registers and mediates the intertwined environmental and gendered instabilities of our time, pressing on anxieties that increasingly shape contemporary political discourse. In the Western world, the far right and its populists advance policies that simultaneously deny climate change while promoting anti-gender ideologies and abortion restrictions. Such agendas are often underpinned by a volatile mix of capitalist, nationalist, and religious fundamentalist perceptions of ‘nature’ – whether referring to sexuality, gender roles, maternity, or the environment – casting it as something to be controlled and strictly defined for ideological purposes. In recent years, these political currents have surfaced in the reversal in the US of *Roe v Wade* by the Supreme Court in 2022, alongside heightened climate change denialism in its politics under the likes of Donald Trump, while in Europe political parties such as Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, Alternative for Germany) promote agendas that are both anti-feminist and anti-environmentalist. The political climate attests to what Petra Kelly, co-founder of the German green political party, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Alliance 90/The Greens) observed in the 1990s – ‘There is a clear and profound relationship between militarism, environmental degradation, and sexism’ (1994: 12) – a connection that has gained renewed relevance in the past decade. While these dynamics play out globally, they resonate sharply in Nordic societies, where far-right movements increasingly mobilise narratives of natural order, gender normativity, and national purity in ways counter to the region’s self-image of ecological and social progressivism.

Therefore, by focusing on feminine monstrosity as a site where cultural anxieties about gender and environment intersect, I show how contemporary Nordic narratives offer a critical vocabulary for articulating – and challenging – dominant ecological imaginaries, both political and aesthetic. To that extent, Nordic ecohorror is exempt from Estok’s influential caution that the genre risks reinforcing ecophobia by framing nature as threatening or hostile. While Estok is right to draw attention to the dangers of representing the nonhuman primarily through fear, the Nordic works examined here mobilise horror less to demonise nature than to expose the cultural structures – heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism, extractivism – that have rendered both women and environments vulnerable. Their monstrous figures do not simply terrify; they materialise the social and ecological entanglements that the region’s narratives of exceptionalism have long overlooked.

Accordingly, Nordic ecohorror is part of a cultural field increasingly invested in the role of art as ecological activism. A number of Nordic writers have framed fiction as inseparable from the urgent socioecological realities of our time. Finnish author Emmi Itäranta emphasises that ‘When our world is on fire, so must our writing be’ (2021), while the Danish poet Lars Skinnebach insists that art which ignores the climate crisis is irrelevant, like ‘playing violin while the ship goes down’ (2023: 24).¹³ Theis Ørntoft agrees, stating that ‘literature that makes the human social world – and only that – its subject matter is part of the evil’ (2018: 39).¹⁴ Such statements frame literature not as ornamental, but as ethically bound to address planetary issues.

Nordic Ecohorror, then, is not mere entertainment, as Estok otherwise warns against; it is one of the cultural forms by which societies negotiate Anthropocene fears and imagine possible futures. In tracing how Nordic ecohorror mobilises feminine monstrosity to probe the volatile entanglements of nature and gender, I situate these works as crucial sites of ecological thought – places where the collapse of old categories paves new ways of sensing, narrating, and inhabiting a rapidly changing world.

The Monstrous and the Feminine

If Nordic ecohorror fiction foregrounds the collapse of stable distinctions between nature and culture in the Anthropocene, the figure in which this instability most forcefully materialises is the monster. The works I examine trace how ecological disturbance and feminine excess converge in monstrous forms that unsettle the norms of ‘natural’ order. To understand the critical and cultural work performed by these figures, it is necessary first to consider what a monster is, how monstrosity is constructed, and why femininity has been so closely linked to it in Western thought.¹⁵

In monster theory and horror studies, monstrosity is typically understood as a form of otherness, whether manifested in physiology, behaviour, or deviation from social standards and ideals. As Rosi Braidotti writes, ‘The monster is the bodily incarnation of difference from the basic human norm: it is a deviant, an a-no(r)maly; it is abnormal’ (2011: 299). The monster thus appears primarily as that which lies outside the sanctioned boundaries of social and cultural order. However, this formulation immediately raises the question of what norm, exactly, is being invoked. For Braidotti, the ‘basic human norm’ against which monstrosity is measured is neither neutral nor universal; it is historically modelled on what she identifies as the idealised body, marked by its ‘masculinity, whiteness, heterosexuality, and Christian values’ (1996: 141). The greater the distance from this position, the more readily a body is produced as monstrous.

To say that a body is produced as monstrous is also to emphasise that monstrosity is not simply an inherent biological anomaly, but is a culturally generated deviation, constructed on the margins of a social order in order to stabilise the centre. By this logic, monstrosity emerges through a necessary act of exclusion – a societal defence mechanism that maintains the illusion of a boundary between ‘them’ and ‘us’, monstrosity and normality, outsiders and insiders. In *Skin Shows*, Jack Halberstam refers to these cultural practices as ‘monster technologies’; the mechanisms by which certain bodies are repeatedly produced and circulated as monstrous (1995: 21). Such technologies also ensure that the monster remains a flexible figure, capable of absorbing shifting cultural anxieties and embodying different forms of otherness, often simultaneously, whether racialised, gendered, sexual, or national.

In 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)' (1996), Jeffrey Jerome Cohen provides a similarly foundational vocabulary for understanding this dynamic. His first thesis – 'the monster's body is a cultural body' – emphasises that monsters are never merely fictional beings; they embody the fears, desires, and contradictions of the cultures that create them. Monsters, Cohen writes, are 'difference made flesh' (1996: 7), who mark the edges of the thinkable, the permissible, the representable. Crucially, monsters are epistemological problems: they appear when categories fail, when boundaries blur, when the familiar becomes strange. They emerge as 'disturbing hybrids' that resist 'any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition' (6-7).

The reason for such alienation strategies has less to do with deviancy as such and more to do with the ways monstrosity exposes the instability of the ideal it is defined against. In this way, the monster implies that the boundaries securing one's own place in the norm are never fixed but permeable; that under different circumstances, anyone might slip beyond them. For that reason, as Margrit Shildrick argues in *Embodying the Monster* (2002), the monstrous constitutes a threat to the autonomous self, revealing that its apparent coherence depends on borders that cannot be fully maintained. She argues that the monstrous is not simply that which is excluded, but that which marks the fragility of the boundaries by which the self is constituted, undermining the fantasy of a unified, impermeable human subject (2002: 3-4). The monster does not simply exist outside the norm; it haunts the norm, revealing its constructedness and the instability on which it depends.

Encountering the monster, then, is never simply an encounter with an external other, but a confrontation with the parts of ourselves we disavow. As Shildrick notes, 'In seeking confirmation of our own secure subjecthood in what we are not, what we see mirrored in the monster are the leaks and flows, the vulnerabilities in our own embodied being' (2002: 4). Through this mirroring, the monster's ambivalent position becomes apparent: it is neither 'total stranger nor completely familiar' (Braidotti 1996: 292), nor 'wholly self nor wholly other' (Shildrick 2002: 3), but occupies a shifting position where selfhood and otherness blur and collapse into one another.¹⁶

This ontological in-betweenness helps to explain why monsters provoke ambiguous responses that flicker between fear and fascination, disgust and desire,

denial and identification. As Noël Carroll has observed, the monster's power lies in its 'categorical impurity,' its refusal to remain confined in established classificatory systems (2020: 137). Rather than simply occupying the margins of cultural norms, monsters expose the fragility of the binary systems by which identity and meaning are conventionally secured, revealing how dependent on stable oppositions these systems are, and how easily such oppositions can be undone.

The monster thus functions as an omen of category crisis and a premonition of what lies beyond established dualistic systems. This dynamic is particularly resonant in the context of the Anthropocene, where the once-standard divisions between humans and nonhumans, nature and culture, begin to collapse. Here, the monstrous becomes a figure for the entanglement of naturecultures, and a sign that the environment is no longer a passive backdrop but an active, sometimes threatening participant in shared worlds. Therefore, in Nordic ecohorror, nature appears monstrous, not because it is wholly other, but because it reveals that the relations between human and more-than-human life persist beyond, and often in spite of, the boundaries constructed to separate them.

Rethinking Feminine Monstrosity

If monstrosity emerges through deviation from the norms that delineate the idealised body – as Braidotti describes it: white, heterosexual, and male – then it is unsurprising that the feminine has so often been positioned in close proximity to the monstrous. As Shildrick also observes, 'In the light of the long-standing association of the feminine with disorder, in terms both of the irrational mind and the leaky body, the conflation of women with monsters should come as no surprise' (2002: 30). Within this Western, patriarchal logic, one might argue that women or femininity are always already positioned as monsters, regardless of their behaviour, morality or aesthetics. It is a position women do not earn, but are born into.

It is for this reason that Barbara Creed introduces the concept of the 'monstrous-feminine' in her seminal work of the same name. Here, Creed deliberately chooses this specific formulation to emphasise that monstrosity is constructed through and defined by femininity, rather than something femininity occasionally acquires. The hyphen underscores this point further, binding the two terms together to signal that

within patriarchal and psychoanalytical discourse, ‘the feminine’ and ‘the monstrous’ are produced in tandem and cannot be cleanly separated (2024: 5).

Creed’s intervention is foundational. With *The Monstrous–Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1993), she was one of the first scholars to radically rethink the figure of the female monster. Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, Creed argues that the prototype for all forms of monstrosity is grounded in the female reproductive body, a site that culture repeatedly frames as excessive, leaking, compromising. Throughout the book, she identifies seven archetypes, or ‘faces’, of the monstrous–feminine that either interlock with the fear of female generative power – as it is embodied in the primordial archaic mother in *Alien* (Scott 1979), the monstrous womb in *The Brood* (Cronenberg 1979), and the castrating mother in *Psycho* (Hitchcock 1960) – or with cultural anxieties surrounding female sexuality as sin, perversion, or exclusory of male desire, exemplified by the possessed girl’s masturbation in *The Exorcist* (Friedkin 1973), the lesbian vampires in *The Hunger* (Scott 1983), and the menstruating witch in *Carrie* (De Palma 1976). In these examples, Creed employs a feminist psychoanalytical viewpoint to emphasise how female corporeality itself is a site of abjection and, crucially, to challenge Freudian and Lacanian notions of sexual difference by circumventing the patriarchal assumption that woman is feared because she is castrated rather than castrator.

However, while *The Monstrous–Feminine* remains an unparalleled work, with a near-monopolistic influence on the theorising of female monsters, I nevertheless pursue alternative approaches that are less indebted to psychoanalysis.¹⁷ Although Creed’s use of abjection theory gestures towards bodily matter and affect, her framework ultimately remains grounded in psychoanalytic thought, which often relies on a structuralist perception of the body as an abstract figure – a metaphorical vessel rather than a lived, material experience of real bodies in real contexts. This orientation is not unique to Creed, but reflects a broader tendency in horror and monster studies which, as Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock also observes, has frequently turned to psychoanalysis because that is where ‘monstrosity and the affect it elicits have been theorized most fully’ (2020: 29). Yet in relation to feminine monstrosity, this dominance has also narrowed the scope of analysis, repeatedly returning to the same formulations of castration anxiety, maternal abjection, and the symbolic

coding of the female body as lack, while leaving less room for the lived, fleshy, and affective dimensions of monstrous embodiment. Psychoanalysis likewise tends to operate in a relatively narrow emotional register, circling around familiar formulations of anxiety, disgust, and desire, thereby constraining the far more expansive affective spectrum of horror aesthetics and feminine monstrosity, which encompasses sensations such as irritation, paranoia, hunger, grief, and pain – affects that exceed the psychoanalytic repertoire of the hysterical, abject, or castrated woman.

Rather than continuing along the well-trodden path of poststructuralism, I instead take an approach that foregrounds the material, affective, and corporeal dimensions of the female monster.¹⁸ In fact, I argue that such an ecomaterialist and transcorporeal engagement with feminine monstrosity can prove especially productive in the context of the Anthropocene. Moreover, it also broadens Creed's claim that women are rendered monstrous almost exclusively through their maternal bodies by extending the framework to include additional dimensions such as emotional, relational, and ecological entanglements.

This material turn also brings into view other limitations in Creed's framework that I wish to address head on. Crucially, it is at times unclear whether she regards the monstrous–feminine as a position of empowering emancipation or one of oppression to be exposed and critiqued. On the one hand, she announces that she wants to challenge traditional perceptions of woman as merely victims; on the other, she is also 'not arguing that simply because monstrous–feminine is constructed as an active rather than passive figure that this image is "feminist" or "liberated"' (2024: 8). While this double stance – attempting to validate the monstrous while simultaneously distancing it from feminist liberation – is not directly contradictory, it does introduce some conceptual instability. The tension is more apparent when she claims that the monstrous–feminine 'speaks to us more about male fears than about feminine desire or feminine subjectivity' (2024: 8), a formulation that somewhat complicates her initial aspiration to validate the existence and distinctness of female monsters. It also sits uneasily alongside her ambition to disrupt psychoanalytical theories of sexual difference – an objective she periodically overlooks and, at times, inadvertently reaffirms. Her suggestion that monstrosity is

not masculine but entirely feminine exemplifies this slippage, inverting rather than dismantling the construct she seeks to critique.

For these reasons, I have not adopted Creed's hyphenated concept of the monstrous–feminine, a concept which solidifies the co-constitution of woman and monstrosity as a fixed and externally imposed condition. Instead, I engage with 'feminine monstrosity' because it reopens the question of agency. Rather than situating monstrosity solely as a projection of androcentric anxiety, I am interested in what the monstrous does – its capacity for disruption, power, and transformational force. Instead of assuming that monstrosity is only forced on women, I entertain the possibility that monstrousness can also operate as a position from which women can act. The monster is thus not always a victim of *monsterisation*, but can also gain *monstrous agency*, drawing power from the very qualities meant to marginalise her. In this sense, feminine monstrosity is not merely a symptom of patriarchal fear but a volatile and potentially generative force – one that troubles normative boundaries and is ripe with possibilities for reimagining embodied, relational life in the Anthropocene.

Yet, while a focus on monstrous agency may offer critical and reconfiguring openings, it also carries complications of its own, particularly the risk of domesticating the monster. In some strands of cultural theory, partially motivated by the affirmative ethics of new materialism or certain feminist deconstructive approaches, the monster has been championed for its ability – or 'promises' (Haraway 1992) and 'possibilities' (Howell 2022) – to disrupt and transform rigid norms, viewing it as a tool of liberation. While subscribing to these perspectives, I am alert to 'postmodern celebrations of the monstrous' that risk neutralising its danger, flattening its complexity, and overlooking the untameable excess at its core, ultimately causing the monster to vanish before our eyes (McNally 2011: 10). Therefore, I am wary of fully being 'on the side of the monsters' as Margrit Shildrick puts it (2002: 129) or turning them 'into pets' as cautioned by Jacques Derrida (1990: 54).

For this reason, my interest lies not in valorising the monster – as good, bad, or liberating – but in taking its agency seriously. I have set out to meet the monster on her own terms: as an excessive and uncontrollable being, whose immense strangeness has the potency to leave us feeling fearful and powerless. It is this

unsettling force, this refusal to be contained, redeemed or made useful, that renders feminine monstrosity a productive site for thinking with and through the Anthropocene; an era where ruptures and unruly enmeshments increasingly shape the messy conditions of life on earth.

In the Nordic context, monstrous agency is especially revealing. Nordic ecohorror repeatedly stages feminine monstrosity as a volatile point of contact between the human and more-than-human worlds, allowing the monster to expose the tensions, contradictions, and suppressed histories embedded in the region's socioecological imaginary. Here, the feminine monster does not function as a symbolic placeholder or a softened metaphor for environmental rupture. Instead, she materialises its force: its affective volatility, its refusal of harmony, and its power to spill beyond the bounds of human containment. Whether manifesting as witches, trolls, huldras, revenants, or ordinary women whose bodies erupt with elemental power, feminine monstrosity becomes a conduit for Nordic ecohorror's confrontation with both ecological upheaval and the cultural narratives that have traditionally framed the Nordics as environmentally pure, socially equal, and morally superior. In doing so, these works reveal the monster not as a deviation from Nordic identity, but as a figure that exposes the fragile currents of Nordic exceptionalism and the turbulent naturecultural entanglements beneath its surface.

Research Gaps and Questions

In terms of the broader methodological and conceptual gaps or openings in the existing scholarship, the conjunction of ecohorror and feminine monstrosity perhaps most significantly brings into focus two critical lineages whose points of intersection, though not wholly unexamined, remain largely underexplored, particularly in relation to Nordic cultural production and in an interdisciplinary framework attentive to materiality, affect, and reception. While feminist theory and ecocritical scholarship have each provided frameworks for examining how texts and media negotiate cultural anxieties about gender and ecological entanglements, they have more often developed on parallel tracks in the context of horror and monstrosity. Foundational feminist approaches to horror have focused on how the genre constructs gendered embodiment as abject and excessive, yet without

attending to ecological frameworks or Anthropocene concerns (Kristeva 1982; Williams 1984; Creed 1993; Freeland 2000). Conversely, key ecocritical and material feminist thinkers, such as Timothy Morton and Stacy Alaimo, have developed nuanced accounts of ecological enmeshment, bodily porosity, and material agency – often with sustained attention to gender – yet rarely in direct relation to horror or feminine monstrosity. By bringing these critical traditions into dialogue, I investigate how Nordic ecohorror stages ecological dread and feminine monstrosity as materially and conceptually intertwined, and how this entanglement negotiates the cultural imaginaries of the Nordic region.

Importantly, the conjunction of environmental horror and feminine monstrosity is not a product of my theoretical framework; it was already staged in the Nordic ecohorror works themselves, in their portrayal of femininity as ecological threat and ecology as feminised excess. In doing so, the works show that gendered and ecological monstrosity are best understood not in isolation, but as mutually constitutive forces. What is at stake is not merely the recurrence of the woman-as-monster or nature-as-antagonist, but the structural alignment of the Anthropocene with the patriarchy, by which fears and desires are projected onto feminised ecologies. Attending to this configuration allows Nordic ecohorror to be read not as a hybrid of two familiar motifs, but as a mode that exposes how cultural anxieties about gender and ecology are structurally intertwined.

Another limitation in ecohorror research is that despite the growing prominence of the genre in contemporary Nordic literature and media, scholarly attention has focused on film, leaving literary ecohorror comparatively overlooked.¹⁹ Similarly, studies of audience and reader engagement with ecohorror – or just horror in general – remain scarce. Where such empirical studies do exist, they have largely concentrated on either cinema or gaming, while focusing almost exclusively on male antagonists. Moreover, as noted above, the literature on horror and especially on feminine monstrosity has long been shaped by psychoanalytic approaches. While such frameworks provide crucial insights into horror's negotiation of sexuality and the unconscious, they are not exhaustive when it comes to contemporary concerns such as the climate crisis or embodied, emotional experiences, all of which are central to ecohorror's negotiation of Anthropocene anxieties. Broadly speaking, both monstrosity and the horror genre operate through dynamics of affect,

materiality, and reception, yet these dimensions have not been consistently foregrounded in existing research. With the emergence of Nordic ecohorror, where ecological monstrosities unfold through affective intensities and material entanglements, these dimensions warrant closer attention.

Even when scholarship does connect (monstrous) femininity to nature, as some ecofeminists have already done (Griffin 1978; Merchant 1980; Shiva 1988; Plumwood 1993), it is often cautious, emphasising the dangers of that association and critiquing it as essentialist or regressive rather than exploring its critical or aesthetic potential. Such readings have been important in exposing the risks of collapsing femininity into nature, yet they also risk limiting our understanding of how these categories might be theorised together in more generative ways.²⁰ I respond to this limitation by proposing new ways of approaching feminine monstrosity – not as an essentialising trope to be outright rejected, but as a critical tool whose material and affective dimensions warrant closer attention, and by which the nexus of femininity and nature can be reconsidered beyond familiar critical impasses.

In response to these gaps, the aim of this thesis is to advance new dialogical approaches to Nordic ecohorror and its negotiations of feminine monstrosity and Nordic naturecultures across contemporary literature, film, and television. These approaches take the material and monstrous dimensions seriously; consider their manifestations in contemporary Nordic cultural production, including literature; and explore how these unsettling figures are experienced and negotiated by readers and viewers. Together, these three concerns inform my research questions and are the reason why this thesis is structured as three interconnected parts, each with its own central question while collectively forming a cumulative analytical trajectory.

The first inquiry pertains to the conceptual and aesthetic contours of the genre itself: *What defines Nordic ecohorror as a mode?* Here, I deliberately use the broader term *mode*, as I consider Nordic ecohorror to be not only a generic category but also a recurring aesthetic and affective configuration that traverses different media and narrative forms, and traditions.²¹ I pursue the question throughout the thesis, but develop it most fully in Part I, which establishes the theoretical vocabulary and traces the genealogies that shape ecohorror and feminine monstrosity. It also examines what makes Nordic ecohorror distinctly Nordic – how northern

landscapes, local mythologies, and cultural imaginaries infuse texts with a regional sense of ecological dread – while foregrounding one of the mode’s central features: the multifaceted representation of feminine monstrosity.²²

The second question concerns how these representations are encountered and negotiated by readers: *How do readers experience and negotiate representations of ecological horror and feminine monstrosity?* I address this primarily in Part II, which combines postcritical and affect theory with empirical reader studies and analyses of public reception in reviews, interviews, and other paratexts. By focusing on reader engagement, I move beyond interpretive readings to illuminate how monstrous femininity is interpreted and (mis)recognised by its readers, as well as how affective responses shape broader cultural understandings of ecology, gender, and the monstrous.

The third question explores how feminine monstrosity manifests aesthetically in the ecohorror: *How do Nordic ecohorror texts mobilise feminine monstrosity across diverse ecological terrains, and what cultural imaginaries do these representations expose?* I pursue this in detail in Part III in what I term an ecotrope-based analysis of literature, film, and television, tracing how monstrous femininity performs and materialises in forested landscapes, icy expanses, and corporeal flesh. More specifically, I investigate how narratives of gender and environment intersect in specific ecologies, establishing how monstrosity operates as a site of both critique and imaginative possibility.

Ultimately, I propose new ways of approaching feminine monstrosity in Nordic ecohorror, examining contemporary Nordic cultural texts and media with an interdisciplinary theoretical framework informed by feminist new materialism, ecocriticism, affect theory, and monster studies, moving beyond traditional ecofeminist and psychoanalytic approaches. United by a shared materialist orientation, these perspectives make it possible to rethink the boundaries between human and nonhuman, nature and culture, self and world, emphasising the uncanny entanglement of environments, bodies, emotions, and material processes. Methodologically, my contribution lies in combining conceptual analysis, empirical reader studies, and textual interpretation to illuminate how cultural imaginaries of gender and nature are produced, experienced, and contested in contemporary Nordic storytelling. I not only chart the contours of Nordic ecohorror and its

portrayal of feminine monstrosity, but also tease out its untapped potential to reframe how we think about gender and the unfolding planetary crisis in a distinctly Nordic *lenscape*.

Material and Selection Criteria

While ‘ecohorror’ is a transnational phenomenon, much of what is commonly recognised under the label stems from American film and television. These works are among the most widely circulated and culturally visible examples of the genre, but their representations cannot be taken as universal. Nordic ecohorror has evolved out of its own cultural imaginaries of nature and therefore offers a distinctive lens by which to examine how ecological anxieties are narrated in a specific context. Whereas contemporary Hollywood-produced ecohorror has often foregrounded large-scale catastrophe, apocalyptic spectacle, or survivalist narratives, Nordic works approach ecological crisis with restrained, self-reflexive, and sociocritical modes.²³ Drawing on regional conceptions of gender politics, welfare state ideology, climate exceptionalism, and local folklore, these texts foreground how ecological imaginaries are bound up with questions of inequality, suppression, and nation-building, while remaining attentive to the nonhuman and the monstrous.

Studying ecohorror in a Nordic context therefore matters because the texts offer alternative perspectives and have a distinctive ecological potential that might prove useful outside the region. Instead of framing ecological crisis through the spectacular, ecophobic, or romanticised visions of nature, Nordic ecohorror often approaches ecological emergency through a *dark ecological* sensibility attuned to grief and existential unease. Less concerned with action-driven doomsday narratives of revenge and redemption, the works foreground emotional depth and ethical reflection, prompting a reckoning not only with the climate crisis, but with the ways we imagine nature and coexistence. In doing so, they probe contemporary imaginaries about ecological fears – not only climate change, but also Nordic identity, colonial trauma, and reproductive futures – and invite readers and viewers to reorient their ways of imagining and inhabiting a shared world.

To explore these region-specific dynamics in depth, I have examined a corpus of contemporary literary texts, television series, and feature films originating primarily

from the Nordic region since 2000.²⁴ Though diverse in form and medium, these works have been selected according to four interrelated criteria.

First, all selected works fall under my definition of Nordic ecohorror as a mode – in its most basic terms, narratives in which environments and nonhuman entities emerge as monstrous sources of dread and destruction, ultimately evoking both a fear *of* and *for* nature. Although these works are rarely, if ever, marketed explicitly as either ecohorror or horror, they are united in their capacity to unsettle anthropocentric and pastoral-national imaginaries, accentuating the agency of the more-than-human and exposing human societies' ecological enmeshment.

Second, the texts are characterised by a Nordic situatedness, understood here as primarily including works created by Nordic authors, directors, or production companies, narratively situated in recognisably Nordic environments and embedded in distinctively Nordic cultural frameworks such as folklore, welfare ideology, and colonial histories of territorial appropriation and resource exploitation.²⁵ However, alongside locally produced texts, the corpus also accommodates the external or partially external perspectives offered by Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019) and Issa López's HBO series *True Detective: Night Country* (2024), which resonate with and reimagine Nordic environments and sociocultural imaginaries about national identity. In these cases, 'Nordic' is not only a matter of geography or authorship, but of an aesthetic, cultural, and ecological orientation. While this broader framing invites attention to how Nordic culture may be represented and reframed through multiple outsider perspectives (a dimension I do not explore in depth), it also reflects how Nordic ecohorror increasingly circulates as a transnational mode whose storytelling practices extend beyond the region itself.

Third, the corpus is defined by its contemporaneity. It comprises works published or released since the turn of the millennium, especially from the 2010s on, thereby reflecting contemporary understandings and conceptions of nature in the Nordic region, as well as the cultural processing of our present planetary predicament in the context of accelerating climate change and shifting sociopolitical conditions.

Finally, each work features feminine monstrosity as a central motif. Whether through monstrous female figures, unsettling maternal bodies, or feminised environments imbued with volatile vitality, femininity shapes the conflicts,

mediates ecological tensions, catalyses crises, and works as a crucial site where questions of nature and gender are articulated and contested. While not all Nordic ecohorror centres on feminine monstrosity, the motif nevertheless recurs frequently in contemporary Nordic ecohorror narratives, making it one of the mode's most persistent thematic configurations. Feminine monstrosity thus emerges not only as a recurring motif in the corpus, but also as a central analytical lens for my examination of how ecological anxiety is entangled with the naturecultural configurations of reproduction, embodiment, care, sexuality, and otherness.

Together, these four criteria ensure that the corpus addresses my central research questions concerning how contemporary Nordic ecohorror narratives mediate ecological anxiety, reimagine (with) feminine monstrosity, and unsettle dominant regional understandings of nature, gender, and human exceptionalism. In addition to these criteria, the corpus deliberately includes a range of media – including feature films, television series, novels, and short stories – the better to demonstrate the scope of contemporary Nordic ecohorror.²⁶ Although I do not engage with questions of mediality or comparative media analysis, the cross-aesthetic corpus helps illuminate recurring narrative and thematic patterns in different forms of cultural expression. It also reflects the growing prominence of ecohorror in contemporary Nordic culture, given that the entanglement of ecological horror and feminine monstrosity extends beyond any single genre or storytelling tradition.

In curating the corpus, I have also sought to balance works that circulate in different cultural registers. The selection therefore includes both critically acclaimed, internationally recognised works (such as Karl Ove Knausgård's *Morgenstjernen* and Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*) and more popular cultural formats, including crime fiction and television drama (Sigurðardóttir's *Auðnin* and SVT's *Midnattssol*). This is intentional. Ecohorror in the Nordic region manifests across both elite and mass-market cultural spheres, and the inclusion of works from both contexts allows the project to capture a broader, more representative range of how ecohorror is articulated and negotiated in contemporary Nordic culture.

Last but not least, to capture how the texts resonate beyond the page and screen, I also incorporate empirical material generated by a qualitative reading study, which investigates how a group of Nordic readers engage with representations of feminine monstrosity in ecohorror texts. This empirical dimension expands the scope of the

project beyond a textual analysis to include the affective and ethical responses that such narratives evoke in readers. By attending to how readers interpret and emotionally respond to depictions of monstrous femininity, the study offers valuable insight into the cultural work these texts perform and how they shape and contest broader imaginaries of gender and nature. In this way, the empirical material complements the textual analyses and enriches my methodological approach, revealing how feminine monstrosity operates not only on the level of representation, but also in the sphere of reception and lived cultural experience.

Thesis Structure and Analytical Trajectory

This thesis unfolds in three interconnected parts that move from conceptual and theoretical foundations, through questions of reception, to close analysis. Beginning with the questions of definition and approach – what ecohorror and feminine monstrosity are and how they can be studied – I move on to how such representations are received and experienced by readers, and ultimately to interpretive readings of Nordic ecohorror works and the ways they negotiate cultural imaginaries of femininity, monstrosity, and ecology.

Part I contains two chapters that lay the conceptual and theoretical foundation underpinning this thesis. First, it introduces Nordic ecohorror as a genre and a mode, tracing its generic lineage, affective dimensions, and aesthetic strategies before situating them in a Nordic context, using Knausgård's novel *Morgenstjernen* (2020, *The Morning Star* 2021) as an example (Chapter Three). Then it turns to the second central concept, tracing the genealogical and material dimensions of feminine monstrosity as they unfold in von Trier's film *Antichrist* (2009) (Chapter Four). Part I thus presents exploratory readings in which *Morgenstjernen* and *Antichrist* are the examples with which the central concepts, theoretical frameworks, and methodological approaches are introduced and operationalised.

In Part II the focus shifts from conception to reception. Here, I consider how readers – both empirical and archival – engage with and respond to representations of feminine monstrosity and ecological horror. First, I present an empirical reader study that examines affective responses and interpretive negotiations surrounding feminine monstrosity, moving beyond aesthetic analysis to investigate what such

portrayals *do* to readers – how they disturb, enchant, or provoke – and how such responses are mediated by cultural norms, social dynamics, and literary conventions (Chapter Five). Secondly, I contextualise these findings in terms of broader literary, cultural frameworks by exploring the Nordic tradition of (social) realism – both historically and in contemporary reception – and its impact on how ecohorror as a speculative, supernatural, and affectively charged genre is received and negotiated in the Nordic literary landscape (Chapter Six). Part II thus extends the thesis beyond textual analysis to show how cultural expectations, genre conventions, and reading practices shape how feminine monstrosity is felt and understood in Nordic ecohorror – and, more broadly, how cultural discourses of gender and nature are produced, negotiated, and transformed through acts of reading.

In Part III, I turn from reception to close reading, applying the conceptual tools and methodological insights developed in the previous parts to three in-depth literary and visual analyses, each structured around a distinct ecotrope. With this term, I combine the literary notion of the *trope* – understood as a recurring figure, motif, or conceptual pattern that shapes narrative meaning – with the ecological concept of the *ecotope*, referring to a specific environmental unit or zone. There is also a nod to the related concept of the *ecotone*, which denotes the transitional space between two ecological communities, as reimagined by writers such as Julianna Spahr, Joshua Clover and Astrida Neimanis. For Clover and Spahr, the ecotone is a poetic and political ‘transition zone’ or ‘space of flows’ where the human, the nonhuman, the social, and the ecological intermingle and transform one another (2017: 149). Neimanis likewise approaches the ecotone as a feminist space of relational becoming, describing it as ‘a zone of fecundity, creativity, transformation’ where bodies and environments are continuously co-constituted through fluid entanglements that entail ethical responsibilities across difference (2017: 93). In this thesis, ecotrope designates not only a thematic or spatial focus, but also a conceptual lens with which to view tension, exchange, and entanglement. It refers to dynamic zones in cultural texts, where environmental logics and cultural imaginaries intersect and transform one another.

In practice, Part III centres on three ecotopes in turn – folk horror, Arctic horror, and body horror (Chapter Seven, Eight and Nine). These chapters open with a brief introduction to their respective ecotopes and the ecological

entanglements they engage – green forest, snowy white landscape, red flesh – before turning to detailed analyses of key texts. Serving as analytical frameworks, the ecotopes anchor the analyses in a distinct ecological, narrative terrain with its own affective resonances, while also drawing on regionally inflected histories, cultural traditions, and imaginaries of nature, monstrosity and femininity in the Nordic region, including folklore, the Arctic, and motherhood. Part III thus traces how feminine monstrosity emerges and unsettles at various sites, and how cultural narratives of gender and nature are both shaped by and constitutive of the environments in which they take form.

More specifically, the first chapter in Part III examines the ecotrope of folk horror through Ari Aster's horror film *Midsommar* (2019), tracing how Nordic folklore, pagan cosmologies, and the region's relationships with nature both shape and destabilise ideas of national identity and environmental mythology (Chapter Seven). Here, I examine how feminine monstrosity takes the exaggerated form of matriarchal cultism and 'green' utopianism, revealing how intensified ideals of femininity, collectivity, and ecological harmony can slide into exclusionary or authoritarian formations that raise disturbing questions about gendered power, purity, and belonging. Next, I turn to the ecotrope of Arctic horror and a transnational reading of Icelandic, American, and Swedish texts and television series, including Yrsa Sigurðardóttir's *Auðnin* (2005, *The Day is Dark* 2011), HBO's *True Detective: Night Country* (2024), and season one of SVT's *Midnattssol* (2016, *Midnight Sun*). Here, I investigate the colonial histories and ongoing geopolitical tensions embedded in the North, particularly in Arctic and subarctic territories that have long been sites of resource extraction, Indigenous erasure, and symbolic purification (Chapter Eight). I specifically interrogate how whiteness (understood not merely as a colour, but as an ideological, aesthetic, and racialised construct) in these narratives upholds dominant environmental imaginaries and marginalises alternative ecological perspectives. In this context, feminine monstrosity is frequently associated with the spectral, the silenced, and the politically repressed: figures or spaces that haunt the shifting boundaries between land, memory, and sovereignty. Lastly, I explore the ecotrope of body horror in narratives of monstrous maternity, transcorporeal becoming, and nonhuman kinship (Chapter Nine). Focusing on the Swedish author John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Gräns* (2006, *The Border*

2013) and the Finnish director Hanna Bergholm's film *Pahanhautoja* (2022, *Hatching*), I explore how Nordic ecohorror mobilises bodily transformation, reproductive anxiety, and red ecological entanglements to unsettle ideals of purity, femininity, and normative belonging. In doing so, I find that corporeal excess and more-than-human embodiment serve to expose the biopolitical and social structures underpinning Nordic imaginaries of the welfare state and the nuclear family.

Thus Part III demonstrates that the true horror of the Nordic ecohorror mode lies in its sustained critique of hegemonic regional ideologies, particularly narratives of Nordic exceptionalism, recreational nature romanticism, and the egalitarian ideals of the social-democratic *folkhem*. By tracing how feminine monstrosity takes shape in green forests, white Arctic expanses, and red corporeal terrains, Nordic ecohorror exposes the fractures and exclusions that underlie these dominant narratives and invites us to imagine alternative futures beyond them.

The trajectory of this thesis is thus to situate contemporary Nordic ecohorror at the intersection of ecological crisis, feminine monstrosity, and regional imaginaries, and use the material turn and related affective and feminist approaches to establish a theoretical and methodological vocabulary to analyse the ecological and gendered dimensions of Nordic ecohorror. By approaching the subject from multiple angles – conceptual, experiential, and analytical – I chart the dynamic ways in which ideas of gender and nature are constructed and contested in contemporary culture.

2. Theory, Method, and Monstrous Reading

In analysing Nordic ecohorror and feminine monstrosity, my approach has been to bring together new materialist, affective, ecocritical, and feminist frameworks, all of which can be situated within the broader material turn, to explore how uncanny environments and monstrous figures operate across Nordic literary and cinematic texts, and how readers respond to these encounters. Rather than treating theory and method as separate domains, I understand them as mutually informed, insofar as theoretical concepts shape my analytical practice while the texts themselves continually challenge, refine, and reorient those concepts.

The material turn is my primary theoretical orientation, as its emphasis on matter, agency, affect, embodiment, and entanglement is particularly productive for analysing ecological horror and monstrous otherness. These perspectives contribute to a material-discursive method that is critical of constructions of otherness yet attentive to embodied, more-than-human matter(s). This approach is further complemented by an empirical reader study that extends the analysis from textual representations to actual readers' affective engagement with ecohorror and its monsters.

Theoretical Framework: The Material Turn Monstrous

It takes unruly methods to examine unruly phenomena. Therefore, in this study I bring together a series of material and feminist movements, and in particular new materialism (Bennett 2010; Haraway 2016), material feminism and ecocriticism (Alaimo & Hekman 2008; Morton 2007), affect theory (Ahmed 2004; Ngai 2005),

and feminist monster theory (Shildrick 2002; Braidotti 2011). Rather than adhering to a single, unified framework, my approach is deliberately eclectic: I assemble theoretical concepts and analytical sensibilities capable of attending to the complex nature of both monsters and ecological crisis. Such eclecticism is essential for analysing Nordic ecohorror, where landscapes, climates, and monstrous otherness refuse symbolic containment and intrude with material intensity into the lives of characters and readers alike.

While varying in emphasis, these approaches and theories share a common grounding in what has been termed the material turn: an orientation that shifts attention from representation to matter, embodiment, and nonhuman agency.²⁷ Whereas dominant interpretive traditions in twentieth-century literary criticism have treated monsters, bodies, and nature as symbolic sites shaped primarily through human meaning-making, the material turn asks us to reconsider these entities as forceful actors in their own right. Feminist monster theory, too, springs from this concern, highlighting bodies that exceed representation, leak boundaries, and destabilise human superiority. In a materialist framework, the monster is not merely a metaphor, but is a nonhuman or posthuman figure by whom material agency becomes narratively legible. This shift from symbolic reading to material understanding resonates strongly with the concerns of Nordic ecohorror, which not only foregrounds unstable environments, severe climates, and monstrous flesh as vibrant presences, but depends on them to unravel human-centred epistemologies, and, more specifically, Nordic imaginaries of environmental stewardship, regional exceptionalism, colonial histories, and extractivist logics.

To further clarify the relevance of the material turn for this study, I will highlight two key concerns that have motivated its emergence. The first relates to its effort to move beyond the poststructuralist inclinations that have long shaped the humanities and literary studies, including in the Nordic countries where discourse-oriented approaches have informed literary scholarship from the 1960s on (Andersen & Weinstock 1986). In response to ‘poststructuralist fatigue’ (Puar 2012: 49), the material turn sidesteps these theories – especially those only concerned with language and representation – arguing that such frameworks risk abstracting ecological and embodied realities to such an extent that they lose sight of the physical conditions actually shaping our world, rendering matter an

amorphous phenomenon that gains meaning only through discursive interpretation. As Kate Soper famously states, ‘it is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer’, critiquing the discursive distance from material reality and the environmental consequences it entails (1995: 151). In Nordic ecohorror, however, this distance collapses as uncanny material entities press into view, rendering ecological crisis not a metaphor but a palpable force.

The second relates to what the material turn *turns* toward: matter. Unlike poststructuralism and its preoccupation with how ‘every object is constituted as an object of discourse’ (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 108), which ‘strips the world of any ontological or agential status’ (Grusin 2015: xi), materialism reasserts materiality – bodies, objects, environments – as vibrant intensities that shape human experience. As Karen Barad insists, ‘Matter is not immutable or passive’ (2007: 151). Ecohorror literalises this claim as the monstrous often emerges from matter itself, whether in the form of contaminated ice, animated landscapes, or unruly feminine bodies that mutate in response to environmental violence. These encounters dramatise the entanglements central to the material turn, yet infuse them with a monstrous quality, lending a distinctly uncanny edge to the idea that humans and more-than-human forces constantly co-produce one another.

Together, these ideas also reflect the material turn’s general resistance to Anthropocene discourse, which has long relied on hierarchical subject–object dualisms that position the autonomous human subject above a passive material world. Ecomaterialism challenges this legacy by stressing that humans are materially embedded in the environments they inhabit and continually shaped by the material conditions they presume to command – an entanglement that ecohorror repeatedly renders uncannily tangible. In this mode, materialities are not simply backdrops or by-products of human action but, as Diana Coole and Samantha Frost argue, ‘active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable’ forces that often exceed human control and comprehension (2010: 9).

This renewed focus on ‘how matters come to matter’ raises urgent questions central to the study of ecohorror and its engagement with feminine monstrosity. What happens when the Western, patriarchal, bodiless, and hegemonic human subject is decentralised? How can nonhuman agency – possessed by monsters and environments – expose the fragile boundaries that sustain notions of ‘the human’?

And how do these material entanglements intersect with the gendered and ecological power structures and ethical concerns that Nordic ecohorror brings to the fore? These questions are not merely literary; they speak directly to the Anthropocene, demanding new ways of thinking about relationality and responsibility. In this context, the monster is the potent figure – a posthuman agent who embodies the breakdown of categories while signalling both ecological collapse and alternative modes of coexistence.

The material turn is therefore a promising entry point for examining Nordic ecohorror and its monstrous portrayals through materialist, affective and ecocritical perspectives. It provides valuable tools for analysing the ontologies of monsters and nature, their respective places in the world, how they are perceived, and how narratives, in particular, can mediate such interrelations. In fact, Nordic ecohorror literature and film serve as particularly productive sites for such inquiries, not only because they imagine nonhuman life and render its knowledge and perspectives perceptible, but because they stage encounters between beings, bodies and environments in ways that highlight their mutual dependencies.

By using material frameworks in the ecohorror's literary and cinematic contexts, I can trace how power is distributed and negotiated across human and nonhuman realms, and how these power relations shape our understanding of planetary crisis and monstrous otherness. They also invite a shift away from abstract, purely symbolic, or discursive readings of monsters, allowing attention instead to their material presence and the dynamic roles they play in environmental imaginaries. This shift is particularly apparent in Nordic ecohorror, where the monstrous parallels the nonhuman, human-centred narratives are unsettled, and the ethical questions about otherness, Anthropocene hubris, and environmental responsibility are posed with renewed, uncanny intensity. Through this lens, monsters come to matter: they appear as vigorous, agential beings that not only participate in this enmeshed world, but actively challenge the boundaries of human individualism and Anthropocene knowledge systems. In Nordic ecohorror in particular, such monstrous figures frequently illustrate the association between gendered bodies and feminised landscapes, using this convergence to expose problematic imaginaries and national discourses that also underpin green romanticism and myths of Nordic exceptionalism.

In situating my research in relation to the material turn, my aim is not to adopt materialism uncritically or to dismiss critical discursive methods, but to explore how these approaches can be brought into productive dialogue. By tracing both the limitations and possibilities of the material turn, I set out the groundwork for a methodology that integrates both material sensitivities and discursive criticism, allowing for a more nuanced engagement with the naturecultural monstrosities that shape contemporary Nordic ecohorror.

Between Matters of Fact and Matters of Fiction

Although the textbook on materialist literary methods is yet to be written, I argue that materialist theory can complement literary analysis by offering a framework for handling the complex interplay of power, environment, and affect in contemporary culture. In turn, literature, and fiction more broadly, can enrich materialist thinking by providing a unique kind of material: textual testimonies, speculative visions, imaginative fabulation and futurist predictions that provoke thoughts, feelings and embodied responses in the reader. Ecohorror narratives, in this sense, are more than passive reflections of culture; they are active participants in shaping how we perceive and engage with monsters, environments, and the moral ramifications these interactions might hold. Moreover, material theories can reinvigorate existing poststructuralist and psychoanalytic approaches to the horror genre by adding a more embodied and ethical dimension. Viewed through this lens, monsters cease to be mere symbols of fear and instead emerge as potent agents with ecological and political significance.

Not that the alliance between the material turn and fiction is without its complications. From the first, the humanities have been defined as the study of humans, concerned exclusively with the human condition. As Finn Collin and Simo Kõppe observe, ‘the humanities were born as an effort to liberate man and therefore deal only with the human’, implicitly excluding nonhuman entities from serious consideration (2014: 27).²⁸ Not only that, but it has been argued that ecocriticism and new materialism face ethical challenges when engaging with art, primarily because artistic works can be construed as human-made representations of a passive outside world, subordinated to the artist’s ethereal inspiration. In this view, art risks reasserting a dualistic worldview in which humans stand apart from

and above nature, reinforcing human sovereignty and a presumed insight into the nature of things. This concern echoes Timothy Morton's critique of what he terms 'ecomimetic' art – a poetics that tends to place nature at a contemplative distance, rendering it a coherent and accessible object rather than confronting its dark and strange realities that ecohorror so vividly stages (2013a: 92). This insight highlights the tension which materialism inherits when approaching fiction: artistic representation risks domesticating the agency it otherwise seeks to acknowledge.

Additionally, ecocriticism, affect theory, and new materialism all have roots in scientific fields such as biology, psychology, and physics (Carson 1962; Tomkins 1962; Barad 2007); a lineage that can make their integration with literary analysis appear counterintuitive. Relatedly, the new materialists' emphasis on 'getting real', as Karen Barad famously phrases it (1998), seems at odds with the central concern of literary studies: fiction. In other words, Barad's call to engage directly with the material, scientific realities of the world appears distant from a discipline grounded in narrative invention and interpretive openness. From this perspective, the scientific foundation of materialist theories seems fundamentally contradictory to the subjective, creative nature of literary analysis, and with genres such as ecohorror that rely on estrangement, what-ifs, and speculative world-building.

Aside from these tensions, many critics argue that the material turn undermines critical inquiry by focusing too narrowly on the 'thingness' of matter and not enough on the cultural and historical processes that shape how we perceive and engage with the world (Ahmed 2008; Žižek 2014; Rekret 2016; Boysen 2018). In *Absolute Recoil* (2014), one of the material turn's most vocal critics, Slavoj Žižek, identifies three interlinked problems that for him render the material turn intellectually fragile and politically dubious. First, he argues that its dismissal of critical inquiry and human subjectivity idealises nonhuman materiality while diminishing the role of language, ideology, and human agency. Second, he contends that materialist theory suffers from an epistemological blind spot, assuming an access to material reality independent of the mediations – cultural, linguistic, historical – by which knowledge is formed. Finally, he claims that the movement fails to overcome the hierarchical dichotomies, ignoring rather than overcoming the subject-object divide that, since Kant, has prevented anyone from knowing anything about any thing. In fact, rather than dismantling hierarchies, the material

turn merely inverts them by elevating nonhuman matter above the human (critiques similar to the ones directed at deep ecology). In Žižek's view, this inversion perpetuates the very issues it seeks to challenge, making the material turn conceptually unstable and ethically problematic.

Žižek's concern about the dismissal of discursive criticism has also been raised by the affect theorist Sara Ahmed, who argues that the affirmative approach – adopted by new materialists and postcritics alike – neglects those who have neither the freedom nor the privilege to simply choose a 'joyful' methodology, as endorsed by scholars such as Rosi Braidotti and Brian Massumi.²⁹ In her critique of new materialism, Ahmed contends that the framework that elevates affirmation also risks reproducing the exclusion it claims to challenge, noting that 'by turning matter into an object or theoretical category in this way, the new materialism reproduces the binarism between materiality and culture that much work in science studies has helped to challenge' (2008: 35). This binarism also surfaces in Braidotti's 'ethics of joy' (2002: 57), which Ahmed critiques for establishing a valorising distinction between good and bad emotions. Such a distinction, she argues, reinforces normative assumptions by positioning bad emotions as closed, stubborn, and retrospective (feelings that supposedly suspends the subject from action), while good emotions are framed as open, progressive, and forward-looking, enabling the subject's 'moving up and getting out' (2010b: 50). Crucially, Ahmed warns that 'it is the very assumption that good feelings are open and bad feelings are closed that allows historical forms of injustice to disappear. The demand that we be affirmative makes those histories disappear' (50).³⁰ Against such erasures, she insists that negative affects – frustration, alienation, discontent – are not obstacles to political engagement but indispensable to it. 'If anything', she writes, 'the experience of being alienated from the affective promise of happy objects gets us somewhere' (50).

The notion that suffering and disillusionment can form the basis for political change is particularly relevant for ecohorror, where dread, grief, melancholy, and uncertainty – rather than joy – function not as emotional dead ends, but as productive modes of environmental attunement. In fact, as Morton argues, 'the ecological thought includes negativity and irony, ugliness and horror' (2010: 17), suggesting that life in the Anthropocene requires an engagement with discomfort rather than its transcendence. His emphasis on the dark-uncanny register of

environmental enmeshment aligns closely with the affective terrain of Nordic ecohorror, where such emotions do not halt action but disclose relations and responsibilities that ultimately become catalysts for ecological awareness and political responsiveness. This dynamic echoes Ahmed's argument: rather than conceding that critique is inherently non-affirmative, she identifies an affirmative potential in the exposure of 'unhappy affects', which not only prompts a reconsideration of what counts as a happy life, but also enables critique of the structures that promise happiness yet fail to deliver it equally. It is from this perspective that I approach Nordic ecohorror: not as a genre that resolves planetary threats or anxieties, but as one that 'stays with the trouble', as Donna Haraway famously puts it, and in doing so sustains horror and discomfort as a critical, ethical resource for thinking and responding.

Žižek's other concern – the issue of epistemological neglect – specifically targets Jane Bennett and her concept of 'vibrant matter' (2010), questioning how new materialists can claim to know anything about nonhuman vitality without it being shaped by the discourse they themselves seek to transcend. In other words, Žižek raises epistemological concerns about the 'hubris' of assuming one can gain access to the Kantian *Ding an sich* (thing-in-itself) and obtain 'pure' knowledge of material realities that have not already been mediated by cultural constructs (2014: 11). This raises fundamental questions about the possibilities of knowing a world free from the influence of language and ideology. For Žižek, ontology, the 'nature of things' as it exists outside human perception, cannot be separated from how humans know and interpret those things. Yet, he contends, Bennett's 'ontological optimism' overlooks the inescapable role of human subjectivity in shaping knowledge. By focusing solely on vibrant matter, he claims, Bennett reduces complex issues of knowledge and power to simplistic ontological inquiries about materiality, without fully engaging with the epistemology and ideological dimensions of those issues. The cultural theorist Paul Rekret seconds this critique, arguing that by disregarding the cultural conditions that make our thinking about the world possible, materialism neglects the social, historical, and linguistic dimensions that shape both knowledge and perception (2016: 3). Moreover, Rekret raises concerns about the movement's depreciation of discourse in favour of materiality and embodiment,

claiming that emphasising matter over discourse not only reinforces dichotomies, but also undermines the legitimacy of critical questioning.

Instead of addressing epistemological questions, Žižek infers that Bennett relies on panpsychism, animism, and anthropomorphism of material ontology, which is why he views her vital materialism as an intellectual regression to a ‘premodern naivety’ (2014: 12). In fact, he finds the idea that all materiality possesses an inherent lively, agential force to be little more than a frivolous ‘kind of spiritualism without gods’ – an enchanted fantasy detached from reality. To drive this point home, Žižek draws a playful analogy between new materialism and J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, suggesting a lack of reliability and seriousness in Bennett’s work.

If, then, New Materialism can still be considered a variant of materialism, it is in the sense in which Tolkien’s Middle-earth is materialist: as an enchanted world full of magical forces, good and evil spirits, etc., but strangely *without gods* – there are no transcendent divine entities in Tolkien’s universe, all magic is immanent to matter, as a spiritual power that dwells in our terrestrial world. (2014: 12, original emphasis)

Žižek’s implication is that new materialism is no more grounded in reality than a work of fiction. Both Bennett’s materialist framework and Tolkien’s Middle-earth, he argues, present a mystical, anti-modern universe, devoid of divine authority yet imbued with immanent magical forces, and thus both can be dismissed as unreal interventions of naïve imagination. However, his analogy also hints at a deeper kinship between fiction and materialism, which might just resolve the epistemological issue that Žižek himself raises.

The Material Turn Method: Reimagining Epistemology

Žižek’s analogy brings us back to the central question of whether the material turn can function as a literary method, and what might it offer to a project concerned with ecohorror fiction and feminine monstrosity. Despite the obstacles outlined above, materialist thinkers are already deeply engaged with literary practices and, crucially, with fiction as a mode of knowledge production. Time and again,

materialist theorists rely on narrative forms – including ‘speculative writing’ (Haraway 2016), ‘fabulation’ (Deleuze 1995; Wiame 2018), ‘proxy stories’ (Neimanis 2017), ‘dramatizations’ (Alaimo 2010a), ‘onto-stories’ (Bennett 2010), ‘writing’ (Massumi 2002) – to explore materiality. All of them utilise literature or fictionality, as it – in the words of Bruno Latour – offers ‘a vast playground to rehearse accounts of what makes us act’, which is also why literary theorists have been ‘much freer in their enquires about figuration than any social scientist’ when it comes to engaging with the many shapes and forms agential matter can take on (2005: 54–55). In this sense, fiction becomes a methodological resource that allows material theorists to tap into the creative properties of fiction and gain unique access to the ‘vibrant’ ontologies of matter. For a genre such as ecohorror, which already deals in monstrous embodiment, speculative futures, and strange material agency, this methodological compatibility is especially fertile. More specifically, ecohorror’s investment in unsettling encounters between bodies, environments, and nonhuman forces mirrors the material turn’s insistence on matter as active and intrusive rather than symbolic and inert. In this mode, landscapes bleed, climates mutate, and feminine bodies defy containment, making fiction a useful repertoire for exploring the material entanglements that new materialist theory seeks to articulate.

This generative overlap between the material turn and fiction has also been addressed by the philosopher Aline Wiame, who suggests that the intersection of new materialism and fiction helps fabulate alternative, future-oriented forms of storytelling capable of addressing the precarious and unpredictable more-than-human complexities of Anthropocene conditions (2018: 532, 536–537). Therefore, fiction – from the Latin *factio*, meaning both ‘something invented’ and ‘a formative or modelling act’ – is not merely a vehicle for exploring materiality from within, but also a means of imagining new forms of knowledge that may facilitate social and political change. For ecohorror in particular, the genre does not simply represent ecological rupture; it stages its anxieties and ethical impasses in embodied and monstrous form. From this perspective fiction can be a crucial tool for rethinking the ways we engage with the material world, and, perhaps more importantly, how we might reshape our relationship to it. By offering alternative narratives that embrace more-than-human perspectives, it can help us navigate and respond to contemporary crises. Central to this potential is Wiame’s argument that

fabulation occupies a 'strange epistemological status' that is 'neither pure fiction nor positivist truth' (537), enabling a mode of knowing attuned with 'the unknown' (531).

In this way, fiction can work as an epistemological resource that Žižek otherwise claims materialism lacks. Or as Tobias Skiveren explains, echoing Wiame, 'fictionality is adopted, here, precisely as an epistemological tool for envisioning that which cannot (yet) be perceived as "true"' (2020: 3). Fiction, he elaborates, moves beyond the dichotomy of truth and falsehood, operating instead through dynamic becomingness – always in motion towards new understandings, visions, and modes of emergence. Literature and film are not required to adhere to reality; rather, it can disrupt our existing conceptions of it, pushing the boundaries of what we accept as real or true. This idea also resonates with philosopher Paul Ricoeur's view that literature has the power to influence reality by creating worlds that are not real, but *could* be: 'I see in the plots we invent the privileged means by which we co-configure our confused, uniformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience' (1984: xi). Stacy Alaimo, too, underscores this notion when she positions 'literature, photography, and oral histories' as disruptive, activist forces that challenge entrenched knowledge systems and Western truth regimes (2010a: 63). By entertaining what might be (rather than simply representing the world as it is) fiction opens new, uncharted spaces of knowledge and opportunity. In other words, fiction, and especially the speculative or fantastical kind, is compelling, enchanting, and eye-opening, not because it is true, but because it could be. As Rita Felski reminds us, literary enchantment is not an escape from knowledge but a means of encountering it differently, whether through affect, resonance, immersion, or a sense of wonder (2008: 51). Fiction does not simply mirror reality; it helps shape it – and, by extension, its readers – offering new insight into alternative spheres, beings, things and phenomena that have otherwise been considered passive, inaccessible, monstrous, or lifeless.

Fiction's ability to foster a sensibility for more-than-human life is also what lies at the heart of Jane Bennett's eco-ethical vision. Yet how, she asks, can one cultivate such a sensibility in a consumer culture where things are commonly seen as inert commodities? Importantly, Bennett frames this question not only as an ethical challenge, but as a methodological one, asking 'What method could possibly be

appropriate for the task of speaking a word for vibrant matter' (2010: xiii). In answering her own question, Bennett suggests embracing a naïve mindset, akin to the imaginative and open perspective found in artistic works; one that welcomes the weirdness, fascination and vitality of things. To grasp the independent life of materiality, she argues, we must dare to be 'foolish' and replace our rational worldview with a more playful, imaginative attitude: 'What seems to be needed is a certain willingness to appear naive or foolish, to affirm what Adorno called his "clownish traits"' (xiii). This stance entails an openness and, as Graham Harman puts it, a readiness to be 'charmed' (2005: 137). For such a task, Bennett infers, fiction is an ideal companion, because 'Poetry can help us feel more of a liveliness hidden in such things and reveal more of the threads of connection binding our fate to theirs' (2012: 232). Through fiction, then, it is possible to attune oneself to an otherwise hidden vitality of the world around us. Or as Mayra Rivera writes, 'literary language ... engages our imaginations at a visceral level, to help us feel what cannot be seen' (2015: 141). Thus foolishness becomes a method grounded in sensibility, including 'sensory attentiveness' and anti-demystification, which Bennett identifies as central to the new materialist analysis (2010: xiv).

Beyond recognising fiction's 'naïve' potential, Bennett actively employs it in her work to further her cause, drawing on Henry David Thoreau's nature writing and Franz Kafka's anthropomorphisms to problematise the Anthropocene logic that divides everything into 'dull matter' or 'vibrant life'. She uses anthropomorphism to rethink human-nonhuman dualisms, evoking a transcendent and coexistent imagination of more-than-human entities (2010: 4). In this framework, Bennett refers to fiction as 'onto-stories', meaning ontological stories that, through their imaginary and affective force, reveal alternative modes of being and new understandings of reality. Such stories, she argues, may help us make wiser interventions in the ecological system to which we belong, for 'The hope is that the story will enhance receptivity to the impersonal life that surrounds and infuses us, will generate a more subtle awareness of the complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies, and will enable wiser interventions into that ecology' (4).

This understanding of fiction's ontological power resonates strongly with horror aesthetics, where monstrous figures function as mediators of such onto-stories. As

Graham Harman argues, H. P. Lovecraft's descriptions of the monster Cthulhu offer readers '*indirect access*' to things-in-themselves that otherwise remain beyond human reach (2012: 17, original emphasis). For Harman, Lovecraft is therefore 'a Kantian writer of "noumenal" horror', whose monsters gesture towards a reality that exceeds scientific explanation and ordinary human belief (27). Read through Bennett's concept of onto-stories, such monstrous figures can be understood not merely as symbols of fear, but as speculative entities that disclose alternative ontologies, rendering nonhuman forces visible through affect and excess rather than through explanation or mastery. On this basis, ecohorror does more than foster othered ontologies or register epistemological shortcomings; it also has the capacity to inspire new attitudes to our surroundings and relations, positioning fiction as a dynamic force that participates in shaping how worlds are sensed, imagined, and ethically negotiated.

In addition, fiction not only fosters sensitivity towards things or future possibilities, but also shapes human self-understanding by revealing the materiality – of body, affect, or nature – in ourselves. This is the starting point of Stacy Alaimo's *Bodily Natures* (2010), in which she grounds her theoretical argument in cli-fi novels. Like Bennett, Alaimo considers fiction's affective, empathic potential to be central to recognising our own transcorporeal materiality, or, as she puts it, 'a recognition that one's bodily substance is vitally connected to the broader environment' (2010a: 63). In her work, Alaimo critiques poststructuralist frameworks for overlooking the movements, emotions, and sensations of the body, dismissing them as too low-brow, too naive or too mundane. Such approaches, she argues, have also framed ethical issues such as racism and misogyny primarily as social constructs, thereby diverting attention away from the material body itself. Fiction, however, resists this erasure by continually returning to corporeality. As Alaimo explains, it 'focus[es] on actual bodies, especially as they are transformed by their encounters with places, substances, and forces ... demonstrating material connections between specific bodies in specific places' (61). In this view, fiction cultivates an awareness of the body's material entanglements, just as 'producers of various works of literature, art, and activism may themselves grapple with ways to render murky material forces palpable or recognizably "real"' (9). This emphasis on embodied interconnection and transformation is particularly relevant for ecohorror,

where feminine monstrous bodies register environmental violence not only symbolically, but materially and emotionally. Such monsters do not merely symbolise otherness, they materialise it. They stage the body as a contested site where power, exclusion, and ecological destruction converge. In this sense, ecohorror's monstrous figures extend Alaimo's transcorporeal insight that bodies are shaped by toxic landscapes, extractive economies, and gendered biopolitics, and are thus epistemic agents that expose the entangled materiality of social and environmental injustice.

While Alaimo uses fiction as an affective, embodied complement to scientific knowledge, Donna Haraway takes a more radical approach by fictionalising science itself, actively employing narrative practices and 'creative inventions' in her otherwise theoretical texts, a genre traditionally grounded in factuality. This is particularly evident in the final chapter of *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), where she introduces 'The Camille Stories': a series of speculative scenarios that are neither true nor false, but rather invented narratives meant not to predict the future, but to guide it.³¹ As Haraway explains, 'The Camille Stories are invitations to participate in a kind of genre fiction committed to strengthening ways to propose near futures, possible futures, and implausible but real nows' (2016: 136). Here, Haraway does not offer a definitive blueprint for what is to come, but instead proposes speculative worlds that encourage us to imagine alternative possibilities, emphasising the importance of actively engaging with the 'real now' while proposing futures that are not yet fixed but open to change. As she says, 'SF is storytelling and fact telling; it is the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, material-semiotic worlds, gone, here, and yet to come' (2016: 31). In speculative writing of this kind we do not merely reflect on the world but actively shape it, offering alternative futures, or as Haraway writes, 'Storytelling was the most powerful practice for comforting, inspiring, remembering, warning, nurturing compassion, mourning, and becoming-with each other in their differences, hopes and terrors' (150). Ecohorror too is a kind of speculative storytelling that channels affective practices through terror and monstrosity, and stages omens, grieving, and becoming-with as modes of ecological attunement.

Ultimately, the encounter between new materialism and literary studies generates a multidimensional analytical space that shifts attention from

interpretation alone to questions of ethical coexistence. Literature's imaginative, speculative capacities enable encounters with nonhuman agency that otherwise exceed empirical verification, while materialist theory provides the conceptual vocabulary necessary to take such encounters seriously as forms of knowledge rather than mere fantasy. Read in this light, Nordic ecohorror can work as a rich site for investigating how ecological crisis is sensed, embodied, and negotiated across human and more-than-human worlds. Rather than offering an escape from reality, the genre cultivates a critical attentiveness to the entangled conditions of life in the Anthropocene, while opening speculative horizons for imagining alternative modes of coexistence in a more-than-human world.

Bridging Discourse and Matter

While the critiques of the material turn's supposed neglect of epistemological mediation, its ontological emphasis, and its supposed depreciation of criticism remain important and necessary correctives, I would also argue that some of the objections risk approaching materialist theory like the devil reads the Bible: selectively and with insufficient attention to the ways materialist thinkers not so much abandon critique and epistemology as reconfigure it.

Most critically, insisting on opposing poststructuralist and new materialist approaches – pitting discourse against matter, critique against affirmation, epistemology against ontology – is, paradoxically, to reaffirm the dualisms that both traditions have worked to overturn. Therefore, rather than treating these frameworks as mutually exclusive, I suggest an approach that holds them in productive tension. In line with Karen Barad's *material-discursive* approach (2007: 140), Val Plumwood's *critical affirmative* mode of analysis (1993: 10), or Rosi Braidotti's call for a *both/and* rather than an *either/or* engagement with the world (2011: 36), my methodological engagement with Nordic ecohorror and its representations of monstrosity is not to choose between structuralism and materialism, criticism and affirmation, but to think through their encounter.

Inspired by Haraway's practices of situated care and Bennett's 'foolishly naive' mindset, I wish to cultivate an attentiveness to the ecohorror text and its monsters that is open to matter and affect, yet firmly grounded in feminist critique and discursive analysis, refusing to overlook patriarchal power dynamics and

Anthropocene hierarchies. After all, neither nature nor monsters are passive nor innocent. As Ingvil Hellstrand's concept of 'political monsters' suggests, fictional monstrosity articulates pressing questions of identity and biopolitical governance (2014: 130). Building on this insight, I read monsters as highly political, rebellious agents that disrupt norms and challenge binaries through varied monstrous strategies of exaggeration and transgression. To ignore their critical force is to misconstrue their ontology.

Bridging discourse and matter in this way entails a double attentiveness in my analyses. On the one hand, I examine how monstrosity is constructed through gendered, ecological, and regionally specific discourses and how Nordic ecohorror stages these cultural anxieties and ideals as sites in need of critical interrogation. On the other hand, I attend to how Nordic ecohorror narratives foreground bodies, landscapes, climates, and affects as material forces that shape and unsettle those very constructions, making more-than-human agency and ecological vibrancy sensorially tangible. Approaching ecohorror through this dual perspective allows for a methodological approach that corresponds to what Nordic ecohorror itself stages: the naturecultural interplay of discursive power and material agency.

Moreover, this material-discursive approach also shapes how I engage with feminine monstrosity. Rather than reducing it to a mere cultural construct or celebrating it as pure material vitality, I approach the monster as a figure in which discursive hierarchies and material forces violently and powerfully intersect. This means that my analyses operate in the tension between critical examinations of processes of monsterisation and a curious openness towards the transformative capacities of monstrous agency. While I remain attentive to how monstrosity has historically functioned as a mechanism of exclusion and othering, I also draw on feminist new materialism and monster theory in understanding the monstrous as a potentially productive force capable of unsettling dominant categories of gender, nature, embodiment, and knowledge. Monstrous excesses, invasions, amplifications, and distortions should therefore not be read simply as spectacles of chaos and havoc, but as ways to expose the regulatory logics of normativity and de(con)struct the categories that work to sustain them. In practice, this entails analysing how representations of feminine monstrosity simultaneously reproduce, challenge, and reconfigure both gendered and ecological norms, allowing bodies

and environments to act in, against, and beyond those frameworks. In this way, feminine monstrosity becomes methodologically instructive: it compels a reading practice attentive both to the discursive production of monstrous difference and to the material intensities that exceed such production. The critical, transformative potential of feminine monstrosity emerges in this tension, where discourse and matter do not resolve into unity but remain dynamically entangled.

Read in this way, feminine monstrosity also functions not merely as an object of analysis, but as a critical agent that unsettles binary thinking. Rather than simply representing otherness, the monsters in Nordic ecohorror materialise the instability of the distinctions between human and nonhuman, nature and culture, life and death, body and environment. Through their excess and transformation, they expose how such divisions are continually produced and policed, and thus how precarious these dualistic logics ultimately are. The monster thus deconstructs dualisms not only by reversing them, but by inhabiting their tensions and rendering their entanglements perceptible. Correspondingly, feminine monstrosity is not only a thematic figure but a methodological guide, enabling analyses that trace how ecological crisis in ecohorror emerges through the inseparable interplay of discursive power and material agency.

Reader Study: Affective and Postcritical Modes

In addition to reading ecohorror literary texts and film in conjunction with the material turn, I also wish to integrate a perspective that, in line with new materialist practice, attends to how these works materialise in and through affective and social intensities. After all, the horror genre is named for the emotional response it elicits in its audience, making such responses intrinsic to its analysis. Accordingly, I examine how readers emotionally and cognitively engage with Nordic ecohorror and its representations of feminine monstrosity. Inspired by Karen Barad's imperative to 'get real' and Bruno Latour's call for renewed empiricism, I draw on two kinds of reader response material: responses gathered in my own empirical reader study and published responses found in reviews, interviews, and critical commentary.

With this dual attention to texts and their reception, my examination of Nordic ecohorror and its feminine monsters moves between scholarly interpretation and reader experience, combining materialist, discursive close readings with a materially oriented investigation of how texts are actually received, felt, and made meaningful by actual audiences. Methodologically, this reader-oriented perspective does not replace textual analysis, but rather extends the discursive-material framework by examining how the agency traced in ecohorror texts continues to unfold in situated acts of reading. This also means my research is not solely concerned with what ecohorror and feminine monstrosity *are* but what they *do* – their performativity, agency, critical potentials, and materialisations beyond academic discourse, as they register emotionally and socially in the world. With this dual focus, I seek to bridge what feminist film critic Annette Kuhn has described as ‘the gulf between textual analysis and contextual inquiry’ (1984: 21).

Engaging with reader reception through archival material – such as interviews, reviews, and other published responses – resembles in many respects the analysis of literary texts and film themselves. Such material is already mediated and somewhat fixed; the analytical task lies primarily in locating, contextualising, and interpreting it rather than generating it anew. While archival reception offers valuable insights into publicly articulated responses and dominant interpretive frameworks, it remains more static and does not allow the researcher to further interrogate responses in the moment they emerge. Engaging with real readers, on the other hand, entails a comparably more open, contingent process. Here, reader responses are actively elicited in a staged setting, and the empirical material emerges through situated encounters marked by dialogic interaction and affective immediacy. While my empirical study (Chapter Five) centres on such reader experiences, published reader responses feature throughout the thesis as a dispersed point of reference. Taken together, these two modes of reception make it possible to trace both immediate, situated reading experiences and their longer-term cultural circulation.

Yet, turning to lay readers also raises a central methodological concern, for how can their emotional and bodily responses to ecohorror and its monsters – responses often treated as private psychological or internal physiological states – be made analytically tangible? Emotional reactions are often understood as fleeting and inconsistently articulated, described less as cognitive processes that can be readily

named and more as diffuse, pre-conscious sensations. For that reason, emotions tend to surface indirectly, expressed as metaphors, hesitations, tonal shifts, or evaluative judgements rather than as stable or clearly defined categories. As such, these responses are also always mediated – as Žižek has already argued – by language, social norms, genre conventions, and the specific conditions under which reading takes place. The analytical challenge, therefore, is not simply to document what readers say they feel, but to develop an approach capable of tracing how these affective, bodily reactions take form, circulate, and acquire meaning in the encounter between text and reader. Addressing this requires theoretical tools that can account for emotions as situated and socially patterned, while remaining attentive to the specificity of individual reading experiences.

To address this challenge, I draw on a combination of postcritical modes and affect theory, which together offer a vocabulary for analysing readerly emotion without reducing it to psychology or treating it as raw, unmediated data amenable to positivist affect measurement. In this framework, reader responses are approached not as transparent reports of inner psychological states, but as situated articulations and circulations by which affect becomes observable and analytically accessible through shared language, metaphorical expressions, social interactions, and evaluative judgements.

One key premise is Rita Felski's postcritical intervention in *Uses of Literature* (2008), where she outlines four modes of reading in response to what she later terms 'the limits of critique'. Parallel to the material turn's reorientation beyond poststructuralist theorisation, Felski similarly argues that suspicion-driven reading has become an almost unquestioned 'holy grail' in literary studies, rooted solely in 'the act of reading and none to the objects read' (2008: 2-3). Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's notion of a hermeneutics of suspicion, she describes a critical position in which the scholar assumes the role of a detective, dismantling texts in order to expose concealed meanings.

As an alternative to this monopolised approach, which she deems self-referential and out of touch with reality, Felski turns attention towards reader engagement and the uses literature has in everyday life. Rather than adding, as Bruno Latour famously puts it, 'fresh ruins to fields of ruins' (2004: 225), Felski urges critics to ask different questions such as "why do we read" (2015: 2), "what are the uses of

literature” (2008), and “how do works of art move us, and why” (2020: viii). These questions open up for investigation of what she describes as ‘a vast terrain of practices, expectations, emotions, hopes, dreams, and interpretations’ (2008: 8) just as they seek to rebalance the cognitive and affective dimensions of aesthetic experience (16). In this way, Felski’s postcriticism resonates strongly with the material turn’s affirmative stance and its scepticism towards poststructuralist dominance, insofar as both approaches emphasise relationality, agency, and the capacity of cultural objects to act on and with bodies, social relations, and political realities beyond the pages of the text.

To conceptualise reader involvement, Felski introduces four modes of engagement – recognition, enchantment, shock, and knowledge – that she describes as ‘multi-leveled interactions between texts and readers’ that cannot be reduced either to intrinsic textual properties or to purely subjective mental states (2008: 14). These modes do not function as a typology of reader types or as stable affective categories; rather, they offer a heuristic for tracing how readers come to feel addressed by a work, unsettled by it, absorbed into it, or oriented towards new forms of understanding. While Felski does not offer a prescriptive method for applying these modes, I use them as a form of literary sociology *en miniature*: as analytical tools for tracing transactions between texts and readers, including how moments of recognition and enchantment emerge in encounters with monstrous figures, environmental disturbance, or the unsettling of familiar boundaries between the human and the more-than-human.³² Moreover, such moments may prompt not only identification or disturbance, but also invite readers to reassess familiar knowledge systems and cultivate a heightened ecological sensibility to human-environment relations.

At the same time, Felski’s postcritical project reveals a notable tension between its theoretical ambitions and its methodological execution. Although *Uses of Literature* (2008) repeatedly calls attention to the everyday experiences of ordinary readers, Felski’s analysis never engages directly with empirical reader responses. Instead, her examples frequently rely on the ideal reader and metatextual illustrations – fictional characters responding to artworks, canonical literary cases, or culturally privileged reception materials produced by authors, critics, and other members of the cultural elite. While such examples are illuminating, they are

ultimately removed from the lived, situated practices of reading that Felski otherwise champions. As a result, her work proposes a new orientation for literary studies without fully enacting it methodologically.

It is at this point my own empirical study branches off from Felski's project. While I draw on her modes of engagement to describe how readers connect with ecohorror texts, I apply them to material generated through encounters with actual lay readers rather than exemplary textual cases. Doing so aligns Felski's postcritical vocabulary more closely with a new materialist commitment to 'getting real': attending to reading as an embodied, affective practice as it unfolds in real life. Felski's framework is thus used not only to move beyond suspicion, but also as a set of tools for analysing how literature's agency takes shape in ordinary readerly encounters, in which monstrosity and ecological unease are not merely interpreted but felt, negotiated, and lived.

While Felski's modes of reading provide productive tools for describing how readers reorient themselves through literary works, they do not aim specifically to address how the emotions operate in reader engagement. To further develop the affective dimensions of the reading modes that Felski foregrounds, I bring her postcritical approach into dialogue with affect theory – most notably as developed by Sara Ahmed (2004) and Sianne Ngai (2005) – which offers conceptual tools for examining how emotions emerge, circulate and come to matter in the interactional dimensions of reading.

Ahmed's understanding of emotions provides a crucial framework for conceptualising how emotions operate beyond the level of individual interiority. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Ahmed argues that emotions do not reside inside subjects as pre-cognitive, private, and internal states as suggested by Brian Massumi (2002), but rather emerge as socially constructed phenomena in our interactions with texts, others, and the world around us, acquiring meaning through repeated signs and histories: Rather than residing 'inside' subjects, emotions emerge through social relations and histories of contact, shaping how bodies orient themselves toward others and the world around them (2004a: 9). Emotions, in this sense, function as orienting forces: they shape how subjects are drawn to or repelled by certain figures, narratives, or environments, thereby establishing boundaries of proximity and distance, belonging and exclusion. In the context of my engagement

with ecohorror texts and their portrayal of feminine monstrosity, Ahmed's perspective proves particularly productive, as it makes it possible to analyse reader emotions – such as fear, unease, fascination, or disgust – not as hidden private feelings, but as relational affective economies emerging both between readers and between readers and texts. Emotions thus become more tangible, accessible, and open to analysis, making it possible to uncover the cultural scripts and power structures that shape such responses. In this perspective, shared emotions can also be examined to determine which bodies come to be perceived as strange, threatening, or out of place, and which are rendered familiar or intelligible. Ultimately, Ahmed's affect theory makes it possible to treat readers' emotional responses not as ineffable or purely personal reactions, but as socially mediated and analytically meaningful phenomena.

While Ahmed's theory foregrounds the cultural circulation and social organisation of affect, Ngai's work provides a complementary framework for attending to emotions that resist clear articulation, resolution, or moral alignment. In *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Ngai focuses on what she terms 'minor' or 'ugly' affects such as irritation, anxiety, envy, disgust, and paranoia – emotions that are often dismissed as politically inert or aesthetically unproductive because they lack catharsis or clear intentionality. Rather than treating them as failures of meaning or agency, Ngai argues that such affects register situations of obstruction, ambivalence, and compromised agency, making them particularly attuned to conditions of power and social inequality. This perspective is particularly relevant for Nordic ecohorror's representations of environmental crisis and monstrous otherness. Moreover, Ngai's affective apparatus speaks to the genre's tendency to evoke such 'ugly', low-grade, lingering affects rather than decisive emotional release. In this respect, Ngai's concept of ugly feelings enables my examination of reader emotion to remain attentive to ambivalent or weakly articulated responses that might otherwise appear insignificant, treating hesitation, irritation, or diffuse unease as analytically meaningful indicators of ecological anxiety and ethical uncertainty rather than as inadequate reactions or failed interpretations.

Together, Felski's postcritical modes of reader engagement and Ahmed's and Ngai's affect theory interventions provide an analytical approach attuned to reading as a material, affective and socially situated practice. Rather than treating readers'

emotions as either inaccessible subjective impressions or stable, transparent data points, this combined analytical lens makes affective responses – in all their ‘ugly’ ambiguity – analytically legible as they emerge in relational encounters between readers and texts. Moreover, this approach is particularly suited to Nordic ecohorror; a genre where monstrosity and ecological unease are not only represented but felt and negotiated by its readers and audiences, thereby emphasising how fiction comes to matter beyond interpretation, in lived and socially embedded ways.

PART ONE

CONCEPTUAL READING AND THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

Nordic Ecohorror and Feminine Monstrosity

3. Nordic Ecohorror and Knausgård's *Morgenstjernen*

In recent years, work upon work of literature, film, games, and television has been haunted by environments that feel unstable, intrusive, and hostile, and by nonhuman forces that resist being contained as mere backdrops or metaphors. Forests, oceans, weather systems, animals, and landscapes repeatedly appear not simply as settings for human drama, but as an active presence that unsettles distinctions between nature and culture, agency and inert matter, victim and perpetrator. These works participate in what has increasingly been described as ecohorror: a mode of horror attuned to ecological crisis and the unsettling realisation that human life is deeply entangled with nonhuman systems that exceed our control.

As ecohorror gains momentum both in creative production and academic criticism, scholars have sought to define the term by attending to its recurring themes, tropes, and conceptual stakes, often emphasising its engagement with climate change and anthropogenic collapse. Read together, these definitions and approaches point towards an evolving understanding of ecohorror across literature and film, reflecting a broader shift in horror studies from isolated or cosmic threats towards planetary-scale ecological entanglements.

To trace this development, I begin with three overlapping trajectories that have significantly shaped ecohorror as both genre and field of study: its emergence from creature-feature and animal horror traditions; its expansion into plant horror and broader questions of material entanglement; and its methodological convergence with ecogothic and environmental humanities approaches. These trajectories do not exhaust the field, but mark key conceptual coordinates from which Nordic ecohorror takes shape.

One of the earliest explicit definitions of ecohorror is offered by the American scholar Joseph Foy, who describes the genre as both entertainment and warning system: “Eco-horror” texts are fright flicks in which nature turns against humankind due to environmental degradation, pollution, encroachment, nuclear disaster, or a host of other reasons. As a genre, it attempts to raise mass consciousness about the very real threats that will face humanity if we are not more environmentally cautious’ (2010: 167). Emphasising the genre’s didactic function, his definition frames ecohorror as both spectacle and ecological alarm, but it also reflects a view of nature as an outside, antagonistic and vengeful force.

Generally speaking, Foy typifies the early scholarly conception of ecohorror, which largely understood the genre in terms of externalised threat, nature’s revenge, and the overriding preoccupation with creature-feature themes. One example of this, and among the earliest works to gesture towards ecological horror, is William Schoell’s *Creature Features: Nature Turned Nasty in the Movies* (2008), which offers a concise, though limited, survey of creature-feature films, typically featuring monstrous animals or other threatening life forms. Similarly constrained in scope is Lee Gambin’s *Massacred by Mother Nature: Exploring the Natural Horror Film* (2012), which focuses exclusively on animal horror, framing nature’s revenge as quintessential to the genre: ‘From the bugs to the bees and the dogs and the cats and the whales and the rats – Mother Nature is not happy, and she will slaughter the human population with the help of her friends, her loyal minions of feather, fur and fin’ (2012: 18). Notably, this gendered formulation also casts nature as a punitive maternal figure – a trope that later ecohorror reconfigures and complicates.

Notably, this early phase of animal or nature horror scholarship was overwhelmingly film-centred. Only gradually did literary studies begin to enter the conversation. A significant step in this direction is the *Palgrave Handbook to Horror Literature* (2018), edited by Kevin Corstorphine and Laura Kremmel, featuring two essays that explicitly address the intersections of horror and environment, of which Bernice Murphy’s essay (2018) offers a comprehensive overview of the role of animals in horror literature, contributing to a much-needed rebalancing of a field long dominated by cinema. Likewise, *Beasts of the Deep: Sea Creatures and Popular Culture* (2018), edited by Jon Hackett and Seán Harrington, turns to the under-

examined domain of oceanic horror, treating the sea and its monstrous inhabitants as potent sites of ecological fear.

In recent years, more expansive definitions of ecohorror have moved beyond narratives of nature ‘turning on’ humanity, and instead foreground the unsettling realisation that the boundaries separating the human and the nonhuman – bodies from environments, mind from matter, culture from nature – are not as sturdy as we like to believe; they are, in many ways, collapsing. As Jason Colavito observes, the horror genre has long thrived on cultural fears generated by scientific and technological change (2008: 79), from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to contemporary narratives of pollution, pandemics, and planetary ruin. In a similar sense, ecohorror texts articulate a deep unease about our place in – and power over – the natural world.

Articulating this shift explicitly, Stephen Rust and Carter Soles define ecohorror as ‘texts in which humans do horrific things to the natural world, or in which horrific texts and tropes are used to promote ecological awareness, represent ecological crisis, or blur human/non-human distinctions more broadly’ (2014: 509–510). This definition, which has become foundational in recent scholarship (Tidwell & Soles 2021; Bigelow 2023), opens the field beyond familiar narratives of external threat or nature’s vengeance, inviting attention to horror’s capacity to challenge anthropocentrism, visualise complex ecological entanglements, and cultivate the unsettling awareness that, as Timothy Morton suggests, we are ‘always already implicated’ in the mesh of life (2010: 8).

Aligned with this turn, ecohorror has increasingly been approached through critical frameworks that foreground entanglement between humans and the nonhuman world, drawing on ecocriticism, posthumanism, and related interdisciplinary perspectives. Rather than viewing ecological horror solely through psychoanalytic or gender-based lenses long central to horror studies, these approaches emphasise environmental anxiety, ethical responsibility, and human-nonhuman relations across film and literature. Collectively, such perspectives illuminate how ecohorror has been understood not only in terms of narrative and theme, but also through its broader ideological and political implications. What emerges is an understanding of ecohorror as a mode by which material and ethical

entanglements are made visible, making relationality rather than antagonism the central site of horror.

This reorientation is evident in *Animal Horror Cinema* (2015), edited by Katarina Gregersdotter, Johan Höglund, and Niklas Hållén, which extends earlier creature-feature traditions by reframing them in terms of species relations and multispecies entanglement, exploring how certain horror films ‘centre on the relation between ‘human’ and ‘animal’ as categories unrelated to their places in the ecosystem’ (2015: 4). In doing so, the volume moves beyond simple predator–prey dynamics, opening space for more nuanced questions of species, agency, and relationality. Continuing this line of inquiry, Dominic Lennard’s *Brute Force: Animal Horror Movies* (2019) offers an equally critically engaged examination of animal horror cinema, situating the subgenre in contemporary theoretical frameworks – including evolutionary psychology – to further demonstrate how the genre reflects shifting cultural anxieties about human–animal boundaries.

This emphasis on material entanglement also appears in the strand of ecohorror that has come to be known as ‘plant horror’. An early contribution to this field is Robin Murray and Joseph Heumann’s *Monstrous Nature* (2016). Although the book focuses exclusively on film, it broadens the scope of ecohorror by going beyond animal horror and traditional creature-features to analyse a range of monstrous figures – giant insects, parasitic organisms, feminised landscapes. These figures appear both as victims and agents of retribution, offering a critique of human environmental manipulation, an exploration of ecological interdependence, and a challenge to anthropocentric worldviews. Through this lens, ‘monstrous natures’ appear not as passive backdrops, but as active, often menacing forces that reflect deeper societal anxieties about environmental degradation while also bringing about a moral reckoning.

The same year saw the publication of an equally influential contribution edited by Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga, *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film* (2016). The volume examines unsettling portrayals of plants as monstrous entities in both literature and cinema, illuminating how vegetal horror challenges human dominance and reflects anxieties about ecological imbalance and environmental neglect. Notably, in the introduction, Keetley outlines six theses on why plants are perceived as horrifying, including alterity,

invisibility, uncontrollability, uncanny interconnection, retaliation, and the rupture of familiar categories and boundaries. These characteristics not only position plant horror as a distant subcategory of ecohorror, but also expand the genre's conceptual reach by highlighting the power of nonhuman alterity – horror rooted not in violence or threat alone, but in the profound strangeness of ecological entanglement.

More recent works such as *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (2019) by Natania Meeker and Antonia Szabari, and *Radical Animism: Reading for the End of the World* (2020) by Jemma Deer, take a broader approach to the role of plants and the nonhuman in literature, art, and science, while moving beyond a strictly horror framework. Although Meeker and Szabari include a chapter on plant horror and Deer engages with the apocalyptic dimensions of the Anthropocene, both books are equally driven by an ethical, activist imperative: to rethink the ways humans engage with the nonhuman world in order to imagine more sustainable modes of existence. *Radical Botany*, for example, uses speculative fiction to challenge traditional notions of life and agency, while *Radical Animism* – similar to Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010) – offers a reimagined animist worldview, positioning literature as a vital medium for responding to contemporary ecological crisis.

A related body of scholarship that explores similar entanglements between nature and the uncanny is the field of ecogothic, which is a mode closely aligned with ecohorror in both theme and method, as it too, in Sofia Wijkmark's words, 'combines the perspectives of ecocriticism, animal studies and posthumanism, aiming to explore a 'familiar Gothic subject – nature' from a non-anthropocentric perspective, and to re-evaluate its function in evoking the monstrous and terrifying' (2017: 146–147, citing Del Principe 2014: 1). This methodological emphasis gained traction in Andrew Smith and William Hughes' pioneering volume *EcoGothic* (2013), which positioned the ecogothic as a theoretical lens for examining how representations of nature in predominantly English-language works negotiate ecological fear and the supernatural. Similarly Anglophone in scope, Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils' *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2018) extended the conversation by examining how Gothic modes were used in

nineteenth-century American texts to express anxieties about nature, wilderness, and the nonhuman.

Building on this foundation, Elizabeth Parker has played a central role in consolidating ecogothic studies through both editorial and scholarly work. As editor of the journal *Gothic Nature: New Directions in Ecohorror and the Ecogothic*, she helped define the parameters of the field, describing it as an interdisciplinary approach that brings Gothic studies and ecocriticism into dialogue in order to examine the uncanny dimensions of human/nonhuman relationships (2019). Her monograph *The Forest and the EcoGothic: The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination* (2020) further develops this framework, focusing on the forest as an emblematic site of Gothic horror and ecological anxiety. Here, Parker shows how Gothic landscapes – especially wooded ones – serve as spaces where human fears about nature and climate collapse are negotiated and intensified.

Pushing the intersection between Gothic and environmental concerns further, the anthology *Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth* (2022), edited by Justin Edwards, Rune Graulund, and Johan Höglund, uses the Gothic as a critical lens for understanding the environmental crisis of the Anthropocene. While the editors recognise that the intersection between Gothic and nature is long-standing, the volume aims to stimulate new dialogues between Gothic studies and recent work in the environmental humanities. In doing so, it underscores how the Gothic and ecohorrific modes remain vital for articulating the affective, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of our planetary predicament – not by depicting nature as an external and vengeful menace, but by encouraging readers to rethink human engagement with and in a damaged world, ultimately bringing horror studies into conversation with ecohumanist approaches to environmental crisis.

Moreover, this turn towards relationality and materiality has opened space for thinking about the affective and atmospheric dimensions of ecohorror: how ecological ruin is sensed and lived rather than merely represented. This trajectory can be seen in *Haunted Nature: Entanglements of the Human and the Nonhuman* (2021), edited by Sladja Blazan, which examines how environmental anxieties are encoded in haunting narratives. In the volume, the ghost motif is read as a means by which the traumas of ecological destruction return and persist, blending ecocriticism with hauntology to show how planetary collapse continues to trouble

the present as both material condition and affective residue. Such work underscores that contemporary ecohorror fiction operates not only at the level of plot or theme, but through atmosphere and emotion, making ecological crisis felt as a haunted condition of everyday life.

Turning now to Nordic ecohorror scholarship, *Nordic Gothic* (2020), edited by Maria Holmgren Troy, Johan Höglund, Yvonne Leffler, and Sofia Wijkmark, is among the first major studies to examine how Gothic modes are reimagined in specifically Nordic cultural and environmental contexts, emphasising the region's unique relationship with landscape and climate concerns, although its analyses remain largely centred on Swedish literature, television and film. In addition, Pietari Kääpä's *Ecology and Contemporary Nordic Cinemas: From Nation-Building to Ecocosmopolitanism* (2014) offers one of the earliest, though limited, examinations of environmental themes in Nordic film culture. Although not primarily concerned with horror, the book includes a chapter on Nordic 'ecoslashers', which blend traditional slasher tropes imported from Hollywood with region-specific myths and storytelling traditions, producing hybrid cinematic forms that expose the tensions between Nordic nation-building and environmental exploitation. Published nearly a decade later, Benjamin Bigelow's *Menacing Environments: Ecohorror in Contemporary Nordic Cinema* (2023) stands out as the most extensive – and presumably the only – monograph dedicated to Nordic ecohorror. Concentrating exclusively on film, Bigelow offers a nuanced definition of the genre framing Nordic environments as dense meshworks that complicate the region's long-standing cultural exceptionalism and illusions of ecological innocence.

Together, these Nordic-focused contributions help suggest that Nordic ecohorror is less concerned with acute, global climate catastrophe than with the visceral, down-and-dirty material, existential and ontological conditions of life in the Anthropocene. It is predominantly in this ecomaterialist understanding of ecohorror – as a site for (re)imagining what it means to live, and fear, in a dying world – that I position myself.

Ecohorror as Genre, Mode, and Affect

While much of the existing scholarship examines ecohorror primarily as a genre – typically defined by shared thematic and formal conventions such as agentive matter, environmental threat, multispecies antagonism, the destabilisation of human superiority, and critiques of anthropocentrism – others have expanded this view by proposing that ecohorror also functions as a mode. Drawing on Linda Williams’s influential conception of melodrama as a mode that constitutes ‘the typical form of American popular narrative in literature, stage, film, and television’ regardless of genre (1998: 50), Christy Tidwell similarly argues that ‘ecohorror is both a genre and a mode’ (2021: 3), signalling that it operates not only through recognisable narrative patterns, but also through a wider set of affective and aesthetic logics.

Ecogothic studies provide a useful precedent for this dual framing. As Elizabeth Parker maintains, the ecogothic is a ‘framework of ideas’ or ‘theoretical lens as opposed to a genre classification’ (2016: 217), emphasising that the Gothic need not be tied to a fixed set of narrative conventions but may instead function as a perspective that illuminates ecological anxieties wherever they surface. Simon Estok likewise treats the ecogothic as an interpretive practice or theoretical framework rather than a bounded category, explaining that ‘EcoGothic theorising helps us toward these understandings’ of how fear of nature is shaping modern environmental discourse (2019: 34). Together, Parker and Estok position the ecogothic as an expansive mode and analytic approach of diagnosing cultural attitudes to nature across diverse media and genres.

Although Parker explicitly argues that the modal potential she attributes to the ecogothic ‘is not the case with eco-horror’, and instead follows Foy in positioning it in a more conventional genre framework (2019: 41), I agree with Tidwell’s broader view that ecohorror operates not only as a recognisable set of themes and generic markers, but also as a mode, and I would suggest that it too – as with the ecogothic – works as a methodological orientation. In other words, ecohorror functions as a transferable atmospheric structure – a creeping undertone, aesthetic texture, or diffuse sets of expressions – that helps cultivate a certain kind of view, awareness, or mood that foregrounds ecological entanglement, uncanniness, and the breakdown of anthropocentric order. At the same time, ecohorror can also offer

a critical framework for approaching such texts, not only as an aesthetic mode, but as an analytic orientation that directs attention to how narratives imagine nonhuman agency, articulate environmental anxieties, and unsettle anthropocentric assumptions.

This modal framing also clarifies ecohorror's capacity to diffuse across genres. As Tidwell notes, ecohorror 'has identifiable characteristics of its own while also appearing in other genres' (2021: 3), meaning that it is not confined to explicitly environmental or horrific works, but can register momentarily or fleetingly in unexpected texts and contexts, inflecting a narrative with moments of ecological dread or ontological insecurity even when horror is not its dominant or organising frame. This aligns with Tzvetan Todorov's notion of 'the fantastic', which he defines not as a stable or fixed genre, but as a fleeting moment of uncertainty between the natural and the supernatural (1975: 27). Likewise, ecohorror may emerge briefly – even in a single frame, sentence, or scene – like a rupture in the narrative, disrupting genre expectations or intermittently altering the affective tone of a work.

Consider, for example, the scene in Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) where the princess flees through the forest: tree branches claw at her, logs morph into snapping alligators, and flurries of leaves swirl in aggressive pursuit. Or Charles Baudelaire's 'Une Charogne' ('A Carcass') in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) where maggots flow like a 'thick liquid' over a decomposing carcass: 'de noirs bataillons | de larves, qui coulaient comme un épais liquide | le long de ces vivants haillons' (1996: 59). Or Anne Vestberg's poetry collection *Katastrofen, byen og skoven* (2016, 'The Catastrophe, the City, and the Forest'), where the narrator encounters a woman in a post-apocalyptic world whose skull is overrun by mushrooms: 'she sat at the bottom | a wreath of mushrooms had occupied her head | they grew out of her skull | through the smooth hair | little, noisy ghosts | they devoured the light and spat it back out | she was at the bottom | with a head full of mushrooms | in and out of her skull | they devoured and drained her' (2016: 52).³³ Or the NBC television series *Hannibal* (2013–2015), starring the Danish actor Mads Mikkelsen, with its bizarrely eco-mythological crime scenes, presented as gory art installations of a lobotomised human beehive; a snail-infested dragonfly-man; a body transformed into a mushroom growbag; a patient with sabretooth implants

who wants to ‘become an animal’; a tree-impaled man blooming with flowers and roots; and the recurring sacrificial stag motif of naked young girls impaled on the antlers of a deer’s severed head.

In this way, ecohorror is fragmentary, creeping, and rhizomatic, allowing it to manifest in a passing moment, a single character, a line, or even a material object, from the animate clay in Matias Faldbakken’s *Vi er fem* (2019, ‘We are Five’) and Edgar Allan Poe’s *Black Cat* (1843) to the sentient forest of Mirkwood in Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* (1937) and Jean-Paul Sartre’s chestnut tree in *Nausea* (1938), whose gnarled, oozing roots provoke existential revulsion. These flashes of ecological horror sometimes manifest as what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls ‘moments of presence’ – aesthetic experiences that are not only textual or visual phenomena but affective events or atmospheric moods that reach directly into bodily emotional experience and facilitate an immediate awareness of the now (2012: 13).

Ecohorror can thus be understood not only as a genre or a mode, but also an affect – an actual visceral response that cannot be reduced to just environmental anxiety. In fact, ecohorror indexes a range of emotional registers, including fear *for* nature as well as fear *of* it; climate shame and guilt in the face of human complicity; ecological grief over species loss and environmental precarity; and the ontological sense of strangeness that arises when the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman begin to blur. These intensities may be embedded in the affective tone and atmosphere of literary and cinematic narratives, inhabit its characters or plot, emerge in readers or audiences, or surface beyond fiction altogether, informing the affective texture of everyday encounters with the Covid pandemic, recycling systems, food waste, frequent flyer miles, and avocado on toast. Accordingly, ecohorror describes not only what texts depict but how they feel and are felt, and how the ecological present presses upon us as a lived and bodily condition.

In sum, ecohorror emerges as an overflowing and boundary-defying mode that resists fixed categorisation, surfacing instead through what Ludwig Wittgenstein describes as ‘a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing; sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities in detail’ (1958: 32, §66). This interjective behaviour also explains ecohorror’s tendency to glide in and out of neighbouring genres. As a result, it is difficult at times – sometimes impossible – to segregate ecohorror from cli-fi, dystopias and apocalyptic narratives, speculative

fiction, the new weird, science fiction, or even noir and crime fiction. Yet at the same time, this tendency to encroach and spill over into adjacent genres also attests to horror's long-standing association with hybridity, ambiguity, and excess. More specifically, ecohorror's form mirrors its thematic proclivity for contamination and its tendency to blur the lines between established categories, making it a mode that highlights the dangers and complexities of interconnectedness on multiple levels. This also parallels James Machin's discussion of 'weird literature' (2018). In his work on writers such as Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, M. R. James, and Oliver Onions, Machin argues that understanding the weird as 'a suggestive adjective and a mode rather than a genre' requires accepting its definitional slipperiness, which also means that 'any attempt at rigidly differentiating it from what is not discussed as the Gothic would be both self-contradictory and counterproductive' (2018: 16). The same could be said of ecohorror as its power and potential relies precisely on its resistance to neat classification.

Even so, it is worthwhile addressing ecohorror's kinship with the ecogothic. While I am much less concerned with the boundaries between the two, critics such as Parker have sought to distinguish between them, framing ecogothic as 'a *way* of interrogating and interpreting the intriguing darkness in our increasingly troubled relationship to and representations of the more-than-human world' while ecohorror is merely 'a *type* of horror fiction' (2019: 11, original emphasis). In *The Forest and the EcoGothic*, she elaborates further, arguing that ecohorror is 'much less evocative of ambient geographical surroundings' and therefore 'less suited to a discussion of the forest environment' (2020: 35). She also adds that 'horror implies a more obvious sense of dangerous immediacy, while the Gothic is associated with a more obvious sense of atmosphere', and that ecohorror tends to centre 'human protagonists' whereas ecogothic is concerned with 'the active foregrounding of Nature' (35–36). Parker even suggests that ecohorror exudes a more 'positive environmentalism' due to its investment in ecological awareness, while ecogothic, by contrast, offers a more complex and often dreadful vision of nature – one that evokes not only fear, as in horror, but also desire (36).

While Parker presents these differences as 'important, if nuanced distinctions' (2020: 34), I find them to be neither. Rather than clarifying the relationship between ecohorror and the ecogothic, her distinctions risk coming across as

reductive and evaluative. For one, ecohorror is not merely a generic category or aesthetic mode, but also functions as a methodological orientation, open to ecocritical, dark ecological, affect-theoretical, monster-theoretical, and new materialist perspectives. It is also rich in ambience, not only because of eerie, sensorial *Stimmung* related to voice and attunement, as introduced by Gumbrecht (2012: 4), but also due to its heightened attentiveness to peripheral agency in a Mortonian sense (2007: 32). Likewise, Parker's claim that ecohorror primarily engages with positive environmentalism while the ecogothic cultivates a darker ecological imagination is not entirely convincing. Ecohorror cannot be aligned with any one environmental ethos – optimistic, Gothic, or otherwise. Rather, it unsettles all inherited frameworks for conceptualising nature, whether green, dark, romantic, sublime, or instrumental, in order to expose the cultural inadequacy of such categories altogether. Moreover, the attempt to distinguish the two based on affect – fear and immediacy in ecohorror versus atmosphere and desire in the ecogothic – overlooks the long-standing critical recognition that horror stories are laced with desire, attraction, and fascination. With titles such as Hogan's *Dark Romance: Sexuality in the Horror Film* (1986), Twitchell's *Dreadful Pleasures* (1985), Leffler's *Horror as Pleasure* (2000), and Clasen's *Why Horror Seduces* (2017) – not to mention Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection (1982) – it is clear that horror is as bound to desire as it is to fear. More importantly, ecohorror's emotional palette extends far beyond these two emotional registers, encompassing a wide range of affects such as rage, grief, wonder, weirdness, and melancholy, to name a few.

Though I do not find a rigid separation between ecohorror and ecogothic particularly productive, I do have specific reasons for using the term ecohorror rather than ecogothic.³⁴ While the term ecogothic is often associated with highbrow aesthetics and sublime conceptions of nature – and many of its scholars seek to elevate the genre through specialised language centred on trauma, transgression, excess, or existential awe – ecohorror embraces both high and low culture, and more importantly, focuses more on actual ecological horrors rather than the metaphysical sublime. In this respect, and somewhat in opposition to the locus-anchored conventions of ecogothic, ecohorror works tend to mobilise more abstract and dispersed notions of ecology, materiality, affectivity, and corporeality. Therefore, I

can only agree with Parker's statement that 'the "eco" in "eco-horror" and "ecogothic" functions differently in each' (2020: 36).

Moreover, while ecogothic continues to draw from conventional Gothic tropes such as 'supernatural activity (or the hint of it), women in danger, ancient castles or monasteries standing over subterranean dungeons or catacombs, the threat of violence and rape, and almost always convoluted family histories, with lost heirs and hidden siblings and parents' (Hillard 2013: 111), ecohorror is less prescriptive and more capricious. Because of this, it tends to challenge not only familiar representations of nature, but ecology more broadly, while also reconfiguring inherited gender roles, frequently casting women – or femininity – *as* danger rather than as simply *in* danger. This also relates to another crucial difference, traditionally speaking, between ecohorror and ecogothic, which is that the latter often relies on the Todorovian doubt, ultimately offering a rational explanation for its uncanny incidents, while ecohorror, especially in its Nordic variants, offers no explanation, no way out, no resolution – only estrangement and further entanglement. For that reason, the relationship between the supernatural and reality is often negotiated differently.

Ultimately, approaching ecohorror as a genre, mode, and affect opens for a broader, more inclusive critical engagement – one attentive to how its aesthetics and sensibilities surface across different generic forms and spaces: in the haunted forests of Gothic fiction, the apocalyptic landscapes of climate narratives, or the speculative edges of contemporary crime stories. Rather than confining ecohorror to fixed or restrictive definitions, this approach makes it possible to recognise its presence across diverse literary and cultural contexts, thereby extending its critical reach and creative scope.

Having now surveyed how the literature defines ecohorror and discusses its formal dimensions – as genre, mode, and affect – it is time to examine the term more closely. Since ecohorror is a compound of ecology and horror, it is worth clarifying the meanings and conceptual history of the terms, before turning to how their fusion generates new understandings, tensions, and affective resonances in a Nordic setting. Building on Parker's interest in what 'the "eco" in "eco-horror"' denotes and how it functions (2020: 36), I begin by briefly introducing key concepts of nature in Western thought – particularly those that have shaped

anthropocentric worldviews – before tracing how ecohorror texts respond to and complicate such assumptions. From there, I turn to horror itself, both as a fictional genre and as an affective experience, to explore how it shapes ecohorror’s capacity to evoke dread, disrupt human-centred perspectives, and provoke ecological awareness.

The Eco in Ecohorror

The concept of nature is an intricate one. As Raymond Williams writes in ‘Ideas of Nature’ (1980), ‘All at once nature is innocent, is unprovided, is sure, is unsure, is fruitful, is destructive, is pure force and is tainted and cursed’ (72). In Western thought, ‘nature’ has been a vessel for a multitude of meanings and valuations, often cast in binary terms as either good or evil, nurturing or threatening, ordered or chaotic. This contradictory framing underscores an enduring tension in how nature has been conceptualised across history, not as a stable or singular concept, but as a contested and evolving site of conflicting perspectives.

This dualism is found in both intellectual history and contemporary theory. Ecocritics such as Kate Soper have identified ‘nature-endorsing’ versus ‘nature-sceptical’ views of nature (1995); Greg Garrard distinguishes between the human and nonhuman realms (2004); Camille Paglia contrasts Apollonian and Dionysian forces (1990). Similarly, Tobias Skiveren and Martin Gregersen observe a dichotomy in Anthropocene thinking between harmonious deep ecology and dissonant dark ecology (2016), while Thomas Bredsdorff, Finn Stefánsson, and Claus Emmeche distil these dualisms into two overarching views, ‘a bounded concept of nature, in which nature is defined in opposition to something else – such as the city, culture, learning, or God – and an unbounded concept of nature, in which nature encompasses everything that exists’ (lex.dk 2025).³⁵ These diverging positions not only shape ecological thinking, but resonate more widely in cultural forms, including ecohorror, a genre that responds to and unsettles assumptions about what nature is, where it begins and ends, and how humans relate to it.

Somewhat simplistically, these tensions crystallise into two dominant yet opposing philosophical trajectories. One envisions nature as a harmonious origin; a pristine, nurturing realm offering freedom and holistic coexistence, often

romanticised as a refuge from the alienations of technology, urbanisation and modernity. The other portrays nature as alien, violent, and unpredictable; a volatile realm where human and nonhuman entanglements defy stability and control. Both visions have shaped contemporary cultural understandings of nature in general and the climate crisis specifically, either by framing nature as a lost ideal to be restored or by dramatising the volatility and profound interdependencies that define our ecological reality. To better understand these divergent views – and to recognise how these notions have been actively constructed rather than merely discovered – it is helpful to trace how nature has been conceptualised in Western philosophy.

Romantic Imaginaries: Nature as Ideal

The Romantic conception of nature emerged in counterpoint to the prevailing mechanistic worldview introduced by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century natural philosophy. For well over a century, causal thinkers such as the English philosopher Francis Bacon, the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, the French philosopher René Descartes, and the English scientist Isaac Newton advanced an instrumental, reductionist view of the natural world in which nature was understood as a machine: a system of discrete and measurable components that could be taken apart and studied individually in order to grasp the mechanics of the whole. Through processes of naming, classification, and cataloguing, nature was rendered knowable (and thus governable), positioning the human subject as a detached, rational observer, standing above and apart from an inert, passive natural world.

Against this mechanistic vision and the Cartesian–Newtonian conception of matter, the Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau offered a radically different understanding – one that marked a crucial starting point for the Romantic, harmonious or ‘green’ perception of nature.³⁶ In *Du Contrat Social* (1762), Rousseau rejected the alienation brought about by rationalism and scientific abstraction, presenting nature as a lost paradise – original, benign, and liberating. Calling for a return to the natural state in which humans once lived in unity with nature, he challenged the Cartesian separation of mind and matter, arguing that it had created an artificial and regrettable rift between the human subject and its environment. Through this critique, Rousseau helped to shift emphasis away from Baconian empiricism towards a more holistic relationship with the natural world.

While Rousseau emphasised reconnection and unity, German philosophy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries took a different approach in challenging the assumptions of mechanistic causality inherent in natural philosophy. Rather than simply seeking to restore a harmonious relationship with nature, key figures in German idealism questioned whether such a relationship – or even a complete understanding of nature – was ever possible in the first place. Immanuel Kant, a pivotal figure in this line of thought, famously distinguished between the *Ding an sich* (thing-in-itself) and the *Ding für uns* (thing-for-us), asserting that human perception is always mediated and can never grant access to nature, as it exists independently of the perceiving subject (Morton 2013b: 312–313). This epistemological boundary reframed nature not as something to be exhaustively known, but as something fundamentally elusive – inescapably filtered through the lens of human perception. Building on this, Johann Gottlieb Fichte introduced the concept of the ‘creating subject’, suggesting that the world is not discovered so much as it is constructed by the self (Rigby 2004: 39). Friedrich von Schelling, influenced by neo-Platonic idealism, extended this idea by proposing that art provides a unique medium for overcoming such Kantian dualisms – mind and matter, subject and object – thus offering a glimpse of unity where philosophy alone could not (41). Friedrich Hegel, too, advanced these ideas through his dialectical framework, in which nature and spirit engage in a dynamic interplay, moving between the particular and the universal (42).

In the slipstream of German idealism came the Romantics, who, as Dalia Nassar notes, were ‘born in the wake of Kantian philosophy and the problems that emerged out of Kant’s system’ (2014: 258) and strove to transcend its limitations by envisioning a world where human beings were not separate from nature, but rather continuations of it – where body and soul, self and world, were intertwined and indivisible. Drawing on pre-Christian goddesses, mythic figures of Mother Earth and the monistic naturalism of Baruch de Spinoza, they sought to heal the breach between humans and nature by dissolving entrenched dualisms that separated civilisation from the natural world.

This relational view of nature drove the scientific work of German geologist Alexander von Humboldt, who envisaged nature not as a static machine, but as a vibrant web of interconnected processes. As historian Andrea Wulf argues in *The*

Invention of Nature (2015), Humboldt's synthesis of empirical measurement and rational analysis with sensory experience and emotional engagement laid the groundwork for modern ecological thinking and shaped the work of Charles Darwin, ecologist Ernst Haeckel, Romantic poets like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and American nature writers such as John Muir and Henry David Thoreau.³⁷

In the twentieth century, this concept of an interconnected ecology found renewed articulation in James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis. Prompted by a transformative experience upon seeing the first photographs of Earth from space – the iconic 'blue marble' – Lovelock proposed that Earth functions as a vast, self-regulating superorganism maintaining its homeostatic balance. In *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (1979), he argued that all living and non-living systems are dynamically interdependent, thereby challenging human-centred models of environmental control and advancing a more holistic and harmonious vision of life in which no single element, including humanity, is isolated or privileged.

In relation to this expanded ecological understanding of Earth as a self-regulating and harmonious system, Rachel Carson's landmark book *Silent Spring* (1962) also brought urgent public attention to the fragile balance of natural systems. By exposing the devastating effects of pesticides, most notably DDT, Carson challenged the prevailing anthropocentric narrative that framed nature as a controllable backdrop for human progress. Instead, she depicted the natural world as an intricate, delicate web of life where all living organisms and their environments are deeply interconnected and interdependent, warning that human interference could unravel these vulnerable natural balances. Her work exposed the destructive consequences of unchecked human interference and ultimately helped catalyse contemporary environmental movements by bringing public attention to the interdependence and vulnerability of ecosystems.

Drawing on Carson's legacy, the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss introduced his philosophy of deep ecology in the early 1970s. Unlike shallow environmentalism, which seeks to preserve nature primarily for human benefit, deep ecology is grounded in an ecocentric worldview that recognises the inherent worth of all living beings (1973). For Næss, humanity is not ontologically separate from nature but fundamentally embedded in it – subject to its rhythms and

implicated in its balances. In this perspective, the world constitutes a holistic unity in which all beings possess equal intrinsic value. Humanity does not stand outside this network, nor can it manipulate nature without altering itself in turn. Seen in this light, the ecological crisis is not only a material or environmental issue of apocalyptic proportions but also an existential one: alienation from nature is ultimately an alienation from ourselves. Conversely, rediscovering our embeddedness in the natural world is an opportunity to reorient human life towards a deeper sense of humility and responsibility.

In these strands of Western intellectual history – from the Rousseauian return to a natural innocence to ecological holism in thinkers such as Humboldt, Lovelock, and Næss – nature is repeatedly cast as a benign site of harmonious stability and ethical grounding. Such idealised visions also linger in the cultural imagination, not least in ecohorror, where the apparent pastoral calm is often the stage for its own undoing. With this unravelling, the genre shifts into an opposing, darker perspective on nature – what Estok refers to as the ecophobic position (2009). Here, nature is not a source of moral clarity or existential belonging, but as a domain of chaos and violent indifference. Rather than a harmonious whole, nature appears here as an uncanny force.

Phobic Imaginaries: Nature as Threat

The roots of the phobic position can be traced to a different genealogy, one that begins not with Rousseau but with Thomas Hobbes. In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes presents the ‘state of nature’ not as an Edenic origin, but as ‘a warre, as is of every man, against every man’ (1970: 64), a condition in which life is ‘solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short’ (65). For Hobbes, the idea of returning to nature is not a moral or existential ideal but a political catastrophe. This was nature as the collapse of civil order, the suspension of law, and the eruption of primal violence. Where Rousseau found liberation, Hobbes saw regression.

The legacy of this disenchanted vision finds continued expression in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Theodor Adorno, and Sigmund Freud; thinkers who, in different ways, rejected the Romantic reconciliation of man and nature, and instead underscored its dangers. Nietzsche, for example, did not deny the power of nature, but regarded it as a Dionysian force – creative and life-affirming, yet also chaotic,

irrational, destructive, and fundamentally indifferent to human suffering (2000). The point was not to idealise nature, but to confront and accept its harsh realities – to embrace our existence in this world in all its violence and absurdity. In this light, civilisation is not a barrier alienating us from the truth; rather, it functions as a necessary sublimation – a cultural and aesthetic counterweight to nature’s indifference. Similarly, Adorno and Horkheimer, writing in the shadow of Auschwitz, caution against any romanticisation of nature. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), they argue that nature cannot be reclaimed as innocent or healing because it has already been inscribed with domination – by myth, by instrumental reason, by capitalist exploitation. Within this framework, the call to ‘return to nature’ risks reifying the very thing that should be critically interrogated. The ideal of pure nature becomes an ideological trap: nostalgic, reactionary, and blind to history. Freud, meanwhile, offered yet another inflection of this phobic position. In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), he described nature not as a benevolent background, but a source of suffering – illness, death, catastrophe – while civilisation functions as a defensive structure erected to restrain the threatening forces of both nature and the unconscious. The price for this defence is repression; the gain is survival.

What unites these thinkers is not a denial of nature but a refusal to view it as morally or spiritually redemptive. They rejected the fantasy of harmonious unity, exposing instead the violence, strangeness, and indifference that nature can entail. In this light, the phobic view appears as a critical counterbalance: a necessary confrontation with the limits of idealisation and an acknowledgment of nature’s radical otherness. At the same time, the phobic stance is not without its dangers in itself. If nature is conceived of primarily as hostile or fundamentally alien, the result may be a renewed distancing of the human from the nonhuman world – a return, paradoxically, to the same logic of separation and mastery that has enabled environmental degradation. Consequently, the phobic position risks legitimising the cultural habits of control and exploitation rather than cultivating reciprocity and care.

This criticism has also resonated in contemporary ecocriticism, particularly in the work of Simon Estok, who introduces the term ‘ecophobia’ to describe not merely an emotional aversion, but a culturally embedded fear and loathing of

nature. Defined as ‘an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world’ (2009: 208), ecophobia manifests both in literature and public discourse as a defensive response to the perceived threat posed by nature as a source of disease or disaster of uncontrollable force. However, such representations, Estok argues, also risk reinforcing antagonistic attitudes to the nonhuman while cultivating a sense of despair and hopelessness. Consequently, ecohorror is no longer a call to action, but is instead couched in terms of mere entertainment and spectacle. Therefore, Estok provocatively argues that since ecophobic representations have real-world consequences, they should be criminalised accordingly: ‘Why are ecophobic representations of and actions towards nature not subject to the law? Why are they not under the category of hate speech and hate crimes?’ (2018: 71). For Estok, the depiction of ecophobia is not just a thematic concern; it is an ethical one.

Estok’s intervention is crucial because it shows how environmental degradation is not only a result of negligence or exploitation, but also of deep-seated cultural anxieties. His work thus reframes our ecological crisis as not just material, but ideological: shaped by a worldview in which nature is feared, othered, and excluded. However, while contemporary ecohorror imaginaries often borrow from this monsterising vocabulary and uncanny aesthetic, they rarely conflate fear and hatred in the way Estok’s definition implies, mobilising dread as a mode of inquiry rather than as an expression of hostility towards the nonhuman world.

As Rayson Alex and Susan Selvaraj have also pointed out, ‘it is not always useful to understand the fearful relation between humans and their ecology as ecophobia’ (2019: 423). Instead, they propose a distinction between ecophobia and eco-fear, arguing that such a delineation opens the door to a more expansive understanding of ecohorror. Indeed, as Tidwell and Soles suggest, ecohorror is not defined solely by human fear of nonhuman nature, but often by human fear for nonhuman nature (2021: 5). In this sense, ecohorror is not simply a venue for ecophobia.

Moreover, ecohorror rarely endorses the separation of nature and culture on which the phobic position relies, and instead unsettles it. As was the case with the genre’s negotiation of the romantic perception of nature, it takes up the terms and tropes it inherits from Western thought only to turn them inside out. In doing so, ecohorror texts gesture to a third conception of nature – one that neither idealises

nor demonises, but exposes the inadequacy of the binary itself. This entangled orientation finds its clearest articulation in the work of Timothy Morton.

Dark Ecology: Nature as Entanglement

Carving out a path beyond the simplistic binaries of nature as either benevolent or hostile, Timothy Morton introduces dark ecology: a theory that, while partially indebted to Lovelock's and Humboldt's notions of ecological interconnectedness, radically reorients them towards darker, more unsettling terrain in line with phobic views of nature as violent and decaying. By this twist, 'Gaia is out', as Morton polemically declares, rejecting Lovelock's image of the Earth as a holistic, self-regulating unity (2010: 35). Instead, he envisions nature as a dense, sprawling rhizome – an opaque, ever-evolving meshwork that resists comprehension or mastery. In this view, nature is not something humans can observe and analyse from a safe distance, but something in which we are already deeply, inescapably entangled.

With this shift, Morton foregrounds nature's unsentimental side: the ugly, gloomy, uncanny, dissonant, discordant, repulsive, sickly, and dying. While this mimics the phobic position, he in turn refuses to ignore or pretend to distance himself from the chaos and weirdness of the natural world. Moreover, Morton refrains from simplistic valuations of good and evil, instead embracing ambivalence, contradiction, irony, and the discomfort of entanglement. This goth orientation gains particular urgency in the context of the Anthropocene, where idealised visions of nature give way to the acknowledgement of the messy realities of ecological collapse – a condition Morton describes as 'not a cozy situation: it's a spooky, uncanny situation' (2013a: 130). He develops this vision in *Ecology Without Nature* (2007), where he advocates for an ecological awareness that confronts the strangeness and unsettling realities of the world.

The ecological thought, the thinking of interconnectedness, has a dark side embodied not in a hippie aesthetic of life over death, or sadistic-sentimental bambification of sentient beings, but in a 'goth' assertion of the contingent and necessarily queer idea that we want to stay with a dying world: *dark ecology*. (2007: 184-185, original emphasis)

With this 'hippie aesthetic' and 'bambification' in mind, Morton extends his critique to both Romantic and deep-ecological thought, viewing them as counterproductive movements that uphold an idealising, sentimental, and ultimately premodern conception of 'Nature'.³⁸ For Morton, both are driven by a nostalgic desire to 'return to Nature', privileging aestheticised and masculinist ideals – such as the sun, wilderness, holism, purity, vitalism, and health – while disregarding the ugly and dangerous realities of ecological coexistence. Crucially, Morton understands the aestheticisation of Nature as structurally analogous to the patriarchal fetishisation of women, insofar as both rely upon forms of idealisation that mask domination beneath the language of admiration and reverence: 'putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration' (2007: 5).

For Morton, then, the idea of Nature – with a capital N – is an ideological invention, not an ontological reality (2010: 3). He therefore deliberately capitalises the term to mark its status as an empty container; 'an arbitrary rhetorical construct' heavily coded with romantic, ecomimetic connotations (2007: 21–22), or as he memorably puts it, 'a ghost at the never-arriving end of an infinite series: craps, waves, lightning, rabbits, silicon ... Nature' (18). Importantly, however, the problem is not that Nature is too broad or associative in scope; it is that ecology too, in Morton's view, is radically expansive. The difference is that where Nature carries an ideological illusion of order, purity, harmony, and separateness, ecology embraces entanglement, contradiction, and the full messiness of existence. Therefore, Morton argues, the romanticised idea of Nature as a pristine, external domain is an aestheticised construct that has become a nuisance to genuine environmental efforts, which is why he advocates for an 'ecology without Nature'.

In place of Nature's distancing idealism, Morton envisages an ecology far beyond the illusion of purity or externality, extending the ecological into every sphere of life. On this account, ecology is not confined to trees, oceans, or atmospheric conditions; it does not end at the edge of the forest or begin with climate activism. Rather, it permeates all areas of existence: our relationships, identities, emotional states, economies, histories, and futures. This expansive sense of ecology is evident in his sweeping definition.

Ecology isn't just about global warming, recycling, and solar power – and also not just to do with everyday relationships between humans and nonhumans. It has to do with love, loss, despair, and compassion. It has to do with depression and psychosis. It has to do with capitalism and with what might exist after capitalism. It has to do with amazement, open-mindedness, and wonder. It has to do with doubt, confusion, and scepticism. It has to do with concepts of space and time. It has to do with delight, beauty, ugliness, disgust, irony, and pain. It has to do with consciousness and awareness. It has to do with ideology and critique. It has to do with reading and writing. It has to do with race, class, and gender. It has to do with ideas of self and the weird paradoxes of subjectivity. It has to do with society. It has to do with coexistence. (Morton 2010: 2)

This trajectory finds its cultural expression in the genre of ecohorror, where the comforting myths of a stable, external, beneficent Nature are relentlessly dismantled. Ecohorror works dramatise the very entanglement Morton theorises, thus revealing that nature is not 'out there', but immanent, intimate, invasive, and often unsettling (2007: 77). In this genre, the boundaries between human and nonhuman, self and environment, collapse; nature is no longer a scenic backdrop but a dynamic, often uncanny participant. Rather than offering redemption through ecological purity, ecohorror confronts us with the inescapable messiness of coexistence. And because ecology permeates all aspects of life, ecohorror narratives not only concern uncanny landscapes or threatening climate crisis, but creep into every aspect of existence – from bodily transgressions (*Raw* 2016) to ecological grief (*Arkticós Dolorós*, 2021), and from cursed domestic spaces (*Mother!* 2017) to ruptures in everyday life (*Morgenstjernen* 2020). In each instance, the genre repeats the same lesson: there is no escape from ecology; there are only deeper, often disturbing forms of embeddedness. That is what puts the 'eco' in ecohorror.

The Horror in Ecohorror

Turning to the second element in ecohorror – horror – it is a notoriously slippery, polysemic concept, because horror straddles the line between genre and affect, functioning at once as a narrative category and as an embodied experience. I thus survey the key critical approaches, tracing how scholars have variously defined

horror using monsters, affect, narrative structures, the pleasures and anxieties it provokes, and the work it is said to perform, in order to understand how these components are activated in ecohorror.

Horror studies cuts across multiple disciplines – philosophy, film theory, literary criticism, evolutionary psychology, feminist theory, and more – each offering distinct, sometimes contradictory frameworks for understanding what horror is, what it does, and why we seek it. Using different thematic routes to defining horror, some of these approaches emphasise the figure of the monster as a locus of otherness and fear (Wood 1979; Tudor 1989; Halberstam 1995; Cohen 1996); others explore sexuality and desire as underlying currents of anxiety and transgression (Twitchell 1985; Clover 1992; Creed 1993); while still others highlight social or cultural taboos, existential dread, or the *unheimlich*, often emphasising themes of ontological instability or the breakdown of rational order (Freud 1919; Todorov 1975; Kristeva 1982; Fisher 2016). One way or another, they all seem to agree that one cannot talk of the horror genre without addressing affect, because the genre is literally named after its most central emotion. The narrative circles around and caters to horror sensations, not the other way around, making it a paramount genre-defining feature.

In fact, much of the theorisation of horror in existing scholarship glides between horror as an emotional experience and horror as a narrative genre – at times consciously, at times implicitly – which is why most attempts to define horror fiction cannot help but refer back to the visceral reactions it provokes. Andrew Tudor, for one, offers a straightforward definition, describing horror films as ‘films that have in common the *intention* to horrify’ (1974: 134, original emphasis). Similarly, the philosopher Noël Carroll defines horror as a genre ‘designed to provoke fear’ (1999: 38). The Swedish horror scholar Mattias Fyhr extends these views, concurring that ‘Horror in art is something depicted as frightening, through a combination of the unnatural and a violation of the prevailing human order’ (2017: 19).³⁹

Yet what constitutes horror’s emotional impact has been parsed differently over time. The eighteenth-century Gothic writer Ann Radcliffe famously distinguished between terror and horror, writing that they are ‘so far opposite that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other

contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them' (1826: 149). This division became foundational to later understandings of the genre, echoed by critics such as James Twitchell, who blends Radcliffe's terms with psychoanalytic theory to describe horror as irrational and dreamlike – an inward, subconscious, and archetypal anxiety – while terror, by contrast, is tied to a more realistic fear of tangible threats one might encounter in the real world. Similarly, Noël Carroll distinguishes between 'art-horror' and 'natural horror' to differentiate the horror elicited through engagement with fictional narratives from that which arises in real-life contexts (1990: 35). This typology also aligns with the Danish horror scholar Rikke Schubart, who distinguishes between ritual horror, which is detached from reality, formulaic, and emotionally safe, and non-ritual horror, which is unpredictable, visceral, and disrupts expectations through its proximity to real-world violence and trauma (1993: 48). Relatedly, Fred Botting suggests that while terror 'marks the uplifting thrill', such as 'the dilation of the pupil in moments of excitement and fear', horror is marked by bodily contraction and revulsion at the presence of the monstrous (1996: 10).

Whereas these frameworks illustrate a critical tradition that merges genre conventions with affective responses, bridging structural categorisation with the visceral experience of the reader, Stephen King tilts the balance more decisively towards the latter, bringing to the fore horror's emotional and physiological impact as its primary organising principle. In *Danse Macabre* (1981), he proposes a tripartite model of horror rooted not in narrative structure or monster typologies, but in affective intensity. For King, horror operates on three distinct emotional levels: terror, which he like Radcliffe sees as the most refined – a sense of mounting dread; horror, a more immediate reaction to shocking or grotesque imagery; and revulsion, the base physical recoil from the disgusting or the obscene (2002: 36–38). King's hierarchy implicitly acknowledges that horror's power lies in its capacity to provoke layered, visceral responses – what Julia Kristeva might call an abjection (1982) – ranging from psychological suspense to bodily disgust.

Either way, what unites these varied accounts is the recognition that the definition of the horror genre relies, in part, on its effect on the audience. Whether defined through narrative structure, affective intent, or physiological response, horror fiction is inseparable from the reactions it seeks to provoke. The genre is

therefore always partly constituted by its recipient – by the body that shudders, the mind that recoils, and the gaze that cannot look away.

Pushing this idea further, Twitchell claims that ‘horror is not, strictly speaking, a genre; it is rather a collection of motifs in a usually predictable sequence that gives us a specific physiological effect – the shivers’ (1985: 8). This emphasis on bodily response is likely indebted to Lovecraft, the originator of modern horror fiction, whose essays on ‘cosmic horror’ foreground not just fear, but fear as a metric of literary success. For Lovecraft, horror could not be judged solely by plot or authorial intention, but on the emotional force it exerts on the reader.

Therefore we must judge the weird tale not so much by the author’s intent, or by the mere mechanics of the plot; but by the emotional level which it attains ... The one test of the really weird is simply this – whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread. (1973: 16)

In Lovecraft’s view, horror fiction is not so much defined by narrative form in itself but by the intensity of the emotional response it provokes. Yet this affect-centred perception is contested. Tzvetan Todorov, for one, is critical of any emphasis on reader emotion, warning that ‘we should have to conclude that a work’s genre depends on the *sang-froid* of its reader’ (1975: 35, original emphasis), thereby implying the methodological instability and sheer unscientificity of such a definition practice.

In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973), Todorov instead proposes a structuralist model that offers a formalist lens for understanding the narrative logic that underpins much of horror fiction. Distinguishing between three narrative modes – the fantastic, the uncanny, and the marvellous – Todorov argues that the fantastic arises in moments of hesitation, when neither a natural nor a supernatural explanation fully accounts for the events in a story (1975: 25). If the narrative ultimately resolves in favour of the rational, it belongs to the uncanny; if it affirms the supernatural, it enters the realm of the marvellous. Horror fiction, particularly in its Gothic and supernatural forms, often inhabits this threshold – either dwelling in the fantastic or slipping into the marvellous – using ambiguity and transgression to unsettle the boundaries between the explainable and the inexplicable. Crucially, Todorov clarifies that this hesitation is not the response of an

actual reader, but rather ‘the role of the reader implicit in the text’ (31). In this way, Todorov re-anchors horror in the formal mechanisms of narrative, distancing it from the subjective terrain of affect and returning it to the formal genre system.

Despite Todorov’s structuralist approach, parallels can be drawn between his notion of the fantastic and what Freud called the *unheimlich* – referring to the unsettling feeling that arises when something familiar yet repressed or forgotten suddenly returns in a strange, eerie form, disrupting our sense of reality and causing deep psychological discomfort. However, whether motivated by a need to free his formalist method from what he views as the imprecise and irrelevant method of psychoanalysis (1975: 151), or by an ‘anxiety of influence’ in Harold Bloom’s sense, Todorov explicitly distances himself from Freud’s framework, asserting that ‘there is not an entire coincidence between Freud’s use of the term and our own’ (47). Still, almost ironically, Freud’s influence repeatedly surfaces in Todorov’s work, for example when he acknowledges that ‘the sentiment of the uncanny originates, then, in certain themes linked to more or less ancient taboos’ (48), thus reaffirming Freud’s theory of repressed fears and forbidden desires resurfacing through uncanny experiences.⁴⁰

Additionally, not all theorists view horror solely as an expression of dread or repulsion, but rather define it by its paradoxical emotional appeal, rooted in the simultaneous experience of fear and pleasure. In *Horror as Pleasure* (2000), Yvonne Leffler contends that although the horror genre has evolved over more than two centuries, ‘the criterion for what constitutes the genre appears to have remained the same: the fictional account must depict horrific events with the intention of arousing pleasurable emotions of horror in the audience’ (2000: 23). Unsurprisingly, this entanglement of horror and pleasure has been critically examined, particularly by the feminist theorists of the 1990s such as Carol Clover, Linda Williams, Kaja Silverman, and Barbara Creed, who argue that this dynamic frequently comes at the expense of women, portraying horror fiction as a reflection of men’s sadomasochistic fears and fantasies. They frame the genre as an expression of patriarchal, misogynistic cultural structures, thus repositioning the interplay of fear–pleasure as a site where gendered power relations are both enacted and contested – a view that foregrounds horror’s capacity to articulate cultural anxieties as much as to evoke them.

Expanding on this sociocultural function, Twitchell suggests that horror fiction serves as a culturally coded rite of passage, preparing adolescent audiences for the traumas of adulthood – especially those linked to sexuality: ‘modern horror myths prepare the teenager for the anxieties of reproduction ... they are fables of sexual identity’ (1985: 7). By this logic, Twitchell concludes that ‘essentially, horror has little to do with fright; it has more to do with laying down rules of socialization and extrapolating a hidden code of sexual behavior. Once we learn these rules, as we do in adolescence, horror dissipates’ (1985: 66). This reconceptualisation puts the emphasis on horror’s pedagogical potential rather than its capacity to evoke fear.

Together, these perspectives speak to the hybridity of horror as a cultural concept, evident in the interplay of genre conventions, emotional responses, cultural meanings, and social uses. While this multiplicity is fruitful when thinking about the various shapes and forms of ‘horror’ in ecohorror – spanning both Carroll’s ‘art-horror’, elicited through fiction, and ‘natural horror’, here mobilised to describe forms of dread arising from everyday life in the Anthropocene (1990: 35) – the mode extends well beyond the established affective parameters of fear and disgust, pointing to wider registers of unease and disorientation that emerge when horror intersects with ecological crisis. As the climate emergency defies easy understanding or resolution, so does our emotional response to it.

Channelling this emotional complexity, ecohorror cannot be reduced to a singular sensation of fear, but expands into a broader affective spectrum – a messy mixture of anxiety, horror, disgust, anger, grief, nostalgia, strangeness and guilt – each a facet of our uneasy confrontation with environmental degradation and loss. Horror, in this context, is not a discrete emotion but a composite affect, and moreover one that captures the instability and ambivalence at the heart of our relationship with the more-than-human world. Ecohorror is therefore not merely a mirror held up to our fears, but a medium by which they are felt, shaped, and made meaningful. It stages the emotional weight of ecological crisis not only as spectacle, but as lived affect – offering a space where dread is a mode of knowing, caring, and engaging, and horror is a way of feeling the world.

If ecohorror’s ecological framework unfolds as an aesthetic, affective negotiation of Western perceptions of nature – moving from romantic idealisation and phobic demonisation to dark ecological entanglement – and if its horror logic expands the

genre's affective register from fear and disgust into a broader, messier emotional ecology in which dread and disorientation are ways to experience ecological collapse in the Anthropocene, then ecohorror exceeds the status of a genre merely depicting environmental crisis. Rather, it challenges the ontological foundations by which Western modernity has traditionally understood the relationship between humanity, nature, and life on Earth itself. This is the trajectory of Nordic ecohorror in all its radical, region-specific, genre-defining stages.

The Nordic in Nordic Ecohorror

Beyond its ecological and horrific dimensions, ecohorror is also shaped by the cultural contexts in which it emerges. In Nordic ecohorror, narratives engage with a cultural understanding of nature that has long been imagined not merely as landscape, but as a restorative space associated with harmony and belonging. As the Nordic Council of Ministers' branding report (2019) and traditions of 'friluftsliv' suggest, Nordic identity remains intertwined with ideas of wilderness as a site of recreation and reconnection – a cultural imaginary that recalls both Romantic ideals and Arne Næss' philosophy of deep ecology, with its emphasis on harmonic, holistic human embeddedness in the natural world. In this sense, the Nordic region might still be, to borrow Morton's phrase, 'in the Romantic period in a number of very significant ways' (2007: 27).⁴¹

Cultural historian Nina Witoszek has also conceptualised this Nordic perception of nature through what she terms 'ecohumanism', a worldview in which humanist ideals – such as authenticity and revitalisation – are intertwined with symbolic attachments to landscape and place (2011: 53). By using the term ecohumanism, however, Witoszek wishes to emphasise that Nordic environmental discourse remains fundamentally centred on human concerns and experiences, by which 'the recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and unalienable rights of all members of the human family' is ultimately 'modified by values springing from man's experience of nature' (53).

In a related critique, Morton argues that romanticised views of nature are problematic in two contrasting ways: on the one hand, it entails an aestheticisation and commodification of nature; on the other, it presents a fantasy of the human

fusion with nature. In the first case, nature is reduced to an idealised object meant to serve human needs and consumption. Or, as Morton writes, ‘Romanticism is consumerism; consumerism is romanticism’ (2007: 110, original emphasis), meaning that both involve a longing for lost wholeness that is attempted to be fulfilled through idealised images, self-fashioning, and romantic stylisation. Meanwhile, the fantasy of oneness is problematic because imagining such an idealised human–nature unity also risks slipping back into objectification: To become one with, dissolve into, be embedded in one’s surroundings can, as Morton infers, ironically obscure the irreducible otherness and strangeness of nature that lies at the heart of ecological coexistence (2010: 8).

Interestingly, this fantasy of human fusion with nature plays into a central motif in Nordic ecohorror: interrelationships. Much like the Romantic and deep-ecological imaginaries discussed above, Nordic nature is frequently envisioned as a restorative space in which damaged relationships and emotional estrangement may be healed through renewed proximity to nature. Accordingly, many fictional characters in Nordic ecohorror literature and film venture into the supposedly therapeutic, revitalising northern wilderness in search of existential reconnection, emotional restoration, or recovery from trauma and grief. In Danish horror author Steen Langstrup’s novel *Skadedyr og tulipaner* (2017, ‘Pests and tulips’), a father and son move from the capital of Copenhagen to a small island in the Baltic Sea following the mother’s fatal road accident. Similarly, in Aske Munk-Jørgensen’s *Når frosten kommer* (2023, ‘When the Frost Comes’), the protagonist Thomas relocates to the Wadden Sea in a despairing attempt to recover from his wife’s car accident. In Ari Aster’s folk horror film *Midsommar* (2019), the recently orphaned Dani crosses the Atlantic to rural Sweden, while Nini Bull Robsahm’s 2019 film adaptation of Norwegian author André Bjerke’s 1942 novel *De dødes tjern* (*Lake of the Dead* 2022) follows Lilian’s return to a forest house a year after the death of her twin brother. In John Ajvide Lindqvist’s horror novel *Människohamn* (2008, *Harbour* 2011), a heartbroken father sets off for the Swedish archipelago after his daughter’s traceless disappearance wrecks his marriage.

Correspondingly, the perhaps most common motivation for seeking solace in nature is the loss of a child, as portrayed in the Danish author Betina Birkjær’s disturbing magic-realism novel *Hus i skoven til salg* (2020, ‘House in the Woods for

Sale'), Johannes Nyholm's surrealistic Danish–Norwegian horror film *Koko-di koko-da* (2019), von Trier's controversial art-house horror film *Antichrist* (2009) and the HBO series *True Detective: Night Country* (2024), where the sudden, strange, or obscure death of a child prompts grief-stricken parents to venture into the woods or the Arctic outskirts of the Nordic hemisphere.

In other ecohorror works, the experience of loss has a more existential flavour, as seen in Caroline Lyngbye's relationship-drama-turns-horror-film *Superposition* (2023) and Hanna Lützen's collection of short stories, *Rødt til en død årstid: Horrorfortællinger fra Holte* (1997, 'Red for a Dead Season: Horror Stories from Holte'), where modern Danish couples have lost not a family member, but rather themselves in the hamster wheel of urban life, and are longing for the authenticity and off-the-grid groundedness of nature. Along similar lines, Erlingur Thoroddsen's psychological thriller *Rökkur* (2017, *Rift*) illustrates how a crumbling relationship and desperate hopes to reconnect drive the queer couple Gunnar and Einar to a remote cabin in the Icelandic periphery. Echoing twentieth-century critiques of civilisation, where nature – and especially the forest – was perceived as a mystical zone outside historical time and thus free of the spiritual decline of industrial society, these narratives share a longing to overcome the alienations of modern life through a return to nature, a romantic desire articulated by the young couple of Lützen's framework narrative, who wish to 'eliminate the terrifying divide between outside and inside' and 'pull their world outside' where 'their children would grow up seeing that the world was held together by order and harmony' (1997: 8).⁴²

Underlying these narratives is what William Cronon identifies as a pastoral understanding of nature as the authentic antithesis of modern society: 'Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilisation that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover our true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity' (1996: 16). The sentimental yearning to emotionally reboot or reconnect with a lost paradise is also illustrated in Gerður Kristný's novel *Hestvík* (2016), where the vulnerable mother Elín drives to an inherited cottage near Hestvík in south-western Iceland with her 12-year-old son, hoping to show him the wondrous wilderness of her childhood. Similarly, in Peter Fröberg Idling's novel *Nidamörkur* (2020, 'Darkest night'), the protagonist is motivated by the same

nostalgic longing for his childhood summers on the Baltic island of Gotland when he impulsively buys a plot of land there.

In Nordic ecohorror, then, interrelationships are at the centre of the narrative, and particularly affective thematisations of traumatic events, melancholy, grief, urban discontent, and existential estrangement. Again and again, characters retreat into the wilderness in search of peace and reconciliation – whether with themselves, lost partners, family members, or the natural world more broadly. Influenced by ecohumanist idealisations that portray Nordic nature as authentic and reparative, the wilderness is imagined as a space capable of healing fractured selves and damaged relations.

Yet Nordic ecohorror soon begins to unsettle this fantasy of harmonious reconnection. Often, not long after the nostalgic pursuit for a reparative reunion with nature has been initiated, those very same romantic illusions are deflated as nature reveals a far darker ecology – a melancholic, decaying, and fundamentally estranging space where the northern landscape gradually erodes both Anthropocene concepts of individualism and relational stability. There is no evergreen, contemplative, and tranquil nature of romantic proportions to be found here, no meditative and curative space to regain balance, insight, or a strengthened sense of self. In the realm of monstrous nature, relational bonds do not heal in the wilderness, but rather grow fragmented and lost.⁴³ The film scholar Gunnar Iversen also captures this shift, but on a broader scale, in his description of how a new wave of Norwegian horror films recasts the otherwise idyllic countryside as a boundless, threatening space.

The new cycle of Norwegian horror films reinvents the Norwegian landscape, moving from pastorage to wilderness and from sanctuary to a wild, uninhabitable space. Nature and landscape become a space without boundaries in which anything can happen – an amoral ground where danger, violence, and death loom large. (2016: 337)

Rather than sustaining cultural perceptions of pastoral nature, then, contemporary Nordic ecohorror increasingly presents a distinct *Nordic ecology* – one grounded not in balance and belonging, but in transcorporeal entanglements, lingering atmospheres of dread and estrangement, and destabilised experiences of time and

scale. It is precisely this ecology that emerges in Karl Ove Knausgård's novel *Morgenstjernen*.

Nordic Ecology in Knausgård's *Morgenstjernen*

There are three recurring features of Nordic ecohorror which together constitute what I term *Nordic ecology* – a conception rooted not only in geographical specificity but in cultural memory, mythic resonance, local customs, social critique, and affective atmospheres. This ecology is expressed through motifs, traditions, and phenomena that are coded as particularly Nordic: pine cones and stag heads, arctic winters and the midnight sun, Sámi cosmologies and forest spirits, Midsummer rituals and Northern folktales rooted in animism. More importantly, these elements are not merely partaking in a scenic backdrop; they actively help shape the regional stakes of Nordic ecohorror, highlighting how environmental relations, affective climates and temporal scales press upon regionally specific formations of Nordic individualism, melancholia, and environmental exceptionalism.

This Nordic ecology takes shape through three overlapping dimensions. First, it emerges in the specificity of its portrayal of *space and environment*. In the presence of dense forests, ancient fjords, reindeer crossings, and quiet villages shaped by seasonal extremes, Nordic ecohorror portrays nature as a transcorporeal entanglement that destabilises the boundary between human and nonhuman as well as culturally entrenched ideals of Nordic individuality. Second, the genre is felt through *atmosphere and affect*: in the emotional weight of long winters, the charged silence of mossy woods, the relentless winter darkness, or the eerie stillness of a sun that never sets. These conditions reveal how mood, seasonal rhythms, and meteorological forces entwine to produce a Northern sense of horror, often inflected by a culturally coded Nordic melancholia. Rather than violent scares and acute fear, dread seeps in through a sad and eerie stillness. Third, *temporality and scale* come into play, as Nordic ecohorror often unfolds within ambiguous temporalities that feel out of joint – stretched, distorted, turned upside down – where existential dread builds not in moments of sudden catastrophe, but through the slow, creeping realisation of irreversible change at both human and planetary scales. These temporal dislocations therefore also render Nordic ecohorror attuned

to the deep layers of regional history, symbolism, folklore, and colonial legacy, which leach into the present as ghostly traces of memory – lingering across spans of time and place – and invite its audience to reflect on the national myths of environmental exceptionalism and their ethical implications.

A rich site for examining these regional ecohorrific dynamics is Karl Ove Knausgård's *Morgenstjernen* (2020, *The Morning Star* 2021). Set over the course of two days in contemporary Norway, in the west coast city of Bergen, the novel weaves together the perspectives of nine loosely connected individuals: Kathrine, an unhappily married priest who, returning from a work trip, checks into a hotel in Bergen to avoid her jealous husband; Arne, a literature professor struggling with his manic wife Tove, three children in a summer house, and a growing drinking problem; Arne's friend Egil, a divorced man in his mid-forties whose interests include theology and documentary filmmaking; Jostein, an unsympathetic arts journalist who would rather work as a crime reporter; his wife Turid, who tries to manage her anxiety while working the night shift at a residential home for people with developmental disabilities; Vibeke, a museum curator who has found herself a man twice her age and consequently acquired a rather intrusive stepson; Solveig, a nurse who, while caring for her mother with Parkinson's disease, falls in love with one of her patients; Emil, a kindergarten substitute who dreams of making it with his band but struggles to cope with criticism of his new songs; and the rootless Iselin, who disappoints her former upper-secondary school teacher after becoming disillusioned with her psychology studies. Despite their otherwise separate lives, these characters are gradually drawn together by the sudden appearance of a new celestial body in the sky. This star, brilliant yet oppressive, heralds a quiet apocalypse marked not by an explosion or sudden collapse, but by a slow and eerie sense of unravelling – animals behaving strangely, the dead refusing to stay dead, weather patterns shifting, and time itself seeming to slip – making Knausgård's novel a fertile text for examining the contours of Nordic ecology and its dreadful representations. In the following, I trace the three main dimensions of Nordic ecohorror, using *Morgenstjernen* to illustrate how these ecological, affective and temporal dynamics take shape.

Environment & Space: Transcorporeal Entanglements

Of the defining characteristics of Nordic ecohorror, the category of spaces and environment is particularly significant in shaping the mode's evocation of ecological unease, being not merely static backdrops or picturesque settings, but dynamic naturecultural sites of disturbing interconnectedness, where human and nonhuman boundaries blur and a sense of individuality is destabilised. This also resonates with the first of Lawrence Buell's influential criteria for environmentally oriented literature, in which 'the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device, but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history' (1995: 7). Nordic ecohorror often exemplifies and radicalises this principle. In works such as Karl Ove Knausgård's *Morgenstjernen*, the environment is staged as an active agent that not only implicates human narratives in ecological processes, as Buell proposes, but also gestures to a profoundly anti-hierarchical interdependence between human and more-than-human life.

Nordic ecohorror thus portrays its environments as active sites of *transcorporeal entanglement*, where human and more-than-human agency intersect and shape one another, destabilising any sense of fixed individuality.⁴⁴ In this sense, the genre aligns with Timothy Morton's expansive understanding of nature as 'a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite center or edge' in which everything is chaotically entangled (2010: 8) as well as Stacy Alaimo's concept of *transcorporeality*, which she defines as the 'time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from "nature" or "environment"'; a site in which corporeal and environmental theories 'meet and mingle in productive ways' (2010a: 3), and a literal 'contact zone' where 'potent ethical and political possibilities emerge' (2). Rather than positioning bodies and environments as distinct domains, this framework foregrounds their mutual permeability, emphasising the material, discursive, biological, and cultural entanglements by which human and more-than-human life is continually constituted. In Nordic ecohorror, then, spatiality is imagined as a transcorporeal, naturecultural mesh in which these interconnections are magnified while any notion of a boundary between self and other is consistently breached and negotiated, rendering space excessive and porous – a condition that easily transforms ecological interconnectedness into a source of revulsion and horror.

Knausgård's *Morgenstjernen* exemplifies this mode through its catalogue of ecological and ontological entanglements. Slowly, Bergen's mundane suburban life slides into a state of exception, where ordinary routines are punctured by animistic encroachments and inexplicable phenomena. The emergence of the enigmatic star exerts an uncanny agency of its own, precipitating a cascade of disturbances in which human and nonhuman boundaries dissolve. Suddenly, animals behave erratically and move with a strange new awareness: foxes and deer lose their wariness of humans; a badger and a fox stray indoors; crabs inexplicably swarm across roads and appear in the woods; herds of rats scabble in broad daylight; and birds produce reptilian sounds. Most startling, men with ox heads are glimpsed in the forest, the literal embodiment of transcorporeality where human and animal bodies intermingle, with echoes of sacrificial rites, the beasts of Revelation, and satanic iconography. These hybrid beings epitomise the messy naturecultures at the heart of Nordic ecohorror, where nature, myth, and corporeality collapse in on one another. In a similar fashion, the Morning Star itself is a Mortonian *hyperobject* (2013) – a vast phenomenon whose complexity exceeds ordinary human comprehension – interconnecting extreme heat, Lucifer's epithet, animal swarms, climate anxiety, doomsday prophecies, Jesus Christ, feelings of guilt, and the return of the dead.

As these uncanny disturbances accumulate, characters increasingly experience the world as unstable and alive in unfamiliar ways, as when literature professor Arne observes that 'the inside of the bay, which petered out into a little peppled shore, was teeming with crabs. Not just little stone crabs, but big sea crabs. There seemed to be hundreds of them, creeping and crawling on top of each other. I'd never seen anything like it' (2021: 25). The image of 'creeping and crawling' crabs evokes precisely the kind of excessive, self-organising material vitality that Jane Bennett describes as vibrant matter. For Bennett, matter is never inert but vibratory and active, a 'turbulent, immanent field in which various and variable materialities collide, congeal, morph, evolve, and disintegrate' (2010: ix), a description that could just as easily capture the buzzing proliferation of uncanny agency in *Morgenstjernen*. The novel is riddled with swarming vitality. Rats, crabs, heat, and seeping unease gather and proliferate with a chaotic energy reminiscent of the ten plagues of Egypt.

On page 666 – the number of the beast – the narrative closes with a vision of swarming life.

Foxes emerged, and a deer in the fields beyond the road. The weather grew warmer. One morning, an enormous flock of black birds settled on the rocks at the shore. I have never seen anything quite like it, there must have been thousands. They remained there, huddled together for several hours, before taking off all at once, a gigantic black cloud rising into the sky, a shifting curtain of flesh, almost as one, to disappear over the trees across the inlet. (2021: 666)

No longer a backdrop to human action, the environment is an enmeshed, teeming presence alive with nonhuman agency. As Bennett suggests, it is through such chaotic gatherings that the vibrancy of the world is visible to us – in much the same way Knausgård's star seems to exert a 'will of its own', altering behaviour, reshaping environs, returning the gaze, and bringing us into affect.

It is in the context of proliferating agency and shifting ontological boundaries that *Morgenstjernen* unsettles the hierarchy between centre and periphery by drawing sustained attention to marginal forces that grow increasingly insistent and strangely present. Such inversions call to mind Morton's concept of ambient poetics. In *Ecology Without Nature*, Morton describes ambience as the marginal or peripheral elements of artworks – 'the margins of a page, the silence before and after music, the frame and the walls around a picture, the decorative spaces of a building' (2007: 34). Traditionally, such elements serve to support the illusion of a coherent world in which human action unfolds, yet they remain unnoticed, operating as background. Morton, however, proposes a more attentive approach that is sensitive to what is usually overlooked: 'a way of conjuring up a sense of a surrounding atmosphere or world' (2007: 22). Attention to ambient elements, Morton argues, can help to break down 'our normal distinction between background and foreground' (2007: 69).

An ambient logic is central to *Morgenstjernen*, which repeatedly brings its narrative attention to bear on what would ordinarily remain marginal. Like Nordic ecohorror more broadly, the novel repeatedly allows the narrative to seep into spatial peripheries, whether literal (in its depictions of coastal villages, mountain cabins, dense forests, and transitional zones between wilderness and settlement) or

conceptual (in a Mortonian sense, as peripheral beings such as crabs, kittens, and deer gradually emerge as strange focal points of the story). One example of this is when Solveig encounters a fox: ‘An animal came into view, venturing out onto the floor by the manure pit to look at me. It was a fox. Its eyes were yellow and it seemed to be weighing me up’ (2021: 173). The novel contains many such encounters, signalling an ontological shift in which the margins assert themselves, and human subjectivity is decentred in the wider field of agency and relations.

In concrete terms, ambience in *Morgenstjernen* does not simply denote a diffuse aesthetic mood. Rather, it refers to the narrative strategy by which what would normally remain background as a mere atmospheric detail – weather changes, animal movements, soundscapes, celestial bodies – gradually proves to be the main event. The ambient is thus that which surrounds without initially demanding attention, yet slowly thickens into presence. In Knausgård’s novel, this means that the invasion of crabs, birds gathering at the shore or a trembling forest are not decorative scenery but events that accumulate meaning and begin to rival human consciousness as centres of narrative gravity.

This redistribution of narrative weight from human centre to environmental margin is not confined to the novel’s narrative world, but also extends into its paratextual sphere. Months before publication, Knausgård’s publisher Forlaget Oktober launched a haunting marketing campaign that leaned into the logic of ambience, focusing solely on marginal agency. Beginning on 15 June 2020, they published a series of Instagram videos with a slow-building sense of ecological unease. Filmed from ground level, there were short sequences of treetops shuddering in the wind, headlights cutting through mist, crabs skittering across asphalt, and dead fish strewn across the forest floor. Human presence was minimal; the focus was on animate, nonhuman agency. Each video was accompanied by cryptic excerpts from the novel, suggesting a world where human perception is destabilised and ordinary environments become sites of ecological unease. One clip showed an abandoned car with its door left open. Again, the perspective is low, like the one of a four-legged animal; it approaches the car while another excerpt appears: ‘Suddenly there was a crunching noise from under the wheels, | it sounded like a series of small explosions. | I slammed on the brakes. Was it a flat tire?’ (2021: 44). Then panning up into an overcast sky and overhanging branches it continues: ‘They

looked like pebbles. But they were moving ... And then I saw that they were crabs
| Crabs, in their hundreds (44).

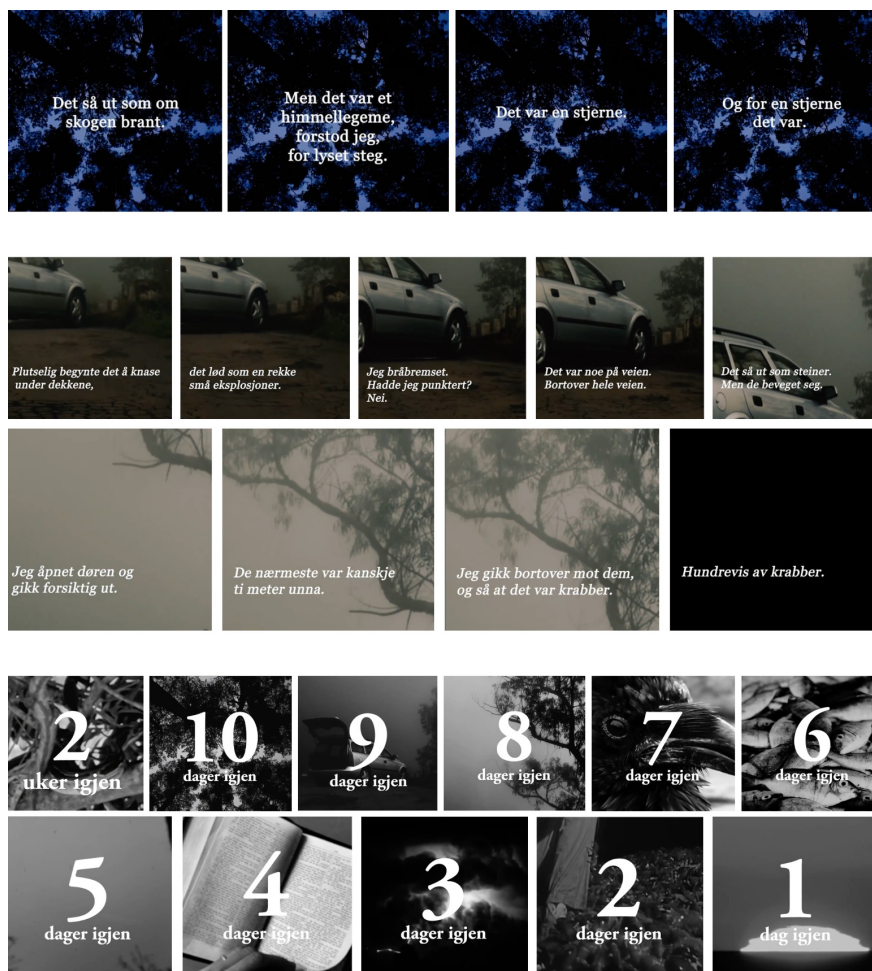


Figure 2. Still images from Forlaget Oktober's Instagram marketing campaign for *Morgenstjernen*, published between 15 July and 17 September 2020.

As the publication date drew nearer, the campaign accelerated into a black-and-white visual countdown, further amplifying this peripheral focus alongside a doomsday logic. Rather than offering plot teasers or character portraits, each post added to the unease, layering fragmentary impressions of a world in flux. First, a snake creeps through a web of branches beneath the words ‘2 weeks left’. At ‘10 days left’, we revisit the treetops swaying overhead; ‘9 days left’, another abandoned car with the boot left open; ‘8 days left’, gliding through a mist-shrouded wilderness; ‘7 days left’, a hand-held close-up of a black raven’s unflinching gaze; ‘6 days left’, panning across a pile of fish glaring wide-eyed at us while something creepy-crawly moves among them; ‘5 days left’, a super close-up of increasing rain rippling into a puddle, dark silhouettes of trees reflected on its shifting surface; ‘4 days left’, a human hand flipping through the pages of a Bible; ‘3 days left’, a pitch-black sky briefly illuminated by lightning; ‘Two days left’, a swarm of crabs clambering around a human foot; and ‘One day left’, imminent daybreak – presumably the rise of the Morning Star – yet the flickering image, suggesting either extreme heat or a watery reflection, leaves us suspended between reality and hallucination, while the cold, dark black-and-white colours produce an oxymoronic depiction of an otherwise life-giving, yellow-warm sunrise. Ultimately, the campaign produces not narrative clarity but ambient saturation: a slow accumulating swarm of marginal creatures and environmental peripheries that mirrors the novel’s entangled ecology.

Yet if *Morgenstjernen* foregrounds space as a porous, proliferating, and anti-hierarchical mesh of entangled agency, it also confronts readers with the impossibility of separation. Although the novel’s environment teems with celestial awe – suggesting transcendence on a cosmic scale – it simultaneously exposes the confining conditions of enmeshment. This claustrophobic spatiality resonates with what Buell identifies as one of four characteristics of environmental writing’s ‘toxic discourse’ concerned with a ‘disenchantment from the illusion of the green oasis ... accompanied or precipitated by totalising images of a world without refuge from toxic penetration’ (1998: 648). Here, Buell talks of a sudden restriction of space as well as our ability to move in it. What once appeared boundless and liberating is now enclosed and inescapable.

This touches upon another aspect of space in Nordic ecohorror revolving around closeness and distance. For a long time, humanity has detached itself from nature

and upheld an illusory perception of ourselves as being ‘over here’ while nature resides somewhere ‘over there’. However, in Morton’s words, the mesh ‘permits no distance’, but rather insists on ‘dissolving the barrier between “over there” and “over here”’ (2010: 39). As the philosopher David Wood asserts, ‘there is no outside, no space for expansion, no more *terra nullius*, no *Lebensraum*, no slack, no “out” or “away” as when we throw something ‘out’ or ‘away”’ (2005: 172–173, original emphasis). The Danish poet Michael Strunge captures this claustrophobic recognition in his apocalyptic verse.

Emotional delivery waste delivery language delivery not waste transport and waste destruction the waste cannot be got rid of after all it is a by-product of the production of everything call it shit if you like but you have to swallow it here or leave it, it never disappears nothing ever disappears from the world the earth at most a lucky satellite rocket but the universe itself it never escapes out of we are standing in shit up to the stratosphere. (1996: 862)⁴⁵

In Nordic ecohorror, this enclosing enmeshment not only reconfigures space; it also unsettles the notion of the individual. If we are always already caught in the mesh, then individuality itself emerges as equally porous and contingent. In *Morgenstjernen*, this transcorporeal condition creates a situation in which the separations that typically secure the modern liberal subject are difficult to uphold. When animal behaviour, weather, matter, and affect begin to act with apparent intention, the individual can no longer be taken for granted as a discrete unit standing apart and above its surroundings. Instead, subjectivity is increasingly staged as something relational and exposed: constituted through permeation and proximity rather than through autonomy. The destabilisation of the individual – a hallmark of Nordic ecohorror – is also dramatised through the novel’s narrative structure. Each chapter follows a single perspective, yet these individual lives are subtly interwoven, their paths repeatedly intersecting through the unsettling presence of the titular Morning Star. Although the novel’s formal structure initially foregrounds individuality by organising the narrative around separate first-person perspectives, each chapter bearing the name of its focal character – Arne, Kathrine, Emil, Iselin, Solveig, Jostein, Turid, Eigil, and Vibeke – the apparent autonomy of these perspectives is slowly

challenged as their everyday lives overlap while ambient ecological forces repeatedly intrude upon and shape their perceptions.

This narrative strategy resonates with a historically specific configuration of individuality in the Nordic region. As the historians Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh argue, the Nordic countries are structured around what they term ‘statist individualism’, meaning a paradoxical alliance between individual sovereignty and state authority in which citizens maintain a strong personal independence while at the same time relying on the state to ensure social security (2010).⁴⁶ In contrast to other cultural contexts where independence and personal stability are negotiated horizontally through intimate ties to family networks, religious institutions or local communities, Nordic independence is secured through a vertical alliance between citizen and state. Autonomy, in this sense, is institutionally mediated: it is sustained by welfare provision and public infrastructure, allowing the individual to remain ‘as independent of his or her fellow citizens as possible’ (2010: 16) and thus comparatively unbound by the asymmetrical obligations embedded in interpersonal dependency. This configuration also underpins what has been termed the ‘Swedish theory of love’: the idea that truly egalitarian relationships are those entered into freely by already autonomous individuals, rather than formed through economic or emotional necessity. Dependency, in this formation, is culturally coded as a threat to equality and sovereignty rather than as a precondition for relational depth (2022: xi).

In *Morgenstjernen*, the Nordic notion of individualism is both radicalised and destabilised by a double breakdown: the collapse of institutional mediation and the erosion of intimate bonds. In terms of the vertical alliance, the novel stages a striking absence of the state. As the Morning Star appears and increasingly uncanny events unfold, no authoritative structure intervenes. There are no crisis committees, no national emergency broadcasts, no coordinated scientific explanation capable of restoring epistemic order. Institutions exist in the background – hospitals, churches, schools – but they do not function as stabilising guarantors of meaning or security. The vertical alliance between citizen and state, which according to Berggren and Trägårdh underwrites Nordic autonomy, is conspicuously muted. This absence is significant: the characters continue to inhabit the habits of statist individualism – acting independently, managing crises privately, enduring uncertainty alone – yet

the institutional framework that normally sustains such independence no longer secures them. What once appeared as autonomous freedom is revealed here to be structurally dependent on a system that now fails to act. The horror, in this sense, is not only cosmic but political: it lies in the exposure of independence as contingent.

The result is not collective mobilisation but greater isolation. Read through the lens of Nordic individualism, the characters do not spontaneously turn towards one another when confronted with the incomprehensible. Instead, they continue to navigate the unfolding events largely on their own. This lack of communal support also extends into the novel's intimate interrelationships. Across the novel's cast of characters, many live in solitude, are divorced, or inhabit relationships marked by dissatisfaction and distance while care is routinely displaced or minimised. Arne, for example, is unhappily married to the unstable artist Tove, whom he ultimately leaves at a psychiatric hospital – an act that is practical and responsible rather than cruel, yet emblematic of a broader logic: care is transferred to an institutional apparatus rather than sustained in the family. While the gesture aligns with statist individualism's outsourcing of care to the welfare state, it also underscores an emotional withdrawal found in every character of the book.

Kathrine, the priest, is drifting away from her jealous husband and checks into a hotel simply to avoid returning home. The unsympathetic journalist Jostein, trapped in an unhappy marriage to Turid, likewise avoids going home, spending most of the novel out on the town, drunk and unfaithful. Even the novel's most ostensibly harmonious partnership is structured through negotiated autonomy as Vibeke's older partner agrees to fatherhood only on the condition of limited involvement: 'Let's have a baby. But looking after it will have to be your job. I'm too old to go to work *and* be a modern dad' (2021: 488, original emphasis). Fatherhood here is conditional and contract-like rather than shared. Egil is the same. Divorced and living alone in a remote cabin, he struggles with his relationship to his son, whose presence he experiences primarily as a disruption of his preferred solitude: 'Because when he was here, he took up my whole time. Took up all my space' (380). Meanwhile, left largely to herself after her father starts a new family and her mother pursues professional advancement, Iselin internalises early self-sufficiency as necessity rather than empowerment: 'Mum was away all week in Oslo upgrading her qualifications, Dad had moved out and had a new family of his own now ... I was

sixteen and old enough to look after myself' (122). In these constellations, *Morgenstjernen* turns Nordic individualism inside out: the ideal of independence – central to Berggren and Trägårdh's theory – is pushed so far that it no longer reads as liberation, but rather produces isolation, loneliness, fractured relationships, neglect, and emotional withdrawal. As the Morning Star remains suspended above Bergen, neither the state nor the family absorbs the disturbance. Institutions linger in the background without authority, and relationships are stretched thin rather than deepened. The cultural architecture of Nordic autonomy is quietly undone.

Read through this lens, *Morgenstjernen* clarifies a broader tendency in Nordic ecohorror. The genre does not merely stage ecological threat; it places pressure on foundational assumptions about self-sufficiency and stability in the Nordic imaginary. This is one way in which Nordic ecohorror engages with regionally specific cultural assumptions: it frightens by toppling the region's twin pillars of order – the sovereign individual and the sovereign state – showing that ecological entanglement leaves both personal independence and the broader social contract precarious, exposing them as contingent rather than autonomous. The horror lies not only in what intrudes from the outside, but in what the intrusion reveals about what lies within.

Morgenstjernen thus demonstrates how environment and space in Nordic ecohorror emerge as transcorporeal enmeshments – dynamic, entangled conditions that unsettle not only spatial surroundings, but also the frameworks by which reality is perceived, as well as the notion of individuality itself. Space is not a container but a participant: it encloses and influences its inhabitants, collapsing the illusion of separation between self and world through which individuality is ordinarily secured. This dissolution of boundaries further attests to Nordic ecohorror's resistance to binary logic. As demonstrated above, *Morgenstjernen* refuses neat distinctions between human and monster, centre and periphery, dead and alive. Instead, the narrative occupies liminal, shifting zones – spaces that are simultaneously intimate and cosmic, claustrophobic and vast, enclosing and expanding, familiar and alien. In doing so, *Morgenstjernen* reframes the ecological crisis not as an external catastrophe, but as an ontological mesh in which 'we ourselves are implicated' (Morton 2007: 187).

Atmosphere & Affect: Lingering Dread and Eerie Estrangement

The second category, centred on atmosphere and affect, is in many ways the most elusive and yet perhaps the most prominent in defining the traits of Nordic ecohorror. Here, atmosphere should be understood not only as meteorological or environmental conditions, but as a thick, immersive mood-space – a *Stimmung* – that pervades the narrative, often merging external environments with inner affective states, which ultimately attunes us to a world experienced less through rational understanding than through shifting moods of unease.⁴⁷ Beyond fear and ecophobia, Nordic ecohorror stresses alternative emotional registers such as melancholia, grief, pain, anger, shame, nostalgia, and indifference – affects that resonate with regional histories, climates and cultural mentality, and can thus be said to constitute part of a Nordic ecological sensibility.

Melancholy, especially, occupies a central place in Nordic cultural imaginaries and therefore also in Nordic ecohorror, where ecological anxiety is intertwined with regional experiences of solitude and seasonality. Although the Nordic countries frequently rank among the world's happiest nations, the region's geographical and climatic conditions have long fostered a melancholic sensibility and existential introspection. The high latitudinal position of the Nordic region produces extreme seasonal variations in daylight, ranging from endless summer brightness to prolonged winter darkness in which the sun scarcely rises, bringing along seasonal depression and social isolation. Surely, such environmental conditions have influenced Nordic art and literature more broadly. The Danish poet Henrik Nordbrandt famously suggested that the Scandinavian calendar contains fourteen months, including 'November, November, November', underscoring the experiential weight of winter darkness. Likewise, artists such as Edvard Munch, Vilhelm Hammershøi, Jean Sibelius, and August Strindberg all made melancholy their muse, expressed through distinctly Nordic configurations of colour, light, landscape, and mood – all encapsulated in the Nobel laureate Pär Lagerkvist's poem 'Ångest, ångest är min arvedel' (1916, *Anguish, anguish is my heritage*). Later, Nordic melancholy became associated with the filmmaker Ingmar Bergman – 'the gloomy Swede' – and subsequently with figures such as Aki Kaurismäki, Lars Norén, and Lars von Trier, while contemporary popular culture continues this tradition in the international success of Nordic noir, whose bleak visual environments and moody protagonists,

such as Kurt Wallander, Varg Veum, and Sarah Lund, situate crime narratives embedded landscapes of foggy rain, dark cities, and cold forest. In *Morgenstjernen*, too, melancholy seeps into music, mood, and landscape, as Arne observes: 'I listened to the War on Drugs for the rest of the way. The melancholy was a perfect match for the mood I was in, and for the landscape through which I drove, the dark wall of weather slowly approaching through the bright sunshine' (2021: 543–544).

Such entanglements between atmospheric environment and affective moods echo literary scholar Kate Rigby's reflections on atmosphere as something both meteorologically and emotionally invasive – toxic, intrusive, and inescapable. In *Reclaiming Romanticism* (2020), Rigby recalls a recurring nightmare, the stuff of apocalyptic sci-fi narratives, in which a 'sudden change in the sky' triggers an 'overwhelming sense of foreboding' causing her to wake with 'heart-thumping terror' and culminating in what she calls 'an atmosphere of unspeakable dread' (2020: 53). Here, Rigby's use of 'atmosphere' has a double charge: etymologically, atmosphere is literally what envelops us: *atmos*, from the Greek, meaning vapour, and *sphaira*, globe, hence a sphere of air. It is weather; it is sky; it is heat; it is, in Rigby's case, the climate of ecological catastrophe imagined as a physical enclosure. At the same time, Rigby's nightmare also attests to the affective dimensions of atmosphere, invoking concepts such as mood, ambience, tone, attunement, and similar intangible forces that envelop the subject.

A literary counterpart to this layered sense of atmosphere can be found in Knausgård's *Morgenstjernen*. Echoing Rigby's 'global warming nightmare', the novel also portrays a sudden change in the sky in form of the Morning Star. Despite being 'filled with meaning', as the character Egil notes, its arrival is never fully explained; instead, the novel's true drama lies not in what happens, but in what is felt and atmospherically endured. Relentlessly, the star exerts its invasive agency, pressing upon bodies and perception alike. Its heat is palpably intrusive, its gaze even more so – 'as if it's watching us', as Kathrine puts it (2021: 329), and its will, as Egil observes, is indomitable.

You only had to look at it, I thought, and tipped my head back to gaze at it. The star was filled with meaning. It affected everyone who saw it. Something silent and intense streamed from it. It was almost as if it possessed a will, something

indomitable that the soul could contain, but not change or influence. That feeling that someone was looking at us. (2021: 426)

In many ways, *Morgenstjernen* epitomises the atmospheric depth characteristic of Nordic ecohorror. The celestial disturbance it depicts is not a spectacle-driven natural disaster, but gestures instead towards something slower, heavier, and much stranger. The star that appears is neither explained nor resolved; it looms as a persistent enigma. Lurking at the edge of comprehension, it is at once radiant and oppressive, imbued with silent meaning, but resistant to interpretation; foreboding, but also anticlimactic. It is a sign, but no one seems to know of what. All they do know is their eerie feeling of uncertainty and a premonition of a changing world. As Jostein reflects upon the star: 'It wasn't often the word beautiful came into my mind, but now it did. Beautiful and unsettling. Why was it unsettling? Because it was completely silent. It just hung there, completely silent in the sky' (2021: 230). Here, its inertia becomes a source of dread, giving form to the novel's pervasive atmosphere of quiet unease.

In *Morgenstjernen*, atmosphere is not merely a backdrop, nor a reflection of the characters' internal states; rather, it is the medium of the novel's ambient sense of dread. Knausgård does not depict a world in overt crisis or fear, but instead immerses the narrative in a creeping atmosphere of unease. Rather than jolting its readers with classical horror tropes and fear tactics – jump scares or cataclysmic weather changes – *Morgenstjernen* is a masterclass in cultivating a kind of lingering sense of foreboding that resists closure, climax, or catharsis. Its atmosphere lulls rather than alarms, suspending both protagonists and the reader in a disorienting space where meaning remains elusive.

Relatedly, the novel's atmosphere is marked by *opacity* – a quality that is closely associated with Morton's ambient poetics, which relies on 'a certain mystifying opacity' to capture the strangeness of the world and the ungraspable agency of the nonhuman (2007: 96). For Morton, the aesthetic of opacity is an artistic remedy that most truthfully expresses humanity's relation to the world. Since the nonhuman can never be fully grasped from a human perspective, attempts to render it completely transparent risk reducing alterity to human conception. Opacity instead allows art to register the presence of what exceeds perception and comprehension without claiming mastery over it. Opaque renditions of ambient

entities, in other words, do not conceal the world so much as disclose it incompletely: they render the otherwise imperceptible perceptible, the inaudible audible, the invisible visible, the unknown partially knowable, yet without domesticating or dispelling its strangeness. Knausgård cultivates this poetic. The events of *Morgenstjernen* remain unexplained, the purpose of the star unresolved, and the shifting polyphony of voices refuses interpretive clarity. Everything is portrayed in a cacophony of glimpses, hints or passing references. What results is not revelation but a chorus of affective confusion, an atmosphere of uncertainty and insecurity that deepens the pervasive sense of estrangement rather than ignoring it.

This is an atmosphere charged with the diffuse unease characteristic of Clark's Anthropocene horror – an elusive and omnipresent 'background unease' without a clear object (2020: 66). Unlike fear, which often manifests in acute and identifiable episodes, the novel evokes a pervasive and inarticulate anxiety marked by paralysis; a low hum of eeriness that saturates the air – akin to what Hermann Schmitz terms *Bangnis*, 'the atmospherically elusive, undivided whole of the uncanny' (2005: 283).⁴⁸ The sensation encapsulates the 'affectpheric' register of Knausgård's novel: a cosmic dread, a slow estrangement, an eerie sense of no longer feeling at home in the world. This is illustrated in the character Arne, a professor who initially views himself as an atheist and rationalist, but gradually finds his sense of reality fraying – not through dramatic events or overt terror, but through subtle dissonances, a dead kitten returning to life, and his wife's apparent foretelling of the Morning Star, which foster a growing suspicion that everything no longer followed the laws of nature (2021: 550).

A parallel disturbance hits Kathrine, a pastor whose life and vocation are grounded in theology and an acceptance of divine omniscience. Yet when confronted with the star, she responds in a manner counter to that. Rather than seeking refuge in faith, she tries to contain her fear through rationality: 'The sight filled me with a terror I tried to counter with rational thought, telling myself it was a natural phenomenon, not a sign, and that a star couldn't see us, couldn't think about us, couldn't judge us' (2021: 329). Ironically, the capacities she fears in the star – all-seeing, transcendence, judgement – mirror the attributes she ordinarily venerates in her God. Like Arne, she is pushed into a position that contradicts her existential orientation in the world. Neither character – representatives of rationality

and faith, the two pillars of human meaning-making – can reach any kind of revelation or consensus, but are left instead with estrangement and bewilderment. Arne and Kathrine thus exemplify the novel's affective register of *Bangnis*: an atmospheric unease without clear object or resolution.

Because the novel's dominant affect is Anthropocene horror rather than immediate fear, there is no panicky rampage in the streets of Bergen. The characters of *Morgenstjernen* are not rushing but merely slouching towards Revelation. They mention the star in passing with uncertainty and wonder, but then quickly resume their trivial activities and everyday routines: Iselin calls it 'the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. A megastar' but soon afterwards 'put *Sheer Heart Attack* on again and followed Ibsens gate' (2021: 146, original emphasis); Emil observes that 'it was a kind of star. But how big it was!', yet moments later 'took the guitar out of its case and put it in its stand in the living room' and 'pulled open the can of 7 Up' (106); and Jostein notes that "all around us people sat gazing up at the star, but no one was standing any more", before he 'lit a fag, reminding myself to buy a new packet at the 7-Eleven' (231). This affective flattening mirrors Ngai's idea of stuplimity: a concept formed by a conflation of 'sublimity' and 'stupefaction' to describe a contradictory aesthetic experience where shock and numbness coexist, producing what she calls 'a bringing together of ... of sharp, sudden excitation and prolonged desensitization, exhaustion, or fatigue' (2005: 271). Knausgård captures this peculiar aesthetic of exhausted amazement whenever the novel's characters register bizarre phenomena – crabs moving through forests, rats appearing in unexpected places, a badger invading a domestic space – yet they respond less with terror than with passive perplexity, suspended between agitating astonishment and dulling indifference. They note the occurrences, but do little to respond; their reactions are muted and strangely apathetic.

Their muteness, however, has not resonated with all readers. Literary critic Sam Byers from the English newspaper *The Guardian*, for one, complains that Knausgård's use of non-linguistic sound is in fact a regression in his poetic eloquence. In his review, 'The Morning Star by Knausgård review – bloated and inconsequential', he writes,

Knausgaard panics and goes pre-verbal, leaning his elbow against the keyboard and hoping for the best. A character throws on some Pink Floyd: DA! DA DA!

DA DA DA DA DA!'; 'La la la la lalalala. La la la la lalalalala'. Another, Beethoven's Seventh Symphony: Bam baa ba, baam ba ba' Others just seethe alone, expressing themselves in vowels: 'Aaaargh, I said quietly between my teeth. Aaaargh'. Approaching a half-hearted emotional peak, Knausgaard flails for drama, but finds only sound. 'Ow, bloody hell! Ow, ow, ow!', thinks a man as he touches his injured head after a car crash. 'Ahhhhh!', thinks another, learning that his son has shot himself. The result is flattening, nullifying, life-sapping. (*The Guardian* 2021)

Yet what Byers dismisses as stylistic failure can equally be understood as a deliberate atmospheric strategy. The breakdown of eloquence – into sound, tone, rhythm, even inarticulate noise – underscores the novel's central point: if the ecological crisis resists comprehension, how does one even begin to address the end of the world? In *Morgenstjernen*, speech falters, language breaks down, and expression shifts into other registers – sound, tone, rhythm – where the state of our surroundings is less told than felt. Rather than offering clarity, these sonic ruptures highlight the inadequacy of explanation itself.

Thus, far from being a flaw, Knausgård's collapse of linguistic mastery underscores how *Morgenstjernen* must be approached. Instead of intellectualising what cannot be fully fathomed or rationalised, the novel invites us to 'read atmospherically' – a concept coined by Anna Jones Abramson, who suggests that readers tune their bodies and perceptions to the subtle frequencies of mood and ambience encoded in the text, sensing 'what feels impending, what feels hauntingly persistent' (2018: 350). Approached in this way, the novel is less a narrative of apocalypse than a profound meditation on human existence in an era of ecological uncertainty.

This encouragement to 'read atmospherically' is reinforced by Knausgård's use of paratexts. The novel's concern with sound, music, and mood extends beyond the printed page into a broader media ecology. Alongside a carefully staged Instagram campaign, saturated with atmospheric imagery, the website *themorningstar.no* was launched as a significant part of the book's paratextual, intermedial storytelling. As an ambient mood board, the site compiles sound, image, and textual fragments: photographs of Chernobyl; red-lettered omens flashing 'Death', 'Forest', 'Revenge', 'Lust' across the screen; Biblical references; mythological figures; the sound of an

old football match; excerpts from the novel; an authentic video of an astronaut drifting above the earth; and a bibliography of nonfictional and fictional works spanning from Ovid to Bram Stoker to Inger Christensen – and Timothy Morton, no less.

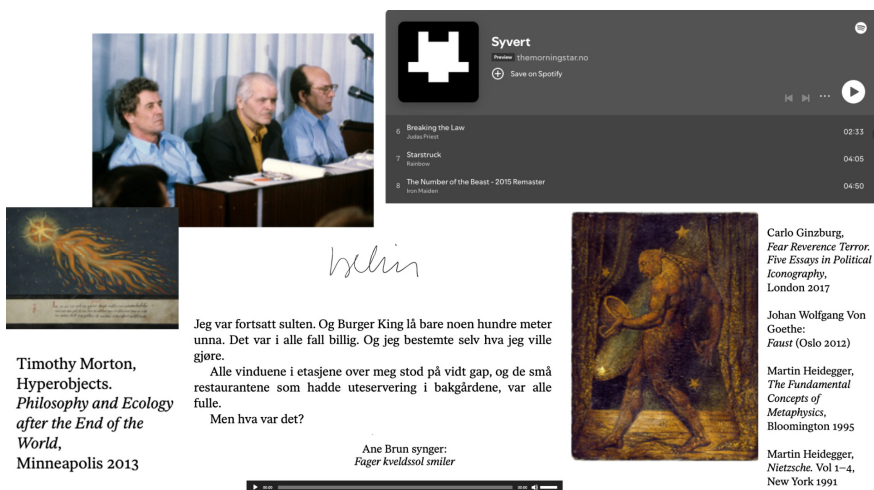


Figure 3. Selected screen captures from the promotional website themorningstar.no.

Alongside the visual collage, the website also provides access to curated Spotify playlists – one for each of the book’s main characters. These lists are not only attuned to the characters’ personalities and life situations, but also serve as sonic extensions of the novel’s atmosphere, offering soundtracks to its central themes. The song titles alone gesture to religious affiliation, Satanism, apocalyptic destruction, and monstrous uncanniness with tracks such as Kanye West’s ‘I Am a God’, Primal Scream’s ‘Miss Lucifer’, Peter Gabriel’s ‘Here Comes the Flood’, The Sound’s ‘I Can’t Escape Myself’, and David Bowie’s ‘Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)’. A song like West’s ‘I Am a God’ pierces with gasping breaths and pre-verbal screams, while Elvis Presley’s ‘Blue Moon’ drifts in with a mumbling, monotone sense of hopelessness. Together, these sonic elements contribute to what Sianne Ngai describes as literary tone: a mood or dynamic that can be sensed but

not fully pinned down or explicitly expressed in textual passages or character statements – atmosphere binding together reader, text, and world.

Ultimately, Knausgård's *Morgenstjernen* exemplifies the poetics of Nordic ecohorror, where environmental change resists reduction to the singular, spectacular disaster. Instead, the star is a lurking and enigmatic presence – at once foreboding and anticlimactic, vibrant yet deadly, wondrous yet heavy with unspeakable meaning. Thus, *Morgenstjernen* crystallises a defining feature of Nordic ecohorror: its reliance on 'atmosphere and affect' rather than spectacle or resolution. In this genre, horror unfolds as a mood – melancholic, eerie, estranging – where the slow violence of ecological change is registered less as terror than as an ambient dread that saturates both world and psyche. It is a horror not of annihilation, but of erosion: of meaning, of stability, of the fragile boundary between self and environment.

Temporality & Scale: Slow Violence and Deranged Time

A third defining characteristic of Nordic ecohorror lies in its treatment of time and scale. Just as the genre destabilises spatial boundaries and unsettles individuality, it also disrupts conventional notions of time and proportion, accentuating temporalities that are slow, cyclical, overlapping, twisted and often resistant to closure. Time in Nordic ecohorror rarely unfolds along a linear trajectory. Instead, it stretches and contracts, lingers and loops, folds back into itself and projects forwards into uncertain futures. The result is a sense of disorientation that mirrors the ecological realities of the Anthropocene, where causes and consequences are decoupled in time and space and where human-scale perception struggles to register vast, slow-moving transformations.

Within the Western narrative tradition, the temporal logic of storytelling has been informed by principles of linearity and causality grounded in Aristotelian poetics, where stories advance in a clearly defined arc – beginning, middle, and end – and where progression towards resolution underpins meaning itself. As Peter Brooks argues in *Reading for the Plot* (1984), 'only the end can finally determine meaning' (1998: 22): it is the endpoint that retroactively organises events into a coherent whole.

Arguably, this linear teleology has underwritten a broader worldview that centres the autonomous, self-contained subject, enforces strict boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, and imagines historical time as a forward-driving progression. This worldview, scholars have argued, also shapes the dominant form of the modern novel, often referred to as ‘the serious novel’ (Moretti 2006; Ghosh 2016), whose aesthetic conventions are indebted to this humanist tradition. Such novels typically exhibit three key features: the marginalisation of exceptional or improbable events in favour of the ordinary; the construction of a coherent individual perspective; and the contraction of narrated time and space to a scale legible to human experience. This formal logic, Amitav Ghosh argues, makes the serious novel ‘peculiarly resistant’ to representing the ruptures and vast scales of the Anthropocene (2016: 10).

As the geologist Jan Zalasiewicz reminds us in *The Earth After Us*, this resistance is rooted in the profound limitations of human perception. It is, he writes, ‘hard, as humans, to get a proper perspective on the human race’ (2008: 1). Human perception is triply constrained: temporally, bound to a historical horizon limited by the span of an individual life or, at most, human history; spatially, anchored in a situated and local being-in-the-world; and ontologically, determined by the cognitive and sensory capacities of our species. To grasp the Anthropocene would require what he calls an ‘appropriate perspective’ – one capacious enough to encompass geological time, planetary space, and even nonhuman ways of sensing and knowing.⁴⁹ Yet such a perspective remains largely beyond human reach, and it is that gap – between the scale on which planetary change unfolds and the scale that human storytelling can apprehend – that Nordic ecohorror probes.

In fact, as the following analyses will show (Chapter Seven, Eight and Nine), Nordic ecohorror has a tendency to work against the grain of conventional teleological storytelling, displacing any consolations of linearity and closure with narrative forms attuned to uncertainty and the limits of human perception. In this respect, Nordic ecohorror is more aligned with Ursula Le Guin’s ‘Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction’ (1986), which critiques what she terms the techno-heroic mode of fiction, meaning the dominant, linear narrative driven by an autonomous subject and organised around conquest and resolution. Le Guin proposes the metaphor of the ‘carrier bag’ instead – a mode of storytelling grounded not in singular acts of

mastery, but in gathering, relation, coexistence, and accumulation. Rather than ‘killer stories’ progressing towards a singular climax or revelation, the carrier bag narrative privileges ‘life stories’ pieced together from ongoing processes of collection (1986: 168): multi-voiced, transformative, relational narratives where there are ‘more tricks than conflicts’ and ‘instead of heroes they have people in them’ (169).

Knausgård’s *Morgenstjernen* can be read as a carrier bag narrative. Instead of unfolding through heroic action or building towards narrative closure, the novel accumulates fragments of perspectives, routines, myths, feelings, and uncanny encounters in an open-ended, relational structure. Alongside its destabilisation of the autonomous subject and the human-nonhuman hierarchy, the novel portrays profound temporal disorientation, where even death – the ultimate end – is denied, subverting the Aristotelian logic of resolution that, as Brooks notes, organises narrative meaning. In general, the novel’s temporal structure is non-progressive and hesitant, rejecting the comfort of closure and refusing the illusion that ecological crisis will resolve in one climactic event. This is not merely a stylistic choice but an ecological one. Drawing on Bruno Latour, time in the Anthropocene can be understood as ‘polytemporal’ – composed of multiple, overlapping temporalities that refuse to align into a single, linear sequence (1993: 75). Nordic ecohorror reflects this condition, portraying a world in which the past seeps into the present, the future weighs on the now, and deep geological, historical, and mythic times collide.

Morgenstjernen enacts this ecological temporality by distorting familiar rhythms and narrative expectations. Despite unfolding over the course of just two days, the novel resists any straightforward sense of linear progression or climax. Rather than culminating in a dramatic apocalypse, the star heralds a strange, suspended condition in which time seems to dilate and stretch. The days feel elongated and causality unravels. There is no climactic revelation, no singular catastrophe – only an eerie state of becoming, an open middle that resists resolution. As readers, we are denied the sense of closure on which conventional narratives rely. Instead, we linger in uncertainty and delay.

This hesitation – as Tzvetan Todorov famously coined in his discussion of the fantastic – is central to how *Morgenstjernen* organises both its temporal rhythms and its affective register. Todorov used it to describe the moment of suspension in

fantastic and Gothic literature, when neither characters nor readers can decide whether the events before them belong to the realm of the real or the supernatural (1975: 25-27). In Knausgård's novel, hesitation is also temporal as well as epistemological: it slows the narrative, unsettles any sense of momentum, and instils doubt and uncertainty. Capturing the fantastic suspension between the natural and the supernatural, Solveig's reaction to the star suggests not only hesitation but a deeper uncertainty that the phenomenon before her cannot be contained within existing epistemological frameworks, causing the meaning of everything to fray: 'There was something quite unreal about it. Or did it make everything else seem unreal?' (2021: 173).

Like Solveig, all of Knausgård's characters remark upon the Morning Star but cannot make out what it means. Yet rather than panic or revolution, there is a pervasive sense of waiting – a mode of suspension aligned with Morton's notion of dark ecology, which, he argues 'puts hesitation, uncertainty, irony, and thoughtfulness back into ecological thinking' (2010: 16). Drawing on Morton, the hesitation in *Morgenstjernen* is not a failure to be overcome but an ecological practice: to 'stay with the open' is to resist the consoling pull of resolution and inhabit ambiguity as a space of attunement to more-than-human entanglements (2010: 8). More generally speaking, then, Nordic ecohorror offers not so much a great awakening as a great awaiting.

This logic of suspension reflects the temporalities of ecological crisis itself. As Morton provocatively states, 'the end of the world has already happened' (2010: 98), meaning that the idea of a stable world existing as a backdrop to human life has collapsed. Climate change, mass extinction, and ecosystem collapse are not looming events on the horizon but ongoing processes already underway, unfolding on scales too vast or too slow to fully grasp. This disjunction is even articulated in *Morgenstjernen* when, discussing the star, one character observes: "It only looks close ... The reality is it's very distant. What we're seeing now is actually something that happened hundreds of years ago' (2021: 329). This speaks to what Clark terms the derangement of scales: the disorientation produced when human perception encounters phenomena that exceed its temporal or spatial frames (2012: 150). Planetary transformations have causes that lie centuries in the past and consequences that stretch millennia into the future, defying conventional narrative

structures and frustrating human desire for clear beginnings and definitive ends. In *Morgenstjernen*, Knausgård expands this insight by suggesting that the challenge is not simply comprehending ecological crisis, but feeling it. As Arne confesses: ‘For some reason, I couldn’t quite believe in the climate crisis, not really ... I knew it was happening, so rationally I did believe in it, but not emotionally. I wasn’t frightened by it, basically because it didn’t feel like it was anything to be frightened of’ (2021: 542).

Nordic ecohorror not only inhabits this disjunction, portraying worlds in which what has already happened and what is yet to come blur into a continual present that is at once anticipatory and retrospective, but also finds a fitting vocabulary for such derangements in the spectral. As long-standing devices of the horror genre, ghosts and the undead are especially suitable for giving narrative form to temporal collapse, embodying the haunting persistence of the past pressing into the present. In Nordic ecohorror, such spectral returns are frequently mobilised as a way of confronting the region’s own histories of colonialism and Christianisation. Similarly, in *Morgenstjernen*, echoes of religion and folklore – of Lucifer as the ‘Morning Star’, of sacrificial rites, biblical references and revenant dead – bleed into the contemporary moment, disrupting Nordic secular modernity. By entwining the mythic and the modern, the dead and the living, the novel collapses temporal distance and stages a haunt-ecological condition that unsettles any stable distinctions between past and present.

On a structural level, this temporal and scalar instability operates not only in *Morgenstjernen* but across Knausgård’s series as a whole. Rather than proceeding chronologically from one novel to the next, the five-volume series moves back and forth in time and space – from contemporary Norway to Russia, and back to Arendal in 1976 – dispersing causality across decades and locations and embedding scalar disorientation in its very structure. At stake here is also a disruption of the coherent individual perspective that Ghosh identifies, as the novel following *Morgenstjernen* does not return to its characters, prompting literary critics such as Ane Farsethås to ask, ‘on behalf of everyone who has read *Morgenstjernen* ... where have you put these people now – I thought I was going to find them here – where are they?’ (2021: 00.04.59).

In *Morgenstjernen* specifically, however, these temporal disruptions culminate in the unsettling of the most fundamental boundary of all: that between life and death. After the appearance of the star, death itself seems to have withdrawn from Bergen. Professor Arne's dead kitten claws its way out of the soil; nurse Solveig's brain-dead patient regains consciousness during an organ removal procedure; the suicidal teenager Ole survives a fatal self-inflicted gunshot; little Liam, who falls from a changing table and slams his head into the floor, glares back at the kindergarten assistant Emil with empty eyes; and the town pastor Kathrine buries a man she only just met at the airport. The novel's epigraph from the Book of Revelation (9:6) – 'In those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them' – reverberates through these incidents, casting them less as isolated anomalies than as signs of a cosmic disorder where the most basic ontological boundaries rupture, giving an apocalyptic timbre to the narrative.

Importantly, the disruption of time and scale also manifests through the star itself, which feels both sudden and ancient, while the narrative continually entwines the mundane and the apocalyptic, the intimate and the cosmic, oscillating between the minute – the wriggling of crabs across asphalt, the stillness of a dead kitten, the drip of rain into a puddle – and the cosmic appearance of a new star. The effect is one of scalar vertigo. In this sense, *Morgenstjernen* resonates with what Rob Nixon describes as 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all' (2011: 2). Unlike the instantaneous destruction familiar from Hollywood disaster films, Nixon's slow violence unfolds incrementally, often invisibly, across extended periods of time. Its effects are diffuse and cumulative, its origins difficult to trace, and its consequences hard to make out in human temporal frames. As Morton argues with his notion of the temporally dispersed hyperobject, ecological crisis resists representation as a singular event. *Morgenstjernen* imagines such a hyperobject in narrative form: the Morning Star is not a singular incident but an overwhelming, lingering presence that unfolds across temporal and spatial scales far beyond human perception and defies legibility amid a dense web of cultural and cosmic references. Its arrival does not bring fiery ruin; instead, it inaugurates a slow, disquieting transformation: the dead rise into the present and the boundaries of life itself grow uncertain. Ultimately, in

Morgenstjernen, as in ecohorror more broadly, the ecological crisis does not arrive with a ‘bang’ but, to borrow from T. S. Eliot, with a ‘whimper’: not as a singular occurrence, but as a drawn-out condition, an unsettling and ongoing unravelling of the world (1963: 92).

Ultimately, *Morgenstjernen* uses the destabilisation of time and scale to mount a critique. By dislodging human temporal frames and unsettling anthropocentric scales, it forces us to confront the limits of our perception, the inadequacy of our narratives, and the entanglement of our histories with the rhythms and scales of the more-than-human world. It reframes climate crisis not as a pending apocalypse yet to come, but as an ontological condition already unfolding around us, demanding new ways of sensing, narrating, and inhabiting the world.

Ethical Critique and Nordic Exceptionalism

If the three dimensions of Nordic ecohorror – transcorporeal entanglement, atmospheric affect and distorted time and scale – articulate how ecology is inhabited, felt, and endured in a Northern context, they also converge with another central aspect of the genre: *ethical critique*. For Nordic ecohorror does not merely depict ecological disturbance; it interrogates the cultural imaginaries by which the Nordic region has come to understand itself. As seen, the genre’s destabilisation of the human subject through transcorporeal entanglement unsettles the image of the autonomous Nordic citizen as rational steward of nature; its melancholic and oppressive atmospheres undermine the region’s romantic imaginaries of nature as benign and restorative, while its distorted temporalities challenge Nordic narratives of progress by replacing linear development with stagnation, repetition, and slow violence. Taken together, these disturbances expose and debunk dominant Nordic self-perceptions that are deeply (and at times problematically) entangled with nationalism, an idealising view of nature, and the old hobbyhorse of Nordic exceptionalism in matters of environmentalism, equality, class, and gender politics.

This ethical critique crystallises above all in the genre’s dismantling of a central pillar of contemporary Nordic identity: the widely shared conviction that the Nordic countries occupy a uniquely advanced, morally exemplary position in global environmental politics. Taking a leading role in European climate initiatives, the

Nordic countries are frequently positioned as progressive predecessors in shaping green agendas and developing sustainable futures. As Sofia Wijkmark remarks, 'In the Nordic region, caring about nature is an important part of the construction of identity; Nordic countries play a leading role in environmental politics in the global arena' (2017: 146). In various ways, this self-conception manifests in political discourse and everyday practices of the region. During the 2019 Danish general election campaign, the Social Democratic leader Mette Frederiksen proclaimed it Denmark's first 'climate election', and throughout the debates all but one party competed to present themselves as the greenest. Similarly, in Sweden, 'flight shame' has become so widespread that it is statistically significant, with a 4 per cent decline in air travel (Lund 2020).

Yet while the impulse to protect nature springs from a deep-seated ecological tradition, pieced together by nature mythology, ecohumanism, and national romanticism, it also makes for an environmental regime primarily occupied with defending or maintaining a certain nature ideal or aesthetic at any cost, sometimes at the expense of nature itself. A prime example of this was Denmark in 2011, when 400 protesters quite literally blocked plans to cut down a 114-year-old chestnut tree in Copenhagen in order to build the metro. 'The tree has become a symbol' one activist explained to a Danish newspaper, demonstrating how romanticised nostalgia can halt actual vital climate initiatives such as public transportation (Ritzau 2011).

More broadly, Nordic exceptionalism also risks hardening into complacent self-congratulation or even ethical inertia, trading progressiveness for contentment, which then pacifies growth and ultimately brings climate initiatives to a halt. Pressing issues are neglected on the assumption that superiority, duly attained, is a constant that needs no maintenance. Exceptionalism, in this sense, backfires: what is presented as an environmentally and ethically progressive model of excellence can ultimately end up doubling as a shield against the real challenges that still need to be addressed. Wijkmark, too, gestures towards this tension.

Nordic countries play a leading role in environmental politics in the global arena, but at the same time their welfare states are still, to a great extent, built on the use of oil and nuclear power, and just as in the rest of the world, consumption in this region is increasing. Moreover, despite the fact that the

Nordic countries have had “objectively high levels of ecological modernisation” (Tunkrova 2008, 27) they continually receive alarming reports that the Nordic landscape is transforming and collapsing in the wake of industrial pollution and global warming. (Wijkmark 2017: 146)

Nordic ecohorror makes this backlash uncannily, materially tangible. By confronting its fictional characters and its readers with dark and dying ecology, the genre dismantles the Nordic perception of nature as inherently good and restorative. Instead, it exposes the environmental dangers of such sentimental views and skewers the region’s self-image as stewards of nature. Thus, Nordic ecohorror’s ethical critique does not arise from explicit moralising but from its atmospheric and ontological destabilisations. By transforming forests into transcorporeal spaces, seasons into oppressive affects, and time into slow planetary dread, the genre exposes the structural fragility behind the narratives of harmony, sustainability, and moral leadership. In doing so, Nordic ecohorror is not merely a regional variation of a global genre, but a self-reflexive aesthetic practice: one that turns the horror of ecological entanglement back onto the narratives of innocence and superiority that have long sustained Nordic identity. If ecohorror asks what it means to live in a dying world, Nordic ecohorror also asks what it means to believe oneself exempt.

This exceptionalist self-image even extends into questions of gender and equality. The Nordic countries consistently rank at the top of global gender equality indices, frequently held up as international benchmarks for female political representation, parental leave, labour market participation, integration policies, and LGBTQ+ rights. Equality has become part of the region’s global branding – a marker of social maturity and ethical advancement. Yet Nordic ecohorror complicates this narrative too. With its recurring figure of feminine monstrosity, the genre reactivates and disrupts long-standing associations between feminine excess and a dark, unruly ecology to challenge the Nordic region’s self-image as a global leader in environmental stewardship and social egalitarianism. To bring back the woman-nature association, Nordic ecohorror does not simply resurrect patriarchal myth; it exposes the unresolved tensions that persist beneath the surface of a region that imagines itself as having transcended them.

The horror in Nordic ecohorror is therefore not only ecological. It is contextual. It arises from the unsettling recognition that the narratives by which the Nordic

region imagines itself – environmentally responsible, socially progressive, ethically advanced – are neither complete nor immune to contradiction. Nordic ecohorror stages the disquieting possibility that exceptionalism itself may be one of the most dangerous fictions of all.

4. Feminine Monstrosity and von Trier's *Antichrist*

Few figures are so common in Nordic ecohorror as the female monster. In its uncanny narratives of ecological disturbance, bodily vulnerability, and nonhuman agency, femininity is frequently positioned as both symptom and source of threat. Yet this recurring configuration is not unique to the ecohorror genre, but rather draws upon a long Western tradition in which women have been imagined as dangerously proximate to nature: excessive, unstable, reproductive, and materially entangled in ways that threaten cultural boundaries.

It is this unruly figure to which I now turn. While the female monster serves as the primary object of analysis, I approach it as one articulation of feminine monstrosity rather than its equivalent. Accordingly, I do not treat feminine monstrosity as a fixed trope or stable identity, but as something that emerges at the intersection of historical imaginaries, material relations, and affective forces – shaped by patriarchal myth, contested by feminist critique, and yet never fully resolved by either. To explore these tensions, I consider Lars von Trier's ecohorror film *Antichrist* (2009) as a particularly concentrated site in which the inherited imaginaries of feminine monstrosity are simultaneously reactivated and placed under pressure. The film does not function here as a definitive account of feminine monstrosity, nor as a model for how it should be interpreted, but rather as a medium that stages the very difficulty of approaching it at all. In this light, *Antichrist* serves as a prism rather than a paradigm: a cinematic space in which feminine monstrosity is neither reaffirmed nor resolved, but instead remains irreducibly contradictory, resistant to interpretive certainty.

Antichrist does not so much offer an understanding of feminine monstrosity as it proposes a way of thinking with it – an approach that ultimately informs my

analytical orientation. To situate this reading, I first trace the history of feminine monstrosity in Western thought, focusing on the persistent alignment between women and a feminised conception of nature. I then examine how feminine monstrosity, as in *Antichrist*, draws on these traditions while simultaneously unsettling them, exposing the points at which both patriarchal narratives and feminist frameworks strain under the weight of ecological and bodily excess. Rather than offering a new definition of feminine monstrosity, I lean into its instability, asking what becomes visible when the female monster cannot be fully dismissed or redeemed.

Women, Nature, and Monstrosity in Western History

Throughout Western thought, the figure of the monstrous woman is remarkably pervasive. From ancient mythology and religious doctrine, scientific discourse, and philosophy to art and popular culture, women have repeatedly been imagined as excessive, dangerous, unstable, or morally suspect. I approach these recurring figures not as merely figurative or aesthetic curiosities, but as historically sedimented and culturally strategic configurations by which Western culture has negotiated anxieties about female embodiment and nature itself. By tracing how conceptions of the female monster recur and change across Western history, I show how these representations are shaped by cultural imaginaries and patriarchal frameworks.

Central to the imaginaries of feminine monstrosity is the imagined affiliation between woman and nature – an association repeatedly reproduced across time and cultural forms. One of the earliest sites where this alignment takes shape is in language itself. On a semantic level, the link between woman and nature is inscribed not only in metaphor but in etymology. The Latin *natura* (birth, origin, or essential qualities) invokes concepts long coded as feminine, pointing to the association between women's maternal bodies and nature's fertile, procreative capacities. Moreover, many languages – including Latin, Old English, Italian, French, Spanish, and Greek – gender the word as feminine. Similarly, the Latin *mater* (mother) shares its root with matter, suggesting a symbolic alignment between femininity and materiality.

The notion of woman-as-nature is further sustained in mythology and religious cosmology, where nature is consistently personified in female and maternal form. From Gaia and Demeter in ancient Greece to Terra Mater in Roman cosmology, the natural world is imagined as cyclical, fertile, and unruly – a life-giving force that, like womanhood, is both nurturing and capricious. This imagery also appears in religious iconography and Christian theology. In the Book of Genesis, the catalyst of the fall of man is Eve's affinity with Edenic nature – trees of knowledge, forbidden fruit, talking serpents and all. In this tradition, the woman–nature connection is not just generative, but also transgressive, threatening to upset the balance between divine law and natural instinct.

In Western literature, the feminisation of nature is standard, whether in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (1955: 6, 'The rich earth | Was asked for more; they dug into her vitals'), the poetry of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (Book IV, Canto X, Stanza 21, 'For all that Nature by her mother-wit | Could frame in earth, and forme of substance base'), or Mary Shelley's Gothic masterpiece *Frankenstein* (1996: 32, 'I pursued nature to her hiding places'). Here, nature is imagined as maternal, fecund, penetrable – an imagery often repeated in art history, where women and their lactating breasts, life-giving stomach, and rounded thighs are illustrated as closely resembling the nourishing fluids and curved contours of the Earth itself. As Simone de Beauvoir famously observes in *The Second Sex* (1949): 'Woman is related to nature; she incarnates it: vale of blood, open rose, siren, the curve of a hill, she represents to man the fertile soil, the sap, the material beauty and soul of the world' (1952: 281).

Early scientific discourse, too, operationalised the woman–nature metaphor. While Isaac Newton and René Descartes likened the universe to a clockwork mechanism – a model in which nature follows fixed, predictable laws that can be measured, calculated, and controlled – other natural philosophers such as Francis Bacon and Carl Linnaeus employed a distinctly gendered framework to describe nature. In *The Advancement of Learning* from 1605, Bacon described nature as a woman that must be subdued and exhausted in order to reveal and control its mysteries, claiming knowledge emerges 'by following and as it were hounding Nature in her wanderings' (quoted in Merchant 2008: 746). Similarly, the Swedish zoologist Linnaeus, who revolutionised the classification of plants and animals,

linked nature to women by introducing the category *mammalia*, from the Latin *mamma*, meaning breast or nipple. According to the historian Londa Schiebinger, however, it was an unjustified choice and the term is better understood as an expression of gender bias than scientific accuracy (1993).⁵⁰

The symbolic framework extended into the political realm as well, where the imagery of women-as-nature has been mobilised to discredit or diminish women. In a speech to the Roman Senate, Cato the Elder declared that ‘woman is a violent and uncontrolled animal’ while, centuries later, Edmund Burke, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, argued that ‘a woman is but an animal, and an animal not of the highest order’ (1969: 171). In a more contemporary context, US president Donald Trump sought to discredit a female journalist by invoking her menstruating body, claiming she had ‘blood coming out of her wherever’ (Rhodes 2015).⁵¹

The concept of ‘nature’ has shown itself not only to be deeply gendered, but also highly unruly, difficult to pin down. For that reason, the connection between nature and woman easily bleeds into adjacent constellations such as woman-as-animal, woman-as-primitive, woman-as-body, woman-as-mother, and woman-as-emotion. Yet, while ‘nature’ easily slips into other categories, it remains underpinned by a broader epistemological system rooted in dualism. Beginning with Plato and extending through Descartes, Western philosophy has established a rigid dichotomy between mind and body, culture and nature, order and chaos. Over time, these binaries were grouped, gendered, and ranked. Male-associated traits – such as rationality, civilisation, intellect, and scientific progress – were grouped together and granted superior value and prestige, while their female-identified counterparts – including nature, biology, passivity, and emotionality – were devalued and subordinated. In this framework, both woman and nature are denied agency, positioned as a silent ‘other’ – passive matter to be acted upon, managed, or redeemed by masculine reason and order. Thus, the woman–nature bond is seldom an association that serves neither. Or as Val Plumwood writes, ‘Feminine “closeness to nature” has hardly been a compliment’ (1993: 19). On the contrary, it works as a powerful metaphor of domination.

Crucially, however, its dualism contains an internal ambiguity – a binary within the binary. As ecofeminist scholarship has shown, nature is imagined not through

one stable image but through two contradictory ones. In the pioneering work *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980), Carolyn Merchant traces how, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, early modern Europe shifted from an organic cosmology that revered earth as nurturing mother towards an opposing mechanistic worldview in which nature was recast as a disorderly, uncontrollable, threatening female force that needed to be subdued and mastered by the rising male scientist (1980: 10–11).⁵²

Regardless, Merchant and other ecofeminist thinkers critique both the idealisation and the demonisation of the nature–woman analogy. Whether cast as mother and bride or witch and beast, these archetypes function merely as controlling metaphors. Pastoral visions depicted nature as both bountiful and altruistic, destined to ‘soothe the anxieties of men distraught by the demand of the urban world’ and bring them comfort through their ‘nurture’, ‘subordinate’ and ‘essentially passive’ female natures (1980: 14) – an ‘angel in the ecosystem’, as ecofeminist Val Plumwood puts it (1993: 9), rephrasing Virginia Woolf, while ecophobic visions portrayed nature as violent, excessive, and morally corrupt. Both imaginaries were designed to justify and sustain men’s domination of women and nature alike, be it pacifying, pastoral idealisation or ostracising, phobic punishment.

This lineage of gendered ecophobia persists into contemporary theory, where it finds one of its more explicit articulations in philosopher Camille Paglia, who draws a direct and rather monstrous connection between nature and women in her controversial book *Sexual Personae* from 1990.⁵³ From the very first page, Paglia makes it known that her understanding of nature is a phobic one, claiming that everything of greatness in human history has been achieved in defiance of nature and that ‘if civilization had been left in female hands, we would still be living in grass huts’ (1990: 38). Rejecting Rousseau and applauding the Marquis de Sade, Paglia asserts that nature is cruel and violent, and therefore it must be contained by the social constructs of man-made civilisation: ‘Without society, we could be storm-tossed on the barbarous sea that is nature’ (1). In this way, the famous Rousseauian idea that ‘man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains’ is turned on its head, insisting that society functions not as a system of oppression, but as a necessary barrier against nature, whose unregulated freedom she associates with anarchy and violent indifference to moral restraint: ‘For Sade, getting back to nature (the

Romantic imperative that still permeates our culture from sex counselling to cereal commercials) would be to give free rein to violence and lust. I agree' (2). However, while the Marquis de Sade, the *fons et origo* of sadism, would welcome such a return to nature's depravities, Paglia sides with a more precarious Nietzschean standpoint, arguing that nature must be kept outside the walls of civilisation.

On this account, Paglia represents a counter position to Merchant, as she not only reasserts and radicalises the foundational Western dichotomy in which women are bound to chthonian nature while men are linked with civilised culture, but goes as far as to frame masculine reason and morality as inherently superior virtues authorised to subordinate and control the monstrous excess associated with feminised nature. Most importantly, Paglia argues that woman's connection to nature is not metaphorical, but rather biologically determined, entirely anchored in the female body and its subjection to nature's rhythms. 'Nature's cycles are woman's cycles', she writes, 'Biological femaleness is a sequence of circular returns, beginning and ending at the same point' (1990: 9). The woman's circular constitution, repeated in her menstrual cycle, rounded figure, and ability to give birth, results in a self-centeredness; a centrality which ensures a self-reliance and stability of identity: 'She does not have to become', Paglia writes in a distorted version of Simone de Beauvoir's famous dictum, 'only to be' (9). Her 'belly-magic', as Paglia names her reproductive ability, is given to her, whether she wants it or not (9). Her body is a vessel, 'a chthonian machine', that can never be freed from its ties to nature, and so 'she has no choice but acceptance' (10).

In this view, feminine sexuality and maternal reproduction also come to represent the site from which the monsterisation of women springs. Permeated by a profound unknowability, female sexuality revolves around fear, doubts, desire, and reputation. It is conceived as Freud's infamous 'dark continent' (1962: 212); a mystery to be solved or a secret to be revealed. Relatedly, Paglia considers the female body to be a riddle; her sex is hidden, her orgasm is imperceptible, her pregnancy reveals only the mother – never the identity of the father. This unknowability is both alluring and anxiety-provoking; it renders female sexuality a permanent topic of interest, something to figure out and conquer, yet also deeply connected to the dangerous undoing of the subject. The hiddenness of the female body continues to spark male fear: fear of castration by a toothed vagina, fear of being sucked back

into the mother, fear of what cannot be known or seen. The latter is vastly problematic, Paglia affirms, because ‘the westerner knows by seeing’ (1990: 5). She argues that the genital visibility and immediacy of the male body fills him with a desire for examination and confirmation – an urge both produced and challenged by the mysteries of the female body; the enigma that needs to be cracked and tamed, or as Paglia provocatively writes, ‘a girl is a sealed vessel that must be broken into by force’ (23). This duplexity – this simultaneity of anxiety and desire – ensures that feminine monstrosity will always be enticing, but also why female sexuality must be controlled.

This fear-inducing ambiguity extends to female reproduction. On one side, as Jane Ussher writes, ‘society tells us that motherhood is natural and blissful. The beatific Madonna adorns church frescos. Smiling sun-kissed supermodels hold their babies in a modern mimicry of the ancient motif’, and so, it is considered unnatural for women not to bear children – which is why, Ussher argues, adoptive mothers, stepmothers and women who are not mothers are perceived as ‘failed women’ (2006: 94). On the other side, the association between maternity and monstrosity runs deep in mythology, folklore, religion, art, and popular culture (Creed 1993; Huet 1993; Caputi 2004; Wood & Schillace 2014; Harrington 2018). Consequently, the maternal body continues to be figured in monstrous representations, from the confining womb and abject breast milk to the vagina dentata. From classical times to the Renaissance, for example, the uterus was often depicted with horns to spell out its association with the devil, while hell in Christian iconography was frequently represented as a womb, ‘a lurid and rotting uterus’ (Miles 1989: 147). This ambivalence is also captured by Harold Bloom, Paglia’s PhD supervisor at Yale, who famously remarked that ‘Woman is born of woman. But man is born of woman and never recovers from that fact’ (cited in Paglia 1992: 108). Perhaps this is why, Rabelais claimed that the devil himself took flight when a woman exposed her vulva to him – or why Dennis Hopper cries ‘Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!’ like a little boy as he stares into his wife’s vagina in the Freudian primal scene in David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986).

Many theorists have explored this duality. While Freud refers to the archaic mother as the first nourisher and first seducer (1964: 188), the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein speaks of the good breast and the bad breast – the one that feeds and

the one that withholds (1988: 291). Similarly, the film scholar Ann Kaplan outlines two archetypal mothers: the good mother and the bad mother – one is the all-nurturing and self-abnegating ‘angel’, the other a dominating, phallic and evil ‘witch’, demanding her own life (1992: 13). Or, as Ussher writes: ‘Woman is positioned as powerful, impure and corrupt, source of moral and physical contamination; or sacred, asexual and nourishing’ (2006: 1). Together, these theoretical positions demonstrate how the maternal body is a site of contradiction: revered as the origin of life, yet feared as a reminder of dependence and loss of autonomy. It is in this tension that maternity remains one of the most enduring forms of feminine monstrosity.

In Western thought, it is evident that feminine monstrosity remains persistently anchored in what I term the feminine naturebody: a body imagined as materially excessive, reproductively charged, and dangerously proximate to nonhuman, ecological life. Yet, at the same time, this tour de force through history also reveals that such a configuration never produces a stable or isolated figure. Instead, feminine monstrosity emerges through a volatile interplay of matter and meaning, biology and symbolism, fear and fascination. Therefore, I argue, feminine monstrosity cannot be reduced to a singular image or narrative trope, or a purely discursive construct or bodily phenomenon. Rather, it emerges as a material-discursive formation – historically variable, symbolically saturated, politically operative, and affectively charged – by which feminine monstrosity does not simply embody nature against culture, but exposes the instability of that distinction. As such, it constitutes a natureculture in which bodies, meanings, affects, and histories are inseparably entangled and challenged, generating excess, ambiguity, and interpretive unrest.

Is Feminine Monstrosity Permissible?

Given the Western historical trajectory by which women have repeatedly been associated with nature, and pathologised and subordinated by that alignment, any study of feminine monstrosity must necessarily confront the ethical impasse it leaves in its wake. Burdened by both symbolic and material lineages of gendered domination, feminine monstrosity cannot be approached as a neutral or ahistorical

analytical category, but rather as a configuration already steeped in cultural marginalisation and uneven distributions of power. A fundamental methodological tension emerges. How can feminine monstrosity be subjected to scholarly examination or aesthetic representation – particularly in an ecological context such as ecohorror, where femininity, monstrosity and nature violently converge – without reproducing the essentialist, patriarchal logic by which woman has historically been monsterised?

This dilemma extends beyond the scope of this present study and speaks to a broader feminist unease. The association between woman, body, and nature has been so thoroughly instrumentalised in Western thought that any return to this constellation appears suspect, if not politically regressive. As Alaimo argues, Western feminism remains haunted by what she terms ‘the specter of nature’ – a legacy of philosophical traditions in which nature has been positioned as the antithesis of culture, reason, progress, and subjectivity, and mobilised to subordinate those deemed closer to it (2008: 240–241). In this framework, femininity’s historical association with nature has rendered the concept politically toxic, prompting what Alaimo describes as a persistent feminist imperative to distance women from nature altogether.

This anxiety about the representation of femininity, nature, and monstrosity is not confined to theory, having repeatedly surfaced in cultural debates about what kind of figures may be portrayed at all. As Margaret Atwood provocatively asked in a 1994 lecture, ‘But is it not, today – well, somehow *unfeminist* – to depict a woman behaving badly?’ (2005a: 172, original emphasis). Atwood’s question captures a paradox in Western feminism, highlighting how the impulse to resist misogynist portrayals of women easily can slide into a reluctance to imagine woman as morally transgressive.

Ironically, a comparable reluctance is evident in the reception of horror fiction, where the figure of the monstrous woman is often treated not simply as a narrative possibility, but as a representational and ethical problem – one that provokes discomfort, resistance, or outright rejection. One explicit articulation of this logic appears in the film critic Gérard Lenne’s essay ‘Monsters and Victims: Women in the Horror Film’, in which he argues that ‘there are very few monstrous and disfigured women in the fantastic, and so much the better’ (1979: 35). He maintains

that women should only be represented in their 'natural' roles in life – as mothers and romantic partners – adding, 'Is it not reasonable that woman, who, in life, is both mother and lover, should be represented by characters that convey the feeling of a sheltering peace?' (35). In short, he dismisses female monsters as 'not real', 'secondary', 'problematic', or a symptom of 'female madness', before concluding that 'great monsters are all male' (39). Lenne's attitude is symptomatic of a broader tendency in horror criticism, where the female monster is ignored or pathologised. This pattern is likewise evident in horror scholarship, where attention has long been given to the relationship between horror and sexuality, but rarely to the subject of feminine monstrosity.

This all leads back to Atwood. 'When bad women get into literature, what are they doing there, and are they permissible, and what, if anything, do we need them for?' (2005a: 172). This is not merely a rhetorical question, nor confined to literary representation; it crystallises the broader feminist unease about the ethical and aesthetic stakes of representing feminine monstrosity at all.

To address this, it is useful to turn to von Trier's *Antichrist*. At the intersection of art cinema, ecological horror, dark fairy tale, and 'hard-porn snuff movie' (Anderson 2009), the film offers an especially charged site for interrogating feminine monstrosity. Its violent entanglement of femininity, nature, grief, sexuality, and the uncanny lays bare the conceptual and ethical impasse at stake in this study. Most strikingly, the film's critical reception is as analytically significant as the film itself, exposing the intensity of moral outrage and ideological fracture that feminine monstrosity continues to provoke.

Released in 2009 and premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, von Trier's *Antichrist* divided critics, who described it in strikingly oxymoronic terms, calling it 'a masterpiece disguised as trash' (Skotte 2009), 'a beautiful dream version of images ... unfolded in terrifying rawness' (Rösing 2009), and 'crazy or brilliant ... both, of course' (Lauridsen 2009). The ambiguity is not coincidental, but rather a direct reflection of the film's own thematic and aesthetic dualities. Lurching between pleasure and pain, exalted beauty and perverse abjection, *Antichrist* unfolds as a film whose very form is structured by ambivalence. Its formal structure is dense with references, flickering between biblical intertextuality, mythological motifs,

ecological imagery, and psychoanalytic undercurrents – a complexity that ignited a crossfire of contradictory reactions and interpretations from critics.

The polarisation started at the Cannes Film Festival, where *Antichrist* met with standing ovations and loud booing, protest walkouts, and reports of nausea and physical discomfort. At the subsequent press conference on 18 May 2009, a visibly indignant journalist demanded that von Trier justify the film (epzentroa 2009). In a related move, the Ecumenical Jury awarded *Antichrist* an ‘anti-prize’ for being the ‘most misogynist movie’ at the festival. These (re)actions reflected a broader wave of criticism that followed – particularly directed at the film’s graphic depictions of sexual violence, which were frequently interpreted as misogynistic projections of von Trier’s personal views about women. One prominent example was Elisabeth Møller Jensen, then director of the Danish Centre for Research on Women and Gender (KVINFO), who publicly distanced herself from the film in an article titled ‘Burn the Witch!’ in which she argued that *Antichrist* ‘confirms and legitimizes the sexualized violence against women’ (KVINFO Webmagasin 2009). Similarly, the Swedish critics Katarina Wennstam and Maria Sveland denounced the film not only as anti-feminist, but also labelled von Trier as pathologically perverted, chauvinistic, and mentally ill (*Dagens Nyheter* 2009). Interestingly, much of the criticism stemmed from a shared interpretation of *Antichrist*’s female protagonist as a witch. As Jensen said, ‘The evil woman is dead, the witch is burned and the man survives miraculously as a wounded hero’ (2009).

More broadly, the criticism of *Antichrist* reveals more than indignation at cinematic aesthetics or narrative resolution, but rather confirms that the portrayal of feminine monstrosity remains a source of discomfort, even in feminist discourse. For many critics, the idea of a woman embodying evil proved conceptually, politically intolerable. In an interview with the Danish film magazine *Ekko*, von Trier addressed this directly, suggesting that surely ‘gender equality must have come so far by now that they [women] can also be allowed to be villains’ (Schepeleern 2009). Here he touches on the paradox at the heart of the controversy, because it reflects a resistance to portraying women as whole, complex beings. Refusing the possibility of female wickedness not only sustains the patriarchal fetishisation of women as inherently virtuous and pleasing, but also strips them of any agency they might derive from more villainous traits such as rage, ambition, selfishness, wit,

desire, and ruthless survival skills. If the capacity for moral ambiguity and transgression is understood as an integral part of what it means to be human, then denying this capacity to women is also to deny them full humanity.

The criticism directed at *Antichrist* arguably risks backtracking on the representational ambitions long articulated in literary and cultural criticism more broadly: the demand for female characters who exceed reductive moral or symbolic roles. As Sarah Appleton Aguiar observes, authors have worked diligently to 'refute literary misrepresentations of females as dimensionless, to subvert preconceptions of objectified characters, and, of predominant importance, to create memorable women full of complexity and character' (2001: 1). The insistence on moral, psychological depth in female characters also aligns with Atwood's summation: 'I'm not making a case for evil behaviour, but unless you have some women characters portrayed as evil characters, you're not playing with a full range' (Carroll 1993).

Against this backdrop of moral outrage and representational limitations, however, it is crucial to distinguish between what the film portrays and what it condones. In the film itself, one particular moment crystallises this tension. In a pivotal scene, the husband challenges his wife's uncritical embrace of the empirical material underpinning her thesis, stating 'The literature that you used in your research was about evil things committed against women. But you read it as proof of the evil of women? You were supposed to be critical of those texts, that was your thesis. Instead you're embracing it' (01:04:50). The moment is a form of meta commentary, prompting the audience to approach the film with similarly critical distance – to resist conflating representation with endorsement. While *Antichrist* undoubtedly and explicitly draws on the patriarchal paradigms of classical Hollywood cinema, it does so in such hyperbolic and deconstructive ways that it lays bare – rather than reinforces – the misogynistic image of woman that underpins these conventions. The film does not simply reproduce the paradigms; it exaggerates them to the point of rupture, compelling the viewer to confront and interrogate the same mechanisms by which women have historically been rendered monstrous as well as the violence of representation itself.

This reading does not deny the ethical risks involved in representing feminine monstrosity, nor does it dismiss feminist critiques of such imagery. Instead, it suggests that the discomfort surrounding female evil is itself analytically productive.

In fact, the very factors that render feminine monstrosity politically fraught – its history of misogyny and violence – are precisely what make it necessary to examine rather than ignore.

Rethinking Feminine Monstrosity with von Trier's *Antichrist*

In what follows, I use *Antichrist* as a filmic laboratory for thinking about feminine monstrosity. The question is not simply how the film represents the female monster, but what it shows about the stakes of representing feminine monstrosity. Read against the ethical tension between critique and complicity, *Antichrist* emerges as a case where inherited constructions of woman, nature and monstrosity are both mobilised and unsettled.

Drawing on long-standing imaginaries, from mythology and Christianity to psychoanalysis, *Antichrist* invokes familiar figures of feminine excess and disorder, while simultaneously extending these traditions into more (eco)materialist, corporeal, and affective registers. Moving between tradition and transgression, I argue the film offers a way of approaching the female monster not as a stable identity, but as a contested figure whose potentials and limitations remain unresolved. It thus serves as a central companion in this analysis' exploration of feminine monstrosity – as a visual, corporal, emotional, (un)natural, mythical, cultural, and political formation – and a site for the articulation of my own critical position.

Prologue: Feminine Grief and the Medical-Male Gaze

Antichrist opens with a stylised black-and-white prologue in slow motion. Calm, balanced, and harmonious, it evokes a stringent serenity infused with dreamlike ecstasy. The sequence, to the music of Handel's Baroque aria 'Lascia ch'io pianga', sensuously portrays the film's two main characters – played by Charlotte Gainsbourg and Willem Dafoe – in the throes of passionate lovemaking, while their 2-year-old son Nic climbs onto a windowsill and falls to his death. This opening scene, executed with such visual beauty that it nearly aestheticises both infanticide and orgasmic meat shots, stages the proximity between death and *la petite mort*. By presenting pleasure and misery in the same aesthetic moment, it introduces the film's governing instability, in which distinctions between beauty and horror,

intimacy and violence, nature and culture are no longer in opposition, but rather blur into one another.

What follows the tragic death of their son is emotional and narrative collapse, starting with the woman having a mental breakdown that leads to her hospitalisation. After a month in the psychiatric ward, her husband – a psychologist himself – becomes impatient with her doctors and decides to take matters into his own hands, ignoring both his wife’s pleas and her doctors’ advice. ‘But you’re just so much smarter, aren’t you?’ she spits (00:10:15), exposing his condescending hubris masked as care. His decision marks the beginning of their marital breakdown. Upon adopting the role of her therapist, the husband – in opposition to his wife – sheds the role of grieving father altogether. At the hospital, he initially appears as her spouse – dressed in civilian clothes, bringing flowers – but once he takes charge of her treatment, his demeanour shifts entirely. Now he appears in formal, impersonal work clothes, signalling his transformation into a practitioner, and approaches his wife with professional distance, referring to their son’s tragic death as ‘the case’ (01:09:36). What begins as care thus quietly shifts into a regime of management.

Soon, he views her only through the sterile lens of diagnosis. Fixing her with his Foucauldian medical gaze, he studies her chart, asks about her medicines, and draws a pyramid diagram of her psychological state. His detached objectivity channels Donna Haraway’s ‘God trick’ (1988: 581) – the fantasy of total, disembodied gaze – resulting in a chilling distance cloaked as scientific wisdom. And when she finally challenges his emotional detachment, accusing him of emotional indifference – ‘You have always been distanced from me and Nic’ (00:13:43) – he responds coolly with the antiseptic dictum of therapy: ‘There is nothing you can’t talk about’ (00:14:45).

In transitioning from husband to doctor, his wife, too, transitions from romantic partner to patient. So when she attempts to escape her psychological torment by reaching out physically – seeking solace through intimacy – he refuses: ‘Never screw your therapist’ (00:19:54). This rejection reinforces the clinical boundary he has constructed between himself and the suffering woman he now views solely as a clinical case, feeding his professional narcissism. ‘I never interested you ... until now ... that I’m your patient’, she snaps (00:14:32), and evidently, her observation rings true: when she shows signs of improvement later on, he seems almost disappointed.

Ultimately, his clinical treatment serves not to heal but to dominate; his interest hinges on her fragility.

The relational breakdown, however, is not the only collapse introduced in the film's prologue. During the fight about the wife's treatment and the husband's tendency to take over, something starts to shift. In this scene, recalling Merchant's description of nature's transformation from idealised setting to intrusive other, the *peripeteia* or sudden reversal in fortune so characteristic of von Trier's films comes when nature gradually intrudes.⁵⁴ Slowly, and indifferent to the scene's marital intrigue, the camera decentralises the human narrative – visually and sonically – to engage in an invasive zoom-in instead, drawing the viewer deeper and deeper into the murky fauna of a transparent flower vase on the bedside table – a camera motion reminiscent of Paglia's phobic conception of nature as a 'blind grinding of subterranean force, the long slow suck, the murk and ooze' (1990: 5–6). Once completely immersed in the vase, the viewer is up close with the rotting stems in a vibrating underwater acoustic, evoking a strange feeling of organic liveliness – as if the uncanny assemblage of turbid water, dirty glass vase, and dying flowers is somehow eavesdropping on the unhappy couple. With this shift in perspective, the human drama is no longer the narrative focal point, but rather disrupted by an emergent nonhuman presence.



Figure 4. A flower vase on the hospital bedside table comes slowly into focus during the couple's argument (*Antichrist* 2009, 00:10:47).

In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), Plumwood explains how nature usually is defined as a passive non-agent, a mere environment or invisible background against which the ‘foreground’ achievements of humans can unfold. This positioning constitutes a common form of devaluation of both women and nature, which Plumwood terms backgrounding, meaning a form of ‘not seeing’ or acknowledging someone or something, causing it to fade into a backdrop position empty of agency and purpose, which can then be moulded and annexed for foreground activities (1993: 21). In *Antichrist*, however, a repositioning takes place. Challenging the anthropocentric gaze, the flower vase is no longer just a movie prop or something to be glanced over but is breaking down the fourth wall and looking back at us. Following the Danish literary scholar Thorsten Bøgh Thomsen’s analysis of von Trier’s film, this exact moment can be understood as a Mortonian ‘re-mark’ by which we are made uncannily aware of ambient elements – what once appeared to be peripheral shifts into focus. Ultimately, this sudden change of perspective and meaning functions as a re-hierarchising act: what initially served as a backdrop now comes to the fore, and what is usually front and centre retreats into the background. In Thomsen’s words, this re-marking is a turning point of the film, because it ‘opened up the story, allowing the non-human world to animatedly invade the narrative of human trauma with increasing momentum’ (2018: 129).

Building on Thomsen’s broader identification of opacity as a defining principle in *Antichrist*, the intrusion of the murky vase can be read as emblematic of Morton’s ambient poetics, and more specifically its opaque, mysterious aesthetics. As seen, ambient poetics draws attention to what usually remains unnoticed (atmosphere, environment, background) while simultaneously refusing to render these elements fully intelligible, thus putting a name – opacity – to a paradoxical condition.

Ambient poetics is about making the imperceptible perceptible, while retaining the form of its imperceptibility – to make the invisible visible, the inaudible audible. ... Ambient art wants to make the unknown known, like science. But it also wishes to retain the flavor of the unknown, a certain mystifying opacity – otherwise ambient art would in fact be science. (Morton 2007: 96)

The vase exemplifies this tension, offering an early manifestation of an opacity that will be progressively more insistent throughout the film. What had functioned as

unnoticed décor – a transparent container holding the flowers he has brought to her – insists on its presence in the frame. The prolonged zoom draws the viewer closer and closer to the nonhuman environment, rendering its material presence undeniable, uncanny even, yet this heightened visibility does not produce clarity or meaning. On the contrary, the closer the camera moves, the stranger the image appears. What emerges is not knowledge, but opacity – quite literally visualised by the cloudy water.

This aesthetic logic is in stark contrast to the husband's scientific conviction. Throughout the film, his therapeutic practice is structured around the assumption that psychological distress can be externalised, categorised, mapped, and rendered visible in diagrams, exposure exercises, and clinical reasoning. The vase silently resists this logic. Where the husband's medical gaze seeks mastery through knowledge, the ambient image offers only sensorial intimacy without comprehension. In this sense, the vase does not simply interrupt the marital confrontation; it exposes the limits of the scientific desire to know. Even when brought into view, nature – like the woman herself – remains opaque. It can be encountered and perceived, but not fully decoded. While no longer hidden in the background, it does not resolve into symbol or explanation either. Instead, it appears as something irreducibly other and insistently resistant to human meaning-making. Yet, despite the opaque logics of the vase, the husband insists on achieving clarity, and turns his diagnostic impulses on his wife, whose emotional turmoil he tries to render transparent in order to make it treatable.

When the clinical setting is replaced by a domestic one, this desire to know does not recede. After returning home from the hospital, the husband finds her in the throes of breakdown – sick and violently self-harming, slamming her head against the toilet bowl. Pain serves as her outlet, a desperate attempt to feel something real, to anchor herself in her body and flee the chaos of her mind. Again, he intervenes, not so much out of compassion, but with the imperative that she must remain in her headspace to heal. This confrontation underscores the film's core symbolic rift: the husband is synonymous with the mind (rational, analytical, detached) while his wife is reduced to mere body (emotional, chaotic, raw flesh) to be studied and fixed. It follows that he would continue to subject her to his superior 'head-magic' (Paglia 1990: 9), while her intellect is persistently undermined: 'Well, you don't have to

understand me, just trust me' (01:08:50), he says patronisingly, while occasionally mocking her perceptions as childlike (00:50:40).

This asymmetry is made explicit in the scene where he attempts to map her anxiety. Sitting opposite her, he draws a pyramid diagram intended to locate the origin of her fear. 'What frightens you?' he asks (00:24:37). Fear, he assumes, must have an object; anxiety must be externalisable and solvable. When she answers that she is afraid of nature, he cannot comprehend the response, but rather finds it a little absurd. Once again, rationality is mobilised as authority, while her fear is reduced to an excess of feeling – an irrational, feminised affect that exceeds comprehension and is therefore rendered suspect.

What underlies the therapy scenes is a gendered conception of affect, which situates female emotion in a broader affective economy marked by pathologisation and repression. In this economy, women are persistently aligned with feelings such as sorrow, hysteria, fear, rage and envy – affects that are not only readily feminised, but that also acquire specific cultural meanings when attributed to female subjects. As Sianne Ngai argues in *Ugly Feelings* (2005), certain emotions become culturally overdetermined when attached to women: rather than being understood as politically meaningful or socially diagnostic, they are interpreted as signs of individual weakness or psychological dysfunction. Consequently, 'women's feelings', as Ngai observes, are persistently imagined as emotions that are 'always easily prone to turning ugly' (33). In addition, Ngai detects an oppressive ambiguity. While women have historically been perceived as naturally susceptible to affects such as jealousy or envy, they are simultaneously condemned for exhibiting them: emotions that are not only to be expected, but also 'more *inexcusable* in a woman than a man' (129, original emphasis). In this framework, female affect is doubly dispossessing – expected yet forbidden, naturalised yet punished.

Antichrist stages this contradiction with brutal clarity. The woman's grief is initially sanctified through the ideal of maternal devotion, but the moment it exceeds normative duration or expression, it is reframed as malfunction. Her sorrow is recast as hysteria; her anxiety as irrational; her despair as violent. In this way, the film re-enacts the long tradition of casting feminine affect as monstrous – too much and never enough. This dynamic echoes what Margrit Shildrick identifies as the persistent conflation of women and monsters: 'In the light of the longstanding

association of the feminine with disorder', she writes, 'in terms both of the irrational mind and the leaky body, the conflation of women with monsters should come as no surprise' (2002: 30). When affect exceeds intelligibility, it becomes threatening; when it resists interpretation it becomes monstrous, and thus a target of dismissal and control.

Accordingly, the husband's clinical obsession with 'solving' his wife's mental condition serves as the engine that *initially* drives the film's narrative. The imperative to decode the feminine mystery propels the plot forwards, synchronising his medical gaze with the spectator's male gaze – both equally invested in uncovering her secrets. Yet this narrative propulsion also operates reflexively, functioning as a meta-commentary on the apparatus of cinema itself and its historic complicity in turning woman into spectacle, into problem, into enigma. Therefore, once the storyline enters the realm of nature, the desire to know as guiding principle begins to unravel, exposing the limits of both the clinical gaze and the cinematic logic that mirrored it.

Enter Eden: Nature is Satan's Church

As the husband's therapeutic efforts intensify, he initiates a second phase of treatment by taking his wife to their remote summer cabin in the forest, known as Eden, convinced that this place once associated with solitary reflection – where she had withdrawn with Nic to write her doctoral thesis – can now function as a site of therapeutic healing. During their train ride to Eden, the husband engages his wife in a hypnotic exercise intended to prepare her for the wilderness that awaits – a place she claims frightens her. Under hypnosis, he leads her on a guided subconscious journey through the forest until she arrives in Eden, a name that evokes the biblical garden of tranquillity and benign beauty, and suggests a return to innocence or healing, while the unnamed married couple – referred to only as 'She' and 'He' – begin to take on the contours of the archetypes of Adam and Eve.

Yet the forest surrounding Eden conjured through hypnosis bears little resemblance to a pastoral paradise. Instead, the imagery is dark, foggy and uncanny, and the camera angles (similar to those used in the Instagram campaign promoting Knausgård's *Morgenstjernen*) are overtaken by the perspectives of trees or animals rummaging in the ferns, foxholes, and treetops. This kind of nonhuman agency is

representative of the natural environment in *Antichrist*, as well as the ecohorror genre in general, which – in line with Buell’s defining characteristic of environmental texts (1995: 7) – refuses to remain passive background and takes on the role of an individual agent instead. Accordingly, the hypnotic tableaux of Eden soon resemble what Atwood describes as the northern wilderness: a space that resists the conventions of ‘old, tidy European’ imagery, offering neither distance nor overview, but instead an entangling visual field in which orientation quickly dissolves into an excess of foreground that ‘goes back and back, endlessly’.

These paintings are not landscape paintings. Because there aren’t any landscapes up there, not in the old, tidy European sense ... Instead there’s a tangle, a receding maze, in which you can become lost almost as soon as you step off the path. There are no backgrounds in any of these paintings, no vistas; only a great deal of foreground that goes back and back, endlessly. (Atwood 1991: 128–129)

When she arrives at Eden, still under hypnosis, her husband instructs her to lie down in the tall grass, urging her to fade into the surrounding greenery. Hesitantly, she complies. Then he tells her to melt into the wilderness: ‘I want you to melt into the green. Don’t fight it. Just turn green!’ (00:31:34). The imperative literalises his ecohumanist conviction that healing requires submission to the environment; that immersion in nature will restore psychic order. As she lies motionless in the grass, her body arranged in a cruciform posture, the image fuses Christian iconography with an even older cultural script in which women are aligned with the earth itself – passive, fertile, and sacrificial. Her body becomes landscape, surface, background.

This image stages a visual confrontation between two seemingly incompatible cosmologies: Christian transcendence and immanent, earthly nature. Moreover, it strongly alludes to the film’s title, which, alongside this imagery, should be understood as an explicit invocation of Friedrich Nietzsche and his radical critique of Christian morality in his work *Der Antikrist* (1888). As his later writings make clear, the figure of the Antichrist is inseparable from his conception of Dionysus – a figure he considers to be in direct opposition to ‘the Crucified One’, embodying everything Christianity seeks to repress: bodily excess, sexuality, and the chaotic vitality of life (Nietzsche 1954: 459).



Figure 5. The female character ‘turning green’ with the surrounding landscape during hypnosis (*Antichrist* 2009, 00:31:29).

This Dionysian figure was first introduced in the philosopher’s earlier work *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), where tragedy is defined as a form that emerges from the powerful interplay between two opposing, yet interdependent forces: the Dionysian – a formless, chaotic and primal source of both suffering and ecstasy, derived from Dionysus, the god of wine and dance, passion, and pleasure – and the Apollonian – the ordering principle of structure, conscience and clarity, inspired by the Apollo, similarly of Greek myth, god of the sun, art, and poetry as well as purity and reason. According to Nietzsche, it is through the dynamic balance between these elements that tragedy achieves its most profound aesthetic impact (2000: 19).

As numerous scholars have already pointed out, von Trier’s *Antichrist* is structured around the clash between Dionysian nature and Apollonian order (Thomsen 2012; Thomsen 2013; Dudenhoeffer 2014; Rösing 2018), as the film repeatedly stages moments in which rational form, language, and moral order collapse under the pressure of corporeal excess, grief, sexuality, and ecological unrest – aligning its symbolic economy closely with Nietzsche’s tragic framework.⁵⁵ However, this Nietzschean configuration acquires a markedly different inflection when read through Paglia’s work, whose adaptation of the Dionysian–Apollonian opposition introduces a radical gendered dimension. While Nietzsche generally refrains from assigning sexual difference to these forces, Paglia explicitly aligns the Apollonian with Western civilisation, law and culture, ingenuity and science,

ultimately making it the realm of man, while the Dionysian comes to represent a hostile nature, barbarism, destruction, madness, and violent indifference, which she identifies as the province of women: 'Apollo's great opponent Dionysus is ruler of the chthonian whose law is procreative femaleness. As we shall see, the Dionysian is liquid nature, a miasmatic swamp whose prototype is the still pond of the womb' (1990: 12).⁵⁶

Through this reconfiguration, the Nietzschean dialectic is transformed into a hierarchical directive. Where both the ancient Greeks and Nietzsche recognised a fruitful dialectical synthesis between the Apollonian and Dionysian, Paglia reframes their relationship as antagonistic, advocating for the suppression of one force by the other. In other words, she appropriates Nietzsche's framework not to illuminate an aesthetic mode, but to legitimise a politicocultural structure in which the Apollonian is positioned as a superior stabilising force tasked with restraining Dionysian excess.

Correspondingly, *Antichrist* and its meditation on the dangerous liaisons between nature, gender and the monstrous not only stages a confrontation between Apollonian reason and Dionysian chaos, but overlays it with the gendered antagonism similar to the one articulated by Paglia. Echoing her vision of the female as bound to the chthonic forces of the earth, *Antichrist* presents the female protagonist as – abjectly, corporally, dreadfully – in cahoots with a malevolent Dionysian nature, while her husband is cast as the personification of Apollonian detachment and patriarchal rationalism – a position that is 'transcendent, disembodied, and removed from the world he surveys' (Alaimo 2018: 435), while she remains entwined with it.

As the narrative unfolds, she grows increasingly attuned to Eden – its rhythm and uproar – sensing 'some strange kind of personality' in an old rotten tree trunk (00:29:50) and hearing 'the cry of all the things that are to die' (00:50:30). She begins to move and act like an animal: crouching in the woods, prowling, and biting and scratching her husband. Her sex drive grows feral and violent, urging him to hit her before she forces herself on him in a display of grotesque rape-like domination. Here in nature, as Paglia famously states, 'sex is violence. Violence is the authentic spirit of Mother Nature' (1990: 235).

In one central sex scene, Nordic ecohorror's defining emphasis on *transcorporeal enmeshment* is vividly visualised as the couple lean against a massive oak tree when a dozen feminine hands emerge from the root openings – gnarled, reaching, spectral – as though extensions of both the tree and the woman herself, her limbs becoming roots, entwining nature and body in one all-consuming embrace. By this point, the woman's fusion with nature has turned monstrous. She is no longer harmoniously attuned to a pastoral nature; she has become its most terrifying embodiment.



Figure 6. Sex scene at the roots of a large tree in Eden (*Antichrist* 2009, 01:07:36) – or, borrowing Paglia's words, on 'a bed of tangled vines, creepers and crawlers, probing dumb fingers of fetid organic life' (1990: 11).

Despite the controversial nature of Paglia's rhetoric, her work remains analytically useful insofar as it crystallises long-standing Western imaginaries of woman and nature that continue to circulate in Nordic ecohorror – whether reproduced, exaggerated, or critically exposed. Her writings condense phobic cultural positions, reveal power dichotomies, and articulate patriarchal fears that *Antichrist* both mobilises and interrogates. For this reason, Paglia does not function here as an explanatory authority, but as a diagnostic tool by which the film's symbolic economy can be read and re-evaluated.

Further, her work also highlights certain problematic contradictions in liberalism, postmodern feminism and romanticism's rose-tinted view on nature. Her rejection of Rousseau's pastoral ideal, in which nature is imagined as

benevolent and nurturing, anticipates critiques later articulated by Morton, whose concept of dark ecology – also introduced in defiance of romantic and sentimentalist ideals – is not so different from Paglia's understanding of Dionysian nature as an anti-hierarchical, grimy, and uncanny meshwork: 'Nature is serpentine, a bed of tangled vines, creepers and crawlers, probing dumb fingers of fetid organic life which Wordsworth taught us to call pretty' (1990: 11). Yet, the valuation of such dark nature differs radically between the two. Paglia's rhetoric is marked by revulsion and misogyny, feelings she not only admits to but even justifies, because 'The historical repugnance to woman has a rational basis: disgust is reason's proper response to the grossness of procreative nature' (12). In her ecophobic framework, Dionysian nature remains something humanity must shield itself from. Morton, by contrast, maintains a goth attitude to ecological darkness as he continues to embrace the irony, ugliness, and horror of nature as a means to raise environmental awareness, and where Paglia wishes to defend culture against nature, Morton seeks to dismantle the idealisations that make such opposition possible, urging us instead to 'choose this poisoned ground' (Morton 2007: 205).

This is the ideological tension in *Antichrist*. As soon as the couple arrive, Eden reveals itself not as a pastoral sanctuary or a proliferating site for healing, but as a space of regression and violence. The lush green landscape turns against the promise of healing, revealing a counter-image of a fallen nature, where a baby bird plunges from its nest to its death, a stillborn fawn hangs limp mid-delivery from its mother's birth canal, and acorns relentlessly drum on the cabin roof – each mirroring Nic's fatal fall from the window. Rather than offering healing and refuge from trauma, Eden is no longer a source of life, but of death. As the female protagonist observes, the falling acorns articulate a vision of nature governed not by balance or necessity, but by surplus, excess and waste – a natural economy in which generation exceeds purpose and where proliferation turns destructive.

Oak trees grow to be hundreds of years old. They only have to produce one single tree every hundred years in order to propagate ... The acorns fell on the roof then too. They kept falling and falling and dying and dying. (*Antichrist* 2009, 00:49:30)

Deep in the fauna of Eden, the prologue's Apollonian totalising form is weakened by Dionysian anarchy, where nature is the absolute inversion of the Rousseauian ideal. This is not a harmonious, healing or morally instructive environment, but muddy, rotten, and punitive – a dark ecology in which grass scorches the soles of human feet until they blister, and a fox speaks with a demonic voice, proclaiming 'Chaos reigns!' (00:57:39). In this framework, Eden represents a distinctly Nordic ecohorror logic: nature is not benevolent or redemptive, but excessive and abject. As the female protagonist ultimately admits, 'everything that used to be beautiful about Eden ... was perhaps hideous' (00:50:10).

Melancholic Mesh

There is also a melancholy at play in *Antichrist's* falling aesthetic. In line with Freud's famous account of melancholia as an aimless, unresolved sorrow, everything in Eden keeps falling pointlessly, without culmination or redemption (1957: 245–246).⁵⁷ As discussed in the previous chapter, Nordic ecohorror often operates through such a distinct atmos-affective melancholic register, shaped by region-specific landscapes, muted light, dense forests, seasonal decay, and an overwhelming sensory monotony. In *Antichrist*, the falling acorns, stillborn fawn, the damp woods, self-devouring fox, the muffled soundscape, and the film's ponderous pace produce an environment saturated with lingering grief, suspending the narrative in a state of unresolved attachment. As such, Eden materialises a melancholic temporality: not through singular catastrophic events, but an ongoing condition of repetition and slow material deterioration that refuses finality. Thus, in line with the Swedish historian of ideas Karin Johannisson, who attributes melancholia with three meanings – atmosphere, emotion, and diagnosis (2009: 29)⁵⁸ – *Antichrist* portrays all three dimensions at once, turning melancholy into an ecological condition distributed across bodies, psyches, landscape, and atmosphere.⁵⁹

In this sense, the film's melancholic register aligns closely with Morton's dark ecology, which explicitly associates ecological awareness with melancholy as mood, aesthetic, and ethical orientation.

The ecological thought is intrinsically dark, mysterious, and open, like an empty city square at dusk, a half-open door, or an unresolved chord. It is realistic,

depressing, intimate, and alive and ironic all at the same time. It is no wonder that the ancients thought that melancholy, their word for depression, was the earth mood. In the language of humor theory, melancholy is black, earthy, and cold. (2010: 16)

Morton positions melancholy as the affective condition most adequate to ecological reality. In contrast to Freudian understandings of melancholia as a pathological failure to detach from a lost object, he insists on the ecological value of not letting go. Similar to Haraway's imperative, 'staying with the trouble', and against the psychological demand to move on, Morton advocates staying with loss, refusing substitution, but remaining true to a damaged world, arguing that only by remaining with ecological devastation rather than escaping it through illusory fantasies of recovery can we begin to confront the reality of what is at stake.

Melancholy has a 'sickly' quality of excessive devotion, excessive fidelity to the darkness ... Yet isn't this excessive fidelity exactly what we need right now? Dark ecology oozes through despair. Being realistic is always refreshing. Depression is the most accurate way of experiencing the current ecological disaster. It's better than wishful thinking. (Morton 2010: 95)

In turn, dark ecology articulates a distinctly melancholic ethos grounded in 'negative desire rather than positive fulfillment' (2007: 186), rejecting the capitalist promise of future happiness and what affect theorists describe as cruel optimism – the attachment to ideals of happiness and self-realisation that ultimately hinder the flourishing they are imagined to secure (Ahmed 2010a; Berlant 2011). From this perspective, the melancholic stasis of Eden emerges as a form of ecological realism. Rather than overcoming grief through transcendence or renewal, the film insists on staying with deterioration and meaninglessness without any compensatory fantasy. In this sense, melancholy is not only affectively accurate, but also ethically, ecologically sustainable.

While the Swedish poet Gunnar Ekelöf understands melancholy as 'neither to have lost nor won', Morton reformulates the melancholic ethos in a loser's perspective: 'We should think like losers, not winners' (2010: 73).⁶⁰ In *Antichrist*, Eden exemplifies such a landscape of loss and losers. Nothing triumphs here;

nothing progresses. Nature proliferates without purpose, death unfolds without meaning, and grief persists without resolution. Accordingly, the melancholic 'affectphere' of Eden directly opposes therapeutic narratives of healing – what the husband seeks to impose on both his wife and nature. His insistence on recovery echoes what Morton critiques as a fundamentally non-ecological desire: the belief that loss can be overcome, grief processed, and damage repaired through forward movement. Eden, however, offers no such futurity. Here, loss is neither resolved nor sublimated; instead, it remains as deterioration, irreversible entanglement, and 'excessive fidelity to the darkness' (Morton 2010: 95).

On a parallel track, the melancholic atmosphere of Eden is also inseparable from the film's meshy ecology. Grief persists precisely because nothing at Eden can be cleanly separated and thus resolved. In keeping with transcorporeal entanglement, the bodies, affects, landscapes, and meanings in *Antichrist* intersect in unstable and uncanny ways beyond the possibility of overview or control. In this sense, Eden does not merely linger in loss, but emerges as a spatial condition of being lost. Indeed, as Thomsen shows, the nature in *Antichrist* materialises what Morton conceptualises as the 'mesh' (2013: 98).

Morton's concept of the mesh (tellingly homophonous with the word 'mess') understands the earth as an enormously chaotic, fraudulent clutter of infinite crisscrossing interconnections. We do not live on earth, Morton insists, but filtered into the mesh, where everything – humans and nonhumans, the living and the non-living, nature and culture – is deeply, yet unfathomably interrelated in vast, boundless, and unruly networks. Yet, there is nothing holistic or hierarchical about these networks just as its interconnectedness entails no symmetry or coherence; unlike Lovelock's homeostatic Gaia hypothesis, the mesh does not lead to any form of harmony or homeostasis. Transgressions, yes, but not transcendence.

This meshy interconnectedness challenges individuality too, which is illustrated vividly in *Antichrist* when the husband wakes up with his hand hanging out of the bedroom window, swarming with blood-sucking ticks: a parasitic invasion of the tissue that reminds us that subjectivity hinges on a fragile border of skin, provoking visceral disgust as flesh turns foreign and the hierarchy between the human and the nonhuman collapses (00:41:06). The erosion of bodily boundaries is likewise echoed in the self-devouring fox enacting the ultimate breakdown of this self–other

distinction, with subject and object folding into each other. In both instances, Dionysian nature repeats a central feature of Nordic ecohorror: a transcorporeal ecology in which the integrity of the human subject is destabilised, and where horror emerges not so much in confrontation with an external monster, but the slow realisation that subjectivity itself is contingent and exposed.

Moreover, like melancholy, the mesh in Eden is not only spatial, but temporal, unsettling the film's sense of sequential progression. In line with another defining feature of Nordic ecohorror, *Antichrist* does not operate in a linear or progressive temporal structure, but unfolds in an almost mythic, dense, cyclic, and affectively charged temporality. Rather than narrative progression, driven by the husband's desire to 'crack the code', the film is structured by repetition, duration, and intensification. Similarly, its chapter structure – Sorrow, Pain, Despair – does not chart recovery but intensifies affect, replacing psychological progress with cyclical descent. Instead of moving towards healing or resolution, time in Eden thickens around loss, returning obsessively to the same images and bodily states: Slow-motion tableaux and fleshy close-ups – open wounds, naked skin, bloodied genitals – suspend action in favour of sensation, ultimately anchoring time in the body rather than in narrative progression. Correspondingly, much like in *Morgenstjernen*, death is all around yet without closure: lingering in a suspended state materialised through the film's animal figures; the crow, undead and constantly reburied in the foxhole or beneath the floor planks and the faun, half born, half enwombed; and, by extension, Nic himself, whose death haunts every scene, re-emerging in new shapes and forms over and over again. In Eden, the fall of nature is not a one-time event, but a condition that repeats itself, relentlessly 'falling and falling'. In this temporal framework, *Antichrist* articulates a dark inversion of Nietzsche's eternal return, where everything folds back into itself, binding time to recurrence rather than progression. Crucially, this anti-linear temporal logic also aligns with the woman as a Dionysian figure, who must be torn apart to be reborn – a ritual structure mirrored in her burning at the stake.

Equally critical to the film's plot, this enmeshment undermines epistemological progression. As it is part of the human condition, spatially and ontologically, to be situated in and equally part of the mesh, we cannot free ourselves from it, study it from afar or acquire any kind of knowledge about it. The constitution of the

meshwork, or lack thereof, contradicts well-established ideas of a subjective cognitive apparatus by which we can hold ‘the blue marble’ out in an arm’s length in order to investigate the connections of the globe. We might be convinced that humans possess such an exclusive and superior scientific gaze, as if we are ‘the only show in town’; we might believe that this meta perspective, upheld from an up-and-above distance, privileges us to transcend our own subjectivity (Morton 2011: 173). The truth is, however, as Morton also asserts – echoing Haraway (1988: 581) – that ‘there is no Goldilocks position that’s just right from which to view objects’ (2013a: 36).

In *Antichrist*, however, the male protagonist tries this trick using his therapeutic gaze, seeking to ‘solve’ his wife’s grief by bringing her into contact with what he believes to be healing nature. However, his method is soon exposed as illusory, as the Edenic setting gradually envelops the couple in a profound state of uncertainty and estrangement. In fact, as Thomsen explains, Eden is permeated by ‘strange strangeness’ – the term Morton uses to describe the fundamental unknowability of all things (2010: 41). Mirroring the notion that knowledge produces knowledge, this condition also propagates, yet in the opposite direction, so that the more one tries to understand a given phenomenon and impose fixed categories, the more complex and incomprehensible everything becomes (Morton 2010: 15). In *Antichrist*, this is particularly evident when the husband discovers his wife’s old research notes from when she was working on her thesis, revealing that the further she progressed, the more illegible and meaningless her scribbles became (01:01:20). As Thomsen also emphasises, the more she researched, the more lost she became in it, until she ultimately abandoned it entirely, noting that ‘the whole project just seemed less important up there’ (00:15:49). ‘In *Antichrist*’, Thomsen declares ‘the signs do not retain meaning, but produce it excessively’, much like the overproductive oak tree, relentlessly shedding acorns (2018: 133). When once apparent symbols, such as a crow, draw together theology, psychology, astrology, and folklore, meaning proliferates rather than resolves and signs turn opaque. Thus, despite the husband’s conviction that nature-based therapy will bring clarity, Eden yields only disorientation and uncertainty.

By this logic, the world is not made knowable through immersion, as the husband initially believes. Instead, immersion intensifies estrangement. Therefore,

when the husband equates proximity with clarity – believing that immersion in nature will generate insight and healing – Edenic nature violently debunks this assumption. Ultimately, nothing – not even the self – can ever be fully known, which is emphasised in the film when it is finally revealed that the female protagonist's greatest fear is in fact 'herself' (01:11:30); she has no idea what she is capable of and is basically alienated from herself. Here, strange strangeness too dismantles subjectivity and the illusion of a coherent self.

This epistemological impasse does not remain confined to the husband's therapeutic logic, but extends to the film's interpretive economy and critical reception. Relentlessly packing on images and symbols of Christianity, Nordic mythology, German philosophy, French psychoanalysis, and baroque aesthetics, the film creates an ever-propagating, dense field of references that muddies any attempt at meaning-making. Consequently, strange strangeness is a fundamental condition which infiltrates not only the cinematic narrative, but also propagates itself in the work of film critics, who easily lose their footing in the multidimensional, meshy layers of meaning the film presents. Elisabeth Møller Jensen, for instance, interprets the female character's mistreatment of her son Nic's feet as a biblical reference to *Haltefanden*, the demonic offspring of the evil witch, who is ultimately burned at the stake for the sake of patriarchy's great redemption and, following Wennstam and Sveland (2009), to abolish female desire and intellect.⁶¹ However, in the literary scholar Lilian Munk Rösing's interpretation of the same example of motherly neglect, the mutilation of Nic's feet is linked to Oedipus, whose name means 'swollen foot', corresponding with her psychoanalytical analysis of the film's prologue as a staging of the Freudian *Urszene*. In this way, sense-making continues to escape the critics, who cannot untangle themselves from the film's mesh-like composition, where an extreme density of signs and allegorical references do not retain meaning, but rather breed it excessively to the point of collapse.

Ultimately, this deconstruction of epistemic and symbolic order resonates strongly with Alaimo's notion of undomesticated space – a feminist ecological imaginary in which nature cannot be reduced to a passive surface for human projection or symbolic inscription. Instead, as Alaimo writes, nature 'is undomesticated both in the sense that it figures as a space apart from the domestic

and in the sense that it is untamed and thus serves as a model for female insurgency' (2010: 16). Eden in *Antichrist* could be such a space: not a restorative pastoral or a healing return to maternal origins, but a volatile ecology that overwhelms any attempt to control or comprehend. In line with Alaimo's thinking, Eden resists domestication in every form. In fact, *Antichrist* refuses both the patriarchal desire to master nature and the tendency to redeem or purify femininity of its monstrosity. Instead, it stages feminine nature as undomesticated and radically unknowable.

Between Patriarchal Myth and Feminist Critique

Antichrist engages with a long-standing cultural tension surrounding feminine monstrosity – a phenomenon historically produced through conflicting views on woman-as-nature. In Western patriarchal discourse, woman has repeatedly been figured as pure nature: instinctual, bodily, unruly, and potentially dangerous. Feminist theory, in turn, has sought to counter this alignment by insisting on woman's inscription in culture, framing femininity as historically produced rather than biologically determined. Feminine monstrosity thus emerges as a profoundly unstable category, suspended between essentialist naturalisation and feminist resistance to biological determinism. It is in this conceptual impasse that the question re-emerges not simply of whether women may be represented as monstrous, but under what conditions such monstrosity is thinkable without collapsing into misogynist inevitability.

I argue that it is this tension that *Antichrist* takes up. In keeping with the film's narrative and structural composition – itself organised as an ecological–existential mesh – feminine monstrosity is not approached as a unified concept, but as produced in the collision of divergent frameworks. Much like Eden itself, the film's exploration of the monstrous feminine unfolds through overlapping, contradictory, and often incompatible perspectives, where meaning proliferates rather than resolves.

In this meshy configuration, *Antichrist* reactivates historically entrenched Western patriarchal imaginaries of the monstrous woman – including the witch, the hysteric, the sexually excessive femme fatale, and the destructive mother – while simultaneously invoking feminist and psychoanalytic counter-interpretations that

have sought to dismantle these figures. Crucially, however, I argue that the film does not simply reproduce these traditions, nor does it replace patriarchal myth with feminist corrective. Instead, it allows both frameworks to coexist, interfere with one another, and gradually destabilise their own interpretive authority.

Accordingly, I follow two lines of analysis. First, I use feminist theory to explore and historicise the patriarchal production of feminine monstrosity in *Antichrist*, and, second, I turn to the points at which the same feminist frameworks are complicated or unsettled by the film's sustained engagement with nature and corporeal excess. By tracing the film's movement between patriarchal myth, feminist critique, and ecological disorientation, I address how feminine monstrosity emerges not as a stable identity or allegory, but as a site of collision in which gender, nature, and culture are increasingly difficult to disentangle.

The Patriarchal Double Bind: From Madonna to Witch

In Western cultural imagination, feminist theory has long argued that the figure of the female monster is organised around a restrictive dualism in which woman is granted cultural intelligibility only through polarised roles: the nurturing mother or the deviant witch. While positioned as moral opposites, these figures are complementary mechanisms of patriarchal regulation. The maternal body is idealised and sanctified insofar as it remains selfless and reproductive, whereas any deviation from this script – sexual autonomy, desire, anger, or independence – is displaced onto the figure of the monstrous woman. Feminine monstrosity thus emerges not outside the patriarchy, but in it, at the point where feminine behaviour is perceived to exceed or transgress its normative boundaries.

Antichrist explicitly stages this patriarchal dichotomy. In the aftermath of Nic's death, the female protagonist initially appears in the culturally sanctioned role of the grieving mother – fragile and helpless. Yet as the narrative unfolds and she grows increasingly entangled with the fallen nature of Eden, this image is gradually inverted. In parallel with Eden's descent into disorder, she is progressively framed as sexually excessive, morally deviant, and explicitly coded as a witch: she refers to nature itself as 'Satan's church' (00:51:10), speaks ominously of the Three Beggars – the deer, the fox, and the raven – as prophetic figures heralding the progression of sorrow, pain, and despair, and eventually appears to invoke a violent hailstorm

reminiscent of ‘the sisters from Ratisbon’ (01:07:05), whom she describes as women burnt as witches, foreshadowing her own eventual execution at the stake.⁶² The film further reinforces this coding through its direct invocation of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the fifteenth-century demonological treatise, first published in Germany in 1486, that helped systematise and legitimise the persecution of witches across Europe, including the more than one thousand witch burnings that took place in Denmark – as well as through scenes that evoke the iconography of the witches’ sabbath, most notably in the intercourse sequence beneath the roots of the tree, where spectral hands emerge from the earth. In this progression, the film mobilises the archetypal figures of mother and witch not as stable identities, but as oscillating positions by which feminine subjectivity is disciplined and pathologised. In doing so, *Antichrist* does not merely depict patriarchal fantasy; it renders visible the cultural logic by which femininity is made monstrous.

It is through this exaggerated re-enactment of patriarchal structures that the film summons feminist critique. By reproducing the Madonna–witch dichotomy with such insistence and schematic clarity, I would argue *Antichrist* invokes the very feminist frameworks that have historically been used to analyse and dismantle those mechanisms. The film’s visual and narrative economy thus appears almost to solicit a feminist psychoanalytic reading, foregrounding the gendered dynamics of looking, desire, and punishment that feminist film theory has long identified as central to cinematic representations of women.

Above all, the film invites a feminist psychoanalytic reading, particularly through Laura Mulvey’s analysis of the male gaze. In her seminal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), Mulvey argues that conventional Hollywood film productions are structured around a monolithic system of power in which women are reduced to passive objects of pleasure for a voyeuristic male gaze. The mechanisms of visual fetishism make the gaze itself gendered, determining ‘woman as image, man as bearer of the look’ (1975: 11). Drawing on the Freudian primal scene and Lacanian theories of the mirror stage, Mulvey demonstrates how the female body is figured as a site of both desire and anxiety, recalling the maternal body and the threat of castration it symbolically represents. To contain this threat, narrative cinema relies on two dominant strategies: voyeuristic punishment – where the dangers of the castrating woman are averted by voyeuristic distancing, sadistic

devaluation and the degrading exposure of her moral deficiency, guilt or pathology – or through fetishistic idealisation, which cloaks the woman in reassuring beauty and purity, rendering her comforting and harmless rather than dangerously seductive. While voyeuristic ‘revelation’ typically targets the carnal and vulgar femme fatale, the fetishistic ‘veiling’ sanctifies the angelic and altruistic Madonna figure (15). The male gaze thus parallels the Freudian whore–Madonna complex as both frameworks secure masculine stability by neutralising the female threat without eliminating her desirability.

This structure of the male gaze is activated in *Antichrist* from the outset, as the film’s prologue reconstructs what Lilian Munk Rösing identifies as the Freudian *Urszene*: the child’s peering through a keyhole, witnessing the parents’ intercourse (2009). Crucially, this primal scene is not only foundational to Freud’s account of subject formation, but also central to Mulvey’s feminist critique of cinematic spectatorship. In her essay, she explicitly draws on the primal scene to explain how voyeuristic pleasure structures the cinematic gaze, arguing that the position of the peeping child comes to mirror that of the film spectator, whose gaze – hidden in cinematic darkness – participates in the same economy of forbidden looking. By restaging this scene so insistently, *Antichrist* reproduces the structure of spectatorship that Mulvey identifies as foundational to the male gaze.

As the narrative unfolds, this visual economy assumes a central role in the film’s representation of the female protagonist, who begins to oscillate between the two positions Mulvey describes. Initially, her maternal devotion is framed by fetishistic idealisation: slow-motion imagery, closed eyes, aestheticised suffering, and clinical observations render her visually consumable. However, as her sexual desire intensifies, this idealisation increasingly gives way to voyeuristic punishment, culminating in her self-mutilation, strangulation, and burning at the stake. Shifting from Apollonian lovemaking to violent, Dionysian sex, her erotic agency is progressively reframed as excessive and dangerous. In this shift, the woman who once appeared as the sanctified maternal figure is gradually recoded as a castrating femme fatale, her desire no longer reassuring but destabilising.

Her troubled relation to motherhood can also be approached through another psychoanalytic logic, articulated by Julia Kristeva, who situates horror not simply in corporeal violence but in the maternal bond itself (2024: 78).⁶³ On a visceral

level, she argues, the reproductive body – all-engulfing, primitive and sullied by bodily fluids such as menstrual blood, breast milk, mucus, and faeces – is considered exceedingly abject by its corporeality, serving as a grotesque reminder, as Saint Augustine of Hippo famously put it, that man is born between ‘faeces et urinam’. More fundamentally, however, Kristeva locates an even deeper form of abjection in the child’s ambivalent relation to the mother, whose body represents both origin and threat. In this pre-Oedipal stage, the emerging ego must establish itself as a subject by rejecting the maternal body. It is through sensations of disgust and horror towards maternal attachment that subjectivity is constituted. The maternal figure thus appears frightening not because she is violent, but because she embodies the possibility of engulfment. In *Antichrist*, this threat is condensed into the image of the stillborn fawn, dangling grotesquely from its mother’s birth canal, suspended in limbo between selfhood and attachment, with the womb as a threshold between creation and annihilation.

From the mother’s perspective, however, maternity constitutes the primary means by which a woman can assert her existential relevance. Only through symbiosis with the child, Kristeva asserts, can the abject mother gain access to the symbolic sphere – a dependency that directly conflicts with the child’s drive for separation and subject-formation (2024: 13). *Antichrist* dramatises this tension, showing how the female protagonist’s separation anxiety is triggered when her toddler, Nic, begins wandering off into the woods of Eden on his own. In an attempt to preserve the maternal bond, she systematically sabotages his mobility, intentionally putting his shoes on the wrong feet and subtly mutilating him to forestall his autonomy. After Nic’s death, the autopsy, combined with family photographs showing his shoes put on incorrectly, reveals her abuse, prompting the husband to confront his wife. Yet, rather than remorse, she displays only resentment towards Nic’s efforts to break away: ‘Nic drifted away from me the last time. He was always out and about. He might have made more of an effort to be there for me’ (00:51:57).

The rupture with ideal motherhood is made explicit in the film’s central revelation, which retroactively reconfigures the visual economy of the prologue. Throughout the opening sequence, the female protagonist is repeatedly shown with closed eyes, absorbed in orgasmic pleasure, seemingly unaware of her son’s

movement towards the open window. Vision here is aligned with erotic absorption and passivity, positioning her firmly in the logic of fetishistic display. However, when this sequence is later revisited in a flashback, this image is radically destabilised. The woman is now shown with open eyes, watching Nic approach the window and yet, at the height of her sexual ecstasy, deliberately choosing not to intervene. This moment does not simply disclose new narrative information, but fundamentally unsettles the status of vision itself in which her status as erotic image is remodelled into a seeing subject, disrupting both the logic of the male gaze and the fantasy of idealised motherhood.



Figure 7. The female character seeing her son about to fall out of the window during a flashback sequence (*Antichrist* 2009, 01:28:37).

This reversal forces the spectator to reconsider the entire economy of looking that has structured the film thus far while also retroactively activating a series of ominous clues that had previously hovered at the margins of the narrative: the teddy bear tied to a helium balloon luring Nic from his crib; the muted baby monitor during the parents' intercourse; her anguished confessions – 'I could have stopped him' and 'I was to blame for Nic's death'; the shoes on the wrong feet; and her insistence on opening windows in Eden despite acorns tumbling in. Together, these details accumulate into a chilling portrait of a mother who is not merely traumatised by loss, but actively complicit in her son's death. By prioritising her own sexual pleasure over her maternal duty, she distils one of Western culture's deepest

tensions: the presumed incompatibility between maternal responsibility and female sexual autonomy.

These scenes thus demonstrate how *Antichrist* mobilises feminist psychoanalytic frameworks to make visible the patriarchal conditions under which femininity is rendered monstrous. Through its insistent staging of the Madonna–witch dichotomy, the male gaze, and the abject maternal bond, the film renders legible a cultural logic in which female sexuality and motherhood are repeatedly cast as mutually incompatible. Read through feminist theory, the female protagonist’s monstrosity thus appears not as an inherent pathology, but as the product of regulatory structures that discipline and punish femininity. At the same time, this reading cannot exhaust the film’s configuration of feminine monstrosity. In fact, as the narrative moves deeper into the mesh of nature and corporeal extremity, the interpretive clarity offered by feminist psychoanalytic critique begins to give way to more ambivalent terrain.

Feminist Tensions: Nature, Difference, Embodiment

Feminist psychoanalytic theory offers a powerful lens by which the patriarchal production of feminine monstrosity in *Antichrist* can be viewed, yet it does not fully account for its instability in the film. Even as *Antichrist* reactivates patriarchal imaginaries of the female monster and invokes the feminist frameworks developed to expose them, the film does not simply invite feminist theory as a corrective apparatus by which these structures can be dismantled. Rather, I argue that *Antichrist* also places certain psychoanalytical, poststructural feminist frameworks under strain. Through its repeated deployment of psychoanalytical idioms of sexuality, maternity, and castration, the film brings into view not only the patriarchal logics by which feminine monstrosity has historically been produced, but also the conceptual tensions that certain strands of feminist critique have encountered in their attempts to redeem it.

Continuing the analysis of the female monster in *Antichrist*, I argue that the film brings three interrelated concerns in feminist theory to the fore: the feminist flight from nature; the question of essentialism and sexual difference; and the limits of feminist psychoanalytic critique when confronted with ecological materiality and corporeal excess. However, these tensions are not presented as outright failures of

feminist theory, but rather in recognition of the female monster as a figure so multifaceted that it cannot be encapsulated, stabilised, or resolved by any singular theoretical framework, however politically attentive these orientations may be. Too unruly to be stabilised and too compromised to be redeemed, the female monster resists moral redemption and theoretical closure alike.

The Feminist Flight from Nature

First, I find that *Antichrist* addresses a theoretical paradox in feminist theory that Alaimo terms ‘the feminist flight from nature’ (2000: 1). Since Western philosophy has persistently affiliated women with nature – positioning both as the antithesis of culture, reason, progress, and subjectivity – feminist theory has repeatedly found itself negotiating the political toxicity of this association. As both Merchant (1980) and Plumwood (1993) have argued, the symbolic feminisation of nature legitimises the domination of both women and the natural world. As a result, Alaimo argues, nature has become a thorny concept for feminist theory as its long-standing association with women expels her from the domains of influence and agency, prompting a feminist imperative to sever the woman–nature connection altogether. In fact, Alaimo suggests that women’s liberation has often been imagined as contingent upon distance from nature, which must be repelled rather than re-evaluated (2008: 3).

One way many feminists have tried to disentangle woman from nature is by insisting that women, like everything else, are cultural constructs. Yet, such efforts often seem to be working in, rather than against these dualisms in question, and therefore, to some extent, reaffirm them. One representative of this logic is Sherry Ortner, who in her renowned article ‘Is Female to Male what Nature is to Culture?’ (1974) states that ‘woman is not “in reality” any closer (or further from) nature than man’ and that this ‘scheme is a construct of culture rather than a fact of nature’ (87). She then urges us to challenge any institution or representation that positions women as ‘closer to nature than men’, which in turn implies an acceptance rather than a reassessment of the nature–culture hierarchy, where women – much in line with Paglia’s reasoning – should aim to be free of nature in order to be elevated into the preferred category of culture.

This discomfort is not confined to theory, but was equally central to the critical reception of *Antichrist*, where the film was repeatedly accused of reinscribing misogynist essentialism by aligning femininity with nature and monstrous excess. The film critic Carl-Johan Malmberg objects to what he describes as von Trier's provocation 'by opposing masculine reason to feminine and evil nature', identifying the film's core problem as its reliance on a rigid dualism between 'masculine and feminine, good and evil, desire and death' (Malmberg 2009).⁶⁴ Similarly, even more affirmative responses reproduce the same conceptual pressure. Writing in *Svenska Dagbladet*, Johan Wennström (2009) seeks to defend the film against accusations of misogyny, insisting that the film should be understood as dismantling 'a set of ideas that for hundreds of years have associated woman with the unruliness and cruelty of nature', culminating in a final image where women appear liberated 'from the nature that has become an argument for their execution'.⁶⁵ While Wennström's reading aims at reconciliation rather than condemnation, it nonetheless reproduces the same underlying logic: that female emancipation requires a decisive break from nature. Across both critical and affirmative receptions, the film thus offers a site in which the feminist flight from nature is activated and rendered visible.

Feminist flight is not only projected onto the film from the outside, though, but is explicitly articulated in the film itself. As discussed earlier in the chapter, a key exchange has the female protagonist tentatively suggest, 'If human nature is evil, then that goes as well for the nature of—' before being abruptly cut off by her husband, who interjects with barely concealed contempt: 'Of the women? Female nature?' (01:04:23). The interruption is telling. Rather than allowing the question of nature to unfold beyond sexual difference, the man immediately construes it as an accusation against women, foreclosing the possibility of thinking nature except through gendered essentialism. His reaction does not simply reiterate patriarchal logic; it mimics a defensive reflex familiar from feminist critique itself – the fear that any association between women and nature will inevitably collapse into misogynist determinism.

Yet herein lies the paradox. Feminist critiques that reject the woman–nature connection often end up reaffirming the patriarchal assumptions they challenge. As Susan Hekman and Stacy Alaimo point out, 'The more feminist theories distance themselves from "nature", the more that very "nature" is implicitly or explicitly

reconfirmed as the treacherous quicksand of misogyny' (2008: 4). By this logic, strange alliances arise: Ortnor aligns with Paglia just as some feminist critics echo the logic of the film's Apollonian male protagonist, demonstrating once more that in the mesh of Eden, clear distinctions dissolve and unexpected intersections between feminism and patriarchy emerge. The self-cannibalising logic of this strange dissolution is eerily echoed in one of *Antichrist's* most haunting images: a fox devouring itself while growling, 'Chaos reigns'. In fact, it even offers a different interpretation to the revelation that the woman 'herself' tops the fear pyramid, suggesting that sometimes the greatest threat to the feminine monstrosity is feminism itself.

Staging Essentialism: Sexual Difference in Extremis

If the feminist flight from nature exposes one paradox in feminist engagements with feminine monstrosity, the question of essentialism introduces a second that is closely related – unavoidable once monstrosity becomes entangled with the female body, sexuality, and reproduction. Essentialism has long troubled feminist theory because of its tendency to stabilise binary identities and naturalise sexual difference by assuming that gendered subjects possess inherent, transhistorical characteristics that precede discourse and social structures. Historically, such assumptions have been mobilised to legitimise political inequality, naturalise violence, and confine women to the bodily and domestic sphere. As Alaimo argues, 'both sexism and racism have been fuelled by essentialist beliefs that women, as well as other groups, such as people of African descent or Indigenous peoples, are inferior due to their unchanging, core "natures"' (2016: 530).

This is particularly acute in the study of feminine monstrosity itself. To analyse the female monster is, inadvertently, to engage with questions of sexual difference and the female body – the terrain that feminist theory has sought to denaturalise. This reintroduces a dilemma already raised in the preceding discussion on the permissibility of feminine monstrosity. How can feminine monstrosity be examined without reproducing the same essentialist premises by which women have historically been rendered monstrous? How can one engage the kinds of questions raised by Creed ('What exactly is it about woman herself, as a being quite separate from the male monster, that produces definitions of female monstrosity?' (2024: 8))

without invoking the segregating logic of sexual difference itself? And more specifically for this chapter, how can feminine monstrosity be approached in ecohorror – a genre deeply invested in bodily vulnerability and ecological entanglement – without collapsing into biological determinism?

Rather than resolving the dilemma, *Antichrist* forces it into the open. The film does not attempt to evade or resolve essentialism, but confronts it head on by magnifying it to the point of grotesque excess. Instead of presenting gender as a nuanced social position, the film reduces its protagonists to the archetypal designations ‘He’ and ‘She’, a gesture that strips them of psychological specificity and leaves them schematic figures, pointing to gender as a structural principle rather than an individuated identity. This abstraction is reinforced visually and narratively: ‘He’ is consistently aligned with rationality, therapeutic discourse and symbolic order; ‘She’ is increasingly bound to corporeality, sexuality, grief, and the chaotic forces of Eden. Biological difference is thus not subtly implied but insistently staged and deliberately overarticulated, thus accentuating the cultural mechanisms by which masculinity and femininity have been historically coded as reason versus nature, Apollo versus Dionysus, mind versus body, bearer of the gaze versus ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’, male doctor versus female witch, castrated versus castrator, Christ versus Antichrist, Mother Nature versus dark ecology. In staging sexual difference at this level of exaggeration, *Antichrist* does not naturalise these binaries so much as expose their constructedness by pushing them to the brink of caricature.

In this way, the essentialism in von Trier’s film is straightforwardly critical. Rather than subscribing to biologically grounded, transhistorical notions of gender or nature articulated by Paglia, the film mobilises what Gayatri Spivak terms *strategic essentialism*: the deliberate and tactical use of essentialist categories in order to expose their political effects (2006: 281). As Spivak argues, such essentialism – when deployed strategically – can be temporarily utilised not merely to reinforce fixed identities, but to illuminate the power structures by which identities are produced and regulated. Here, essentialism is not a rigid endpoint, but a critical instrument. As Phoebe Godfrey explains, such tactics can challenge ‘biologically determined, or ahistorical, or naturalized essences’ through deliberate use of universal figures (2005: 54). Diana Fuss likewise insists that essentialism in itself is ‘neither good nor bad, progressive nor reactionary, beneficial nor dangerous’, but

instead demands a contextual question: what motivates its deployment? (2013: xi). Read in the light of this question, the hyperbolic gender polarities in *Antichrist* are not ‘deployed’ to stabilise femininity or masculinity, but to expose the violence required to sustain such distinctions.

After Freud: When Metaphor Becomes Matter

Lastly, *Antichrist* brings into focus a third limitation in dominant feminist approaches to feminine monstrosity: the tendency to privilege symbolic interpretation over material embodiment. As seen, feminist psychoanalytic theory – from Mulvey’s theory of the gaze to Kristeva’s abjection and Creed’s monstrous–feminine – may be indispensable for exposing patriarchal productions of feminine monstrosity, but it often approaches the body itself as image rather than matter, as signifier rather than substance. Even when the body is central, as it often is in horror fiction, it is frequently approached as text – something to be read and decoded – rather than as flesh that bleeds, suffers, and feels. From this perspective, feminine monstrosity is often perceived as a disturbance in representation or symbolic order rather than a confrontation with corporeal reality.

This symbolic emphasis reflects a broader trajectory in poststructural feminist theory. Following the linguistic turn, questions of power and subjectivity were increasingly theorised using discourse and language, while the body – particularly the sexed body – became a politically fraught terrain. As Elizabeth Grosz observes: ‘Patriarchal oppression, in other words, justifies itself, at least in part, by connecting women much more closely than men to the body and, through this identification, restricting women’s social and economic roles to (pseudo) biological terms’ (1994: 14). In response to this entrenched association, feminist theory sought to loosen the grip of biological determinism by insisting on the constructedness of gender, most influentially articulated in Judith Butler’s reconceptualisation of gender as distinct from biological sex (1990). While this intervention powerfully destabilised naturalised notions of identity, it also reinforced a conceptual divide between nature as fixed biology and culture as constructed and thus changeable.

A similar privileging of the symbolic over the material can also be found in certain strands of monster theory, particularly in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s influential first thesis: ‘The Monster’s Body is a Cultural Body’ (1996: 4). This claim presents

the monster not as a literal or material being, but as a symbolic construct – a figure shaped by, and reflective of, the cultural anxieties, taboos, and desires of its time. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock echoes this view, writing that ‘monsters in this sense may be considered a kind of language, a way to give symbolic shape to and communicate affect and experience. The body of the monster is a text expressing human fear and desire – one language we speak through is monsters’ (2020: 20). In both formulations, monstrosity is reduced to language – a metaphorical or discursive tool by which culture externalises its unconscious conflicts and desires. Consequently, the actual monster is rendered secondary, subordinated to its function as a cultural signifier. ‘The monster only exists to be read’, Cohen continues, emphasising the monster’s role as a cautionary tale, a cultural commentary or a symbol rather than substance (1996: 4).

Consequently, I argue that just as the feminist flight from nature has created a paradoxical overinvestment in culture, feminist caution about biological essentialism has produced a parallel flight from embodied materiality. The historical perception of women as naturebodies has made materiality a dangerous conceptual terrain for feminist theory – one haunted by the threat of reductionism, stasis, and biological determinism. In seeking to escape these associations, Alaimo infers, feminist thought tends to emphasise discourse at the expense of matter (2010a). Yet the outcome is not the elimination of essentialism, but its displacement: the biological body is ignored rather than rethought. Consequently, Nancy Tuana argues that feminists have painted themselves into a corner by denouncing the body as ‘fixed, essential, material basis of human nature’ – a move that inadvertently provides biological determinism with a backwards kind of validity (1996: 57); only by engaging directly with matter itself, Tuana argues, can feminism dismantle essentialist assumptions. On a similar note, Lynda Birke argues that feminist theory need not abandon the biological body in order to avoid determinism; rather, it must reconceptualise materiality itself as dynamic and contingent. By insisting that bodies are ‘changing and changeable, as *transformable*’ (1999: 45, original emphasis), Birke offers a framework for thinking embodiment without reducing it to fixed essence, a possibility that *Antichrist* explores not theoretically, but viscerally.

In fact, it is this tension between symbolic abstraction and embodied reality which is central to *Antichrist*. The film continually invokes psychoanalytic

structures only to confront their insufficiency. The *Urszene*, the castration complex, the archaic mother, and the logic of sexual difference: all are unmistakably present, inviting interpretation through familiar theoretical frameworks, yet repeatedly collapse under the weight of corporeal extremity. In *Antichrist*, castration is not merely a metaphor, maternity is not only a symbolic position, and monstrosity is not confined to representation. The body intrudes with undeniable force: wounded, penetrated, mutilated. This destabilisation of semiotic-discursive and psychoanalytic theory is ultimately emphasised when Gainsbourg's character pointedly remarks, in another nod to Nietzsche, 'Freud is dead, isn't he?' (00:54:50) – a line that functions as both a rejection of her husband's diagnostic authority and a broader dismissal of psychoanalytic mastery over female pain and subjectivity.

Following her declaration, the film's symbolic treatment of the female body, the male gaze, and castration complexes is violently interrupted by a raw, invasive material reality. In an inverted cinematic climax, the male character is castrated, and the female protagonist performs an act of genital self-mutilation. Presented in unflinching close-up, the scene confronts the viewer with female genitalia and shows, in graphic detail, the clitoris being cut with a pair of scissors. This moment has proven to be one of the film's most divisive, critics grappling with its grotesque realism and affective impact. At the press conference in Cannes, the Canadian reporter Liz Renzetti of *The Globe and Mail* commented on the scene, noting the tension between the film's beauty and its brutality: 'There are some very beautiful images in the film, but also some very disturbing ones. And I think possibly the most disturbing one is the act of genital self-mutilation. So, I am interested in knowing what Mr von Trier intended with that scene?' Von Trier's answer was telling: to not show it, he claimed, 'would be lying' (foreverCLG 2026).

With his reply, von Trier exposed a hypocrisy in (psycho)analysis – a tradition comfortable theorising castration and anchoring feminine monstrosity in that very complex, but only as metaphor, an abstraction – rarely confronting its actual material consequences. By avoiding the physical reality of castration, psychoanalytic discourse maintains a safe distance from the body it claims to interpret. This ironic dissonance was even echoed by Lilian Munk Rösing, who openly admitted that the film's final moments were a little too real for her: 'I will also not hide the fact that

I have never actually seen the worst images in *Antichrist*, but rather closed my eyes during the leg-piercing, testicle-smashing and clitorectomy' (2011: 157).⁶⁶

In the castration scene – where metaphor becomes matter – *Antichrist* not only dismantles the analytical gaze and exposes the limitations of dominant psychoanalytic accounts of feminine monstrosity, but also collapses the distance between theory and flesh, metaphor and mutilation. In doing so, the film reminds us that while the female body is indeed never just a body, the female body is also just a body. Yet the film goes further still as it stages a violent undoing of gendered positions altogether. In the castration scene, after the female character has raped, castrated and masturbated her husband until he ejaculates blood, she drills a hole into his lower leg using a hand-crank drill and penetrates the wound with her finger before bolting a grindstone to his limb. This grotesque, violently transgressive act queers both bodies; the bleeding phallus is feminised into a menstrual orifice, while the invasive drilling and fingering echo phallic penetration. The leg-bolting, mirroring her mutilation of Nic's feet, immobilises him and reverses the gendered logic of restraint, rendering his body subject to the same disabling control that patriarchal structures have long imposed on women.

The whole ordeal reaches its climax when she cuts off her clitoris. While most readings interpret this act of self-mutilation as a submission to the Law of the Father, Church, Dogma, the patriarchy – or, as Christopher Sharrett puts it, 'Female castration is the logical consequence of a life of a woman under this sort of rule – pleasure is denied or subjugated, the woman contained and ultimately destroyed. She, in this film, enacts upon herself what her civilization – right down to the male most proximate to her – has insistently demanded, and continues to demand' (2016: 26) – it may also be an act of un-sexing: a radical attempt to liberate herself from the cultural hegemony of patriarchy by destroying the bodily marker by which sexual difference has been made meaningful. Crucially, this act cannot be stabilised as either submission or resistance. Instead, it exposes how feminine monstrosity in *Antichrist* resists interpretive closure altogether, undoing the same categories by which gender, agency, and meaning have been organised.

In sum, *Antichrist* ultimately demonstrates that feminine monstrosity cannot be understood through fixed binaries or singular explanatory models as either discursive construct or biological essence. Rather, I propose it as a natureculture: a

mode of being that unfolds across bodies, environments, affects, theories, and histories without allowing these domains to be separated. In this sense, feminine monstrosity resonates with Karen Barad's understanding of materiality: 'Matter, like meaning, is not an individually articulated or static entity. Matter is not little bits of nature, or a blank slate, surface, or site passively awaiting signification; nor is it an uncontested ground for scientific, feminist, or Marxist theories' (2003: 139). The female monster is therefore neither simply the product of patriarchal monsterisation nor merely its victim or reversal, but rather dissolves the epistemological frameworks through which she has historically been condemned and reclaimed. She inhabits and acts through feminine monstrosity, exposing the unstable boundaries between nature and culture, body and symbol, human and nonhuman. It is in this tension, rather than in any form of resolution, that its critical leverage and disruptive power lies. Correspondingly, it is because feminine monstrosity cannot be purified, redeemed, or stabilised that it remains analytically productive. By resisting closure and insisting on 'staying with the trouble', it offers a way of thinking with the entanglements of life in the Anthropocene.

PART TWO

READER STUDIES, STUDYING READERS

Reading Monstrosity and Ecohorror

5. Reading Monstrosity: Female Monsters and (Mis)recognition

Feminine monstrosity remains a deeply contested phenomenon. Emerging from long historical alignments between the feminine, nature, and corporeal excess, the monstrous woman appears as a figure always already burdened by cultural violence and political unease, rendering her status and legitimacy both unstable and disputed. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the reception of Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* extended beyond debates about style or narrative, exposing instead a deeper resistance to the portrayal of the female monster (see Chapter Four). The controversy about the film thus points beyond issues of representation and towards fundamental tensions in recognition, concerning not only how monstrous women are depicted, but under what conditions they are accepted, resisted, or rendered difficult to interpret. I argue that such dynamics shape how feminine monstrosity becomes culturally intelligible. To explore this further, this chapter introduced an empirical reader study that shifts attention from representation to reception.

Having demonstrated how representations of feminine monstrosity provoke ethical discomfort and outright rejection, I find similar tendencies in scholarship, where the figure of the female monster has received little sustained attention. In Twitchell's critical work *Dreadful Pleasures* (1985), for example, he only touches upon female agency briefly before disregarding female psychopaths as 'mannish', while David Hogan, in his book *Dark Romance* (1986), considers films that portray female monstrosity to be 'obvious and childish' (1986: 19). Even Robin Wood's analysis in *The American Nightmare* (1979) centres largely on masculine expressions of monstrosity, leaving female figures underexplored. Likewise, numerous empirical studies have analysed audience reactions to horror films, gendered spectatorship, and responses to male antagonists (Johnson 1995; Zillmann & Weaver 1996;

Zillmann et al. 1986; Harris et al. 2000; Hoffner & Levine 2005; Clasen et al. 2020), but generally ignore the reception of the female monster.

A similar tendency can be observed in cultural production more broadly, where male villains continue to dominate the popular imagination and critical acclaim. Characters such as Patrick Bateman in Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991); Thomas Harris's cannibalistic psychiatrist Hannibal Lecter in *Red Dragon* (1981); Alex DeLarge from Anthony Burgess's dystopian satire *A Clockwork Orange* (1962); or Jack Torrance in Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977) exemplify how violent male figures frequently achieve cultural fascination and iconic status. Comparable figures are readily found in Nordic literature, from the tyrannical schoolmaster Lektor Blomme in Hans Scherfig's *Det försönte förår* (1940, *Stolen Spring* 1983) to the institutionalised culture of male violence depicted in Jan Guillou's *Ondskan* (1981, 'Evil'). The list of infamous yet captivating male anti-heroes, subjected to glorifying celebration and cult idolisation, seems endless. Constructing a similar list of iconic female antagonists, however, is less straightforward.

Empirical indicators support this observation. On the American Film Institute's list of the 50 greatest villains in 100 years of film history, only 15 are women, illustrating how rarely female antagonists achieve enduring canonical recognition. Analysis of film scripts likewise shows that women are more frequently positioned as victims than perpetrators (Cuklanz 2019), indicating a persistent tendency to frame femininity as something endangered rather than dangerous, while studies of popular film and media narratives reveal persistent gender inequalities in character representation and narrative centrality, limiting the range and complexity of the roles available to women on screen (Smith et al. 2014). A comparable tendency can be observed in Nordic noir, where narratives of violence are frequently structured around male offenders or patriarchal regimes, while female characters more often occupy investigative or victim positions (Agger 2011; Åström et al. 2013; Nestingen & Arvas 2011). These patterns suggest differing cultural expectations about who is readily recognised as frightening or narratively compelling, prompting the question of why feminine monstrosity so often seems to provoke hesitation, resistance, or interpretive uncertainty rather than sustained fascination or straightforward narrative acceptance. Is femininity simply not the stuff nightmares are made on? Or is its perceived fear factor somehow eclipsed by the long shadow cast by male antagonists?

Several strands of scholarship have sought to account for this asymmetry. In philosophy and horror criticism, it is often held that women make less convincing villains because they do not evoke fear to the same extent as men (Hogan 1986; Lenne 1979). At the same time, the feminist and psychoanalytic traditions have shown how female figures have historically been confined to culturally sanctioned roles associated with care and domesticity (Mulvey 1975; Kristeva 1982; Williams 1984; Clover 1992). When these expectations are violated, however, the consequences are often monstrous – quite literally. In fact, female monsterisation often emerges at this point as a symbolic punishment for transgressing societal ideals of womanhood, which is why female monsters are frequently portrayed as excessively sexual (vampires), overly maternal to the point of grotesque (witches), or threatening to traditional family structures (the *femme fatale*) – portrayals that are rarely designed to grant them agency or complexity, like their male counterparts, but rather to reinforce their otherness and exclusion. Yet unlike many male antagonists, whose transgressions – even when marked by extreme violence or moral excess – are more readily granted narrative centrality and cultural fascination, female figures embodying comparable violations often provoke unease of a different order. Their violence risks being interpreted not merely as narrative possibility, but as a disturbance of gendered expectations, inviting ethical concern, interpretive resistance, or demands for justification. The issue, therefore, lies not solely in how they are represented, but in the ways audiences and readers encounter and negotiate them.

While these feminist frameworks have been crucial in identifying the cultural anxieties surrounding monstrous femininity, they have often theorised reception at the level of structural or implied spectatorship rather than examining how real readers themselves respond. By examining how readers engage emotionally, bodily, and reflectively with representations of female antagonists in contemporary horror literature, I investigate how meanings of feminine monstrosity emerge in the encounter between text and reader. In doing so, I explore how gendered expectations and broader cultural attitudes shape experiences of recognition, fear, fascination, and estrangement – and how these responses illuminate the conditions under which the female monster becomes culturally intelligible or resisted in contemporary Nordic ecohorror texts. In a broader sense this empirical study of

feminine monstrosity matters because it exposes the cultural boundaries that continue to shape which forms of female agency, violence, and difference are recognised as legitimate, and which are rejected, feared, or rendered unacceptable.

Study Design

To further address these concerns, it is first necessary to explain how the empirical material was attained. Here, I outline the design of the study, introducing its research questions as well as the key methodological choices regarding text selection, participant recruitment, data collection, and interpretive approach. Together, these elements provide the basis for the analysis that follows, rendering readers' responses and experiences analytically accessible.

Research Questions

This study is guided by a primary question: how lay readers engage – emotionally, bodily, and reflectively – with representations of feminine monstrosity in contemporary horror literature, and how do these engagements reveal broader understandings of gender, power, and the monstrous? I investigate this by considering how processes and patterns of (mis)recognition and estrangement mediate readers' identification with or distancing from female monsters, and what such dynamics might reveal about prevailing cultural narratives surrounding gendered monstrosity. Finally, it asks how these perceptions and reactions differ from those directed towards a male antagonist, and how such differences might disclose underlying gendered patterns in the reception of horror.

Participants and Recruitment

As an empirical study of the emotional, cognitive, and bodily dynamics of reading, I focus on actual readers – individuals who engage with literature through situated acts of reading. Participants were recruited by an open call with analogue posters placed in high-traffic areas in Copenhagen, including the University of Copenhagen, Øresund College, outside the main railway station, and the main shopping street Strøget. To qualify, participants had to be at least 18 and able to

read and communicate in Danish. Once eight qualified people had signed up, the registration closed. The research participants were randomly recruited and had various demographics in terms of age (24–54), gender (four men, four women), occupation (including retail, journalism, communication, and design), level of education (from completion of Year 10 to an MA degree) and reading preferences (ranging from rarely reading to reading weekly). As with most qualitative reader studies, the group is not intended to be statistically representative; rather, its value lies in depth and interpretive richness rather than generalisability.

Material: Selection of Short Stories

To ensure comparability while limiting irrelevant variables or confounding factors, I established certain parameters when selecting the two short stories for participants to read. The aim was to identify two texts – both explicitly labelled as ‘horror’ – that were similar in length, complexity, narrative style, type of narrator, and victim profile. I also sought stories with overlapping themes and motifs fuelled by similar emotions, leaving one significant difference: the gender of the antagonist.

I initially expected this process of finding two similar texts to be relatively straightforward, given horror is often considered the most formulaic, ritualised genre with repetitive narratological structures (Clover 1992: 11, Schubart 1993: 50). However, the element of gender quickly complicated comparability. After reading hundreds of short stories, it became evident that horror stories featuring female antagonists follow a different narrative trajectory and instil a different set of emotions than those with male antagonists. Female monsters were almost always depicted as supernatural and environmentally entangled, often motivated by extreme sexual desires, jealousy or vengeance, whereas male antagonists were more frequently anchored in ‘ordinary’ social reality and driven by existential or psychological concerns. This made it difficult to have comparable settings, themes, and affective schemes while varying the gender of the antagonist.

Despite the challenges, I ultimately selected two stories of approximately equal length, both featuring an omniscient narrator and a revenge-driven plot with female victims. The first story, featuring a female monster, is *Vand* (‘Water’) by Ditte Kuré, published in the short story collection *Monstre* (2016), edited by the author Teddy Vork. The second, featuring a male antagonist, is *Delilas lokker* (‘Delilah’s locks’)

written by Vork himself and published in *Horror.dk* (2008). While both stories incorporate supernatural elements and draw on older mythological traditions – Nordic folklore in the form of the Nix and Greek mythology in the allusion to Samson and Delilah – Kuré's *Vand* falls into the ecohorror subgenre, whereas Vork's *Delilas lokker* aligns more closely with the slasher horror tradition. Although I had hoped to choose stories set in similar settings, it turned out that most horror stories featuring female antagonists gravitate towards ecohorror, while those with male antagonists do not – a pattern that itself points towards a persistent cultural association between female monstrosity and nature. Despite this difference, however, the two stories share several narrative similarities, including the use of flashbacks, supernatural antagonists, family trauma, revenge-driven plots, and relatively innocent female victims.

Procedure and Data Collection

Data collection took place in a meeting room at Lund University's Language and Literature Centre. Each participant was seated at a table, prepared in advance with a pen, an open notebook, a computer, and two folders, each containing a short story. Before the session began, participants signed a consent form and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without explanation. I then provided them with brief verbal instructions explaining that the study did not assess reading speed or ability, and that they should instead focus on their subjective experience of the text, including emotional responses. The specific research focus was not disclosed in order to encourage spontaneous, unbiased reactions.

The study followed an A/B design: participants read one short story (Text A) featuring a female antagonist, then another (Text B) with a male antagonist. Although the primary research interest of this study concerns feminine monstrosity, the inclusion of a second text centred on a male antagonist allows for a comparative framework. This design makes it possible not only to identify gendered differences in readerly engagement, but also to bring responses to the female monster into sharper relief through contrast. In this sense, the male antagonist functions only as an analytical counterpoint, enabling the specifically gendered dimensions of monstrosity to emerge more distinctly.

To reduce order effects, half the participants read Text A first and half read Text B first. Having read both texts, participants completed a digital survey on their designated computer, consisting of both closed-ended and open-ended questions related to the story. Once both surveys were completed, the participants took part in an audio-recorded group discussion which I facilitated. A set of semi-structured interview questions was prepared before the session; however, these were largely set aside, as participants independently initiated an engaged discussion of their reading experiences. Allowing the conversation to unfold organically was beneficial for capturing more spontaneous reflections. The collected material – including my own observation notes, survey responses, the audio recording and transcript of the group interview – formed the basis for analysing participants’ responses to each short story, as well as their comparative perceptions of male and female monstrosity.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

It is not possible to eliminate all methodological uncertainty, and in this case two principal tensions deserve attention. First, any apparent aversion to the female antagonist may owe as much to the narrative quality of the short stories as to participants’ gender bias; in other words, a poorly crafted story or shallow character development could drive negative reactions regardless of the figure’s gender. To address this, participants were asked which short story they preferred, and their responses were diverse, suggesting that neither text was uniformly rejected. Individual reader responses may of course still be shaped by personal aesthetic preferences rather than solely by perceptions of gendered monstrosity, which is why this uncertainty remains an inherent limitation of the study and cannot be fully disentangled from the interpretations that follow.

Second, the analysis raises an ethical question: to what extent is it justifiable to apply interpretive tools from literary and affect theory to real people’s accounts of their emotions without reducing complex lived experiences to analytical manoeuvres? To mitigate this risk, I have adopted a reflexive stance, informed by situated knowledge. As Donna Haraway reminds us, objectivity depends not on transcendence or neutrality, but on acknowledging the partial and situated conditions from which knowledge is produced (1988: 580). Accordingly, my analysis is offered not as a universal account of what participants ‘really felt’, but as a

situated interpretation of what participants articulated in the study. This positioning aligns with my conviction that emotions are notoriously invisible, evasive, and resist direct articulation – even self-reported feelings resist neat categorisation or measurement – which is why a situated lens offers a way of engaging with emotional accounts while acknowledging both their interpretive mediation and their contextual emergence. Rather than treating participants' accounts as transparent access to inner emotional states, in my analysis I therefore consider them to be meaningful expressions shaped by language, context, and interaction.

To remain alert to this positionality, I kept a running journal of analytical memos throughout reading sessions and group discussions, documenting my reflections and potential biases at each stage. This precaution helped ensure I did not take undue liberties in my readings of participants' affective expressions, but instead honoured their own language and experiences without unwarranted speculation. The findings presented here are thus best understood as my situated interpretation of the participants' reception of the texts, based on their statements and behaviour, rather than as objective accounts of 'what really happened' in their minds.

I also acknowledge the study's limitations in sample size, demographic scope, and the absence of intercoder reliability measures. This study relies on a qualitative approach rather than a positivist design, eschewing statistical validity calculations and reliability metrics in favour of in-depth interpretation aligned with literary reading methodologies. For this reason, the findings are presented in continuous prose rather than as a formulaic, data-driven report. This stylistic choice reflects the project's interpretive ethos and draws inspiration from ethnographic modes of presentation, privileging nuance, context, and theoretical reflection over quantification. The aim is not to produce generalisable claims but to illuminate patterns of engagement as they emerge from readers' encounters with feminine monstrosity in horror literature. While this approach privileges depth over generalisability and emphasises the dynamic interplay between reader and text, it also requires a cautious, ethical stance on how participants' emotional data are represented and interpreted.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority in advance, and all participants gave written informed consent after being assured of

their anonymity, the confidentiality of their data, and their right to withdraw.⁶⁷ Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect identities.⁶⁸

Method and Analytical Process

Rather than a formal codebook, my analysis was a fluid, three-stage interpretive process that allowed reader responses, literature, and theory to shape one another dynamically. In the first stage, during and immediately after the group session, I composed free-text memos in which I recorded anything that struck me as particularly evocative: prevailing moods, shifts in social dynamic, contradictions, or any turn of phrase that conveyed any material or affective dimension of the reading encounter. These unfiltered notes captured the raw textures of the participants' experience and my perception of them before I attempted any categorisation, preserving responses as they emerged in the situated conditions of the encounter.

Building on these initial impressions, I then engaged in iterative readings of the full transcripts. Using my memos as signposts, I highlighted and annotated passages that resonated with the core concepts of postcritical and affect theory – recognition, strangeness, bodily responses, or emotional intensity – while always allowing the participants' own language to guide the identification of meaningful patterns. Rather than applying predefined categories, patterns were allowed to emerge through sustained engagement with the material, enabling the theoretical concepts to function as sensitising lenses rather than rigid classificatory tools. In the final stage, I brought these provisional patterns (for example, the contrast between 'aching-stomach' empathy and 'white-knuckle' detachment) into peer debriefing sessions, where colleagues and I worked dialogically to test my interpretations. This helped me refine how theory and data interacted, without losing the complexity and nuance of individual voices.

At every stage, I strove for transparency by preserving participants' own wording in illustrative excerpts and by explicitly linking each interpretive claim to both empirical material and theoretical orientation. This thematic, reflexive approach privileges depth over quantification and shows how theoretical lenses and lived responses constitute one another in the findings. As such, the analytical process operationalises my broader methodological purpose: to bring textual analysis and

reader experience into sustained dialogue by tracing how affective responses take shape in situated encounters between texts and readers.

Theoretical Framework

To capture the complex and often ambiguous ways readers encounter feminine monstrosity, this study requires an analytical lens capable of tracing both relational and emotional responses to monstrous figures. My analytical framework thus brings together two complementary approaches: postcritical modes of literary engagement, as theorised by Rita Felski; and affect theory, here adapted from Sara Ahmed and Sianne Ngai to the analysis of empirical reader response. Since these theories share a concern with how literature is experienced rather than merely interpreted, a combined approach enables an examination of how readers engage with literature emotionally, bodily, and reflectively.⁶⁹ Although Felski does not engage directly with real readers, her theorisation of literary engagement nevertheless provides a productive vocabulary for analysing situated reader responses. Taken together, this combined framework offers a way of addressing the study's research questions concerning how readers emotionally and reflectively engage with feminine monstrosity, and how such engagements shape understandings of gender, power, and alterity, while also revealing both literature's confirmative and affirmative potential as well as its capacity to prompt reflection, ethical orientation, and cultural intervention.

Specifically, Felski's concept of *recognition* (2008) in dialogue with Ahmed's emotive notion of *strangeness* (2000) makes for an analytical tool particularly suited for examining readers' engagement with portrayals of the female monster. In understanding how and why readerly encounters with monstrous female figures are often shaped by either attraction and resistance, the analytical concepts must be able to account for both moments of connection and experiences of unease or resistance. This particular combined framework makes it possible to trace how readers identify with – or distance themselves from – specific fictional characters and narratives. Recognition offers a vocabulary for analysing how readers perceive familiarity or attachment in their encounters with fictional figures, while strangeness makes it possible to examine how those same encounters may be experienced as unsettling

or resistant to easy interpretation. Together, these perspectives enable a study of how readers' emotions, recognition, and estrangement circulate between texts, bodies, and cultural imaginaries.

It should be noted that although Felski does not explicitly engage with affect theory in her work, her insistence on balancing cognitive and affective dimensions of aesthetic response nevertheless invites such a reading. As she openly declares, 'My aim is to give equal weight to cognitive and affective aspects of aesthetic response; any theory worth its salt surely needs to ponder how literature changes our understanding of ourselves and the world as well as its often visceral impact on our psyche' (2008: 23). Accordingly, recognition should not be understood solely as a cognitive act of identification, but also as an affective experience shaped by the reader's emotional response to the text. Indeed, recognition does not merely register likeness, Ahmed argues, it is felt on the body. Megan Watkins elaborates further by describing recognition as a catalyst for affect – a corporeal sensation that fosters a sense of self-worth and belonging: 'Affects, as such, are the corporeal instantiation of recognition, the sensations one may feel in being recognized, which accumulate over time, fostering a sense of self-worth. Moments of recognition, therefore, function as affective force' (2010: 273). The emotional nature of recognition therefore also resonates with what Ngai calls a 'meta-feeling' (2005: 14), and even more so with Spinoza's *affectus*, meaning that which causes or triggers affect. Felski, too, draws on Spinoza and the affect theorist Silvan Tomkins to emphasise that the cognitive and emotive aspects of recognition are not mutually exclusive: 'moments of self-apprehension can trigger a spectrum of emotional reactions shading from delight to discomfort, from joy to chagrin' (2008: 29). Recognition, in this sense, cannot be separated from the emotional responses it evokes.

Analytical Concepts: Recognition and Strangeness

What does it mean to recognise oneself in a book or fictional character? What happens when readers discover traces of themselves in a text? When they feel addressed by its words, or surprised by a sudden sense of unity with something they have only just encountered? Such moments of recognition, both startling and reassuring, lie at the heart of literary engagement. Far from being a purely individual act of understanding, recognition is a relational process that connects readers to

texts and, by extension, to themselves and others. As both cognitive acknowledgement and emotional resonance, recognition offers a productive analytical framework for exploring how literature fosters empathy, self-reflection, and critical awareness. In this way, it is an analytical concept that bridges cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of literary engagement. As Felski notes, 'Rather than simply debunking or disrupting recognition, in other words, the literary field offers endless illustrations of its complexity as an experiential mode and an analytical concept' (2008: 46). Therefore, approaching recognition alongside such theorists as Felski and Ahmed enables a deeper understanding of how reader-text relations participate in shaping questions of identity and social belonging.

In *Uses of Literature*, Felski develops recognition as a mode of literary engagement by which readers have 'a moment of knowing or know again' or find resonance with literary elements (2008: 29). This process is simultaneously cognitive and affective, involving empathy, awareness, and self-understanding, and often produces responses ranging from pleasure to discomfort. While moments of recognition can confirm existing perceptions, they can also challenge readers to reconsider established beliefs and identities. Readers might experience a 'flash of connection' with a character, narrative, or scenario that mirrors their own personalities or life experiences, ultimately deepening their engagement with the text; yet recognition may also occur in unexpected or estranging ways, when readers encounter aspects of themselves in characters or situations initially perceived as distant or alien (23). Such ambivalence is particularly significant in cultural representations and receptions of feminine monstrosity, which have historically provoked both fear and fascination.

This duality – the interplay between familiarity and difference – adds depth to the concept. As Felski observes, recognition embodies 'a volatile mix of the familiar and the different; to recognise is to know again but also to see afresh' (2020: 101). Recognition is therefore not a simple repetition of what is already known but a feeling that something is in the process of *becoming* known – by which something previously indistinct or peripheral is rendered newly perceptible: 'Something that may have been sensed in a vague, diffuse, or semi-conscious way now takes on a distinct shape, is amplified, heightened, or made newly visible' (2008: 25).

I argue that recognition also plays a crucial role in Timothy Morton's ambient poetics, which directs attention towards what appears marginal or external, bringing background conditions of experience into perceptual focus (2007: 32–34). Rather than emerging solely through moments of explicit identification, recognition here may arise as a diffuse attunement to atmosphere or environment – a gradual acknowledgement that one is already implicated in what initially appears distant, unnoticeable, or other. Recognition does not merely connect reader and character but situates the reader in broader ecological and relational contexts, potentially fostering awareness not only of the surrounding world, but also of one's own situatedness in it. Here, Morton's account gives material and ecological specificity to a dynamic already identified by Felski, who argues that encounters with fictional worlds may orient readers 'outward rather than inward', allowing something external to inspire a revised sense of self (Felski 2008: 23). Read through Morton, however, this outwards movement no longer concerns only intersubjective relations but extends to atmospheric and more-than-human entanglements. Morton's ambient poetics thus does not merely extend Felski's insight but situates it in a material and ecological horizon, clarifying how literary encounters can recalibrate perception not only by mirroring the self, but by revealing entanglements between self, environment, and monstrous others. Recognition unfolds in ambient ways, through what Felski describes as 'a mobile interplay of exteriority and interiority', in which 'something that exists outside me inspires a revised or altered sense of who I am' (2008: 25). This notion is central to my argument, where such orientations continue to shape encounters with feminine monstrosity and ecological horror.

Further, it is significant that a reader who recognises herself in a fictional text is in turn also recognised – and so acknowledged – by the text. By creating fictional characters or presenting narratives in which readers can see themselves, a literary work can affirm the existence and validity of the identities and experiences it portrays. By extension, it also affirms the reader in their experience of recognition. Thus, a mutual and affirming exchange of recognition emerges, one that flows both ways: between the self and the other, the reader and the text. The philosopher Alexandre Kojève captures this dynamic when he equates recognition with affirmation: 'The establishment of one's self-understanding is inextricably dependent on recognition or affirmation on the part of others' (1980: 11).

The same principle applies when recognition-as-acknowledgement is directed outwards rather than inwards – that is, when the focus is not on the self, but on someone or something else. In this case, there is a distinction between recognising oneself in something and feeling acknowledged because of it, versus recognising someone or something as *they are* and affirming their otherness. This kind of affirmative recognition includes both aspects, and for that reason Watkins describes recognition as inherently ‘interaffective’ – a dynamic process that involves both giving and receiving (2010: 277). Both parties in this exchange experience recognition: one feels it *for* something or someone else, while the other experiences *being* recognised. Such moments demonstrate recognition’s transformative potential, enabling readers to see themselves in a new light while fostering a deeper understanding of others.

Recognition thus resonates strongly with new materialist frameworks that emphasise similar notions of relationality, affirmation, ethics, and the entanglement of human and nonhuman actors. Literature’s capacity to evoke recognition across differences – whether involving ecosystems, animals, monsters, or marginalised communities – invites readers to reconsider their position in broader ecological and social relations. Felski describes literature as an ‘ideal laboratory’ for exploring such encounters, providing a space for readers to experiment with alternative modes of perception (2008: 32). As she writes, ‘Entering other worlds, we become acquainted with the unfamiliar, are drawn to see things from different angles, glimpse aspects of ourselves in distant lives’ (43). Through recognition literature may shape not only interpretation but cultivate awareness and empathy, affecting how readers relate ethically and affectively to others. As she argues, literature not only ‘affects our actions as well as the stories we tell about ourselves’ (33); it may also ‘solicit our devotion and care’ towards others (2020: 94). This echoes Haraway’s insistence that ‘it matters what stories we tell’ insofar as acts of recognition participate in reconfiguring how caring relations between humans, environments, and others become imaginable (2016: 12). This dimension of recognition underscores its capacity to not only shape how we perceive ourselves and relate to others, but also to foster a sense of responsibility and inspire activism. Seen in this light, ecohorror fiction offers a particularly productive site – or ‘laboratory’ – for examining this ethical potential of recognition in practice, as feminine monstrous figures

materialise forms of marginalised more-than-human existence that confront readers with ethically and emotionally charged encounters across bodies and environments.

Grounded in relationality, this form of affirmative recognition can foster moments in which readers come to realise that there are others like themselves, giving rise to a sense of 'we' – a feeling of belonging anchored in shared identity that opens possibilities for mutual understanding and solidarity. This sense of community underscores the interrelational nature of identity. As Felski observes, "‘having an identity’ owes a great deal to such flashes of intersubjective recognition, of perceived commonality and shared history' (39). However, whenever a sense of 'we' is established, it often entails the marking of a 'them'. In other words, affirmative recognition – while fostering social bonding and collective identity – can simultaneously reinforce the implicit dynamics of exclusion, privilege, and power. Or as Watkins notes, 'Recognition can also function in a negative way, carrying the resultant force of negative affects' (2010: 273).⁷⁰ It is this ambivalence that Butler highlights in 'The Longing for Recognition' (2000), arguing that recognition operates not only as affirmation, but also as a site of tension and constraint. While recognition promises inclusion, it simultaneously constructs boundaries that delineate who is acknowledged and who is excluded. This tension reveals that recognition is shaped by normative frameworks that privilege certain identities while marginalising others. For Butler, the question is not simply about who is recognised but about the terms and conditions of recognition itself – who sets these terms, and who remains invisible or unintelligible in them.

Felski, too, adds to this critique, warning that 'To recognize is not just to trivialize, but also to colonize' (2008: 27). With these words, she cautions against a narcissistic mode of recognition in which literature is valued primarily for its reflection of the self – a demand that absorbs alterity and diminishes the transformative force of literary works. Such recognition may descend into what she describes as 'narcissistic self-duplication, a scandalous solipsism, an imperious expansion of a subjectivity that seeks to appropriate otherness by turning everything into a version of itself' (27). While Felski diagnoses this dynamic at the level of aesthetic and readerly engagement, the literary scholar Shu-mei Shih extends the critique to the global circulation of literature, arguing that recognition can function as a regulatory mechanism by which non-Western writers are blighted by

Eurocentric norms, rendering them captive in ‘the prison house of recognition’ (2004: 25). As a result, recognition no longer appears as ethical openness to alterity, but as an assimilative logic that reduces otherness and difference into what Majid Yar calls ‘the identitarian totality of the same’ (2001: 57). What is at stake is not just a mode of reading, but a regime of power in which recognition operates as a political strategy, which regulates visibility and constrains alterity in dominant frameworks.

Levinas further emphasises the ethical necessity of resisting the impulse to assimilate the other. For Levinas, ethics begins with the recognition of the other’s irreducible singularity – their resistance to being fully known or understood. As Felski summarises it,

As an advocate of otherness, Levinas warns against the hubris of thinking that we can ultimately come to understand that which is different or strange. Ethics means accepting the mysteriousness of the other, its resistance to conceptual schemes; it means learning to relinquish our own desire to know. Seeking to link a literary work to one’s own life is a threat to its irreducible singularity. (2008: 26-27)

At stake here is a different understanding of ethical recognition – not as identification, but as the acknowledgement of difference. This ethical dimension finds a particularly compelling expression in the figure of the monster, which, as a symbol of radical alterity, resists assimilation into familiar categories and unsettles the reassuring logics of recognition. In Levinas’ terms, the monstrous calls for ethical relation grounded not in comprehension or appropriation but in sustained openness to difference. The monster thus confronts us with the limits of recognition, urging an engagement with strangeness not as something to be resolved or absorbed, but as something to be encountered and respected in its irreducible alterity.

Having already opened onto the critical tensions in recognition, the emphasis now shifts more directly to its darker underside: the dynamics of misrecognition, exclusion, and estrangement. While the affirmative forms of recognition can be understood as rightfully taking place, critical recognition is never quite right: incomplete, misunderstood, or outright negative.⁷¹ Rather than simply forming

bonds, recognition can also mark limits – delineating who may be acknowledged, on what terms, and at whose expense.

To address this critical dimension, Felski introduces the concept of misrecognition, building on two foundational models of subject formation: Jacques Lacan's *stade du miroir*, in which the child identifies with an idealised image of itself in the mirror; and Louis Althusser's *interpellation*, in which an individual is 'hailed' into a subject position by societal force, like a policeman's call, 'as someone bound by the law' (2008: 27–28). In both fables, recognition entails misrecognition: individuality is shaped by external forces, and subjectivity is constructed by something outside the self – from mirroring mothers, through the policeman's call, to literary encounters. As Felski writes, 'Whether the work of fiction is analogous to the mirror or the police, it seeks to lull readers into a misapprehension of their existence as unified, autonomous individuals' (28). By her account, misrecognition lies in the reader's recognition of an apparently coherent and autonomous self, even though this sense of subjectivity emerges through socially internalised norms and external ideological forms.

Extending this discussion, Ahmed's concept of misrecognition also draws on Althusser while shifting attention to the cultural and affective economies by which subjects take shape and become readable to others (2000: 22–23). Whereas Althusser's model explains how subjects are hailed into being, Ahmed asks what conditions make such a response possible to begin with: who is able to recognise themselves in the police officer's address and who already fits the figure being hailed? Rather than treating interpellation as a discrete linguistic moment in which a subject comes into being by responding to a police officer's call, Ahmed redirects attention to the structures by which recognition is organised in the first place: bodies, emotions, and historically sedimented social norms. To be recognised, then, is not simply a matter of being named; it is lived as ease, familiarity, and belonging – an alignment between body and norm. Failed or partial recognition, by contrast, is experienced as discomfort or wrongness, as the body registers its misalignment with the social address. Extending Felski's engagement with Althusser, Ahmed thus reframes interpellation as simultaneously constitutive and differentiating: 'the act of hailing an-other, 'hey you', opens out the possibility *that subjects become differentiated at the very same moment that they are constituted as such*' (2000: 23,

original emphasis). The policeman's call not only produces subjects, but also marks distinctions, delineating who can be effortlessly recognised as the 'right' kind of subject and who is instead singled out and excluded.

Crucially, Ahmed gives this unevenness an affective, embodied dimension. Since she does not consider feelings to be internal, private, or essential states but relational forces that circulate between bodies and signs, how we feel about certain subjects is socially mobilised rather than individually produced. As she writes, 'We shouldn't look for emotions "in" soft bodies. Emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others' (2004a: 4). Echoing the Marxist idea of surplus value, Ahmed argues that emotional responses build up through repeated cultural narratives until certain affects come to 'stick' to certain figures. These affective economies – mobilised relationally and linguistically – shape perception itself, influencing who appears to belong and who comes to be recognised as out of place or threatening. From this perspective, interpellation cannot be understood as a neutral mechanism operating evenly across subjects. Recognition is always shaped by normative histories that render some identities more readily inhabitable than others do. Terms such as 'monster', 'woman', or 'stranger' are not empty designations; they are categories organised around inherited expectations that make certain bodies immediately legible as legitimate subjects while others encounter friction or estrangement.

Recognition, in this sense, does not simply produce belonging; it establishes boundaries by determining how and under what terms someone is either acknowledged or misrecognised. Yet even in misrecognition, something is recognised – an otherness, difference, or strangeness. As Ahmed argues, 'the figure of the "stranger" is produced, not as that which we fail to recognize, but as that which we have already recognized as "a stranger"', an act that simultaneously identifies and excludes (2000: 3). To clarify, she distinguishes between 'the other' and 'the stranger'. Where the other is someone we simply do not know, the stranger is someone we precisely recognise *as* a stranger – as a body that is 'out of place' and does not belong. The difference is important, especially for the stranger. While we can still acknowledge 'the other', whom we simply do not know, 'the stranger' is a sticky object – a body to which certain values and signs have already been attached,

and whose proximity is therefore perceived as a threat – and as such is seldom acknowledged. In this way, as Ahmed notes, critical recognition also serves as a survival strategy: ‘Recognising strangers is here embedded in a discourse of survival’ (2000: 22), and for that reason, there is nothing more dangerous for a body than being recognised as a stranger. In this perspective, strangeness emerges as a mode of recognition by which boundaries of belonging and alienation are socially and emotionally developed rather than individually or rationally determined.

Drawing on Ahmed’s understanding of the emotions as relational forces that orient bodies in social worlds, this study approaches reader responses not as private reactions, but as situated affective processes by which cultural meanings are produced and negotiated. She writes that ‘Emotions are not “afterthoughts” but shape how bodies are moved by the worlds they inhabit’ (2010a: 230). In line with new materialist perspectives, affects are thus understood as relational and world-making, rendering the reader’s emotions – otherwise considered invisible and private – both analytically accessible and culturally significant. Readerly feelings thus function as a means of tracing how engagements with feminine monstrosity are embedded in broader cultural imaginaries, directly addressing the study’s central question of how emotional encounters shape understandings of gender and the monstrous.

Building on this, I use strangeness as a performative, affectively charged analytical entry point with which to investigate how certain emotions stick to certain subjects, and why this stickiness contributes to their exclusion. In the context of feminine monstrosity, these affective economies are crucial to understanding how certain characters are recognised as strangers, misplaced, or simply not belonging in specific genres or narratives, helping to explain why certain positions work for some but not for others. Methodologically, it means that moments when readers express attraction, discomfort, hesitation, or resistance are approached as sites where (mis)recognition and exclusion are negotiated. Rather than asking whether readers correctly understand monstrous figures, the analysis examines how such affective responses reveal the conditions under which feminine monstrosity becomes intelligible as deviant or out of place in cultural imaginaries. Seen in this light, what emerges here is what Ngai describes as the critical potential of affective responses: rather than resolving social tensions, such feelings are ‘diagnostic rather than

strategic', opening a space for reflection on the social biases and normative frameworks that underpin processes of exclusion in the first place (2005: 22).

Empirical Analysis: (Mis)recognising the Female Monster

Before turning to the empirical reader responses, I begin with a brief summary of the two short stories under analysis. Since the analytical focus of this study is feminine monstrosity, the summary of Ditte Kuré's *Vand* (2016, 'Water') is given in greater detail. The second story, Teddy Vork's *Delilas lokker* (2008, 'Delilah's locks'), is presented more briefly, serving primarily as a comparative contrast that helps bring the gendered dimensions of reader engagement into sharper relief.

Kuré's *Vand* centres on the relationship between the twin sisters Lærke and Luna, gradually unfolding a narrative of bodily transformation, exclusion, and nonhuman affiliation. The story opens with Lærke visiting Luna on their twenty-first birthdays. Luna still lives in a cramped, forgotten attic room in their parents' house, and instead of using the main entrance, Lærke climbs in through a skylight to avoid their mother, with whom the twins have a strained relationship – especially after the death of their father – and who now drinks heavily. Through a series of flashbacks, the reader learns that Luna's unusual physical appearance and behaviour have led her parents to isolate her in this neglected space, keeping her largely out of sight.

The narration recounts that Luna stopped growing at the age of 11, marking the moment when her body began to change in unsettling and strange ways. Her hair roots turned 'white as dust', and dark veins appeared beneath her pale skin. These bodily abnormalities became more pronounced over time, and when placed beside her twin sister, the contrast was stark: 'If Luna had been an only child, it might have gone unnoticed for another year or two, but all you had to do was put her next to Lærke, and then it was clear as day' (2016: 62).⁷² As her appearance grew more unusual, Luna was set further apart from her family. Her skin, in particular, plays a central role in this alienation. Brutally, her mother tried to 'make her look normal' (63) by scrubbing her skin with a wire brush, trying to erase the signs of deviation, but the effort only left Luna bleeding and even more marked by her condition. Lærke later observes that the 'black veins cover her whole body now' (72),

suggesting that the mother's intervention has only made Luna's difference even more pronounced.⁷³

This growing difference also influences Luna's place in the household. As her body changes, she is pushed out of the family's shared spaces, eventually 'banished to the attic when they were 12 years old' (62). On one occasion, her father sends her away entirely.

It was their father who first decided that enough was enough. Late one Saturday night, he found the warmest clothes that would fit her, packed a rucksack with food and drink and sent her into the woods behind the house. Told her to hide. They would come for her when they were ready. He said that devil children always survive. Satan would take care of her. (2016: 62)⁷⁴

Although 'her parents hoped she would never return' (65), Luna eventually finds her way home.⁷⁵ While the family's act of ostracism is neglectful, it creates a new space for Luna as the forest begins to take on a new significance for her. It comes to function as a place of refuge and belonging, in contrast to the rejection she faces at home. Ultimately, the spatial dynamics of the story – the family house, the attic, the forest – interact with the tension of Luna's strange body to create a narrative of exclusion, exile, and survival.

Back in the present-day frame of the story, on the night of the sisters' birthdays, Lærke wakes in the dead of night to find that Luna has disappeared. She has returned to the forest, hoping to reunite with the mysterious Shadow Man and the Nix, whom she encountered during her exile there and whom she has come to regard as her protectors. Lærke follows, but what she encounters is not what she expects. The story ends with a visceral scene in which Lærke is drowned in scalding water by the forest creatures. Luna, now aligned with these strange beings, chooses not to intervene. The text suggests that Lærke's earlier passivity – her failure to defend Luna or speak out against her marginalisation – seals her fate. The story closes with this act of revenge at one remove: not an act of violence by Luna herself, but a reckoning carried out by her new nonhuman allies – a strange 'family' who exist outside normative structures of kinship.

Serving as a comparative counterpoint to *Vand's* environmentally entangled, relational form of monstrosity, *Delilas lokker* (2008) presents a more familiar

configuration of male violence. The story follows Michelle, a cleaner who is sent to prepare a holiday cottage for new guests. While cleaning, she notices unusual traces left behind by what she assumes are the previous visitors, including large amounts of cut hair and other signs suggesting that something violent has taken place in the house. As she investigates further, it becomes clear that the house is haunted by a vindictive, spectral male presence who, scorned by his seemingly unfaithful wife, takes his anger out on all women. When he ultimately manifests, soot-covered and burnt by the fire he lit which killed him and his family, he stabs Michelle to death with scissors.

Reading Luna as a Stranger

People had started to talk. Luna was behaving strangely. Staring. Recoiling from things that weren't there. Talking about ghosts and ghouls. People called her 'poor little girl'. Said she was going crazy. Remembered how much potential she'd once had. Sometimes you'd think they already considered her dead. (*Vand* 2016: 62)⁷⁶

When people talk, something happens. Sitting with the group as the discussion unfolded, I noticed how certain words kept circulating between them, moving from one speaker to another as descriptions and specific phrasings were gradually adopted – sometimes echoing phrases from the literary texts, sometimes adding new expressions based on the reader's own feelings or interpretations activated by the text or between one another. A shared vocabulary began to circulate among the participants as they described the male antagonist in *Delilas lokker* as 'insane', 'guilty', 'misogynist', 'psychotic evil' and even 'incel'; words that slowly accumulated into a collective identification of him as a 'psychopath' (GD P2; SD R2; SD R5; SD R7). Throughout, participants responded to the Scissorman with striking immediacy. In their survey responses, Emil describes him as 'a classic horror villain' or 'basically just a psychopath' (SD R5), whereas Astrid characterises him as 'the kind of character you already recognise from films' (SD R3). In a similar vein, Signe writes that 'you immediately know what he is' (SD R2), while Bjørn describes him as 'simply outright psychotically evil' (SD R5;

SD R6). Rather than emerging through interpretation alone, these classifications seem to stabilise him from the outset. In Felski's terms, recognition here functions smoothly: readers 'know again' the figure before them, allowing affective response to follow without friction.

By contrast, Luna interrupted this recognitional ease as readers approached her through provisional language, repeatedly referring to her as 'strange' – a term used seven times – but also associated words such as spacey, crazy, monstrous, monster, hard to place, sickly, complicated, devil child, ambivalent, creepy, childlike, mysterious, supernatural, unnatural, dark, child of nature, weird, and peculiar circulated in the conversation (GD P3; GD P2; GD P1; SV R3; SV R2; SV R5; GD P8). From here on, a dominant perception started to stick to Luna: she was *strange*. Unlike the male figure in *Delilas lokker*, whose antagonism stabilised through nouns – psychopath, villain, or bad guy – Luna was more often spoken of in adjectives that marked qualities or atmospheres – 'more mysterious', 'hard to place', 'strange' (SV R2; SV R3; GD P3) – rather than a fixed identity. The figure of Luna emerged not through immediate classification but through sustained interpretive work.

This dynamic can be understood with Ahmed's account of 'affective economies' (2004b). Emotions and signs circulate all around us, bouncing off and against bodily surfaces and material surroundings, and sometimes – through time and repetition – some of these circulations accumulate into affects or perceptions that eventually come to *stick* to certain bodies, gradually informing how those bodies are identified and perceived. As such, affective economies provide a way of addressing my central research question, as the participants' circulating descriptions simultaneously shape and reveal how they engage emotionally and reflectively with Luna, and how that draws on and feeds into broader cultural imaginaries of gender and monstrosity.

By this comparison between readers' discussions of the Scissorman and Luna, it also occurred to me that a central difference manifested in conversational form; not just in the words the participants used, but in the course of the discussion itself. When discussing the Scissorman, the readers' interaction largely took the shape of what might be described as *agreement talk*. Such statements were rarely challenged or expanded upon; rather, they accumulated into consensus. Talk about the

Scissorman therefore tended to close itself: recognition produced agreement, and agreement allowed the conversation to progress without sustained negotiation. Discussions of Luna, however, unfolded differently. Instead of agreement talk, the group repeatedly engaged in what resembles a form of *repair talk*, characterised by hesitation, reformulation, confusion, and ongoing attempts to clarify what kind of figure she might be. Participants returned to her at multiple moments in the interview, often revising or qualifying earlier statements. Rather than stabilising interpretation, contributions frequently reopened it, prompting further questioning. When discussing Luna, the conversation often shifted position – from empathy to uncertainty, from moral evaluation to analytical speculation – indicating an ongoing collective effort to recalibrate their understanding. At several points, participants implicitly corrected or supplemented one another's interpretations, suggesting that meaning remained provisional and collectively negotiated. Seen in this light, the figure of Luna did not simply generate *more* discussion but altered *how* the discussion proceeded.

What emerges through these repeated conversational adjustments is that Luna's strangeness is not only attributed to her character but gradually came to structure the readers' own experience. As the discussion repeatedly returned to Luna, participants struggled to engage with her as either a relatable figure or a recognisable horror antagonist, often describing her as 'difficult to place'. As Astrid formulates it in the discussion, 'She is hard to place because one never fully figures out what she is' (GD P3). Rather than indicating a failure of comprehension, these repeated attempts at categorisation gradually fixed Luna's position in another way. As Ahmed suggests, 'strangers are not simply those who are not known ... but those who are, in their very proximity, *already recognised as not belonging*, as being out of place' (2000: 21, original emphasis). Listening to the discussion unfold, I noted how the readers' struggle to categorise Luna became a categorisation in itself – a recognition of her as different, as not belonging, as being out of place. Strangeness emerged relationally, produced not only in the narrative, but also in the encounter between text and readers, and functioning as an affective mode by which Luna's monstrous difference became perceptible. This perception also appears in Astrid's survey response, where she writes that Luna 'doesn't seem like part of the world around her, like she's something entirely different' (SV R3).

This sense of Luna as misfit surfaces again in the survey material, where Emil writes, 'I never really understood what she wanted. She just felt like a disruptive force in the story' (SV R5), while Signe similarly notes that 'there was something about her that just didn't fit into the narrative' (SV R2). I read these remarks as more than just evaluative judgements about plot; they are descriptions of how the figure of Luna destabilised expectations about coherence, motive, and recognisable character logic. This also aligns with Ahmed's notion of the stranger as someone who is not only unknown, but who actively destabilises familiar structures. Correspondingly, the recognition of Luna as a stranger, who cannot be placed in the boundaries of familiar categories or storytelling, highlights her as a figure of ambiguity and unease. In the group discussion, Signe names this affective consequence directly: 'I can't fully figure her out, and that makes me anxious' (GD P2). For these readers, strangeness was not merely a characteristic that stuck to Luna, but also an affective state she triggered in them. This is strangeness manifested as both a subject and a sensation.

Put differently, Luna's character challenged recognition as a mode of readerly attachment. As Felski argues, 'recognition turns out to rely on an interplay of sameness and difference' that allows readers to situate what they encounter in an already meaningful frame (2008: 133); however, something about Luna's ambiguous persona prevents clear identification, leading to discomfort and alienation. This aligns with Ahmed's assertion that recognition itself can function as an exclusionary mechanism (2000: 29–30), reinforcing Luna's outsider status rather than integrating her into a shared moral framework.

In my interpretation, the group's encounter thus remained suspended between recognition and estrangement. This ambiguity seemed to disrupt the reader's affective orientation (what to feel), interpretive footing (how to explain), and, in some instances, bodily composure (how to stay with the scene), leaving them in a space of interpretative uncertainty. Whether perceived as an uncanny presence, a tragic figure, or simply opaque, Luna repeatedly refused stable identification, embodying the affective logic of strangeness Ahmed describes: not just unfamiliarity, but a persistent failure to be placed. Crucially, that refusal is not a minor detail: it is one route by which female monstrosity is made legible in this material – not through stable antagonistic legibility, but as pressure on categories

and moral certainty. This distinction matters because, as the analysis in what follows will demonstrate, monstrosity here does not depend on a figure's ability to function as a stable antagonist, but emerges through the very breakdown of such narrative and affective stability.⁷⁷

Faced with this persistent instability, readers appeared to adopt different affective strategies in order to regain their footing in the narrative encounter. In what follows, I examine how two distinct positions – empathic immersion and strategic detachment – work as affective and bodily filters for fear, shaping and at times limiting how readers can stabilise Luna as a figure of threat.

Aching Stomach and White Knuckles as Fear Filter

Although Luna was collectively described as strange and mysterious, participants responded to her in markedly different ways: some accounts oriented towards empathy and pity, while others reacted with detachment. I explore these two reader positions more closely – referring to them as ‘aching stomachs’ and ‘white-knucklers’ – to examine how affective engagement or avoidance functions as filters for fear, shaping and at times limiting how readers understand Luna as a horror antagonist. Viewed through the lens of (mis)recognition, these reader positions make visible how affective responses are integral to interpretation, shaping what Luna can credibly become for the reader – whether she is legible as a threat, a victim, or something in between.

Aching Stomachs

Several readers responded to Luna's suffering with what Felski terms recognition-as-empathy – an emotionally charged form of engagement grounded in acknowledgement and concern. As Felski explains in *Hooked* (2020), this kind of recognition entails a powerful sense of acknowledgement that fosters deep investment in a character's experience. Such responses are both intellectual and emotional, creating a space where the reader not only understands a character's struggles, but also feels for them, leading to a more immersive and visceral resonance with their plight.⁷⁸ Frida expresses this most forcefully.

I actually felt sorry for her. I did not think she was equally scary, I thought it was unfair to her. And I thought; I actually understand you ... Fucking shitty family ... you have been locked up in that attic your entire life! (GD P1)

This statement contains strong language – ‘fucking shitty family’ – underscoring an intense emotional investment in the narrative and a pronounced sympathy for Luna. Later in the same discussion, Frida describes this response as bodily as well as emotional: ‘I was sick to my stomach about it ... a *Sharp Objects* kind of feeling about someone being oppressed and feeling bad. And then there is also a powerlessness in some way, too’ (GD P1). Alongside the intertextual reference to Gillian Flynn’s debut novel *Sharp Objects*, one element that stands out in this statement is the explicit naming of powerlessness.⁷⁹ In my reading, this formulation does not simply refer to a clearly bounded personal emotion but seems to gesture towards a more diffuse experiential quality. The reader appears less to describe Luna’s – or even her own – specific feelings than to search for a term capable of capturing how the story affects her as she reads. From this perspective, her response can be understood through what Ngai describes as an affective tone: a pervasive atmospheric feeling that circulates in a work rather than belonging exclusively to a single character. What the participant registers is the story’s broader atmosphere of oppression and injustice. Equally striking, however, is how this response is described as bodily: empathy is not only articulated cognitively but registered somatically as a knot in her stomach.

The Danish *ondt i maven* signifies both a literal pain in the stomach, but also a bad feeling or moral discomfort (and often both) anchored in feelings of empathy or concern yet experienced as bodily discomfort located in the gut – a place where affect is felt both emotionally and physically. Indeed, in many traditions, the stomach has long been considered a site where emotional and spiritual states coexist, making it a transcorporeal meeting point for psyche and soma, reason and instinct, logic and feeling, the conscious and the unconscious. Aristotle’s idea of catharsis was ‘originally associated with the eminently physical activity of purging one’s bowels’ (Felski 2008: 112), grounding emotional release in visceral bodily function, while Spinoza attributed a ‘special sensibility’ to the stomach – on a par with the genital organs – which fascinated him more than other affects that, in his view, ‘are attributable to the body only, without any reference to the mind’ (1979: 103). This

is further exemplified in a gut feeling, a common term for intuition that likewise hovers between body and cognition. In humoral pathology, too, this soft centre of the human body – containing the melancholic spleen, the choleric yellow bile, and the sanguine liver – was conceived as a physiological assemblage, both symbolic and anatomical, where bodily fluids and organs, seasonal rhythms and natural elements, spiritual dispositions and moral temperaments were materially entangled (Siraisi 1997). Meanwhile, as Grosz argues in her reading of Nietzsche, knowledge itself can be understood as a digestive process, requiring a ‘stomach’ capable of assimilating what is difficult or unsettling (Grosz 1993), while Le Guin, writing in a feminist speculative tradition, imagined the belly as a narrative container, capable of carrying collective, cyclical, and spatial ‘life stories’ (1989: 7). Thus the stomach has repeatedly functioned as a site where feeling and judgement converge.

In my reading, the readers’ bodily reactions to Luna activate this tradition: injustice is not only interpreted but felt somatically, attesting to an entanglement of empathy, acknowledgement, and embodiment at the core of their reading experience. The stomach is analytically significant as the place where empathy and evaluation meet – a bodily register by which readers process the ethical dimensions of the narrative. As Felski reminds us, affirmative recognition – characterised by strong feelings of acknowledgement and empathy – should not be set in opposition to critical thinking or cognitive reflections (2008: 29). Emotions and cognition do not cancel one another out; rather, they reinforce one another, especially when readers confront narratives of injustice. Viewed in these terms, the reader’s stomach – as a unified bodily container for affect and reflection – functions as a physical moral compass.

However, it is important to point out that this kind of empathy-as-identification does not necessarily involve actively sharing another’s emotional state. In this case, the reader in question felt empathy but not the actual injustice and neglect that Luna experiences. As Felski explains, there is a crucial distinction between ‘feeling *with* someone and feeling *for* someone’ (2020: 105, original emphasis) – and while a majority of the participants expressed concern and pity for Luna, they did not report experiencing the same emotions of neglect, hurt, or rage as her. As Felski puts it, ‘We can care or feel for a character without experiencing their emotions or mimicking their affective state’ (105), while Ahmed has argued that while empathy

is relational, it is never a shared emotion; ‘empathy remains a “wish feeling”, in which subjects “feel” something other than what another feels’ (2004a: 30). This suggests that the readers’ empathy for Luna is not a form of deep identification, but rather a more distanced affective stance – one that positions her as pitiable rather than terrifying.

Rather than consolidating fear immediately, participants lingered on questions of injustice and blame. Their empathic orientation – or ‘aching stomachs’ – therefore appeared to complicate the recognition of Luna as a threatening or antagonistic figure. Instead of encountering her as straightforward threat, many participants redirected their affective attention towards her suffering, describing her less as frightening than as pitiable. In her survey response, Signe writes, ‘I don’t think she is a monster in the story. In a way, you just feel sorry for her because of how she has been treated’ (SV R2). Similarly, Astrid reports that, ‘I don’t perceive her as truly evil, but more as neglected and shaped by that neglect’ (SV R3), while Niels notes that ‘I don’t think of her as classically evil. Her revenge has deep roots in her childhood, and it seems more like she is trying to restore some kind of justice’ (SV R7). In these responses, empathy did not intensify horror but redirected it, suspending fear while readers thought through their ethical evaluation.

These feelings of empathy appeared to prompt some readers to reshape their own moral frameworks. In her survey response, Astrid writes that ‘even though it’s horrible that she kills her family, I still have more sympathy for her than I think she is outright evil’ (SV R3), while Emil notes, ‘In a way, you can understand her motives, considering she has been abused all her life and is seeking revenge, and that her sister let it happen’ (SV R5). Signe also emphasises Luna’s innocence: ‘She has an innocence to her despite looking eerie, which makes it difficult to see her as purely evil’ (SV R2).

In comparison, readers responded to the male antagonist in *Delilas lokker* with immediate, bodily fear, unmediated by ethical or interpretive evaluation. In the survey material, Niels describes the story’s affective peak as a moment of intense bodily immersion, writing that ‘my heart was pounding and I could almost see the man approaching’ (SD R7) while Frida, Emil, and Bjørn report similar bodily reactions such as ‘I had palpitations’, ‘I could feel my pulse rising’, and ‘I got goosebumps’ (SD R1; SD R5; SD R6). These responses put sensation before

reflection: the participants recognised threat before any need for moral positioning, allowing fear to attach quickly because the male antagonist presented no interpretive hesitation.

Group discussion responses reinforced this immediacy. Reflecting on the holiday home narrative, Karin recalls how a small textual detail instantly produced unease: 'the note written in the guestbook was extremely uncomfortable – you could just feel that there was some kind of psychopathic man behind it' (GD P4). Niels similarly describes how the bodily responses came early in the reading process: 'when the strange things start happening with Michelle and the hair, I can feel my pulse rising – it's as much excitement as fear, a tension element' (GD P7). What matters here is not only intensity but sequencing: sensation precedes evaluation, and recognition stabilises fear without requiring readers to negotiate sympathy or responsibility. By contrast, readers' acknowledgement of Luna's suffering made it difficult for them to determine whether her transgressions were justified. As Signe puts it in the discussion, *Vand* 'was difficult because I actually felt bad for Luna. I didn't find her as scary, I felt sorry for her. And I kind of thought: I actually understand you' (GD P2). Once again, the readers' perceptions of Luna were infused with ambiguity, leaving them in a space of moral and emotional uncertainty. Frida elaborates on this tension.

In some way, I also think the forest scene is ambiguous – I actually think Luna becomes kind of empowered. And I'm like, 'You go!' Smash them all!' But then I think it's a shame that she kills her sister. The sister wasn't really at fault, but at the same time, Luna has suffered so terribly for so many years. So, I don't know if I really see her as a monster. (GD P1)

Read together, the responses suggest that male antagonism in this material appears to operate through rapid recognitional closure, allowing fear to stabilise quickly, whereas Luna, by contrast, introduces an additional interpretive step. Before deciding whether Luna is frightening, readers must first decide how to judge her suffering. While the Scissorman's villainy registered as ontologically stable, Luna's character emerged more as an affective, moral tension. This dynamic aligns with Felski's observation that recognition can overwhelm rather than facilitate identification (2008: 46). Readers engage Luna primarily as a victim, making it

difficult to perceive her as a threat. Ultimately, her violence gets partially clouded by emotional investment, as empathy redirects attention away from threat and towards injustice.

White Knuckles

While some readers responded with intense empathy and distanced identification, others played it down, approaching the text with a strategy of detachment. I refer to these readers as white-knucklers – a term used in previous studies to describe readers who seek to suppress or manage fear. In these studies, horror engagement is typically traced in two consumer orientations: the thrill-seekers, also called *adrenaline junkies*, who pursue maximal fear arousal; and the ‘fear-avoiders’, or *white-knucklers*, who attempt to minimise their fear response (Robinson et al. 2014; Clasen et al. 2019).⁸⁰ In my study, several participants exhibited white-knuckler tendencies, remaining deliberately detached from the text to avoid emotional engagement. In these cases, recognition is not only halted due to arbitrary morality or an emotional gap between the reader and the work, but rather avoided through a conscious, strategic choice *not to identify* (Felski 2020: 84). A similar mechanism is described by Ronald Tamborini, who observes that ‘individuals who do not daydream or who do not let their imagination wander never forget that what they are watching is only a movie and thus do not get upset by these events’ (1991: 313). Several participants in the present study appear to employ comparable strategies towards horror fiction, maintaining an explicit awareness of the text as fiction in order to regulate emotional involvement. One such strategy is evident in the following exchange between Niels and myself.

Niels: I think everyone has probably experienced that at some point. So, it’s harder not to get emotionally involved in some way, even though I’m not really trying to do that. (GD P7)

I (interviewer): Yeah, OK, so it insists in some way?

Niels: Yeah, so it ends up being scary anyway, even though that’s not really the perspective I start from. (GD P7)

I: So you might actually have more of a strategy where you try ... you don't necessarily become Michelle, like [another reader] does, and go into that cabin. You sort of think, 'Now I'm reading a story, and it has nothing to do with me'?

Niels: Yeah, definitely! (GD P7)

What appears here is not an absence of affect but of affective management. Niels acknowledges the text's pull while simultaneously trying to contain it. Detachment thus operates as an embodied strategy: a way of regulating how deeply the story is allowed to enter. In that sense, distancing emerges not as disembodiment, but as a bodily strategy of containment, one that not only keeps his experience of horror in check, but also withholds empathy and recognition. As a result, Niels appears prone to what Ngai terms stuplimity, in which an ambiguous aesthetic experience invokes contradictory feelings of boredom and awe, numbness and hyper-attention, monotony and overwhelm (2005: 271). Based on his own statements, Niels appears caught between self-imposed indifference and feeling overwhelmed.

Another common white-knuckler strategy appears in the readers' formalist approach to *Vand*. Rather than engaging emotionally, these readers focused their attention on structure, genre, and narrative coherence, at times dismissing the story on formal grounds. Lukas, for example, states that the story becomes disappointing because it shifts into something 'more like fantasy ... and then I kind of think, OK, maybe this isn't so scary' (GD P8). Likewise, Signe, Karin, and Emil all describe *Vand* as 'too visual', 'unresolved', or even 'ridiculous', suggesting a turn towards evaluative critique rather than affective immersion (SV R4; GD P5; GD P2). As Felski notes, this kind of formalist mode of engagement 'can strongly affect its power to resonate with particular audiences – or fail to do so' (2020: 95).

This also points to another related fear-managing strategy: rationalisation. This approach reflects a broader tendency among white-knucklers to rely on anticipatory coping mechanisms – such as rationalising or distancing themselves from objects of terror – to prevent emotional responses from taking hold.⁸¹ As Folkman and Lazarus (1988) note, such antecedent strategies are aimed at stopping unpleasant emotions from activating in the first place. A comparable dynamic can be observed in the reader study, where analytical distancing was closely tied to participants' encounters with *Vand* and the figure of Luna specifically. Because the story was

perceived as resisting clear categorisation and had a supernatural setting, several readers shifted from emotional engagement towards explanation and interpretation. Repeatedly, both Signe and Bjørn describe the story world as ‘mysterious’, ‘unrealistic’, ‘too abstract’, or difficult to anchor in lived experience – responses that often coincided with shifts towards analytical engagement rather than visceral reaction (SV R2; SV R6). Signe continues along this line in the group discussion, where she explains that the story draws her into interpretation rather than immersion, prompting reflection on the text’s symbolism and meaning rather than immediate emotional involvement: ‘Then you also started to interpret more about these legendary figures ... and then I thought, OK, but is there another layer to this?’ (GD P2). In these moments, distance results in an affective downscaling as readers move from participation to observation – evaluating, explaining, and judging rather than reacting and connecting.

By contrast, participants repeatedly describe the male antagonist narrative as experientially proximate, emphasising that the setting felt recognisable and imaginable in ordinary life. As Signe explains in her survey response that ‘you can more easily imagine yourself walking into a holiday cottage like that’ (SD R2), while Bjørn and Karin both describe the setting as something that ‘felt realistic’, ‘closer to real life’, or simply ‘something that could actually happen’ (SD R6; SV R4). Rather than functioning as mere objective markers of realism, such statements also signal a perceived proximity between the text and the reader. The readers repeatedly emphasised that the holiday home setting in *Delilas lokker* felt familiar and imaginable. During the discussion, Emil adds ‘you can see yourself in that kind of situation ... you would never be able to imagine yourself facing some kind of swamp monster’ (GD P5).⁸² The level of recognition elicited by *Delilas lokker* made distancing strategies harder to maintain, while the supernatural framing of *Vand* allowed readers to keep the narrative – and Luna – at arm’s length.

For some readers, this rational distancing also allowed them to undermine Luna’s antagonistic legibility. Frida’s survey responses make that hesitation especially clear. In one response, she writes that Luna is ‘hard to place because you never really find out what she is – whether she is a real monster or just really tired of her family’ (SV R1). Elsewhere in the questionnaire, Frida returns to the same uncertainty, describing Luna as ‘more mysterious than scary’ and noting that ‘I never quite

figured out whether or not she was possessed by a demon, so she's also difficult to relate to' (SV R1). As a result, Luna's strangeness makes it difficult for readers to identify her as an antagonist – not only because of their empathy, but also because they struggle to stabilise her as a threat in the narrative. As Signe also notes: 'She isn't scary in the normal way, she's just ... wrong' (SV R2) before concluding that 'it is clear that Nøkken is a kind of monster and her ally, but I didn't see her as a monster' (SV R2).

Although some readers explicitly said they did not 'see Luna as a monster', I would argue that what is at stake here is less a rejection of her monstrosity than a difficulty in stabilising her as an antagonist in the narrative. Following feminist and posthuman monster theory, Luna's resistance to classification is precisely what renders her monstrous. As Braidotti argues, echoing Ahmed's notion of strangeness, the monstrous subject is a figure of in-betweenness, occupying a position that is neither 'total stranger nor completely familiar' (1996: 292). Defined by this liminal condition, the monster resists binary systems of identity and meaning-making, unsettling the boundaries by which subjects are ordinarily rendered intelligible. Luna's ambiguity mirrors this dynamic, as readers are unable to fully define her as either an antagonist or a victim, leading to an unresolved tension that challenges their interpretive frameworks, and thereby bringing her monstrosity into view. Correspondingly, Emil describes how the experience of ambiguity itself – more than Luna – was the primary source of horror: 'I couldn't tell if I was supposed to sympathise with her or fear her. She felt both human and inhuman at the same time, which was unsettling' (SV R5).

While category crisis is a key trait in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's monster theory, the present material suggests that readers respond to such ambiguity in different ways. For some, it intensifies unease; for others, it prompts a distancing response in which ambiguity is managed rather than affectively engaged. In these cases, the white-knuckler strategy seeks to control the perceived threat by rejecting Luna as difficult to categorise or narratively opaque – a response that aligns with Cohen's notion of monsterisation, where difference is marked and externalised in order to maintain boundaries between self and other (1996: 7). To render Luna unintelligible as a coherent antagonist is thus not to deny her monstrosity, but rather to produce it as

a defensive gesture, placing her at the limits of the intelligible, where she can be contained rather than engaged.

Consequently, the white-knucklers' distance and disengagement made the conditions for recognition so frail that, for some readers, their initial but limited sense of empathy ultimately flipped into apathy. This division is clearly illustrated in an exchange between Bjørn and Frida during the group discussion.

Bjørn: But my concern changes at some point ... in the one with Lærke and Luna. Cause you worry in the beginning, because you have no idea of what is going on. (GD P6)

I: Worry about what?

Bjørn: About ... ehm ... if Luna has been taken or has run away from home and cannot take care of herself. She has been kept in the attic and now she is gone ... so that makes me think ... how is she going to make it? Right until you find out— (GD P6)

Frida [interrupts]: —she has chosen it herself? (GD P1)

Bjørn: Yeah... and then all my concern is gone. (GD P6)

[Brief silence]

Frida: But... then ... I just have to say ... just because she [Luna] has chosen to go into the woods herself, it did not stop me from worrying. (GD P1)

Niels: You didn't stop worrying? (GD P7)

Frida: No. (GD P1)

This conversation illustrates the clash of (mis)recognition between the white-knucklers and the aching-stomach readers. It suggests that Luna's perceived ambiguity disrupts processes of recognition and, in doing so, exposes the limits of reader empathy when a character refuses to fit into easily identifiable moral categories. The white-knuckler detaches emotionally the moment Luna appears to act with autonomy, as if her agency cancels out his earlier concern. In contrast, the empathic reader maintains concern not because of what Luna does, but because of what she has endured. This exchange reveals how agency and victimhood come to

function as interpretive tipping points in the reader's emotional alignment, and yet despite moving in opposite affective directions, both responses ultimately fail to stabilise Luna as either victim or antagonist, leaving her status unresolved.

Although Luna's character evokes a wide range of emotional responses, they all seem to challenge conventional frameworks of antagonism and fear. Even in the seemingly opposing responses of aching-stomach readers and white-knucklers, Luna is placed in a space of moral and emotional uncertainty that complicates readers' recognition of her as an antagonist. The aching-stomach readers, rooted in empathy, foreground Luna's suffering, making it difficult for them to embrace her as a true antagonist. In contrast, the white-knuckle readers, with their strategic detachment and rationalisation, resist engaging with Luna's antagonism altogether.

Yet, my findings also suggest that Luna's monstrosity does not depend on whether she convinces as a classical antagonist. Rather, it becomes perceptible precisely through her bodily misfit, her category instability, and her refusal of affective and narrative propriety – features of misrecognition that provoke reader discomfort while also making her difficult to stabilise as a conventional source of threat. Luna ultimately complicates fear rather than straightforwardly eliciting it. Readers' fear *for* Luna outweighs their fear *of* her – a shift that reflects how female monstrosity is often framed not as pure terror or stable antagonism, but as transgression and warning.

Reader Rejection: Irritation and the Female Complaint

As recognition and strangeness are not affects in themselves but conditions that trigger affective responses, it is therefore relevant to look closely at the participants' affective reactions to Luna's strangeness. Rather than registering Luna primarily as a source of threat or fear, participants repeatedly reported their feelings of frustration and a low-grade irritation that circulated between text, bodies, and group conversation. I read this 'irritation situation' (Felski 2020: 104) not as a 'wrong' response to horror, but as an affective diagnostic: it illuminates the expectations by which readers negotiate sympathy, moral legibility, and narrative satisfaction – and it shows how feminine monstrosity can be encountered as an abrasive disruption of those scripts.

Irritation

The data show that participants experienced a pervasive yet elusive unease in response to Luna. Astrid, for one, captures this diffuse mood in the discussion when she remarks that ‘you sense all the way through that something is not quite right’ (GD P3). Sianne Ngai’s account of irritation in *Ugly Feelings* helps to account for this response, describing irritation as a ‘minor, low-intensity negative affect’ which, in contrast to “major affects”, lacks a distinct target and is therefore less specifically oriented (2005: 174). Unlike fear or horror, irritation does not have a distinct object, but is characterised as a diffuse, lingering unresolved discomfort. This diffusiveness is also why Ngai classifies irritation as a mood rather than an emotion: ‘For irritation is a mood, distinct from emotion in that it lacks an explicit occasion or object’ (179). This distinction has already been noted by Annette Baier, who explains that emotions are about *something*, not just anything, whereas moods, if they are about anything at all, seem to concern almost *everything*: ‘Moods are either objectless, or have near all-inclusive and undifferentiated objects’ (1990: 3). One of Astrid’s survey responses makes that diffuseness even clearer, demonstrating how a mood of annoyance can develop into an all-encompassing, indistinguishable pressure aimed at the entire narrative situation – its characters, relationships, confusing storylines and unaddressed acts of violence.

I had the sense of a toxic environment where everyone covers for each other. That Luna and Lærke are the same person. That terrible things have happened which nobody takes responsibility for. Therefore I became irritated with the adult characters for not understanding what they put their daughter through – and for not taking responsibility. (SV R4)

In this way, the participants’ irritation seemed to manifest on multiple levels. It was prompted by Luna’s character, was an undercurrent about the narrative and formal narration techniques in *Vand*, and even seemed to hang in the air in the group discussion. This echoes Ngai’s observation of irritation as ‘operating at the level of discourse as well as story, and at the level of reception as well as internal structure and form’, showing how a single mood can entangle aesthetic form, narrative

content, societal contexts, and reader response into one affectively charged experience (2005: 175).

Taking each dimension in turn, on the atmospheric level, irritation registers as a general mood or pervasive tone throughout the group discussion. As Ngai suggests, an artwork can project a particular affective tone – one that, although not explicitly expressed or identified by its fictional characters, still permeates readers, who sense a distinct, pervasive feeling in the work, making it seem as though a text ‘*runs on a feeling that no one actually feels*’ (69, original emphasis). Similarly, in the discussion of *Vand*, I noted how the tone of annoyance was not only implicitly present in the short story itself, but emerged in the group interview, where several readers spoke in an irritable manner, albeit without explicitly naming the feeling as such; irritation is thus not only reported but performed, surfacing through increased pacing, interruptions, and sharpening of evaluative phrasing, giving rise to an embodied and affective atmosphere that emerges through readerly interactions with the figure of Luna rather than residing ‘inside’ any single reader. Nevertheless, Astrid eventually names the collective irritation implicitly by saying ‘I don’t think I experienced *that* frustration over her killing Lærke’ (GD P3, my emphasis). By ‘*that* frustration’ Astrid is pointing to the prevailing atmosphere of collective annoyance she felt building up in the room.

On a more interpersonal level, the participants’ sense of irritation also came to centre on Luna and her perceived moral decline. Although irritation primarily manifested as a mood – partly because it, like all ugly feelings, is inherently objectless in its orientation – Baier also argues that irritation ‘sometimes involve emotions searching for appropriate objects’ (1990: 3). In this respect, the reader study suggests that Luna has been installed into this empty object-space so that participants’ otherwise diffuse irritation can be directed at something. Positioning Luna in this way reveals that the frustration readers felt towards her is not an intrinsic feature of her character, but rather produced in response to her defiance of discursive norms.

Moreover, Ngai argues that irritation often emerges from disrupted expectations (2005: 174), which was precisely the catalyst of many readers’ frustration with Luna. In her survey response, Signe writes that ‘irritation/frustration arises when Luna is cruel to Lærke in the forest’ (SV R2), while Niels makes a similar point in the

discussion when he asks: 'Yeah ... but at the same time, I also kind of feel like ... why does she [Lærke] have to die?' (GD P7). In other words, the participants' annoyance seems to be less about Luna's 'irritatingness' in itself than about her misalignment with the moral and gendered expectations that structure her readability in the story. As Bjørn puts it: 'She has a soft and childlike presence at first, but later she becomes something eerie and unsettling', indicating discomfort with Luna's apparent loss of innocence (SV R6). Once again, the irritation that emerges around Luna in the reader study challenges the notion of emotions as purely internal forces lurking beneath the surface, or 'under the skin'. Instead, it registers as socially and politically charged, as Luna's monstrosity comes to unsettle not only individual expectations, but also the shared interpretive frameworks that emerged in participants' responses, rendering her moral ambiguity a source of frustration that simultaneously reveals the power of social norms and the politics of empathy.

Another way Luna fails to meet reader expectations is her perceived inability to respond with what is conventionally deemed an appropriate or proportional affect. At the story's chilling close, the narrator underscores this affective gap: 'Luna does not raise her voice ... She sounds neither angry nor upset. She simply says it, as though it were a necessary consequence. Like two plus three equalling five' (2016: 71–72).⁸³ That same frosty detachment was repeatedly noted by participants in the study. In his survey response, Bjørn writes that Luna 'ends up being cold and cynical. She thinks only of herself, the Nøkken and the Shadow Man. Completely without empathy or sympathy for her own sister' (SV R6). This emotional deficit marks Luna as what one might call an 'affect alien' – someone whose emotions fail to align with expected or 'correct' ways to respond in certain circumstances. Hence, Luna's lack of proper emotional responsiveness disrupts the reader's affective response, or as Ngai notes, makes 'a void created by an initial absence of responsiveness or expressiveness', deepening the reader's disorientation (2005: 194).

To further theorise how readers navigate – or bridge – such voids, Philip Fisher in *The Vehement Passions* (2001) identifies two paradigms of reader engagement: one is sympathy, in which the reader directly shares a character's feelings, and the other is what he terms 'volunteered passion', whereby the reader experiences an emotion precisely because the character does not (2001: 142–144). The former

involves 'feeling alongside another's explicit emotional state', while the latter creates an emotional 'blank spot' that the reader fills with missing emotions such as fear, shame, or anger (144). In *Vand*, however, readers consider Luna so incomprehensible and 'off the mark' that they are left unsure how to respond. Her inscrutability makes both sympathy and volunteered passion unavailable – and thus, as Ngai suggests, readers are denied both the possibility of sharing the protagonist's emotional perspective and the compensatory role of feeling on her behalf (2005: 189). Consequently, participants describe being left not with a sense of closure but in a deeper emotional impasse, interrupting the movement towards resolution that several readers otherwise seemed to expect from the genre.

On a formalist and structural level, the readers also directed their annoyance towards the short story's form. Some criticised *Vand* for apparent plot holes and narratological glitches that blocked any attempt to fill the affective gaps, thereby exacerbating their sense of incongruence and disproportion. This textual indeterminacy resonates with Ngai's definition of ugly feelings as affective states that resist closure – instead, they linger, build up, and plod on. As several participants attested to, *Vand* felt – in Karin's words – 'unresolved' and 'open-ended' (GD P4) while Lukas commented, 'I just want to know what it [*Vand*] is about. Now it's getting weird. So I just want to get to the ending to figure out what it's about', (GD P8) to which Karin agrees, 'Yeah, you're left feeling a bit unresolved, just like you [another reader] also said, right? What is this? What was the point? ... You're just sitting there ... without really getting any answers, right?' (GD P4). In a bid to resolve their confusion, participants reported rereading passages of the text – yet these attempts proved futile, as they remained baffled by Luna's behaviour and unable to arrive at a coherent interpretation of the story.

Frida: But the other one [*Vand*], I had to go back in the text and reread some passages again. (GD P1) ...

Niels: Yes, I also had to go back several times in that text to understand the characters. (GD P5)

Frida: Yes, and you don't really get there, I think ... at least I don't get as far as interpreting everything that's going on ... out in the forest. (GD P1)

Emil: No ... no. No, not at all. (GD P5)

Niels: No, because I was equally confused and equally ... as you also say [addressing another reader], you actually had ... it kind of became like. (GD P7)

The group's repeated flip-backs to earlier passages in *Vand* point to moments of reflective labour in the reading process, as they return to the text in attempts to stabilise meaning, motive, and moral orientation; yet the story's structural gaps appeared to prevent them from resolving their affective uncertainty, leaving them seemingly suspended in narrative confusion and emotional disorientation. Interestingly, these feelings of perplexity and estrangement at the story level became inextricably tied to Luna's character, whom Emil describes as 'impossible to understand' (SV R5) while Signe considers her 'out of place' (SV R2), ultimately conflating her difficulty understanding Luna with her difficulty understanding the story: 'Yeah. I just felt like ... meh. I wish I could have gotten more under Luna's skin and everything ... in some way. There were too many elements involved, and in the end, I wasn't really sure what to do with them, I think' (SD R4). Here, Luna's offishness not only rendered her incomprehensible, but also began to unsettle narrative clarity itself, provoking further confusion and frustration. Signe returns to the same uncertainty in the discussion, admitting: 'I think I was constantly in doubt ... which also kind of made me very unsure about what the story was actually about' (GD P2). The participants' irritation with Luna's failure to conform to moral or narrative expectations extended beyond a reaction to her character and permeated their entire experience of the text, making their engagement with the story feel just as unstable and unresolved – a dynamic that aligns with monster theory, in which such instability is not just a failure of meaning but a defining feature of the monstrous.

The pattern is even clearer when set against participants' responses to the study's male antagonist. In this comparison, the same narrative devices that generated interpretive overload in the readers' experience of *Vand* appeared to generate suspense in *Delilas lokker*. During the discussion, Niels describes *Delilas lokker* as following 'the classic horror curve' (GD P7), emphasising that fear emerged because the narrative kept escalating, as Frida also contends: 'you could sense something was coming all the time' (GD P1). Lukas adds that the tension 'kept building continuously' (GD P8), leaving readers, in Bjørn's words, 'just waiting to see what

he would do' (GD P6). The antagonist remained affectively, morally legible as danger: Emil notes that 'he cuts people's hair off and stabs them with scissors – he's simply evil' (GD P5) while Niels calls him 'just plainly psychopathic' (GD P7). Precisely because 'something was off' (GD P3), as Astrid infers, uncertainty did not obstruct meaning but intensified anticipation; as Signe puts it, 'it became more frightening because you didn't know when it would happen' (GD P2). Here, uncertainty amplifies expectation and a sense of horror rather than generating an interpretive block and frustration.

Placed side by side, these responses suggest that ambiguity does not produce a single, predictable emotional response. Instead, its affective outcome depends on whether readers can recognise the figure in an existing horizon of expectation. While the male antagonist remains threatening because his violence aligns with culturally stabilised scripts, Luna's ambiguity unsettles those very scripts. In the case of *Delilas lokker*, recognisable motives, human embodiment, and genre familiarity allow uncertainty to function as suspense; in Luna's case, the absence of such recognitional grounding causes ambiguity to dissolve narrative direction, transforming uncertainty into interpretive noise rather than fear. As Felski suggests, recognition depends on a balance between familiarity and difference (2008: 133); when that balance fails, estrangement can tip towards frustration rather than fascination. What emerges, then, is a distinctly gendered affective economy: ambiguous masculinity sustains fear, whereas ambiguous femininity destabilises interpretation itself. The same formal strategy that produces suspense about the male antagonist becomes, when attached to Luna, a prime source of irritation. Ambiguity does not lose intensity; rather, its intensity is redirected – away from bodily fear and towards reflective frustration – thereby illuminating how readers' emotional engagement with horror fiction remains structured by gendered expectations about who can plausibly occupy the position of threat.

This interpretive impasse surrounding Luna also helps explain why participants described their encounter with her as an inability – in Karin's terms – to 'get under Luna's skin' (GD P4) – a formulation that resonates on several levels. On a literal level, Luna's skin is a site of disturbance: marked by dark veins that refuse to remain hidden and violently scrubbed by her mother in an attempt to erase their presence. On a figurative level, Luna herself remains opaque, her motives elusive, and her

emotional world difficult to access. This dual inaccessibility extends beyond Luna to the story as a whole, denying readers the cathartic resolution typically promised by horror stories. As Ngai observes, irritation often arises when a character's motives remain obscure – and here, that opacity extends beyond Luna to the narrative as a whole. Luna does not fit neatly into traditional roles – neither tragic victim nor clear-cut villain – rendering her illegible in standard affective, narrative, and moral frameworks. This lack of resolution operates on multiple levels: Luna remains enigmatic, the story resists closure, and the sense of irritation feels diffuse and difficult to articulate. As Ngai puts it, one of the aesthetic outcomes 'is thus a relationship between text and reader that is as vexed or "offish" as ... irritation itself' (2005: 189). This dynamic also resonates with Felski's claim that literary encounters can produce forms of 'negative recognition' that relates to 'the limits of knowability ... the opacity of persons and their failure to be fully transparent to themselves or others' (2008: 46).

Viewed in these terms, irritation can also be seen as a *verdict* – a critique as well as a demand that someone ought to conform or behave differently. In this respect, irritation is an affective engagement that, much like 'recognition', can be mobilised to negate or exclude those who fail to meet these expectations – anything or anyone that behaves 'offish' or 'out of place', for as Ngai infers, '*both* our sympathy with the protagonist *and* the emotion we might volunteer on her behalf are aggressively refused' (2005: 189, original emphasis). The outright rejection of potential sympathy or acknowledgement constitutes an exercise of power, asserting that Luna must conform to a prescribed emotional or moral framework – and when she does not, participants expressed disappointment. In the group discussion, Karin captures this frustration: 'It felt kind of unresolved, I think. In the end, I was just sitting there like ... but why, though ... now she was just completely the dark avenger' (GD P4). A sense of chagrin can also be experienced as irritating per se – here the initial energy invested in identification and empathy now feels wasted and futile. Among the participants, this shift from sympathy to annoyance was especially pronounced when it came to Luna's final act of revenge, which seemed to invalidate all previous emotional engagement. In a survey response, Astrid even went so far as to dismiss the climax entirely.

I don't find her scary. As I said, I sympathised with her for most of the story, but towards the end in the forest, she becomes evil in that kind of psycho way with weird eyes and the 'I will kill you because you were mean to me' attitude, which doesn't scare me but just seems a bit silly. (SV R3)

In my data, the irritation elicited by Luna in *Vand* emerges not as a momentary or individual reaction, but as a gradually intensifying current, gathering momentum throughout the study. In the group discussion, irritation did not flare up and fade; rather, it built up as Sara Ahmed's notion of an accumulating economy of affects prescribes. There was a progression in the course of data collection and discussion: first, an almost imperceptible unease ('something is not quite right') reported in the surveys; then a diffuse mood of irritation with no single target expressed in the group discussion; next, clear frustration once Luna is positioned as the story's focal 'affect alien'; followed by escalating critique of the text's structural gaps as 'bewildering', 'unresolved', or even 'toxic'; and finally, a definitive rejection at Luna's revenge, where sympathy gives way to outright dismissal. As the discussion unfolded, the participants' responses fed into one another, as each comment not only expressed annoyance, but also reinforced it in the group, so that what began as a subtle undercurrent became a communal affective force.

Ultimately, by labelling Luna's vengeance 'silly' rather than scary, the readers' irritation as articulated in the discussion not only negated any sense of sympathy, but collectively reconfigured the experience of horror as comic trivialisation. In this mediated group setting, annoyance appeared to multiply in the conversation, gradually shaping the discussion into a socially negotiated affective event that undermined conventional fear factors and recast engagement with feminine monstrosity as an exercise in critique and derision rather than a straightforward experience of fear anchored in a clearly identifiable antagonist. Importantly, this irritation should not be understood either as an absence of impact or as acts of misreading, but as a specific mode of engagement: an affective response that reveals how encounters with feminine monstrosity place pressure on how sympathy and narrative justice are negotiated by readers.

Complaint

Much of the irritation charted in the surveys and group discussion coalesced around the moment Luna finally puts her suffering into words: accusing her sister of betrayal and calling down justice. Until that point, participants had largely pitied the silent, attic-bound girl, yet a shift happens when she voices her grievance. The irritation that had been circulating around the story or her strange character now centred on what she says. Several readers struggled to recognise her words as justified suffering, registering them instead as a *complaint*. At this juncture, some participants begin to see Luna in ways that resemble what Ahmed describes as the feminist killjoy, the figure who, by her nonparticipation, actively rejects the emotional scripts that sustain collective comfort (2010a: 65). Luna's quiet detachment, her refusal to embody the family 'we', and her final acts of vengeance position her as a disruptive figure who defies societal expectations and norms. Whereas most people conform to the collective to preserve its status quo, the readers interpret Luna as a figure who shows no interest in maintaining the mood and refuses to perform the emotional conventions of compliance or redemption. As the narrator also notes, Luna is 'stubborn and defiant and doesn't want to listen' (Vand 2016: 61)⁸⁴ – a resistance that Astrid notes in a survey response: 'She refuses to accept help, and it's almost like she wants to feel bad' (SV R4).

As Ahmed points out, the killjoy not only rejects patriarchal structures, but also instrumentalises this resistance through strategic non-engagement – 'I do not laugh, because I do not comply' – transforming exclusion itself into a form of protest (2017: 153). Luna's detachment can thus be read as a deliberate act of defiance. Though she rarely speaks of her family's abuse, her very existence – her appearance – constitutes an objection. Her silence, her lack of acceptable emotional responsiveness, and her bodily manifestations are all interpreted as a refusal to conform to societal norms or participate in the family collective: the sickly white hairs that continue to grow back; the dark veins that deepen the more her mother scrubs her with the steel brush; even the bruises left by each violent hand and her nightly escapes from home. As Ahmed reminds us, 'leaving can be heard as complaint' (2021: 236).

Despite Luna's quiet protest through non-participation, however, her grievances remain unrecognised. As Ahmed demonstrates in *Complaint!* (2021), the complaints

of marginalised figures are often dismissed as excessive or disruptive rather than validated as legitimate concerns (2021: 1–3). In fact, complaining risks not only being ignored, but also marking the complainer as an outsider, set apart from the community. Luna embodies this dynamic. Read as ‘the complainer’, she comes to be positioned as someone who is bent on fracturing familial unity, and therefore, her strangeness, protest, and final retaliation are construed not merely as a complaint, but as disloyalty; an ill-willed, uncompromising betrayal against social equilibrium and narrative ease (131). Within this logic, Luna is perceived by a number of participants as deliberately working against any chance of the happy ending she was never invited to, becoming what Ahmed describes as the one who “‘spoils” the happiness of others’ (2010a: 65). Her sister Lærke, however, despite her best intentions, remains firmly in the family collective and in opposition to Luna – partly because she ignores the violence. As Ahmed observes, ‘To belong might require getting along or going along with something’ (2021: 124). Yet, the problem with this form of ‘passing’ is that, by succeeding in doing nothing, one also continues to participate in the exclusion: ‘There can be violence in the requirement to overlook or be unaffected by violence’ (124). For this reason, when Luna’s complaint is finally put into words at the story’s end, it is squarely directed at Lærke: ‘You let them do it to me. When you were a child, I could understand. Children do not have that kind of power. But now. You kept not doing anything. You would have continued letting them do it’ (*Vand* 2016: 75).⁸⁵

Interestingly, it was at this juncture that the participants’ sympathy began to falter. As Ahmed explains, there is a significant difference between *a complaint* and *complaining*; the former is a more formalised object, whereas the latter is more often burdened with emotional stigma and therefore tends to stick to certain subjects already perceived as overly emotional. Accordingly, in the ears of the participants, Luna’s words were not heard as a complaint – instead, she was complaining; and as Ahmed informs us, ‘to be heard as complaining is not to be heard’ (2021: 1). For example, Karin’s response captures this dismissal, reducing Luna’s grievance to something both incomprehensible and trivial.

Also because, I didn’t completely understand that thing about ... at least, I didn’t really understand that thing about Lærke ... I mean, why does she suddenly have

to take revenge ... on her sister, I mean ... maybe a few years had passed ... but I couldn't really, I ... I didn't completely understand what ... yeah. (GD P4)

The *biography* of the complaint – its build-up, its historicity, and its corporeal traces – fades into incoherence, as does the core issue the moment it is expressed (Ahmed 2021: 20). The complaint is no longer treated as a formalised object, but interpreted as an expression of Luna's personality – or as Ahmed writes: 'A complaint becomes part of you, part of who you become, that problem child, you can't shed it' (19). In this way, Luna becomes the complaint, which is why both ultimately are dismissed. This also aligns with Ahmed's assertion that 'the person who makes the complaint is the one who ends up standing out, "assuming the character of a problem"' (148). In the group discussion, Niels performs a similar erasure of Luna's grievance, responding instead with laughter and understatement.

Alright, yeah, yeah, she [Lærke] had forgotten about you a little, but come on ... When Luna said, she [Lærke] had forgotten about her, I too had forgotten, she had forgotten her [laughs]. (GD P7)

Ultimately, several participants' comments suggest that sympathy for Luna's suffering receded, and that her complaint was treated as excessive – so 'overemotional' an overreaction that it paradoxically casts her as both hypersensitive and ruthlessly unforgiving. As Ngai observes, both feminism and the patriarchal culture have contributed to strengthening the association between emotionality and femininity, while simultaneously producing anxiety around women's feelings as more liable to 'turn ugly' (2005: 33). Read in this light, the participants' growing discomfort with Luna's anger and complaint does not merely reflect narrative dissatisfaction, but registers the moral constraints historically placed on female aggression, where antagonistic feeling risks undermining the sympathy which ordinarily sustains collective identification. Her complaint is experienced as a treacherous act that not only harms those she directs it against, but also herself – and as an act that almost feels more condemnable than the actual violent act she later commits.

A comparative perspective helps specify what is at stake in this moral turn. In the participants' responses to the male antagonist in *Delilas lokker*, violence was rarely

subjected to the same demand for explanation. Instead, readers repeatedly dismissed motive as secondary to ontological evil: Niels calls him ‘just plainly psychopathic’ (GD P7), Emil says that ‘he is just evil’ (GD P5), while Signe remarks that ‘yeah, it was just evil’ (GD P2). The repeated qualifier ‘just’ performs a small but telling interpretive move: it closes off further explanation and, in keeping with the group’s consensus, stabilises the figure as self-evidently monstrous. Rather than weakening the horror experience, the absence of explanatory anchoring appeared to intensify it: Niels emphasises that not fully knowing who he was or why he acted made the situation ‘extra frightening’ (GD P7), while Bjørn notes that ‘it actually makes it more intense that he just does it’ (GD P6). In these responses, violence functions less as a moral relation to be explained than as an ontological marker of antagonism; the male figure in *Delilas lokker* is frightening because readers do not view his actions in a framework of justification or moral negotiation.

This gendered difference is even clearer when considering that retaliation is present in both narratives, yet it is distributed and read through markedly different moral logics. While some participants recognised that the male antagonist acts out of betrayal – as Niels notes, ‘he takes revenge on all women’ (GD P7) – this grievance is not read as a complaint that demands ethical consideration. Instead, it merely reinforces his status as a threat. Luna’s retaliation, by contrast, is persistently drawn into questions of proportionality, motivation, and emotional legitimacy. The difference lies less in narrative than in reception: where the male antagonist’s retaliation motivates fear, Luna’s revenge redirects the readers’ engagement from affective reaction to moral judgement.

The moral asymmetry is particularly visible in the participants’ responses to Luna’s complaint. Rather than directing their strongest reactions towards the injustice inflicted on Luna, some participants instead expressed greater irritation at her response to the abuse. As the reader statement above shows, blame shifts: it no longer rests with the abusive family but falls on Luna herself. Complaining thus becomes a ruling over the one who complains, as if it is the complainer themselves who is guilty of their own alienation. Or as Ahmed writes: ‘You complain because you do not belong here. And your complaint becomes evidence you do not belong here’ (2021: 158). Consequently, Luna is positioned not as someone excluded by her family, but as someone who is ‘cutting themselves off from the group’ (131).

This logic is reinforced in the discussion when Niels frames Luna's complaint as a point of no return, stating,

'No, at that point, I was just like ... she has gone to the dark side, there is no way to save her now' (GD P7).

In other words, something about the act of complaining appears, in some responses, to render Luna newly monstrous. In fact, the refusal to recognise Luna's complaint as valid mirrors the broader cultural patterns Ahmed identifies, where those who disrupt harmony by pointing out injustice are cast as perpetrators themselves.

Ultimately, this dynamic can be clarified using Felski's notion of *glitches in identification*, understood as 'a failure to identify', which either occurs when the reader gets bored, distracted or annoyed by the text, or the reader simply makes a conscious choice not to identify: 'a conscious refusal to identify for political, ethical, or other reasons' (2020: 84). In this case, Luna's act of revenge and her emotional outburst appear to trigger precisely such a glitch in Niels' identification with her, producing a denouncing misrecognition triggered by what is perceived as an unethical act of revenge and emotional overreaction, which, to borrow Felski's words, leaves him 'apathetic, irritated, and turned off' (84). Evidently not only strangeness, but also the act of complaining – especially when it challenges societal norms and moral principles – can be a catalyst for disengagement and exclusion. Niels spells out that withdrawal bluntly at the end of the discussion:

'I lost all respect for her [Luna] in the end ... at that point, I no longer cared' (GD P7).

Thus participants greeted Luna's monstrosity not as much with dread as with frustration, since her vengeance defied the neat resolution and conventional schemes typically associated with horror narratives. Reader irritation is at its most obvious when her revenge is dismissed as mere overreaction instead of recognised as a bold assertion of agency – a response that resonates with broader cultural patterns Ahmed identifies, in which female anger and complaint risk being delegitimised. By foregrounding the ways Luna's emotional intensity and her refusal to adhere to narrative conventions unsettle the reader's expectations and comfort,

both Ngai's and Ahmed's frameworks help to reveal – and contextualise – why this frustration so readily hardens into disengagement and alienation.

In the participants' engagement with Luna in *Vand*, female monstrosity emerges not as straightforward horror, but as an affective disruption. Luna's refusal to conform to normative emotional and narrative expectations creates a fracture that not only isolates her, but also unsettles reader engagement. Her complaint, misrecognised and dismissed, becomes an act that challenges traditional sympathy and justice frameworks, exposing how emotional intensity – particularly when it disrupts social harmony – is both gendered and excessive. Moreover, the participants' perception of Luna as a killjoy highlights how female emotion and complaints are often not received as legitimate grievances, but as disruptive excess, ultimately marking her as both monstrous and, paradoxically, difficult to stabilise as a clear source of threat. Crucially, here, Luna is no less monstrous because she fails to function as a classical antagonist; rather, her failure to stabilise as an antagonist is itself part of how her monstrosity appears in the reception of *Vand*.

Complaining as a Feminist Method:

Luna's perception throughout the reader study is marked by friction. She appears too indifferent or too emotional, too silent or too complaining, too pitiful or too cruel. Her behaviour is always read as disproportionate – both insufficient and excessive – and never aligning with what readers perceive as culturally recognisable or emotionally appropriate. Rather than stabilising interpretation or offering clear emotional cues, she produces monstrous oscillation: readers move between empathy and irritation, identification and withdrawal, acknowledgement and judgement. This instability exemplifies what Felski terms aesthetic friction: a mode of literary engagement in which recognition and estrangement operate simultaneously (2020). This friction, according to Felski, disrupts passive consumption and compels readers to negotiate meaning. Correspondingly, in an empirical setting, feminine monstrosity does not elicit immediate fear but generates ethical hesitation, interpretive labour, affective ambivalence, and collective negotiation. What emerges is not resolution but suspension. Luna is unreadable – not because she lacks meaning, but because she exceeds the interpretive frameworks by which antagonism

is ordinarily processed. She comes to resemble what Ngai describes, citing Laura Kipnis, as ‘the erupting symptomatic body display[ing] monstrous and unreadable forms to a horrified society’ (Ngai 2005: 206; Kipnis 1993: 289).

Read in light of my research question about how lay readers’ experiences of (mis)recognition and estrangement mediate their engagement with the female antagonist, this material reveals a gendered asymmetry. While masculine antagonism stabilised quickly through immediate recognition, producing rapid agreement and a clear affective orientation towards fear, feminine antagonism was constantly filtered through expectations concerning emotional appropriateness, legitimacy, and moral proportionality. Rather than eliciting immediate fear from participants, Luna prompted diffuse feelings of irritation, sympathy, hesitation, discomfort, and ethical scrutiny. Her anger, revenge, and withdrawal were repeatedly evaluated in terms of legitimacy and excess, thus hinting towards underlying norms about how women should feel, act, and respond. This difference points to how recognition, affect, and moral legibility operate unevenly in gendered figures.

Importantly, however, the material demonstrates that antagonism and monstrosity do not necessarily coincide. Whereas the male figure in *Delilas lokker* is readily legible as a threat and functions effectively as an antagonist, without significantly destabilising normative frameworks, Luna, by contrast, does not stabilise as a clear antagonist yet emerges as more distinctly monstrous through her disruption of those very frameworks.

These findings lend renewed empirical support to a central insight in feminist monster theory: that woman is always culturally produced as already monstrous. This is maintained by Braidotti, who argues that monstrosity stems from deviation from dominant norms of embodiment, historically aligned with the white, heterosexual, male body (1996: 141), while Creed’s concept of the monstrous–feminine further sharpens this claim by insisting that monstrosity is not something femininity occasionally acquires, but something by which femininity – as the hyphen suggests – is constructed and defined (2024: 5). Similarly, I would not claim that women are inherently monstrous; rather, I find that the cultural logic persists at the level of reader reception, where feminine-coded figures more readily come to

register as monstrous – rather than antagonistic – by resisting normative frameworks of legibility and control.

Following Levinas, however, Luna's ambiguity need not be understood as a character flaw, but as a persistence of alterity (Felski 2008: 26-27). Her difference is not domesticated but persists, resisting incorporation into familiar moral and narrative frameworks. Accordingly, feminine monstrosity does not invite assimilation but confronts readers with the limits of their own interpretive schemas, exposing the gendered assumptions that shape how figures are rendered legible as victims, agents, or threats in the first place. In this light, the readers' misrecognition of Luna does not simply mark an interpretive impasse, but functions as a critical exposure of the normative perceptions that render some figures immediately legible and others always out of place.

This also means that feminine monstrosity does not necessarily fail to produce horror; rather, it produces a different kind. As the reader Signe notes, 'She isn't scary in the normal way, she's just ... wrong' (SV R2). Rather than confronting readers with a clearly externalised threat, feminine monstrosity destabilises terms by which such threat is recognised in the first place. The discomfort it generates lies in the breakdown of moral and affective orientation: readers are unsure how to position themselves, whether to condemn or understand, whether to fear or to defend. What emerges is not simply visceral fear, but a more structural unease about the instability of the norms that seek to contain it. While male transgression is more readily legible as threat, female transgression unsettles the terms of legibility itself. It is this disruption – the inability to stabilise, categorise, or fully assimilate the female monster – that constitutes its horror.

Moreover, Luna's unreadability not only disrupts recognition, it also exposes another dimension of power: the force of non-participation. When recognition fails, withdrawal becomes a form of agency. To reject joy, disrupt harmony, or refuse to conform may thus function as acts of monstrous protest. This resonates directly with what Ngai identifies as the counter-power of ugly feelings: low-intensity, dysphoric affects that do not propel decisive action, but instead suspend it (2005: 12). Ngai turns to figures such as Melville's *Bartleby* – whose defining gesture, 'I prefer not to', signals neither open rebellion nor passive compliance – to show how such affects index situations of obstructed agency (1). These feelings are

experientially negative, socially stigmatised, and syntactically organised around withdrawal rather than forward movement, but it is their weak intentionality and refusal of cathartic release that render them diagnostically powerful (22). They register structural constraint rather than overcoming it, exposing the normative ideals they fail – or refuse – to inhabit. While such emotions can be suspensive or excessive, their refusal to idealise the conditions under which they arise is what grants them the critical force that can set things into motion. As Ahmed has already once stated, ‘being alienated from the promise of happy objects gets us somewhere’ (2010b: 50).

To complain, as Ahmed argues, is also a feminist method (2021: 7). While complaining does not always resolve injustice; it does dwell in it, name it, and make its structures perceptible. Although complaining often leads to exclusion and delegitimisation, it also carries the kind of critical potential Ngai describes (2005: 22): it refuses harmony, resists the demand for affective adjustment, and in doing so exposes the structures that normalise inequality. Complaints are thus more than an expression; they constitute a form of affective non-cooperation that shows the harms and injustices otherwise ignored or dismissed.

In the reception material, the complaint appears not merely as a political gesture, but as a specifically monstrous strategy. According to the participants, Luna’s articulation of grievance does not restore understanding; it often intensifies irritation, moral judgement, or withdrawal. What is most revealing here is not Luna’s complaint *per se*, but the reactions it provokes, prompting readers to question the legitimacy, scale, or appropriateness of her revenge, which in turn reveals the cultural expectations that frame feminine anger and dissent as excessive, disruptive, or improper. In this way, the contested reception of female complaint renders visible the gendered norms that govern legibility itself, by which femininity remains tethered to expectations of emotional moderation and moral coherence.

Ultimately, my findings suggest that feminine monstrosity does not primarily reside in the figure itself, but emerges relationally in the encounter between text and reader. What appear to be confusion, irritation, or misrecognition at the level of reception are not merely noise or interpretive error, but a diagnostic site at which the limits of cultural intelligibility become perceptible. The study therefore shifts attention from what the feminine monster is to what she does: not stabilising fear

as an externalised threat, but unsettling the very frameworks by which threat, agency, and morality are rendered recognisable.

6. Reading Ecohorror: Nordic Realism and Uncanny Enchantment

When Karl Ove Knausgård received the Swedish Academy's Nordic Prize in 2019, jury member Per Wästberg stated: 'With a tsunami of autofiction, he has flooded not only the Nordics. A merciless epic about the journey from boy to family man, intensely realistic, fanatically detailed – more Balzac than Beckett.'⁸⁶ With this statement, and by invoking one of the founders of realism in European literature, Wästberg presents Knausgård's aptitude for 'intense realism' and 'fanatic detail' as markers of artistic excellence, confirming his *oeuvre* as the emblem of Nordic realism.

The following year, however, Knausgård published his novel, *Morgenstjernen* (2020, *The Morning Star* 2021), which is brimful with religiously themed supernatural incidents and ecohorrific events. As my analysis of *Morgenstjernen* demonstrates, it initially anchors itself in the conventions of everyday realism before gradually introducing disturbances that challenge this mimetic framework (see Chapter Three). This shift left critics both fascinated and confused, some even frustrated, as the neurotically mundane realism that had made Knausgård famous 'not only in the Nordics' slowly disintegrates as the novel progresses.⁸⁷ Much like the fictional characters of the book, critics eagerly searched for rational explanations to keep the supernatural at bay.

Such was the case in an episode of the Norwegian radio programme *NRK Åpen bok* (lit. open book) when Marta Norheim and Tom Egil Hverven discussed whether the supernatural elements of *Morgenstjernen* could be explained by real-world cognitive parameters or if more open or marvellous explanations are required. Hverven's reading of the novel remains in the realm of reality as he argues that every mysterious and uncanny event is the result of 'free imagination' and 'hallucinations

or madness' prompted by the character's use of 'different types of drugs' (2020: 05:45 & 07:35).⁸⁸ Conversely, Norheim maintains that the realistic framework of the book gets momentarily disrupted, but she also continues to pose an interesting question: 'Are we capable of taking it in?' (09:43).⁸⁹ Here, Norheim is alluding to the reader's inability to grasp or accept non-mimetic elements in the narration. Together with Hverven's attempt to rationalise and demystify the horrifically supernatural aspects of Knausgård's novel, Norheim's question can be heard as a testament to the strong hold realism appears to have on both the reader and the Nordic literary scene in general.

In this chapter, I will examine how this preference for realist narration has influenced and negotiated the reception of supernatural horror fiction in the Nordic region, yet before proceeding, I must clarify what is meant by realism. As Roman Jakobson notes in his essay 'On Realism in Art' (1921), 'the extreme relativity of the concept of "realism"' (1987: 24) makes it necessary to specify how I use the term. In the following text, then, realism refers to literary and social realism – that is, both an aesthetic mode and artistic current characterised by mimetic representation, psychological verisimilitude, and attention to social conditions, and a broader cultural orientation towards what is perceived as real or credible. This understanding draws on Jakobson's conception of realism as a historical, stylistic category in literature that also extends to the epistemological dimension of how readers and critics negotiate the boundaries of the real.⁹⁰

To illustrate the elasticity of the term, Jakobson identifies five principal conceptions of realism in art: first, as an artistic aspiration or intention to render life as it is; second, as what is perceived to be realistic, 'as true to life'; third, as a specific 'artistic current' or period in art history (1987: 20); fourth, as the use of certain narrative techniques, such as detailed descriptions or an objective third-person narrator; and fifth, as a particular realistic style or subgenre, such as social realism or working-class literature. In what follows, I examine these five aspects of realism from three complementary perspectives: a historical overview, an empirical reader study, and a discussion of genre and aesthetics. I begin with a historical perspective on reception, tracing realism as an *artistic current* in the Nordic literary tradition, from the late nineteenth-century advent of modernism to present-day literary criticism and public service agreements, which – to this day – are motivated by the

social realist *aspiration* to portray life ‘as it is’.⁹¹ Second, I return to my reader study to investigate how an actual audience *perceives* a narrative to be (un)realistic and how this affects their reading experience and text valuation. Third, I will discuss the impact of the Nordic realist tradition on Nordic ecohorror as a genre, with particular attention to how the genre blends *realistic narration* and *style* with supernatural horror elements as a way of negotiating or circumventing the prominence of realism as a leading artistic preference in the region. Ultimately, I argue that while realism remains a favourite in Nordic literature, ecohorror and folkloric narratives reveal a growing tension – and productive synthesis – between realist representations and an aesthetic of enchantment in both literary production and reader reception.⁹²

Nordic Realist Tradition and its Gothic Shadows

The Nordic propensity for literary realism is often attributed to the Danish intellectual Georg Brandes, who famously announced the turn to critical realism in 1871. In a series of epoch-making lectures on the ‘Main Currents of Nineteenth-Century Literature’ at the University of Copenhagen, Brandes advocated for a literature ‘that provokes debate’ about societal and political issues rather than offering escapist narratives (Brandes 2017: 700). Annoyed with romanticism and influenced by Hegelian thought, Brandes argued that literature should serve to advance liberty and humanity by addressing themes such as women’s rights and social division, while challenging religion and promoting modernity. Since Brandes considered religion to be based on ‘made-up stories’, it would be paradoxical for this new literature, in its critique of religion, to succumb to similar modes of storytelling. Instead, it had to be *real* and alive. ‘In our day and age’, he declared, ‘a literature shows its life force by debating problems ... For a literature not to raise any question for debate is the same as for it to set out to lose all significance’ (1901: 17).

Many consider the impact of Brandes’ critical realism on the Nordic arts as profound (Naess 1982; Stounbjerg 2002; Bjerring-Hansen & Wilkens 2023).⁹³ Although the advent of realism had already been anticipated by some Romantics, Brandes’ framework gained widespread traction, challenging hyper-aestheticised writing and fantasy. Brandes’ ideas contributed to the gradual decline of

Romanticism's dominance in the region – especially in Denmark and Norway – and reinforced the perception that realism was the more serious, socially engaged mode of literary expression (Kastbjerg 2013). Through his lectures, Brandes continued to disqualify romantic literature as lowbrow, thereby cementing a hierarchical distinction between Romanticism and Realism, which crystallised into a broader valuation of low and high literature – an assessment that, according to Dirk Johannsen, would last well into the twentieth century (2016: 592). Brandes' lectures triggered what became known as the Modern Breakthrough, the Nordic literary movement of the 1870s and 1880s inspired by the naturalistic principles of objectivism, social commentary, and attention to detail.⁹⁴

'The rise of realism,' as Bjerring-Hansen and Wilkens describe it, extended beyond literary trends to questions of production, translation, and critical assessment, shaping the Nordic literary landscape in ways that, at times, bordered on monopoly and censorship (2022).⁹⁵ In Denmark, for example, widely recognised Gothic novels by Walpole, Radcliffe, and Shelley were not translated into Danish in the nineteenth century, contributing to the perception that the Gothic genre never gained a foothold in Danish literature (Eibe 1939;⁹⁶ Dalgaard 2015) – and this despite the fact that several notable Danish writers, including Bernhard Severin Ingemann, Hans Christian Andersen, and Karen Blixen, were clearly inspired by both the Anglophone Gothic tradition and the German *unheimlich*.⁹⁷

As Kirstine Marie Kastbjerg argues, the 'Scandinavian region's proclivity for realism' not only led to a neglect of the Gothic and the fantastic in Denmark, but also led to a broader rejection of more speculative fiction and its conventions (2013: 343).⁹⁸ Niels Dalgaard confirms this assessment, noting that 'Danish literary history ignores or despises the genre to such an extent that it is usually written completely out of history' (2015: 7).⁹⁹ One author who fell victim to this rejection was Ingemann, who is widely known as a Danish national romantic and hymnist, while his Gothic *oeuvre* – comprising works such as *Nattevandrerinden* (1813, 'The Night Wandereress'), *Sfinksen* (1820, 'The Sphinx') and *Varulven* (1834, 'The Werewolf') – came under attack by the critics before fading into oblivion. The influential Danish literary critic Frederik Billeskov Jansen wrote that 'the cozy Dane does not have the magic of the German', a remark that not only alluded to E. T. A. Hoffmann's

superiority, but also belittled Ingemann's authorship as benign and harmless (1958: 131).¹⁰⁰ Brandes likewise interpreted Ingemann's uncanny explorations and Fantastic-Gothic prose as a symptom of the author's pathology, referring to his work as *Lejebiblioteksromaner* (lit. subscription library novels), the derogatory term for low-brow literature at the time (1887: 444). Consequently, and perhaps to maintain a coherent perception of Ingemann as a national icon, much of his Gothic authorship – as Blixen later observed – was forgotten: 'We have few or no fantastic books here at home. We have Ingemann's "The Sphinx" and Heiberg's *Christmas Jests and New Years Fun*, but who remembers them?' (Brantly 2002: 13).

Similarly, Hans Christian Andersen is world-renowned for his fairy tales, although his primary motivation for writing them was financial. Despite several books, poems, and dramas to his name, Andersen was and is predominantly considered a writer of children's literature, while his Gothic works – including *Det Sjunkne Kloster* (1831, *The Sunken Convent* 1872) and *Tante Tandpine* (1872, *Auntie Toothache* 1949) – remain lesser known.¹⁰¹ The novel *Improvisatoren* (1835, *The Improvisatore* 1847) even contains dark ecogothic elements, which makes a dent in Andersen's romantic image (Bøggild 2015; Thomsen 2019). Yet, much like Ingemann, with whom Andersen shared a close friendship, he continues to be positioned as a harmless and romantic national poet – a branding strategy which, according to Dag Heede, successfully censors Andersen's homosocial preferences and 'deviant syntax' alongside the outrageous sexual motifs and Gothic qualities of his literary works. Instead, Andersen comes to represent 'Denmark as a cosy little kingdom, where the national poet is the most idyllic of them all: fairy-tale poet and the children's friend' (2005: 28).¹⁰² Fittingly, in reference to another of Andersen's darker texts, literary scholar Johan de Mylius asks: 'Is it the same Andersen we know? Is it the poet or his shadow that is world famous?' (2004: 35).¹⁰³

Well aware of the Gothic genre's low status on the Danish literary scene, Blixen chose to translate and partially rewrite her internationally acclaimed *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934), originally written in English, into *Syv fantastiske fortællinger* (1935, lit. seven fantastic tales), believing it necessary to downplay the work's Gothic elements for it to gain acceptance in Denmark.¹⁰⁴ As Blixen herself explained: 'I still believe that the Danish readership, which has not the slightest tradition for this kind of fantastical, – or nonsense – type of literature, will ask with some indignation: what

is this all about?’ (Mortensen 2025: 231). Likewise, in an interview with the Danish newspaper *Politiken* in 1934, Blixen expressed her conviction that Danish readers would demand some kind of meaning.

In the whole of Danish literature there is not a single book of this kind, in English there are many and they are read eagerly. The English favors such a nonsense book ... I don’t know another word for books in which all sorts of fantastic things happen. You know Hoffmann’s adventures, right? It is something of the same kind and yet not the same. It is not Edgar Poe either, but still ... if we write like that in Danish, it must be a disappointment for people who expect a book with meaning in it. And Danish readers always expect that. (Jacobsen 1980: 163)¹⁰⁵

Her suspicion proved correct. While the English version of her short story collection garnered critical acclaim abroad, the Danish version was met with some reluctance at home. At the time, critical realism had been channelled into *kulturradikalismen* (cultural radicalism), which demanded cultural, sociopolitical, and aesthetic contextualisation very much at odds with Blixen’s anachronistically aristocratic, ornate, hyperbolic style. Similarly, Blixen’s most conventional Gothic work *Gengældelsens veje* (1944, *The Angelic Avengers* 1946), which she herself referred to as her ‘illegitimate child’ (*Paris Review* 1956), was given a cold reception. Much like Ingemann, Blixen was declared ‘deluded’ (Schyberg 1935) while her work was with ‘no literary value’ and for which reason it ‘need not detain us’ (Langbaum 1964: 198).

In Norway, meanwhile, Maurits Hansen’s short story *Novellen* (1827, ‘The Novella’) was one of the earliest examples of Gothic fiction. However, much like his Danish contemporaries, the text was discredited on publication because of its outdated romantic-fantastic style, which sat uneasily with the principles of modern realism.¹⁰⁶ As the editor Thorgeir Haugen acknowledges in one of the few books about Norwegian fantastic writers, the aptly titled *Litterære skygger – Norsk fantastisk litteratur* (1998, lit. literary shadows),¹⁰⁷ ‘large parts of the fantastic literature have, in other words, spent a shadowy existence in Norwegian literary history’ (1998: 13).¹⁰⁸ Where Haugen only mentions the Gothic in passing, Henning Howlid Wærp highlights how the critical reception of Ragnhild Jølsen’s *Rikka Gan* (1904)

has been misguided as the novel's Gothic characteristics have largely been overlooked. Instead, the novel has been subjected to a succession of contradictory classifications, with Jølsen's authorship variously described as 'romantic, romantic impressionist, naturalist, neo-romantic, art nouveau writer, neo-realist, premodernist, and modernist' (1998: 105).¹⁰⁹ Other critics have dismissed her work on formalist grounds: Danish critic Jørgen Bukdahl dismissively refers to her books as 'more dramatic drafts than novels' (1924: 188) while Rolf Nyboe Nettum critiques 'the contrast between the romantic and the realistic elements', which he viewed as 'symptoms of a personal conflict' in Jølsen's works, ultimately 'reflected in her style and narrative technique' (1972: 157).¹¹⁰ For Howlid Wærp, however, such assessments reveal less about Jølsen's writing than about a general misreading or failure to engage with her works in accordance with the principles of Gothic literature (1998: 116).

Likewise, in 1994, one Norwegian newspaper stated that while 'hard-nosed social realism has almost destroyed the Norwegian horror novel', some horror literature had nonetheless been produced in Norway (*Urban* 1994).¹¹¹ The article lists a total of 13 books, ranging from Asbjørnsen and Moe's 1841 Norwegian folk tales to Tom Egeland's *Skyggelandet* (1993, 'Shadowland'), and even marvels at the fact that 'two (!) whole books in the genre were published last year': Egeland's novel and Trond Buland's *Blod* (1993, 'Blood').¹¹² Yet the article's enthusiasm for a burgeoning Norwegian horror movement was short-lived, as Buland was soon discouraged by publishers, while 'Norway's currently only proper horror author' at the time, Egeland, eventually made the transition from horror to crime novels with great success. A similar generic drift can be seen in André Bjerke's authorship, perhaps Norway's most acclaimed horror writer, whose novels tempers their horror elements with the conventions of the psychological crime thriller. More contemporary examples of this shift include Nikolaj Frobenius' psychological thriller *Jeg skal vise dere frykten* (2008, 'I Will Show You Fear') and Lajla Rolstad's Gothic crime story *Nekronauten* (2009, 'The Necronaut') – both of which retain ties to realism through historical context and crime fiction: Frobenius through the character study of Edgar Allan Poe, Rolstad through her references to Sherlock Holmes. Together, these examples lend support to Gunhild Agger's observation

that Nordic noir is built on a 'dual legacy' that combines 'the tradition of social realism and the tradition of Gothic thrillers' (2021: 20).

In the foreword to *Norwegian Nightmares: The Horror Cinema of a Nordic Country* (2022), Christer Bakke Andresen explains how film genres such as horror had 'never taken permanent hold at any point in Norway's cinema history, until shortly after 2000' (xii). Some have connected this void to the region's tradition of public service broadcasting. While Eva Novrup Redvall ascribes the success of social realism in recent Nordic television drama to the public service obligation to represent 'national life and current conflicts of the people' alongside limited budgets that 'creates an obvious inclination to turn the gaze towards real or naturalist settings rather than bounding expensive sets' (2013: 44), Gunnar Iversen explains how a 'long and coherent horror tradition' in the Nordic countries has been elusive, namely because government financing policies and strict film censorship have discouraged a film genre that was long viewed as morally outré (2016: 332-333). Consequently, only a handful of horror films were produced in the Nordic region until the 1990s with Victor Sjöström's *Körkarlen* (1921, *The Phantom Carriage*), Benjamin Christensen's *Häxan* (1922, *Witchcraft through the Ages*), and Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932, *Vampire*) as the most well-known exceptions.

Although Finnish literary history evolved in different linguistic and national circumstances (Mehtonen & Savolainen 2013), the late nineteenth century saw the similar consolidation of a strong realist tradition associated with writers such as Juhani Aho, Maria Jotuni, and Elisabeth Järnefelt and her circle of pioneering Finnish realists. Minna Canth was especially influential with socially critical dramas and prose that addressed issues such as poverty, women's rights, religious hypocrisy, and social inequality. Like the writers associated with the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough, Canth insisted that literature should confront the social problems of the day rather than retreat into romantic idealisation. Indeed, according to the Finnish literary critic Toini Havu, Brandes was Canth's 'lähin oppi-isänsä' – her 'closest intellectual parent' (1997: xi) – and in 1887 she translated the first part of his *Emigrantlitteraturen* into Finnish, helping to disseminate Brandesian realism beyond Denmark and Norway.

As in the rest of the Nordic region, however, the increasing authority of realism had the effect of marginalising literary forms associated with the supernatural, the

Gothic, and the fantastic. As Juha Raipola observes, Finnish literary culture has long been shaped by ‘the conventions of realist writing that have dominated the Finnish literary canon’ (2025: 114). The same observations appear in discussions of contemporary Finnish literature, where critics note the persistence of ‘the tradition of realist writing which has dominated [the] Finnish literary scene for a long time’ (Samola & Roine 2016). In Raipola’s account, the prestige attached to mimetic representation and social verisimilitude has therefore tended to position non-realist genres at the margins of the literary field. He further notes that writers working with fantastic or speculative elements have frequently perceived ‘the Finnish expectations of literary realism as restricting’ (Raipola 2025: 114). Likewise, the Finnish author Johanna Sinisalo herself describes how works labelled ‘fantasy’ or ‘science fiction’ risk being met with narrow, dismissive expectations among a broader readership – an attitude that reinforces realism as the default marker of seriousness and credibility in the literary public sphere (Sinisalo 2011). This imbalance is also reflected in the relatively limited body of scholarship devoted specifically to Gothic or horror traditions in Finland. Relatively few studies address these themes directly, among them *Gothic Topographies: Language, Nation Building and ‘Race’* (2013), edited by Päivi Mehtonen and Marti Savolainen, which primarily examines the Gothic as a pan-European phenomenon, but also includes essays on Finnish adaptations of the Gothic tradition, and Pietari Kääpä’s *Ecology and Contemporary Nordic Cinemas: From Nation-building to Ecocosmopolitanism* (2014), which features a chapter on contemporary Norwegian, Finnish, and Icelandic horror films.

Although Sweden has an acknowledged Gothic tradition, unlike its neighbour, which I believe has contributed to it being the most prominent Nordic contributor to horror literature today, it was until only recently a common conception among literary scholars that there was no real horror tradition in Sweden before the nineteenth century. As Yvonne Leffler, one of the first scholars to engage with this particular field,¹¹³ puts it: ‘It is not until Erik Johan Stagnelius, Clas Livijn, and Carl Jonas Love Almqvist that Swedish literature gets more completed examples of horror romanticism’s mystery-making and suggestive storytelling technique’ (2008b: 2).¹¹⁴ While this view was most convincingly reassessed by Mattias Fyhr in 2017, who in his two-volume work *Svensk skräcklitteratur 1 & 2* (2017/2023) demonstrates that Sweden in fact has a long history of Gothic and horror, he also

points out that ‘As recently as 2009, the prevailing view, also among literary scholars, was that Swedish horror literature was born with John Ajvide Lindqvist’ (2017: 9).¹¹⁵

This consensus was partly cultivated by Lindqvist himself when he made the following statement in the slipstream of his debut in 2004: ‘There is almost no horror written in Swedish. Why not? No clue. The fear of the locked, dark room with something crawling in the corner is universal. But until now that room has been in the US or England. Now we are changing that’ (2004: 10).¹¹⁶ Not long after, and spurred on by a well-executed PR-strategy, Lindqvist was marketed as the pioneer of a long-awaited Swedish horror tradition; a self-proclaimed position which surprisingly was not only left undisputed, but also uncritically accumulating in the literary field. As Fyhr continues to demonstrate in *Svensk skräcklitteratur 1*, Lindqvist’s publicity stunt statements were taken at face value and repeated in official publications such as BTJ’s *Svenska samtidsförfattare* (2009), which stated that ‘there was hardly any real tradition of horror writers before him. At least not here in Sweden’ (Engstrand 2009: 17), while the Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet* claimed that Lindqvist’s ‘*Let the Right One in* was the first Swedish novel in the horror genre’ (Mosander 2006).¹¹⁷ Another compelling aspect, also noted by Fyhr, is that the critical success and recognition of Lindqvist’s debut novel *Låt den rätte komma in* (2004, *Let the Right One in* 2007) is significantly attributed to its foundation in social realism (Fyhr 2022: 264).

While the strong tradition of social realism in Nordic literature has contributed to the ongoing marginalisation of fantastical and horror traditions – often dismissing, overlooking or reframing them in more critically accepted genres like children’s literature, crime fiction or psychological thrillers – these genres have never been entirely absent in the Nordic region, but merely perceived as such.

Reader Study: Reading for Realism

While the historical overview above demonstrates the cultural authority of realism in Nordic literary culture, its influence also appears to shape how readers engage with horror texts. Returning to the empirical reader study presented in the previous chapter, the material revealed a distinct mode of reading among participants, who

it turned out were all *reading for realism*. By this, I mean that the modus operandi of the participants' reading practices were motivated and steered by realistic principles. In other words, their reading was driven by realism. In fact, realism permeated their engagement with the text – before, during, and after reading.

More specifically, 'reading for realism' not only reflects the participants' genre or narratological preferences for social realism and the realm of the real, but also shows how they approached literary texts with an expectation of a realistic framework already from the outset. During the readings, the participants seemed driven by a specific pre-existing motivation, or a strong rational impulse, to disclose hidden truths and demystify apparent supernatural events in order to effectively resituate the narrative in the real. This tendency influenced the readers' interpretation of the text; as my study shows, participants went to great lengths, employing complex analytical manoeuvres, to maintain the narration grounded in realism, which ultimately influenced their reading experience.

Between Realism and the Supernatural

After reading two horror short stories and completing individual questionnaires, the participants engaged in a group interview. However, regardless of the question posed, the discussion quickly gravitated towards the tension between realist and supernatural narration. From the outset, a preference for a realistic narration or style – and specifically social realism as an 'artistic current', to paraphrase Roman Jakobson's definition (1987: 20) – was clear among the participants.

Though both stories have supernatural elements, participants soon labelled *Delilas lokker* as realistic and traditional, and therefore a more recognisable horror story, while they considered *Vand* not only fantastical, but too fantastical. As Bjørn noted, 'The one with the scissors [*Delilas lokker*] is more realistic, and therefore I can better familiarise myself with it. The other one [*Vand*] is too spacey' (GD P6). Relatedly, the readers described *Vand* in a range of fantastical terms as 'kind of fantasy', 'close to fantasy', 'Harry Potter-like', 'a bit fairy-like', 'elf-like', 'a fairy tale', 'a fairy tale world', 'surreal', 'like a mushroom trip', 'abstract', 'unreal' and 'strange' (SV R1; GD P8; GD P4; GD P3; SV R5; GD P1; SV R2) – terms which were repeatedly juxtaposed with the preferred realism of *Delilas lokker*: 'It is much easier to understand a man with scissors than boiling water', Bjørn remarks in this

comparison of the male antagonist in *Delilas lokker* to the vengeful animism in *Vand* (GD P6). Emil offers a similar sentiment in the questionnaire: 'I'm probably more into the psychological stories like *The Dice Man* and *American Psycho*, if a story has to have a horrifying effect. Here [*Vand*] it gets a little too unreal with evil wooden monsters and a scalding stream' (SV R5).

The discrepancy between the two horror stories, one being considered realistic, while the other was found to be too supernatural, reveals several important insights. First, it showcases the readers' preference for aesthetic realism over the supernatural, but also how the former is inherently aligned with male antagonism, while the latter is linked to female monstrosity. Second, realism appears to be paramount for the reader's experience of horror. And third, it reveals how the participants engage in two interrelated interpretive performances in order to shoehorn the stories into a realistic framework: one that works to alter, read over, or metaphorise any features of supernatural narration to make them appear more grounded in reality; and one which seeks to demystify, rationalise, and debunk those very same supernatural elements altogether. Both strategies are employed on both short stories, however, more successfully on *Delilas lokker*, which ultimately is considered to be more realistic, more relatable, and more terrifying than *Vand* – an assessment that also reflects gendered expectations, and specifically the tendency to think male antagonism inherently more realistic than female monstrosity.

Realist Interpretive Strategies

As both short stories contain supernatural elements, readers in the study engaged in considerable interpretive work in order to reconcile them with the preferred realist framework. Consequently, in the participants' reading of *Delilas lokker*, occult appearances are downplayed or overlooked while the male antagonist is collectively interpreted as 'a real man'. This realist framing situates the story in a familiar, tangible reality, rendering its horrors more immediate and terrifying. In contrast, some readers approached *Vand* with a social realist interpretive mode to circumvent the text's supernatural components, which elicited feelings of sadness rather than horror. Across the two stories, then, 'reading for realism' operates in two distinct ways: in *Delilas lokker* it amplifies fear by rendering the threat more plausible, while

in *Vand*, it diffuses fear by interpreting the supernatural as metaphorical or symbolic.

One allows for a real monster to appear, the other does not. As Lukas puts it, 'There is more of a monster in the one with the holiday home [*Delilas lokker*], and there is more of a "society as monster" in the one with the sisters [*Vand*], as I read it' (GD P8). Astrid even describes almost instinctively reading *Vand* through a social realist lens: 'I came to read it [*Vand*] more like ... almost with a social realism' (GD P3). Echoing Tom Egil Hverven's reading of the fantastical elements in Knausgård's *Morgenstjernen* as symptoms of mental illness or drug-induced hallucinations, she offers a similar rationalisation for the surreal elements in *Vand*, proposing that the supernatural occurrences could be understood as a traumatic child's coping mechanism: 'I think I experience it as a child's way of channeling something they can't ... they have no other language for it' (GD P3). Astrid, however, speculated that the supernatural events could be explained by hallucinogenic experiences, describing them as kind of 'mushroom-trippy' (GD P3). A comparable strategy is employed by Signe, who remarks 'I think, I put more of a social realist, slightly metaphorical perspective on it' (GD P2). While there is an oxymoronic ring to it, what Signe means is that, in order to read the text through a social realist lens, the supernatural elements must be treated metaphorically rather than literally. When asked whether or not she had already decided on the genre beforehand, she answered: 'Yes, I think so. I think, I was more into the fact that it was a bit of a metaphor ... and then I would think ... that for me, what's most eerie is actually ... the social realist ... that there is evil in the world that is real' (GD P2).

Similar interpretive work goes into the reading of *Delilas lokker*; however, this time a shared interpretation emerges between the participants in the group interview, showcasing how the affective responses of fear or eeriness are highly conditioned by realism. Further, it also emphasises how the 'realness' of the male antagonist is more readily accepted. There appears to be something inherently realistic about 'the man with the scissors' in *Delilas lokker*, while his female counterpart in *Vand* is more likely to be perceived as strange, freakish, and surreal.

Bjørn: But isn't the man with the scissors also a demon? (GD P6)

Frida: Nah, I read it as a real man hiding in the chimney. (GD P1)

Karin: Nooo? Nasty! (GD P4)

[Silence, one participant is looking back through the text]

Signe: Ewww! (GD P2)

Frida: I guess that is why he's all black. (GD P1)

Karin: Yeah, I thought that was a bit of a mysterious element ... the thing about him being all sooty. I thought, is he burned or what is happening? (GD P4)

Frida: Yes, but he's really just sooty because he's been hiding in the chimney. (GD P1)

Karin [covers her face]: No, how creepy! (GD P4)

Niels: Good thing I didn't figure that out when I was reading it. (GD P7)

Emil: No, but fucking disgusting. (GD P5)

Niels: Damn, that's awful! (GD P7)

Frida: It's a good thing we don't have a chimney here. (GD P1)

[Silence]

I: So which character did you find the most terrifying?

Karin: I'm sure we all think it's the man with scissors. (GD P4)

Emil: Yes, now. (GD P5)

Karin: Now? (GD P4)

Emil: Well ... before, when I thought he was some kind of demon or shadow thing-like ... I was kind of like, oh well ... but now that it's a man, it is super horrifying! (GD P5)

[Everyone laughs]

Karin: Well, it's just my interpretation (GD P4)

Here Frida's account of her own understanding of the text – in itself a testament to a performative 'reading for realism' – evolves into an interactive, shared interpretation. Rather than accepting the premise of the text and its more fantastical or demonic representation of the male antagonist in *Delilas lokker*, Frida grounds the figure in physical reality, imagining him not as a supernatural presence, but as a tangible threat: 'a real man hiding in the chimney' (GD P1). In doing so, she makes use of the narrative gaps left by the text to steer it in a more realistic direction, turning ambiguous details into rational evidence of human presence. For example, where some of the other readers thought the perpetrator's blackened appearance was a mysterious marker of his otherworldliness – a ghost rising from the ashes of the fire that killed him – Frida pragmatically attributes it to soot, explaining that 'he's really just sooty because he's been hiding in the chimney' (GD P1). This interpretive move is crucial, as it repositions the source of fear from the realm of the fantastic to the disturbingly real. Her realist reading renders the threat immediate and credible, transforming eerie ambiguity into corporeal horror.

In line with Wolfgang Iser's understanding of reader-response theory (1974), Frida can be seen to engage actively with the text's 'empty spaces' – corresponding to Ingarden's *Unbestimmtheitsstellen* – which activates the reader, whose task is to fill in the narrative gaps with meaningful content. Following Iser, reading is not so much about the extraction of an immanent message that already exists in the text, but about the meaning-making that occurs in the interplay between reader and text. In Frida's case, the apparent supernatural implications of the text itself are disregarded and overridden by the meanings she co-constructs. This approach resonates with Stanley Fish's concept of reader response, which shifts the focus away from hermeneutics and textual fidelity to emphasise the reader's active role in shaping meaning instead. In fact, Fish does not believe that 'meaning' should be found in the text, but rather in what the reader does with the text: 'Interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems: they make them' (1980: 327).

Interestingly, upon sharing her reading experience, what begins as Frida's individual interpretation gradually evolves into a collective one. The group interview takes the form of what Fish calls a social *interpretive community*, where the text contributes with the words, the community with the meaning (1980). The

interpretation first introduced by Frida is quickly taken up by others in the group, eventually becoming so integrated into the discussion that Karin even refers to it as her own interpretation, stating ‘Well, it’s just *my* interpretation’ (GD P4, my emphasis). However, what is particularly interesting is not merely how the participants collectively construct and rewrite the text in a shared interpretation, but how this communal co-reading also reshapes the group’s emotional response to the story itself. Emil explicitly reflects on this shift in perception, explaining that when he initially interpreted the figure as a demon, he felt relatively detached – ‘oh well’ – but once the possibility of a human perpetrator emerged, ‘it is super horrifying!’ (GD P5). The group’s shared reading results in a new, shared emotional response, illustrating how the realist interpretation introduced earlier not only constructs meaning, but also acts as a catalyst for the group’s intensified experience of fear.

Through this communal reinterpretation, feelings of fear are mobilised and intensified via an external and social outside-in, rather than an internal and personal inside-out, movement. Fish’s interpretive community therefore corresponds to Ahmed’s concept of affective community, whereby emotions are always socially conditioned and circulate *between* rather than *in* subjects: ‘Fear does not come from within the subject, nor does it reside in its object: we are not afraid of others because they are fearsome. Through the circulation of signs of fear, the black other “becomes” fearsome’ (Ahmed 2004b: 127).

Such a circulation of fear is exactly what happened among the participants. Following Ahmed, it is not so much the object of fear itself, ‘the man with the scissors’, that creates sensations of horror, nor is it something that already exists in the reading subjects. Rather, fear arises in the midst of the readers’ conversation, through the sharing of ‘signs of fear’ – in this case deeply indebted to reality – which circulates between the readers and ultimately produces the object of fear: ‘the real man’. During this shared reading, a shared feeling of fear materialises and accumulates between the participants. Just as Fish believes that shared reading makes the text, Ahmed argues that a shared feeling makes the object of fear. The dialogue above attests to both claims, where both meaning and emotion are co-created and tied to reality, culminating in a powerful, collective experience of horror. Thus, shared reading anchored in a realist interpretation mode does not

merely alter the understanding of the story's events, but reshapes the entire affective landscape of the reading experience.

Demystification

In addition to shared interpretation or 'reading for realism', the participants also employed another strategy, or impulse perhaps, that sought to demystify by dissecting and deciphering the text. While this approach essentially undermines fantastical features and eradicates any experience of enchantment, Felski explains how this critically attuned reading practice has become the 'holy grail' of literary studies (2008: 2). Deeply engaged in 'the act of reading and none to the objects read', critical reading devotes itself again and again to what Paul Ricoeur calls 'the hermeneutics of suspicion' where the reader acts almost like a detective, seeking to decode the mysteries of the text – always searching for clues with the sole purpose of revealing hidden truths (3).

Brandes similarly urged modern novelists to avoid arbitrariness and demanded that supernatural elements be excluded or exposed in their constructed character. By this imperative, authors had to assume the role of scientists rather than creative artists, while readers had to take on the role as analysts rather than gullible consumers. Thus, like analytical detectives, the participants' reading for realism can be understood as a 'tracing-and-exposure project', as Kosofsky Sedgwick puts it (2003: 124), aiming to make sense of the senseless, disarm the supernatural, and restore reality as we know it. In fact, Bjørn describes his reading of *Vand* in direct alignment with the detective metaphor.

It was more like, perhaps similar to you [looks at Signe], like 'Now I have to find out what the hell ... is up with that girl'. I mean, what was it? It was more like that, perhaps a curiosity, rather than 'now the heart rate rises and now there is a thrill' ... it was more like, well, that you wanted to solve it, like, what is going on? (GD P6)

In addition to the interpretative strategy that works to confirm what is already known, Bjørn also expresses a desire to know, which in his own words derails any sensation of horror or thrill. His rational curiosity prevents the narrative from

generating fear based on supernatural happenings and emphasises a distant engagement with the story rather than emotional immersion. A similar outcome applies to Karin's reading, who explains how she approached the text with a curiosity, scavenging the text for answers: 'I had to go back into the text and read some passages of the text again, so I was really drawn to it as well ... but in a different way ... it wasn't because I thought it was uncanny, but more like ... what is going on here?' (GD P4). Once again, this approach highlights the shift from a fear-driven emotional response to a more inquiry-based engagement, where the reader's focus is on unravelling the narrative rather than being afraid.

Relatedly, some participants also attempt to tackle *Vand* with sensible explanations to keep these seemingly supernatural disturbances at bay. In this regard, Signe tried to explain away the strangeness of the female character Luna by suggesting different diagnoses: 'I thought that she had like ... I don't know ... cancer or anorexia or something, that there was a reason they had packed her away in the attic, so like ... well, so I was in doubt all the time, I didn't quite understand the point ... I ended up sort of like, what was the actual purpose of it? Was it real or wasn't it real?' (GD P2). By attributing Luna's isolation and ghostly characteristics to conditions such as cancer or anorexia, Signe seems to domesticate the uncanny, transforming what might otherwise be perceived as supernatural horror into something recognisably human and physical. Yet, as her own words reveal, this rationalisation remains incomplete and unsatisfying, leaving her suspended in doubt. Signe's experience therefore reflects what Felski has identified as the two main charges against enchantment: 'that it deludes and that it disables' (2008: 74).

As this enquiry reveals, the readers' strategies of reading for realism – including demystification, rationalisation or realist interpretation – proved less effective or applicable to *Vand*, partly due to its female monster and perceived supernatural universe. This, in turn, seemed to undermine both its literary value and fear factor in the eyes of the readers, especially when compared to the more realistic, credible, frightening, and meaningful *Delilas lokker*, which features a male monster. However, while Felski concludes 'this desire to purge aesthetic experience of its enigmatic and irrational qualities merely has the effect of driving them

underground' (2008: 54), this inquiry also shows how readerly attempts to rationalise the uncanny sometimes fail to fully dispel its lingering strangeness.

Folkloric Enchantment

Having examined how realism shapes both Nordic literary traditions and contemporary reading practices, I now turn to the aesthetic and generic tensions when realism intersects with supernatural, folkloric, and speculative narrative modes. Although, as Yvonne Leffler notes, 'realism and naturalism have been keywords in Scandinavian literary studies and criticism since the beginning of the nineteenth century' (2008a: 49), Nordic literary traditions are equally shaped by a romanticised view of nature and a deep connection to regional folklore.¹¹⁸ In *Upplysningstidens romantik* (1918–1920), the Swedish literary historian Martin Lamm presents romanticism and realism as dialectical forces, arguing that realism in Nordic literature carries an undercurrent of romantic or imaginative elements.¹¹⁹ Moreover, he identifies a distinct Nordic tendency to preserve elements of fairy tales and folklore in realistic narratives, highlighting Carl Jonas Love Almqvist's authorship as a key example of how utopian and fantastical features can be integrated into realist prose.¹²⁰

In doing so, Lamm challenges the notion that the Nordic literary tradition is wholly dominated by realism in its narrative style, value system, or readership. Instead, he argues that realism did not arise in opposition to Romanticism, but rather as a continuation, with Romantic themes continuing to influence the narrative. If so, Nordic literature is not solely defined by secularity and realism, but is equally – and sometimes dialectically – related to a romantic perception of Nordic nature, folklore, and the supernatural. In a fitting parallel, Brandes later admitted that he himself, the archenemy of Romanticism, was in fact a romantic at heart (Nolin 1965: 64).

One author who encapsulated this apparent duplicity early on was Brandes' contemporary, the Norwegian author Arne Garborg. A prominent contributor to the Modern Breakthrough, Garborg was known for his naturalist fiction and outspoken social criticism. It therefore baffled his contemporaries when he published *Haugtussa* in 1895: an epic cycle of poems about a psychic young girl,

who communicates with the dead and encounters elves and trolls and other supernatural creatures from Nordic folklore before descending into Hel – the afterlife in Norse mythology. Most of Garborg's previous work had been realistic accounts of social issues, including criticism of Christianity, in compliance with the Brandesian dictum.¹²¹ *Haugtussa*, however, stood apart because of its strange and unconventional form, fantastic uncertainty, uncanny use of folklore, and religious reflections.

The sudden shift in Garborg's style and genre has been vigorously debated. Literary scholar Dirk Johannsen argues that it was motivated by his friendship with folklorist Moltke Moe, who in 1888 proposed that fiction and religion were 'two sides of the same coin'; or rather – as pointed out by Johannsen – that mythical narratives and supernatural concepts serve as 'poetic roots' (2016: 593). Moreover, Moe – along with other folklorists – identified folkloric tales as a considerable provider of a progressive poetic reservoir that could fuel a 'literature of the future' (Hansson 1890: 353). Fast-forwarding to the present, one cannot help but wonder whether Knausgård, drawing from this idea, was inspired by his compatriot Arne Garborg's dramatic shift from realism to the fantastic when he wrote *Morgenstjernen* – a novel equally rife with religious symbolism and supernatural elements.

While Garborg tried to mediate Brandes' sharp divide between religion and realism, Knausgård appears to do the same, but in the context of the contemporary Anthropocene, where biblical doomsday prophecies intersect with climate apocalypse. Much like Moltke Moe's ideas of 'poetic roots', Knausgård's novel – as the earlier analysis of *Morgenstjernen* also demonstrates – illustrates how folkloric and religious imaginaries are not merely naïve-regressive nonsense but can serve as a unique resource for addressing both present and future issues facing the world. Just because tales of wonder, folkloric myths and ecohorror narratives employ surreal supernatural elements that exceed our modern understanding of reality, it does not mean these art forms cannot offer valuable truths about the actual state of the real world. As Simon Hay emphasises, supernatural narratives 'consistently engage with the same questions of epistemology, representation and meaning that realist novels ask' (2011: 229).

Even in a narratological sense, as Tzvetan Todorov has already accounted for, fantastic literature is anchored in the real. The fantastic requires an establishment

of a rational worldview, which constitutes the known, as a baseline. Only when such a familiar and realistic starting point has been established, can the appearance of the supernatural truly disturb our expectations, which then brings us to falter between reality and the surreal – a wavering between a welcomed natural explanation and a reluctant acceptance of the unnatural, invalidating our perception of the world and its natural laws (1975: 33). Without reality, the fantastic cannot exist; yet, without the fantastic, one might add, reality cannot be transformed. Should progressive literature be confined to describing the given reality, as Brandes proclaimed, or should it rather, as Moe advocates, explore alternative realities? While *reading for realism* illustrates life ‘as it is’ in order to mobilise criticism, *reading for enchanting realities* explores life ‘as it could be’, making alternative suggestions for constructive change.

Enchanting Encounters with Reality

Somewhere between realism and a romanticised folklore tradition – both paradoxically foundational to the region’s national identity – Nordic ecohorror emerges. This genre, with its folkloric enchantment and the horrors of real-world environmental crisis, fuses two narrative styles – critical realism and the supernatural – into a form of storytelling that not only critiques the sociopolitical failures of the Anthropocene, but also reimagines human–nature relations while suggesting alternative ways of engaging with ecological realities.¹²²

The fusion of realism and enchantment allows for a reconciliation between rational, progressive worldviews and the imaginative possibilities of the mysterious and supernatural. Michael Saler refers to such a genre constellation – ‘characterized by a fascination with spiritualism and the occult, a vogue for non-Western religions and art, and a turn to aestheticism, neopaganism, and celebrations of the irrational will’ – as a form of rational enchantment since it seeks to ‘reconcile enchantment with the rational and secular tenets of modernity’ (2004: 139). While folkloric and romanticised narration has often been accused of being regressively outdated and beguiling, others maintain that ‘northern realism is an exhausted tradition’ (Marris 2001: 49) that, too, has become tainted by its affinity for ‘backward looking elegies, steeped in masculinist ideologies of the past’ (Dave 2011: 17). In contrast, Nordic ecohorror – in its hybrid form – demonstrates how the fusion of critical realism and

fantastical possibilities can evolve into ‘a literature of the future’ with significant ecomaterialist potential.¹²³ As the Finnish author Emmi Itäranta similarly stresses, ‘fiction is not separate from reality’ but provides ‘a very real space to explore what matters: our grief and fear and sense of loss, as well as our hope and dreams of what we can still save’ (2021). From this perspective, speculative and fantastical narratives do not simply escape reality, but offer imaginative arenas in which ecological anxieties, uncertainties, and ethical dilemmas of the future can be explored. In the literary scholar Marek Oziewicz’s terms, ecohorror and speculative fiction constitute ‘a global reaction of human creative imagination struggling to envision a possible future at the time of a major transition from local to global humanity’ (2017: 1).

The interplay between realism and the supernatural also lends narrative credibility to fantastical elements by grounding them in a recognisable social reality. As Saler points out, the intertwining of realism and enchantment – a defining feature of Nordic ecohorror – can be likened to the ‘hoaxes’ used by Lovecraft ‘to describe his realistic tales of frightening yet wondrous creatures who invade our world from other dimensions of time and space’ (2004: 140). Lovecraft himself describes how this fusion of realism and enchantment allows him to write fantastical tales in a rationalist age.

[I get a] big kick . . . from taking reality just as it is – accepting all the limitations of the most orthodox science – and then permitting my symbolizing faculty to build outward from the existing facts; rearing a structure of indefinite promise and possibility. . . But the whole secret of the kick is that I know damn well it isn’t so. I’m probably trying to have my cake and eat it at the same time – to get the intoxication of a sense of cosmic contact and significance as the theists do, and yet to avoid the ignorant ostrich-act whereby they cripple their vision and secure the desiderate results. (1971: 140)

Here, Lovecraft explains how his ‘rational enchanted’ storytelling provides a method to ground his fiction in realism while simultaneously pushing beyond its limits. This approach allows him to explore the ‘indefinite promise and possibilities’ of enchantment without abandoning the critical realism necessary ‘to avoid ignorant ostrich-act’, thereby unlocking great literary potency.

Moreover, this hybrid narrative strategy enables horror narratives to gain acceptance in the Nordic tradition of social realism. In this sense, the Nordic ecohorror genre has found a similar loophole to the one Lovecraft describes – a way to integrate horror features into the Nordic stronghold of realism. As both Olu Jenzen (2013) and Mattias Fyhr (2022) have already pointed out about the critically acclaimed novels of John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Lätt den rätte komma in* (2004, *Let the Right One In* 2007), Sara Elfgren and Mats Strandberg's *Cirkeln* (2011, *The Circle* 2012), Stefan Spjut's *Stallo* (2012, *Stallo* 2015) and *Stalpi* (2017), and Peter Høeg's *Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* (1992, *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* 1993), horror narratives must be fused with social realism in order to gain acceptance in the Nordic literary scene.

The pattern is also evident in Nordic horror cinema. Tommy Gustafsson and Pietari Kääpä (2015) note that films such as the Finnish *Valkoinen peura* (1952, *The White Reindeer*) and the Norwegian *De dodes tjern* (1958, *Lake of the Dead* 2022) achieved both commercial success and critical acclaim because they blended subtle horror features with more realistic elements of ethnography and crime fiction. Olu Jenzen extends this observation to television, noting that von Trier's miniseries *Riget* (1994, *The Kingdom*) fuses ghostly activity with Dogme 95-style filmmaking and a sharp critique of the Nordic welfare system (2013). Taken together, these examples illustrate how storytelling that combines realist aesthetics with supernatural elements has helped pave the way for the growing prominence of ecohorror in the Nordic region.

Another consequence of this hybrid form is that it dramatises the entanglement of human and nonhuman life. By combining urgent ecocritical concerns, such as climate change, environmental responsibility, and social justice, with elements of the supernatural, the genre renders these entanglements visible, lending them cultural relevance, critical force, and a haunting glimpse into possible futures. Rasmus Horskjær, film commissioner at the Danish Film Institute, affirms this new tendency in an interview with *Variety*.

A few years ago everyone was talking about Nordic Noir, thanks to movies like 'The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo' or drama series like 'Borgen'. Now we're seeing the 'Nordic Twilight' movement rising with supernatural/fantasy stories, horror thrillers that are not made in a Hollywood way ... Our genre films are

slower, stranger and artsy – mixing the codes of genre movies with traditional arthouse European elements and Scandinavia’s tradition of social realism. (Keslassy 2014)

Additionally, while this blending of realism with a sense of enchantment or wonder means ecohorror fiction has gained acceptance on the Nordic art scene, it also enables the genre to generate a more profound existential impact by encouraging readers to extend their consideration and recognition beyond the human. As the literary scholar Irina Souch writes, a ‘mixture of realist and fantastic genres can be productively employed to point out the unsustainability of industrially overdeveloped Western lifestyles, and to teach viewers lessons in ecological thinking’ (2020: 111). By unifying plausible environmental threats with supernatural horror and folkloric imaginations, Nordic ecohorror attempts to dramatise the complex entanglement of human and nonhuman lives, drawing attention to the existence and experiences of a plurality of ontological realities – thus potentially encouraging recognition, care and ethical responsibility towards more-than-human life. This resonates with Moe’s early assertion – preceding Bennett’s theory of vibrant matter – that folkloric tales contain a useful anti-hierarchical impulse.

Characteristic to myths and fairy tales, to folk belief and all of that, is the ongoing conflict with all the laws of logic and experience, a mad inversion of all of reality ... All of nature, animate or inanimate, is intellectually on equal terms with mankind. (1926: 265)

By uniting regional folklore with a heightened sensitivity to nonhuman entities, realist narratives inflected by an aesthetics of enchantment may help cultivate a deeper ecological consciousness – one that is further intensified by bringing the region’s national identity, deeply rooted in Nordic folk religion, myth, and nature, into play while also encouraging readers to extend empathy beyond the human. A similar narrative strategy can be observed in the works of John Ajvide Lindqvist, who describes how grounding supernatural elements in a believable realist framework allows readers gradually to empathise with beings that initially appear strange or inhuman: ‘Because of the extreme or supernatural elements in my stories, I strive to make everything as believable as possible. Then I sneak in other elements

a bit at a time, until you as reader or spectator find yourself accepting and even rooting for creatures that you would never meet in your everyday life' (Lindqvist quoted in *Border* press kit, 2018: 10).

Beyond fostering empathy with nonhuman beings, the aesthetics of enchantment also has an epistemological function. Just as religion may help us to exist in a world we do not fully comprehend, ecohorror can help us engage with a reality marked by great environmental uncertainty and unfathomable strangeness. As Amitav Ghosh argues in *The Great Derangement* (2016), the conventions of modern literary realism have often struggled to register the scale and improbability of climate change, prompting writers to explore alternative narrative forms capable of engaging with planetary transformation. In this sense, ecohorror can help us to understand that we in fact do not understand. The supernatural elements of ecohorror not only challenge humanity's perception of reality – which, from an ecological point of view, is urgently needed – but also expose it as just that: a perception. This, as Felski also observes, is where the power of enchantment lies: 'Enchantment matters because one reason that people turn to works of art is to be taken out of themselves, to be pulled into an altered state of consciousness' (2008: 76).

This epistemological dimension is particularly significant in the context of the Anthropocene, where environmental transformation often exceeds the explanatory limits of conventional realism. In the face of today's environmental and ecopolitical challenges, uncertainty has become a constant just as our sense of reality and the known is constantly disrupted. This instability makes it difficult to completely dismiss the eerie entities Nordic ecohorror envisions – whether they are retaliatory eco-viruses, fungal monsters, or otherworldly manifestations of an abused nature. As VanderMeer explains, drawing from the weird naturalism of his own work, we inhabit 'an alien planet filled with incredibly sophisticated organisms that we only partially understand ... our so-called smart-phones and other advanced technology is incredibly dull and primitive next to the diversity and intensity of other life on Earth' (*Weird Fiction Review* 2014). In these words, VanderMeer highlights the humbling reality that the world, and the organisms in it, surpasses human understanding and defies our conventional categories of knowledge, making our preconceived ideas of what classifies as realistic or not rather obsolete.

The agenda of Nordic ecohorror therefore also correlates with *speculative realism*, a philosophical movement whose main aim, as formulated by Graham Harman (2012), is to do away with ‘correlationism’ – the assumption that everything in this world must be understood in relation to human perception of reality. In this framework, Harman also turns to H. P. Lovecraft, whose artistic style presents a maddening and uncanny reality that exists beyond the one we normally confide in. Lovecraftian literature, particularly his descriptions of the monster Cthulhu, confronts readers with the horrible, unknowable and traumatic strangeness of reality – pushing against the limits of basic rational categorisation and revealing a reality that neither science nor human cognition can fully comprehend. In Harman’s words, the true horror in Lovecraft’s writings lies in the realisation that ‘reality itself is weird because reality itself is incommensurate with any attempt to represent or measure it’ (2012: 51). Rather than scientific inquiry, Harman suggests that it is through literary speculation and imagination that we engage most meaningfully with reality: ‘When it comes to grasping reality, illusion and innuendo are the best we can do’ (51).

This corresponds with the way Nordic ecohorror deploys supernatural horror to critically engage with (future) realities, offering an eerie yet plausible depiction of an unstable world beyond human control. While social realism is primarily critical of social injustice, Nordic ecohorror is sceptical of reality itself – or, to use Jenzen’s words, ‘the paranormal in social realism gives the genre a way of relating critically to realism’ (2013: 232). By blurring the boundaries between the real and the unreal, the strange realities of ecohorror do more than depict environmental catastrophe – they unsettle our very perception of reality, forcing us to acknowledge the instability of the world we inhabit. In doing so, the genre mirrors Lovecraft’s unsettling vision of a universe indifferent to human existence, where horror lies not in the supernatural itself, but in the realisation that reality is far stranger than we dare to imagine.

Enchanted Readers

To conclude this discussion, I return once more to the reader study to demonstrate how the participants, despite their strong affinity for realism, were nonetheless captivated by the folkloric and supernatural elements of the stories. As Frida notes,

‘there is just something fascinating about the more unnatural creatures, such as the Shadow Man and Nøkken’ (GD P1). This fascination was articulated not merely as a thematic interest, but also emerged in participants’ descriptions of their reading experience. Several readers said the stories gradually drew them into an unsettling atmosphere, describing how they became ‘intrigued’ as the narrative unfolded (GD P5) or how they were ‘very captivated by the story’ (SV R1) or ‘lulled into’ the unfolding narrative world (GD P7).

Such remarks point towards a mode of engagement that resonates with what Rita Felski describes as literary enchantment: a state in which readers find themselves so absorbed in an aesthetic object that they feel ‘sucked in, swept up, spirited away’ (2008: 55). In such moments, the reader experiences a form of aesthetic absorption – being drawn into the narrative in a way that is affective, immersive, and difficult to reduce to detached interpretation. In the reader study, for example, Frida described how the story immediately captured her attention, explaining that she felt ‘pulled right into it’ (GD P1). Such remarks suggest that the readers’ engagement with the text is not limited to analytical interpretation, but also involves moments of immersive absorption, where the narrative temporarily suspends their otherwise dominant mode of reading for realism.

While Felski’s concept of enchantment is not tied specifically to supernatural narratives, the responses in the present reading study suggest that the participants’ sense of enchantment was often ignited by the uncanny or supernatural elements of the stories. As Astrid noted: ‘I was captivated by the absurdity of it’ (GD P3). Even when participants expressed scepticism towards overtly supernatural explanations, the fantastical and unexplained aspects of the narratives appeared nevertheless to function as catalysts for the readers’ immersion, drawing them into the imaginative atmosphere of the texts. As Frida put it: ‘It was more mysterious, so I found myself drawn in by it’ (GD P1). This also points to the general tension between the readers’ instinctive proclivity for the real, as discussed above, and their more reluctant yet intrigued fascination with the supernatural. As Niels observes: ‘There is something alluring about the unnatural and that which cannot be explained – and actually also that which can be explained’ (SV R3).

This ambivalent response closely resembles Saler’s notion of ‘rational enchantment’, where readers can experience wonder in fiction while remaining

critically aware of its fictional status (2004: 139). From this perspective, enchantment does not necessarily oppose realism as such, but rather *interrupts* the interpretive impulse to immediately explain or demystify the strange. Yet Saler's concept also implies the reverse movement: for readers, experiences of wonder and enchantment are not confined to the supernatural but may equally arise in the realm of the real.

A similar idea is articulated in *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (2001), where Jane Bennett, in dialogue with Max Weber, challenges the common view of modernity as disenchanted and overly rationalised. She argues instead that modern life remains charged with wonder, surprise, and affective attachments. Crucially, Bennett contends that the decline of divine authority in modern society does not mean enchantment has vanished; rather, it has become secularised. In her view, wonder continues to emerge through sensory and joyful encounters with the material world, and she even advocates for cultivating new forms of enchantment – found in everything from animal hybrids and scientific photographs to Kafka's writings – as a means of promoting a more affirmative engagement with reality.

Bennett's vision of a secularised, affective enchantment therefore resonates not only with Moe's view of folklore as a poetic and epistemological resource – both suggesting that enchantment, far from obsolete, continues to shape how we relate to reality – but also with the responses observed in the reading study, where participants describe experiences of wonder emerging not only from supernatural elements, but also from the emotional depth, personal resonance, and narrative complexity of the stories. This sense of absorption often emerged through sensory and affective forms of engagement: Participant Niels described how 'something happened in my body' as the narrative intensified (GD P7), while also emphasising how vividly he could visualise the scenes unfolding before him, stating that he could 'see the elements' and imagine 'how things happened' as he read (GD P7). Similarly, Frida emphasised the story's atmospheric quality in the questionnaire, noting that 'the story is very atmospheric, and throughout you sense that something is not quite as it should be' (SV R1).

Such remarks suggest that readers were drawn into a heightened attentiveness to the story's atmosphere and sensory details, experiencing a form of aesthetic absorption that does not necessarily depend on a commitment to the supernatural.

Instead, enchantment derives from narrative mood and affective involvement rather than supernatural conviction, aligning closely with Bennett's understanding of enchantment as a secularised mode of wonder embedded in ordinary aesthetic experience (2001). Moreover, this reflects the central tension observed throughout the study: that enchantment arises not in opposition to realism, but often through it, revealing the real and the imagined as overlapping spaces where modern forms of wonder continue to unfold.

Just as critical realism and enchantment can coexist in ecohorror artworks, they can also coexist as two parallel modes in the act of reading. This duality offers a response to critics who view enchantment as uncritical or dangerously naive. As Felski argues, readers are often given far too little credit: 'Even as we are enchanted, we remain aware of our condition of enchantment, without such knowledge diminishing or diluting the intensity of our involvement' (2008: 74). She describes this as a kind of double consciousness, because 'Even as we are bewitched, possessed, emotionally overwhelmed, we know ourselves to be immersed in an imaginary spectacle: we experience art in a state of double consciousness' (74). In a similar vein, Saler introduces the concept of 'ironic imagination', whereby readers can immerse themselves in wonder-inducing narratives while remaining aware that they are engaging with fictional make-believe: 'Ideally, ironic imagination promises a way to experience wonders and marvels while avoiding enchantment's potential to beguile' (2004: 139).

In this light, while participants in the reading study primarily engaged in a 'reading for realism' – seeking to debunk supernatural elements and thereby diminish sensations of horror – they also exhibited moments of double-conscious engagement. Signe, for example, describes *Vand* as 'real and not real' (GD P2), while Astrid characterises the antagonist in *Delilas lokker* as 'both metaphorical and incredibly real' (SD P3). Karin captures the interplay of realism and unreality particularly well: 'It may well be that the figures are spirits and unreal, but the death anxiety itself and the killing itself are described so vividly that it becomes real' (GD P4). In other words, even when a narrative is surreal or speculative, it can still evoke genuine affective responses tied to real-life concerns, such as 'the fear of death', and in doing so, interfere with the reader's perception of reality – echoing Harman's interpretation of Lovecraft's aesthetic vision, where the readers are

pushed to confront the unknowable and unsettling limits of human understanding (2012). These modes of reading are not mutually exclusive; rather, they can coexist and even amplify one another. In this way, the participants demonstrate a double consciousness, where both critical realism and enchantment coexist in the act of reading, amplifying one another and deepening the emotional and existential engagement with both the imaginary narrative and lived reality.

That said, while I am sympathetic to Felski's efforts to credit readers with greater interpretive agency, I believe she occasionally overstates their critical awareness. Despite the participants' perceptiveness, there were contradictions throughout the study. For example, while they unanimously praised *Delilas lokker* for its recognisable structure and psychological realism – describing it as more credible and uncanny – they spent 78 per cent of the interview discussing *Vand*, which they ostensibly appreciated less because of its supernatural and folkloric content. This suggests a deeper and perhaps less consciously acknowledged engagement with *Vand*, likely driven by its perceived supernatural elements and the enchantment they elicited. Even when reading for realism there remains space for an undercurrent of mystery and enchantment.

Thus while there is an assumption that realism continues to dominate the literary landscape of the Nordic region – among scholars, critics, and lay readers alike – there remains a subtle yet enduring fascination with the fantastical, the folkloric, and the more-than-human. As Martin Lamm observed a century ago, this attraction continues to pulse through Nordic literature today, captivating audiences with its productive blend of the real and the fantastic. Nordic ecohorror, as a genre, bridges the gap between these seemingly opposing tendencies by fusing ecocritical concerns with supernatural horror, drawing on both realist imperatives and a diehard national-romantic longing for enchantment. In doing so, it creates a hybrid space where the socially relevant and the speculative imaginary coexist, and where enchantment and critique are not oppositional but complementary – pointing towards new literary possibilities. Most importantly, Nordic ecohorror does not seek to resolve the tension between realist form and the aesthetics of enchantment, but rather to explore the generative potential that arises when these two currents intersect, offering a more complex and layered way of experiencing the world – one

that resonates with the uncertainties and entanglements of modern life and reflects our evolving relationship with nature and the speculative futures that lie ahead.

PART THREE

ECOTROPES ANALYSED

Folk Ecohorror, Arctic Ecohorror,
and Body Ecohorror

7. Folk Ecohorror: Pagan Nature Worship and Nordic Folklore

I now turn to the ecotrope analyses based on close readings of literature, film, and television. As outlined in the introduction, an ecotrope refers to a recurring narrative configuration in which environmental imaginaries and cultural meanings intersect in ecohorror texts. The first of the ecotropes to be considered is *folk ecohorror* and designates those works that draw specifically on folklore, myth, and rural cosmologies to imagine nature as an enchanted yet menacing force. Drawing on the established folk horror subgenre – where folklore is mobilised to evoke dread, disorientation, and a sense of foreboding – Nordic folk ecohorror shifts focus to ecomythological representations of nature.¹²⁴ Here, nature is imagined not merely as a setting or backdrop, but as a sacred and supernatural force deeply intertwined with local myth, folklore, superstition, and tradition. In a Nordic context, this ecotrope connects to region-specific rural landscapes and their historical associations with Norse mythology and ancestral belief systems.

The folk ecohorror ecotrope is particularly evident in Nordic ecohorror literature and media through the revival of regional folk figures and mythological archetypes. Trolls appear prominently in Stefan Spjut's *Stallo* (2012, *Stallo* 2015), Ajvide Lindqvist's short story *Gräns* (2006, *The Border* 2013), Johanna Sinisalo's Finlandia Prize-winning *Ennen päivänlaskua ei voi* (2000, *Not Before Sundown* 2003), Rasmus Daugbjerg's *Troll* (2022, 'Troll'), and the Norwegian films *Trollhunter* (2010) and *Troll* (2022). Changelings are central in the Icelandic Netflix series *Katla* (2021) and Charlotte Weitze's novel *Bjergtaget* (1999, 'Taken by the Mountain'), while pixies and elves feature in Peter Fröberg Idlin's *Nidamörkur* (2020, 'Darkest Night') and the Danish Netflix series *Nisser* (2021, *Elves*). The skogsrå, or forest spirits, are explored in the Swedish television series *Jordskott* (2015–2017, *Jordskott: The Roots*

of *Evil*), the horror films *Vittra* (2012, 'Wither') and *Huldra: Lady of the Forest* (2016), Lars Landgren's novel *Ljusnan du mörka* (2021, 'Ljusnan, Thou Dark One'), and the Norwegian horror films *Thale* (2012) and *Skyggernes Dal* (2017, *Valley of Shadows*). The nixie – a water spirit – haunts Frida Arwen Rosesund's *Näckens döttrar* (2017, 'Daughters of the Nix'), while witches feature prominently in Mats Strandberg and Sara Bergmark's *Cirkeln* (2011, *The Circle* 2012), Olga Ravn's *Voksbarne* (2023, *The Wax Child* 2025), Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009), and Joachim von Trier's *Carrie*-inspired horror film *Thelma* (2017). Notably, many of the folkloric figures assume feminine forms, highlighting the recurring convergence of ecological disturbance and feminine monstrosity in Nordic ecohorror narratives.

Beyond the narrative and symbolic archive of folklore and myth, the folk ecohorror ecotrope also operates through narratives shaped by nature-based spirituality and pagan belief systems. These narratives reflect a fascination with pre-Christian cosmologies and environmental mysticism, often portraying nature as a sacred or divine force in accordance with animistic worldviews. Such examples include Matias Faldbakken's *Vi er fem* (2019, 'We Are Five'), Knausgård's novel *Morgenstjernen* (2020, *The Morning Star* 2021), the Danish Netflix series *Equinox* (2020), and even the British novel *The Ritual* (2011) by Adam Nevill, set in the outskirts of rural Sweden. In the realm of video games, titles such as *Through the Woods* (2016) by the Oslo-based studio Antagonist, and *Apsulov: End of Gods* (2019) and *Unforgiving: A Northern Hymn* (2017), produced by Sweden's Angry Demon Studio, extend folk ecohorror into interactive digital storytelling.

At times, these Nordic folk ecohorror narratives extend into forms of environmental radicalism and fanatical romanticised eco-beliefs. These narratives portray an obsessive return to 'pure' nature as a spiritual sanctuary while reflecting a broader critique of radical environmental ideologies. This subtheme is explored in Annika Luther's *Skogen som Gud glömde* (2005, 'The Forest That God Forgot'), Emmi Itäranta's *Teemestarin kirja* (2012, *Memory of Water* 2014), Harry Martinson's epic *Aniara* (1956) and its film adaptation in 2018, Dennis Gade Kofoed's novel *Nancy* (2015), Ari Aster's film *Midsommar* (2019), and the Swedish television series *Partisan* (2020). Similarly, anthologies such as *Folketro* (2020, 'Folk Belief'), *Höstväsen: Skräckberättelser* (2017, 'Autumn Beings: Horror Stories'), Per

Faxneld's *Offerträdet* (2020, 'The Sacrificial Tree'), and Hanna Lützen's *Rødt til en død årstid: Horrorfortællinger fra Holte* (1997, 'Red for a Dead Season: Horror Stories from Holte') also foreground the tensions between Nordic modernity and the region's cultural identity, which is deeply embedded in folklore and enchanted perceptions of nature.

Taken together, the works operating within the folk ecohorror ecotrope tap into a specific cultural imaginary in which nature is closely intertwined with national identity. As Helen Andersson observes in relation to Sweden, in the nineteenth century 'nature was considered to constitute the basis of democratic nationalism', wherein 'the Swedish landscape and scenes from the Swedish folk life ... became key signifiers' in processes of national identity formation (2019: 585). Although contemporary debates about Swedish nationhood have generated competing visions of national belonging, Andersson argues that the role of nature in Swedish identity has remained remarkably stable. Whether this 'Swedishness is articulated through older social democratic forms of civic nationalism or through more recent forms of 'ethno-nationalism characterized by ideals of cultural conformity and social cohesion,' nature continues to function as a central symbolic reservoir of Swedish nation-building, retaining associations with 'purity, openness, and fairness' (2019: 587). This dynamic is found in all the Nordic countries, where regional mythologies and characteristic landscapes continue to play a central role in shaping national identity and cultural belonging (Witoszek 2011; Halink 2015; Elgenius & Rydgren 2019).

Nordic folk ecohorror also shares many thematic characteristics with the folk horror genre, particularly in its emphasis on folklore and rural landscapes. To clarify this relationship, Adam Scovell's theorisation of folk horror cinema offers a useful analytical framework. In *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (2017), he defines the genre through his articulation of the 'folk-horror chain': a series of four interlinked motifs that appear in most folk horror texts. The first link in this chain is landscape, which, similar to Nordic ecohorror, cannot be reduced to a mere setting or backdrop. Instead, it represents a significant topography of powerful agency that ushers in 'adverse effects on the social and moral identity of its inhabitants' (2017: 17). In general terms, Scovell's perception of the folk horror landscape aligns closely with the folk ecohorror ecotrope, as both depict rural

environments not as promising spaces of escapism, but on the contrary, a haunting space of entrapment: ‘the evil under the soil, the terror in the backwoods of a forgotten lane ... and the ghosts that haunt stones and patches of dark, lonely water’ (2017: 183).

The comparison between folk horror and Nordic folk ecohorror continues with the second link in Scovell’s chain, concerning isolation. As Scovell explains, the characters in folk horror are often confined in an ‘inhospitable place’ that exists outside the norms and moral codes of modern society (2017: 17). This dynamic echoes horror theorist Carol Clover’s notion of ‘the terrible place’ – a confined space that, at first glance, appears to be a safe haven before turning on its refugees: ‘the walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become, once the killer penetrates them, the walls that hold the victim in’ (1992: 30–31). This logic of inescapable isolation resonates strongly with the ecohorror genre in general, where the sense of ‘entrapment’ expands from a single hostile environment to the planetary scale of a dying world from which there is no escape (Buell 1998; Morton 2013a; Clark 2020).

Extending into the third link of the chain, these isolated rural landscapes give rise to ‘skewed belief systems and morality’, standing in stark contrast to modern worldviews (Scovell 2017: 18). In these settings, the past lurks just beneath the surface, which is why the rural landscapes of folk horror are often suffused with nostalgia, tradition, and slumbering historical pasts, as well as uncanny returns of suppressed trauma. According to Tommy Kuusela, Nordic nature is particularly adept at producing such conditions.

With its vast, remote landscapes seemingly devoid of human activity, Scandinavia certainly makes a terrific setting for a horror film. After all, what could be a more fitting hiding place for secretive cults and supernatural beings, for places and creatures untouched by industrialization and our modern society? (*Foreign Policy* 2021)

This third link also highlights the role of the ‘folk’ in folk horror, who often represent a cultural residue of traditional or suppressed belief systems. For Scovell, the ‘folk’ are not merely rural people but carriers of esoteric knowledge, often positioned in contrast to institutionalised modernity. They serve as custodians of

secret histories and belief systems embedded in landscape, myth, and ritual. Moreover, as Stacey McDowell elaborates, ‘Traditionally, the “folk” have been equated with the lower classes, whose superstitions were regarded as naïve or “backward” in comparison to normative standards’ (2013: 253). This notion is also echoed in Clover’s *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (1992), where she analyses the portrayal of ‘country people’ in American horror cinema as unhygienic, inbred, uneducated, verbally limited, and degenerate – figures who live primitive, isolated lives far removed from the civilised and privileged urban centres of reason and morality: ‘More to the point, country people live beyond the reaches of social law’ (1992: 125). In the context of the folk ecohorror ecotrope, the ‘folk’ may also represent communities positioned at the margins of Anthropocene modernity whose beliefs and practices remain deeply embedded in the landscape, sustaining alternative ecological understandings of human–nature relations that oppose dominant anthropocentric frameworks.

Finally, the fourth and final link in the folk horror chain culminates in what Scovell refers to as the ‘happening’, ‘summoning’ or ‘horrific fallout’ (2017: 18). This culminating event typically manifests in violent, primal, sacrificial rituals or pagan offerings, which, as Dawn Keetley notes, ‘pushes the narrative into “horror” terrain’ (2023: 9). Such moments also propel the narrative into the realm of religious fanaticism, in concert with what Scovell describes as ‘occult-flavoured esoteric content’ – be it rituals, witchcraft, or magic – thereby intensifying the disturbing clash between the rural ‘arcana’ and modernity (2017: 7). In folk ecohorror, however, this ‘horrific fallout’ is often reconfigured into ecological catastrophe or into narratives that frame ritual sacrifice as an ecological reckoning. The final ‘happening’ ultimately serves as an Anthropocene allegory: not merely a pagan ritual gone wrong, but a moment that exposes the environmental consequences of humanity’s (imagined) disconnection from the natural world.

More specifically, the works with the folk ecohorror trope are concerned with how Norse folklore and regional mythology – and their (super)natural interconnection with characteristic Nordic landscapes and ecosystems – serve as cautionary tales of environmental significance. Unlike Anglophone folk horror, which often centres on the remnants of the past erupting into the present, Nordic folk ecohorror imagines how ancient worldviews might offer guidance for surviving

an environmentally endangered future. The genre therefore uses mythological creatures, ancient beliefs, and supernatural forces to reflect on modern environmental anxieties, all while drawing on deep-rooted cultural traditions. This interweaving of mythological heritage and region-specific ecologies provides a richer, more nuanced understanding of the ways nature operates in literature as both material landscape and cultural construct (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xviii). Accordingly, these narratives construct a form of enchanted environmental storytelling that gives voice to nonhuman perspectives and cultivates both cultural reflection and ecological awareness. By invoking folklore in response to environmental urgency, Nordic folk ecohorror reactivates myth as a narrative framework by which human relationships to landscape and the more-than-human world can be renegotiated in an era of planetary crisis.

For this reason, Nordic folk ecohorror is also distinct from traditional folk horror because of its markedly different perspective on nature. Where the folk horror subgenre – much like many examples of Hollywood ecohorror – often conveys a phobic perception of nature as malevolent and archaic, Nordic ecohorror articulates a complex, even paradoxical, understanding of nature as sacred and recreational. As a result, Nordic ecohorror narratives frequently begin with an existential, almost romantic, desire to reconnect with nature, whereas most American folk (eco)horror films – such as *The Village* (2004), *The Witch* (2015), or *Apostle* (2018) – tend to approach nature with more dualistic and ecophobic attitudes. As Benjamin Bigelow observes, there is a telling ‘distinction between American urbanoia, rooted in the Puritanical fear of the wilderness, and the Nordic ecohumanist tradition, which sees nature as a site of rejuvenation for the modern city dweller’ (2023: 167). Rather than constructing nature as a binary force of good and evil, Nordic ecohorror predominantly embraces its contradictions: nature appears as both sanctuary and threat, both origin and unknowable other.¹²⁵ In an interview with *Soundvenue*, the Iranian-Danish filmmaker Ali Abbasi points precisely to this peculiar cultural position that nature occupies in Scandinavian societies.

[Something] that interests me about Scandinavia is that people live with advanced technology and in many areas are ahead of the curve socially and scientifically. But you all are also in close contact with nature. It is as if nature

expands and becomes something almost religious for you all. And all horror films I have seen come out of religion. (Hjort 2016)

Abbasi's observation points to a discrepancy in the Scandinavian relationship with nature: a tension between the region's progressive socioeconomic prosperity and a cultural preference for a simpler life lived in close proximity to natural environments. This tension extends into the paradoxical combination of secular modernity in the Nordic welfare states and an almost superstitious belief in nature as something sacred. Correspondingly, a recent study conducted by a group of social scientists examined recreational habits and spiritual beliefs in Denmark and Sweden, arguing that the experience of transcendence, typically associated with religion, has not vacated the Scandinavian mentality, but has instead 'relocated' from conventional sites of organised worship to more personal experiences of recreation in nature. Moreover, the study suggests that natural spaces like the Nordic forests or coastline, which are generally recognised as secular or even pagan, 'are permeated by transcendence in a way that we *and* our interlocutors easily recognize as like religion' (Thurfjell et al. 2019: 92, original emphasis).

This cohesion of nature and spirituality is not without its historical roots. Going back to pre-Christian nature mythologies, pagan traditions, and the nineteenth-century fixation on wild landscapes in various expressions of national Romanticism, the Nordic countries have long cultivated a distinctive relationship with nature that remains, in Morton's terms, 'in the Romantic period', and closely aligned with Arne Næss' deep-ecological understanding of nature as a site of harmonious coexistence (Morton 2007: 27). This tendency even finds empirical support in my empirical reader study, where Lukas explicitly rejects the portrayal of nature as an antagonistic and terrifying site of horror, describing it instead as a 'wonderful' place of leisure.

Nature as such is not uncanny in itself, I think. It's really nice to be in the woods, in the sunshine ... it's more about ... I don't want to meet an axe murderer there. That is what is terrifying about the forest. It is not the trees themselves or that they are alive. It is wonderful to be in nature. It's more ... something from the outside that makes it all horrifying, at least that's how it is for me. (GD P8)

This response resonates with a broader Nordic cultural imaginary that continues to frame nature primarily as a space of recreation and existential grounding. However, as previously discussed, this perception of nature is increasingly destabilised in the context of ecological crisis (see Chapter Three). As Morton has already informed us, ‘Gaia is out’, thereby ruling out Lovelockian perceptions of earthly life as a holistic-harmonious and self-regulating system (2010: 35). A similar disillusionment is staged in Nordic ecohorror, where the encounter with nature is not one of beauty or peace but a confrontation with its raw, chaotic power – forces that strip away illusions of control and order.

This inversion captures the central tension of Nordic folk ecohorror: a cultural imagination that has long framed nature as invigorating, beautiful, and even sacred is brutally overturned by a dark, estranging, and melancholy ecological reality. The general Nordic view of nature as an origin – an *ursprung*, a home – turns violently *unheimlich*; a paradise lost. Rather than rejecting outright the Nordic spiritual connection with nature described by David Thurfjell, these narratives distort and intensify it, preserving its structure while transforming its meaning into an Anthropocene-inflected version of the Fall. As Žižek succinctly puts it, in Astra Taylor’s *Examined Life* (2008), while traversing a vast landfill site: ‘This notion of nature – nature as a harmonious, organic, balanced, reproducing, almost living organism, which is then disturbed, perturbed, derailed ... is, I think, a secular version of the religious story of the Fall’ (00:54:28). In this sense, nature emerges not as sanctuary, but as a site of rupture, where ecological and cultural certainties begin to collapse.

It is precisely this unstable interplay between reverence and violence, tradition and excess, which is most strikingly expressed in contemporary Nordic folk ecohorror cinema. In Ari Aster’s *Midsommar* (2019) – a paradigmatic example of the ecotrope – ritual, folklore, and Scandinavian cultural identity are intensified through acts of extreme nature worship and uncanny exaggeration, unsettling distinctions between human and nonhuman, harmony and domination, community and coercion. With this destabilisation, *Midsommar* exposes the latent contradictions in both ecological thought and cultural myth, revealing how visions of belonging and ‘natural’ order may themselves conceal deeply troubling forms of power.

Ecofascism and the Matriarchal Trifecta in *Midsommar*

In a distorted mirroring of the Shakespearean midsummer night's dream, Ari Aster's Swedish horror film *Midsommar* presents us with Midsummer days of dread. As a particularly vivid example of Nordic folk ecohorror, the film mobilises all of the ecotrope's constituent strands, drawing simultaneously on the folk horror tradition, on Nordic folklore and myth, and on forms of nature-centred spirituality and ritual associated with the midsummer festival. In doing so, the film also exemplifies the hybrid aesthetic outlined in the previous chapter, operating at the intersection of ecological horror and folkloresque enchantment in an otherwise grounded psychological realism (see Chapter Six). Rather than adhering to a single genre, *Midsommar* sustains a productive tension between realism and the supernatural, allowing ecohorror to emerge in familiar social structures.

For this reason, *Midsommar* also seems to resist straightforward generic classification. While many reviewers label it as an obvious descendant of the folk horror classic *The Wicker Man* (1973), others, such as Keith Phipps, position *Midsommar* as a climate-change film or 'previews of what could emerge after a political or climatic breakdown' (*Pacific Standard* 2019). Ari Aster himself has variously described it as 'a fairy tale with horror elements', 'a high-school comedy' and even a 'break-up movie' (Lizotte 2019). The latter description is certainly where the film begins and ends.

This ambiguity is further underscored by the film's intertextual resonances. Beyond its aesthetic and thematic affinities with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), Aster's emphasis on interpersonal conflict unfolding during a midsummer celebration also recalls August Strindberg's *Fröken Julie* (1888, *Miss Julie*).¹²⁶ Set on Midsummer's Eve in rural Sweden, the play – saturated with symbols of fertility and sexual transgression – centres on the fraught love affair between Julie, desperate for love, and her servant, the self-absorbed Jean, whom Strindberg describes as 'modern characters, living in a period of transition ... wavering, torn, between the old and the new' (1888: xi) – a description that condenses the intertwined dynamics of interrelational drama and the temporal aspects of folk horror also portrayed in *Midsommar*.¹²⁷

The film begins by introducing viewers to the deteriorating relationship between the psychology student Dani (Florence Pugh) and her boyfriend Christian (Jack

Reynor), who spends his free time wargaming a breakup with his insensitive graduate student buddies. But before he gets a chance to put his words into action, Dani experiences the sudden, traumatic loss of her family in a murder-suicide carried out by her bipolar sister Terri, and is left only with Christian, whose emotional availability fluctuates between dutiful bromides and blatant gaslighting. In light of this tragedy, Christian feels obligated to invite Dani to join him and his friends – the PhD students Josh (William Jackson Harper) and Mark (Will Poulter) and a Swedish exchange student called Pelle (Vilhelm Blomgren) – on their trip to a nine-day midsummer festival in the secluded neopagan community of Hårga where Pelle grew up. Against Christian's hopes and expectations, Dani accepts the invitation and so they pack up their doomed relationship and travel across the Atlantic to sun-drenched Hälsingland in northern Sweden where the solstice reigns and night never falls. However, what initially appears to be a restorative retreat into nature gradually reveals itself to be a radical ecology structured around belonging and exclusion.

From this point onwards, the film's narrative closely tracks Scovell's four-linked folk-horror chain. On arriving at the Hårga commune, the American travel group are both delighted and disturbed by the rural Edenic *landscape* that meets them. In these otherworldly pristine surroundings, white people clothed in flowing white garments live in tune with nature, sleep in communal wooden barn houses, eat hearty farm fare, and grow flowers and plants as decoration, medicine, and hallucinogenic drugs. Soon, however, this unison with nature turns excessive, and – as Scovell also points out – the significant and agential topography of Hårga skews 'the social and moral identity of its inhabitants' (2017: 17) who adhere to ancient Norse traditions and fanatic nature worship. This neopagan ecofundamentalism is spurred on and reinforced by another link in Scovell's chain: *isolation*. The Hårga community is secluded geographically, demographically, and mentally. Eager to gather material for his thesis, Josh asks Pelle how they support themselves. The villager explains how they have a water-driven power plant, engage in homeopathy, weave their own linen, and cultivate their own food (00:41:30). In other words, they are self-sufficient and independent from capitalist markets, consumerism, globalisation, and other ideologies of the modern Western world, and thereby 'cut off from some established social progress of the diegetic world' (Scovell 2017: 18).

Slowly, and almost without realising it, the group of Americans become increasingly isolated. Initially, the visitors are cut off from an outside world due to non-existent cell service while also being socially secluded in the commune, where the Hårga cultists communicate among themselves in Swedish, left intentionally unsubtitled by director Ari Aster to further emphasise the language barrier. Gradually, the sense of isolation deepens and turns into entrapment as the Americans find themselves detained by a murderous matriarchal cult, who enforce the pagan laws of Mother Nature. Those who try to leave are considered a threat to the commune and killed.

In accordance with Scovell's third link, the residents of Hårga adhere to 'skewed belief systems and morality' (2017: 18) whereby the four classical elements are worshipped by sacrificial killings and a seasonal change brings a ritualised senicide called *ättestupa*: a supposedly prehistoric Norse tradition described in an Icelandic saga, whereby elderly people throw themselves off cliffs and to their deaths.¹²⁸ In the eyes of the Hårgans, this violent sacrifice is viewed as a recycling act of giving something back to nature, or – in Scovell's terms – is 'leading back into the landscape and, in a sense, *for* the landscape' (2017: 64, original emphasis). This also speaks to the final link in the folk horror chain: the violent *happening*. While the film shows multiple violent and pagan sacrificial events, from playing 'skin the fool' to dancing round the May Pole, it all culminates in a pyre ritual, where everyone in the American group is sacrificed in a triangular yellow temple, apart from Dani, who has won the competition to be Queen of the May and is therefore accepted into the Hårga community.

There are three stages to my analysis of *Midsommar* and the folk ecohorror ecotrope. I first demonstrate how *Midsommar* functions as a cinematic emblem of deep-green ecology *in extremis* – or perhaps more accurately what Timothy Morton describes as a 'bright green' shade of environmental thinking that is 'strongly affirmative' as well as 'sunny, straightforward, ableist, holistic, hearty, and "healthy"' (2010: 16).¹²⁹ While Aster's film shares several thematic concerns with Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* – including troubled romantic relationships, mythic conceptions of nature, and the spectre of feminine monstrosity – the two films operate as aesthetic opposites. Where *Antichrist* embodies what might be termed a dark ecological imaginary of decay and entropy, *Midsommar* presents a brightly illuminated counterpart: a radiant pastoral landscape shaped by bright green

ecological harmony, health, and beauty. In this aesthetic comparison, Aster's film demonstrates how ecohorror does not necessarily emerge from a murky mesh of darkness, dirt and decay, but can just as readily arise in luminous environments of ecological abundance through the effects of fanatic nature worship, ideals of purity and ethnonationalism. Second, beyond the film's investment in green, I turn to its symbolic and affective use of the colour yellow, whose overwhelming brightness obscures rather than alleviates the film's unsettling atmosphere. Finally, I analyse how *Midsommar* mobilises folk ecohorror tropes alongside elements of radical ecofeminism to expose the Western monsterisation of female fertility, emotionality, and care, and how these monstrosities are in turn weaponised to destabilise the hierarchical binaries of the patriarchy.

Bright Green Ecofundamentalism

The landscape of Hårga in *Midsommar* can easily be paralleled with the untouched, aesthetically pleasing, rural countryside described by the marine biologist Rachel Carson at the beginning of *Silent Spring* (1962). Although Carson's publication first and foremost is a scientific attack on pesticide use, she begins by painting a picture of an idyllic agrarian landscape with small clusters of houses and a 'checkerboard of prosperous farms' in complete 'harmony with their surroundings' (2002: 1). By invoking preindustrial pastoral traditions, Carson describes a paradise of wildflowers and birdsong that has 'delighted many a traveler's eye' much like the American group's first encounter with the Hårga commune (1).

Such a comparison is not only interesting because of the imagistic resemblance, but even more so because the environmentalist belief systems in the Hårga community in many ways correlate with Carson, or at least what *Silent Spring* would come to represent. Carson's publication was among the first unflinching critiques of humanity's destructive effect on the environment, and therefore went on to become a founding text of ecocentric movements. As Greg Garrard states in the very first sentence of the first chapter in his authoritative introduction to *Ecocriticism* (2004): 'modern environmentalism begins with the prologue to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), "A Fable for Tomorrow"' (2023: 1). Carson's perception of nature as a harmonic system of homeostasis spurred on radical bio- and ecocentric environmental orientations in the 1960s and 1970s. The most

influential of these budding movements was deep ecology, spearheaded by Arne Næss, who, as seen, gained a following with his 'ecosophy', defined as 'a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium' (1973: 99). Building on the environmental awakening catalysed by Carson, Næss' ecosophy was a radical showdown with anthropocentric thinking and human exploitation of nature, naming it deep ecology in order to distance himself and his movement from what he calls shallow ecological organisations, who only contest pollution and resource depletion for the sake of human health and survival. Deep ecology, on the other hand, is not only about climate change and pollution, but also – as the name suggests – 'deeper concerns' that touch upon diversity, symbiosis, and egalitarianism. By widening humanity's perspective and self-perception as an equal part of a greater ecological context, deep ecology is intended as a corrective to the foundational categories of anthropocentrism that have enabled the large-scale exploitation of the biosphere. The theorist Michael Zimmerman puts it this way.

Deep ecology, then, seeks to overturn the major Western categories that are apparently responsible for humanity's destruction of the biosphere: *anthropocentrism, dualism, atomism, hierarchism, rigid autonomy, and abstract rationalism*. (1990: 141, original emphasis)

In *Midsommar*, many of these Western power principles enlisted by Zimmerman are embodied by the male members of the American group: Josh the academic rationalist, Christian the self-centred opportunist, who prefers to be single, and Mark, who adheres to the juvenile ranking codex of 'pals before gals'. Yet these familiar ideological coordinates are quickly turned on their heads once the characters enter the territory of Hårga. Here, the film demonstrates one defining feature of Nordic ecohorror, concerning the disruptions of *temporality and scale*, in which human systems of order are unsettled by encounters with alternative ecological or cosmological frameworks. *Midsommar* visually encodes this disruption in a pivotal scene, where the image is flipped upside down as the American visitors drive into Hålsingland (00:23:17).



Figure 8. The image turns upside down as the Americans enter Hälsingland, signalling the inversion of contemporary Western epistemological and moral orders in Hårga (*Midsommar* 2019, 00:23:31).

This inversion not only signals a shift or, as Dawn Keetley interprets it (2023: 7–8), a passage into a parallel world in line with Scovell’s theorisation, but also anticipates a narrative space in which the epistemological and moral coordinates of modern Western society are inverted and overturned. In Hårga, time unfolds strangely as the sun never fully sets, while social and epistemic hierarchies are reorganised. Matriarchal authority replaces patriarchal leadership, personal emotional distress is reconfigured as communal empowerment, abstract drawings and ritualised imagery supersede rational academic writings, and the Hårga-character Ruben is not a disfigured product of shameful incestuous relations but an oracle of divine dimensions.

Such reversals also resonate strongly with the logic of folk horror. As Scovell argues, rurality in folk horror is not simply a geographical setting, but a mechanism that ‘warp[s] the very reality of its narrative worlds’ through the eerie alterity of the countryside (2017: 81). Likewise, Nordic folk ecohorror such as *Midsommar* turns everything upside-down, flips naive ecohumanist fantasies into nightmarish entanglements, introduces haunting parallel world orders and more-than-human agency, and capsizes dualisms, hierarchies, and the status quo by offering twisted realities, alternative truths, and a skewed moral code.

Most prominent, perhaps, is the commune's reversal of *atomism* and *autonomy* that, for Zimmerman, underpin anthropocentric modes of environmental destruction. In this regard, the commune adheres to deep-ecological directives as prescribed by Arne Næss, who considered the earth to be a holistic, harmonious entity where everything is inextricably linked in such a way that no one is more privileged than anyone or anything else. Humanity can therefore not be ontologically separated from nature, but rather is fundamentally in balance with it and therefore also at the mercy of its whims and rhythms. In *Økologi, samfunn og livsstil* (1976), Næss writes,

Everything has an internal interrelation. *We are not the same* without these connections. Ecology's organisation of the biosphere *as a whole* is apt to show this internal relation and thus also that man is not a privileged animal species. We live under the same conditions as all other life forms. We do not stand outside the rest of nature and therefore cannot do with it as we please without changing ourselves. We are a part of the ecosphere just as intimately as we are part of our own society. (1991: 265, original emphasis)¹³⁰

The Hårga community subscribes to such a deep-ecological philosophy in the widest sense as nature's agency and ecological organisation dictate the belief systems and customs of the commune. Devoted to the organic rhythms and environmental principles of the ecosphere, the pagan community is characterised by its all-encompassing and anti-hierarchical interconnectedness. In Hårga 'everyone sort of does everything together', Pelle explains, and soon, the audience will witness how the paganists move as one, feel as one, eat as one (00:51:15). This communal ethos is visible in a number of ritualised sequences throughout the film. When the outsiders first join the villagers for a ceremonial meal, for example, the entire community waits in silence until the elders signal that the meal may begin. Only then do the villagers sit down and begin eating simultaneously, performing a highly choreographed gesture of collective participation that emphasises the alignment of individual bodies in a shared socioecological rhythm. The same pattern recurs throughout the festival as villagers sleep in dormitories, co-parent, and generally act in synchronised gestures, producing the impression of a social body that operates as a unified organism rather than as a collection of autonomous individuals. Living in

a harmonious union with one another and their natural surroundings, the cultists seem to have an almost otherworldly affinity with nature and great concern for the flora and fauna, which contrasts the self-interest and individualism that define the group of Americans.

In this way, the Hårga community adheres to a form of natural religion that closely mirrors Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis (1979), whereby nature is conceived not as a passive background, but as a self-regulating totality whose balance governs social life, ritual practice, and ethical value. Like Lovelock, the villagers perceive Gaia or Mother Earth as a feminine, coherent super-organism in which all earthly life coexists in a harmonic-holistic system characterised by homeostatic stability. Pelle condenses this worldview when he explains that 'nature just knows instinctively how to stay in harmony. Everything just mechanically doing its part' (00:29:10). In *Midsommar*, this ideal of harmony does not remain an abstract eco-religious principle, but instead constitutes the organising logic of the commune itself.

Another important aspect of deep ecology, related to the ontology of harmony, is the concern for nonhuman matter. In opposition to 'shallow' ecological movements, deep ecology wishes to save the environment because nature and nonhuman life have inherent value in themselves. This is what Næss calls 'biospherical egalitarianism' or '*the equal right to live and blossom*' (1973: 95–96, original emphasis). By this, he not only renounces anthropocentrism, but also favours a biocentrism where it is no longer humans but 'bios', bio-ecological life, that stands front and centre. In *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* (1995), Arne Næss and George Sessions contend that 'deep ecology is concerned with encouraging an egalitarian attitude on the part of humans, not only towards all members of the ecosphere, but even toward all identifiable entities and forms in the ecosphere' (279).

Such a worldview resonates strongly with the cosmology of the Hårga commune, where the villagers subscribe to a similar anti-hierarchical animism whereby all things – animals, plants, the weather, the spring water, menstrual blood, withered ancestral trees, and runes – possess a vibrant and emotive agency. Pelle highlights this perspective when he speaks of the liveliness of trees: 'Can you feel that? The energy coming up from the earth. Look! The trees, too, they are breathing' (00:28:40). Here, nature is not presented as an external environment surrounding

human life, but as a dynamic field of shared vitality in which humans are already materially implicated. In this sense, *Midsommar* demonstrates another defining feature of Nordic ecohorror by presenting the Hårga commune as a space of *transcorporeal enmeshment*: a relational ontology in which bodies and material forces are mutually constitutive rather than ontologically separate. The commune can therefore also be understood as a *natureculture* in which social organisation, religious rituals and ecological cycles are inseparably intertwined, merging into a cosmological system in which human life is governed by more-than-human rhythms and agency.

Aside from identical depictions of rural pastoral environments and natural philosophy, there is also a narratological overlap between Aster's *Midsommar* and Carson's *Silent Spring*. Carson's 'A Fable for Tomorrow' may have the characteristics of a fable, but also dreams up strategies to describe something of a mythical past in which harmony between humanity and nature 'once' existed (2002: 1). This corresponds to Aster's description of *Midsommar* as a fairy tale as well as with what Scovell identifies as a defining feature of folk horror: its tendency to reach back towards premodern imaginaries in which archaic cosmologies and alternative moral orders disrupt the assumptions of modern rationality (2017: 183). Carson's fable likewise mobilises a quasi-mythic register in order to dramatise ecological crisis. As Greg Garrard notes (2023), the passage is saturated with supernatural terminology such as 'malady', 'mysterious', and 'spell' to underscore pending doom. Through this language, Carson's pastoral fable turns into an eco-mythical apocalypse.

Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flock of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everything was a shadow of death. (2002: 2)

This passage is mirrored in *Midsommar*, which moves from rural utopia to horrifying demise, yet once again something is flipped on its head. In contrast to Carson's fable, it is no longer ecosystems that are exploited and destroyed so that humanity can prosper, but rather human bodies that are sacrificed in the name of ecological harmony. The 'shadow of death' that seeps in is thus not ecological but

anthropological. Gradually, like Carson's description, an uncanny strangeness creeps up on the Hårga idyll, yet without ever compromising the ultra-green scenery, ecological health, and picturesque landscape. In fact, what distorts the pastoral bliss is not a dark shadow, but the extreme abundance of sun-enveloped beauty, nature worship, Nordic diplomacy, and homeostatic entanglement, which grows increasingly disturbing.

At the same time, it is also the beautiful rural surroundings and Nordic politeness that persuade the American visitors to stay despite the outrageous rituals and mysterious disappearances in broad daylight. One could say that the midnight sun both enchantingly elevates aesthetic beauty and manipulatively blinds the Americans' realisation of the commune's skewed morality. So while the evil spell in Carson's tale refers to an overuse of unnatural contamination perpetrated by human greed and ignorance, casting the shadow of death over ecological wildlife and vigour, it is, conversely, an excess of ecological harmony in *Midsommar* that proves lethal, taking out the American flock one by one like sacrificial animals. In this reversal, nature is no longer the victim of human violence, but the divinity invoked to justify it.

This unsettling atmosphere surrounding the Hårga clan is further intensified by the way Ari Aster activates the concerns and critiques of deep ecology and amplifies them through folkloresque effects.¹³¹ Like Carson's use of fantastic narration, the film invokes stylised pagan rituals, runic symbols, floral costumes, and seemingly ancient traditions, embedding the commune in a distinctly Nordic folk imaginary. This fusion of deep-ecological thought and folkloric aesthetics is far from innocent. Rather, it produces a volatile configuration in which ecological idealism begins to resemble religious fundamentalism. This slippage is particularly troubling in light of one of the most persistent critiques of deep ecology: its tendency to backslide into a form of naive, regressive misanthropy. Such allegations stem from deep ecology's tendency to couple a sentimental longing for a return to nature and a nostalgic pre-modern existence with a profound contempt for the modern world, which it holds accountable for climate change and environmental degradation. The movement has deemed humans to be the greatest perpetrators against nature. The founder of Sea Shepherd, Paul Watson, even refers to humans as a cancer, which is why deep ecologists ultimately advocate for a population decline. In this view, the

benefits provided by modernity are readily dismissed, even those that in practice contribute constructively to life on earth.

Aided by folk horror tropes, Aster illustrates how disturbing such a regressive return might pan out to be as the Hårgans engage in ritual killings and outdated worldviews in the name of Mother Nature but at the expense of human life. More specifically, the film echoes a central critique of deep ecology, claiming that the movement's resentment towards modernity and its destructive effects on nature can all too readily slide into antipathy to humanity itself. Moreover, while deep ecology's anti-hierarchical ambitions originally sought to dissolve human exceptionalism by demoting humanity from a position of privilege and dominance, more radical interpretations have been accused of turning this exact power relationship on its head, placing nonhuman life above human existence – a reversal repeatedly mirrored in the film's own logic of inversion. The Hårgans epitomise precisely such an extreme ecocentrism, aligning with what Rögnvaldur Hannesson has termed ecofundamentalism: an ideology-bordering-on-religion that elevates environmental preservation above human welfare and ultimately 'puts nature above man' (2014: 3):

Deep ecology, despite its noble intentions, often reveals a troubling inclination towards a romanticized view of a pre-modern past. It is a view that places nature above humanity, but one that also leads to a dangerous contempt for modern society and technological progress. In its most extreme form, this can result in ecofundamentalism, where the movement calls for a return to an idealized, primitive state – a state in which human life is subjugated to the dictates of nature, often with devastating consequences for those who do not conform to its ideals. (Hannesson 2014: 92)

In such terms, ecofundamentalism represents the extreme end of ecocentric thinking, where ecological harmony is elevated into an absolute ethical imperative that overrides conventional moral frameworks governing human life. Here, ecological balance is no longer simply a guiding principle but an unquestionable moral law, and deviations from this natural order are treated as violations requiring correction or punishment. In *Midsommar*, this impulse is taken to a disturbing extreme, finding its embodied, ritualised expression in the Hårga commune, whose entire social structure is organised around an ecological cosmology in which human

life is subordinated to the rhythms of nature, thereby obscuring questions of power and cultural exclusion.

This worldview finds one of its most striking expressions in the *ättestupa* ritual, in which elderly members of the commune voluntarily leap from a cliff once they reach the age of 72 (00:57:54). Rather than being framed as a tragedy, the ritual is presented as a natural and necessary return to the earth – a reaffirmation of the community's commitment to ecological balance. In this sense, transcorporeal enmeshment in Hårga is not merely a homeostatic state in the biosphere, but an ethical imperative. This logic is further underscored in a scene where Josh's lower leg is discovered in a vegetable patch protruding from the ground, visually reinforcing the reduction of the human body to organic matter and recalling Donna Haraway's claim that humans are merely compost: 'We are humus, not Homo, not anthropos; we are compost, not posthuman' (2016: 55). In Hårga, humans are not an exceptional or dominant species, but a fundamentally entwined and subordinate part of nature.

Ultimately, *Midsommar* presents ecofundamentalism as a terrifying inversion of ecological ethics. What begins as a philosophy of interconnectedness – humans living in harmony with nature – evolves into a totalising belief system in which nature is sacred, community is absolute, and individual human life is disposable. In this respect, the film evokes a reversed version of Adorno and Horkheimer's dialectic of Enlightenment, exposing how ideals of ecological harmony can, when taken to their extreme, legitimise forms of ideological fanaticism that resemble religious fundamentalism or even political extremism. From this perspective, the horror of *Midsommar* emerges not merely from its ritual violence but from the ideological structure that legitimises it.

Ecofascism

This line of criticism brings us to another point addressed by the film, raised by sociocentric environmental thinkers who have accused deep ecology of articulating an elitist, implicitly white environmentalism. By condemning humanity as a unified entity equally responsible for ecological degradation, certain ecocentric movements risk overlooking how environmental harm disproportionately affects marginalised social, racial, and economic groups.¹³² Moreover, this tendency exposes a tension

between ecological idealism and exclusionary worldviews – one that *Midsommar*, once again, takes to a disturbing extreme. While the Hårga commune initially appears as a pastoral utopia living in ecological harmony with its surroundings, the film gradually reveals that this harmony depends upon strict boundaries of racial and cultural belonging, and where social cohesion is maintained through the ritual elimination of outsiders. The film's visual aesthetics reinforce this ideological structure. In one symmetrical shot after another, bathed in almost blinding sunlight and populated by uniformly white bodies dressed in identical garments, the commune produces a visual regime of homogeneity. The landscape itself – chalk-coloured cliffs, bleached architecture, and white ritual clothing – creates a symbolic environment in which whiteness serves as the unspoken criterion for belonging.

At its most extreme, the Hårgans' ecofundamentalism extends beyond folk-religious fanaticism and radical ecological devotion into a worldview that borders on *ecofascism*. The commune's fusion of nationalist folk traditions, romanticised nature philosophy, and strict racial homogeneity evokes what one critic has described as a 'white supremacist's wet dream' (Noor Al-Sibai 2019). While the connection between deep-ecological thought and fascist ideology may initially seem far-fetched, the film foregrounds and exaggerates their shared investment in notions of *purity* – whether ecological, cultural or racial – that, when radicalised, turn exclusionary and violent. In Hårga's luminous landscape, the ecological cultivation of healthy greenery and ideals of purity gradually slides into a form of ethnic biopolitics that privileges sameness, collective identity and reproductive control over individual difference. This logic is embedded in the commune's propagation practices. As the villager Valentin explains, 'bloodlines are very preserved' and mating is carefully regulated (01:19:48), with outsiders introduced as 'new blood' in order to maintain and selectively expand the gene pool (02:05:41). In this sense, the film aligns with what has also been described as *white environmentalism*: an exclusionary environmental discourse historically shaped by white social norms and a focus on wilderness preservation, linking nature to ideals of purity and belonging while marginalising racial and cultural difference (Hickcox 2018: 502–503). Nowhere is this logic more starkly embodied than in the figure of Ruben, whose inbreeding is presented as a sacred condition that grants him prophetic authority. He is a hyperbolised representation of the commune's ethnically homogeneous ideal.

In this sense, the community's tenets of self-sufficiency, harmony, and homeostasis have not only been skewed in their extremity, but also reveal unsettling parallels between ecological absolutism and fascist totalitarianism. Aster himself makes numerous attempts to underscore these ideological undercurrents through a series of carefully placed Nazi references and Easter eggs: Dani's family dies from gas poisoning, the Hårga village is referred to as 'the camp'; the film's fiery climax – the sacrificial burning – subtly refers to the Holocaust, which so happens to mean 'burnt offering'; and, more explicitly, a fictional book (presumably belonging to Josh), titled *The Secret Nazi Language of the Uthark*, appears early in the film, linking the Elder Futhark, the runes used by the commune, to appropriations of Norse symbolism in white supremacist ideology (Spadoni 2020: 711).¹³³

This connection is further reinforced in the scene where the American tourists approach Hårga, passing beneath a banner at the county boundary reading 'Stop mass immigration to Hälsingland – vote for Free North in the autumn' (00:23:55).¹³⁴ This message is in keeping with the ethno-separatist isolation of Hårga, a village that works hard to keep out strangers and set up borders to keep the commune pure. While Næss advocates for a dissolution of the globalised world society into more decentralised local communities of self-sufficiency in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and energy consumption (1973: 98), the Hårgans take these ambitions much further by evoking isolationist fantasies of cultural purity and econational belonging. *Midsommar* also critically engages with the ideological fantasy of historical continuity through the commune's nostalgic aesthetics, apparent timelessness, and reinvention of 'ancient' traditions, echoing what Jonah Hultman and Erika Andersson Cederholm describe as 'an essentialist image of cultures and natures preserved and of time standing still' (2006: 80–81). Moreover, this fabricated continuity aligns with broader ethnonationalist longings for a pre-immigration 'golden age' in Sweden, often defined by the 'absence of foreign ethnic minorities' (Elgenius & Rydgren 2019: 590).

The anti-immigration sentiments illustrated in the film can be paralleled with both the historical and contemporary political landscape in Sweden and its neighbouring countries. In particular, the rise of the Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats) illustrates how nationalist rhetoric has gained increasing political traction in recent decades. Founded in 1988, the party emerged from far-right

networks that included individuals with direct links to the neo-Nazi and white supremacist movements. Although the party has since attempted to rebrand itself along more mainstream nationalist lines, its political platform continues to revolve around strict immigration control and the protection of what it frames as Swedish cultural identity. Over the past two decades, the Sweden Democrats have transformed from a marginal far-right movement into one of Sweden's largest political parties, whose growing electoral success throughout the 2010s and early 2020s has increasingly complicated the international image of the Nordic region as a uniquely tolerant, egalitarian political model.

Tapping into this political backdrop, *Midsommar* also actively destabilises the myth of Nordic exceptionalism by exposing the ideological tensions beneath its celebrated narratives of equality, welfare, and environmental progress. More precisely, the Hårga commune can be read as an allegorical yet hyperbolic image of the Swedish *folkhem* – a concept historically used to describe the welfare state as a cohesive, egalitarian national community. However, rather than simply reproducing this ideal – long regarded as a benevolent model of collective belonging – the film interrogates it, particularly in light of increasing public and academic scrutiny of how it excludes those who fall outside its imagined cultural and racial boundaries.

This critique is further intensified by the film's transnational production context. As a Swedish-American co-production, the film reframes Nordic cultural traditions through a partially external gaze that exaggerates and estranges familiar notions of Swedishness, thereby rendering otherwise 'exceptional' Nordic values associated with closeness to nature and solidarity newly visible as sites of latent exclusion and ideological homogeneity. By depicting Hårga as an idyllic rural collective that maintains cohesion through strict ethno-separatism and ritualised violence, *Midsommar* exposes the authoritarian underside of this national imaginary, suggesting that beneath the region's international reputation for tolerance, sustainability, and social progress may lurk unresolved tensions surrounding nationalism and cultural identity. More broadly, Aster's pastoral horror does not merely depict a fictional cult, but rather stages a broader sociocultural critique of the ideological fantasies that sustain the myth of Nordic exceptionalism, viewed through a partial outsider perspective.

Deep ecology's alignment with ethnonationalism also involves a nostalgic susceptibility to folklore, matched with a desire to return to a bygone golden era of (ethnic) uniformity. Relatedly, folklore becomes especially politically potent because it frames cultural identity as ancient and territorially rooted rather than historically constructed. In ecofascist and ethnonationalist discourse, folk traditions and mythic pasts therefore function not merely as cultural heritage, but as evidence of an allegedly natural connection between land and ethnicity. Correspondingly, right-wing populists in the Nordic region often seek to cultivate a strong ethnonational identity built upon old myths and other romanticised versions of the past. In line with this, Robert Spadoni points out in his essay 'Midsommar: Thing theory' (2020), how Swedish right-wing parties appropriate regional folk tradition as a part of their nationalist movement in order to 'reclaim and revitalize its national heritage by casting a nostalgic eye to folkloric traditions' (2020: 711). Elgenius and Rydgren agree when writing that 'radical right-wing parties share an emphasis on ethno-nationalism rooted in myths about a shared history and cultural homogeneity' (2019: 584). In this framework, nature itself becomes an extension of cultural identity: a homeland imagined through ideals of historical continuity and an ethnically homogeneous past. As a result, the environmental protection of an emblematically Swedish nature becomes intertwined with folk tradition, and together comes to signify an equally archetypal ethnonational identity that must be preserved through ideals of pureness and isolation.¹³⁵ Thus, protecting Swedish culture and tradition is inherently tied to preserving the natural environment, as it is both an integral part of and the foundation of these cultural values.

This longing for a return to a pristine past, however, has been critiqued by thinkers such as Timothy Morton, who challenges the romantic legacy of ecocentrism in *Ecology without Nature* (2007). Here, Morton argues that Western thought remains deeply entrenched in a nostalgic view of nature by which we continue to resuscitate the Romantics' invention of nature as first and foremost an aesthetic ideal. Inspired by German idealism and the Kantian notion of the fundamental inaccessibility of things, the Romantics dreamed of bridging the gap between man and nature by, among other things, reaching back and reviving pre-Christian nature goddesses, ideals of Mother Earth and Spinozan monistic naturalism. Consequently, this idealised view of nature as essentially good, green,

and beautiful continues to permeate aspects of modern art and contemporary environmental discourse alike. Further, it is also a romantic notion that nature stands in opposition to modernity. As Morton writes, ‘The “thing” we call nature becomes, in the Romantic period and afterwards, a way of healing what modern society has damaged’ (2007: 22). He finds this inherited perception of nature to be counterproductive in the environmental sense as he believes such sentimentalism hinders more adequate forms of ecological thinking and engagement.

This issue is also addressed in *Midsommar*, where the villagers’ romanticised idealisation of nature seems to backfire in more than one way. Not only has the post-Kantian desire for a reconciliation of subject and object gone to extreme lengths when humans are reduced to compostable plant fertiliser while Nature is romanticised as a space of ‘purity’ and uniformity, but the Hårgans’ nature worship also (mis)interprets ‘the hottest heatwave in living memory’ as a blessing, a gift from nature, rather than an ominous indicator of global warming (00:37:45).¹³⁶ This blindness reflects the romanticised conception of nature that Morton has criticised in modern environmental thought, arguing that the idea of ‘Nature’ often functions as an ideological construct that prevents genuinely ecological thinking (2007). The film thus exposes the dark underside of ecological romanticism and ecomimesis: a pastoral ideal that, when taken to its extreme, proves virtually indistinguishable from authoritarian fantasies of purity and cultural sameness.

Yellow Affects and Atmospheres

Other than deep green, the colour yellow is also fundamental to the themes, affects, symbolism and foreshadowing in *Midsommar*: it exudes duplicitous meanings that range from a foreshadowing of the sinister aesthetics of Hårga to emotive symbols of grief, insanity, illness and heartbreak, or even poisonous gas(lightning), while also evoking ecological connotations to spring, fertility, rebirth, and the sun. In one of the first scenes of *Midsommar*, the camera pans over a yellow, flowery wallpaper in Dani’s parents’ bedroom before settling by their bedside. Tucked beneath yellow floral bedding and with a vase of yellow flowers standing on the nightstand hovering over a family portrait of Dani, subtly foreshadowing her coronation as May Queen, her parents appear to be sound asleep. Yet, mirroring the re-marking function of

the flower vase in von Trier's *Antichrist*, the yellow bouquet emerges as an intrusive, foreboding symbol of the menacing ecological realities to come.

Correspondingly, the family idyll in *Midsommar* soon turns grim as the house is flooded with flashing yellow lights from emergency vehicles while firemen in black-and-yellow uniforms ascend the staircase, following two yellow gas pipes; one that leads to the parents' bedroom, while the other ends in a gas mask worn by Dani's sister Terri, who sits dead on the floor in a bright yellow t-shirt. From this moment onwards, the colour yellow comes to surround and follow Dani wherever she goes. It is as if the colour seeps into her sphere, constantly attesting to her emotive state and serving as a reminder of her traumatic loss, while also serving as an omen of what will come and eventually carrying the ambiguous promise of rebirth.

Read through the lens of Nordic ecohorror's emphasis on atmosphere and affect, yellow in *Midsommar* does not merely function as symbolic colour coding, but as an atmospheric medium in its own right. As seen, this ecohorror feature operates through a saturation of mood – a *Stimmung* that fuses environment and embodied experience into a shared affective field. Yellow does not simply signify meaning at the level of interpretation; rather, it works by permeating the film's sensory and emotional register, binding Dani's psychic state to her surroundings in a way that produces the kind of lingering, diffuse unease characteristic of the genre and what Clark describes as 'Anthropocene horror' (2020), outlined earlier as a form of dread that is ambient, impersonal, and without a clearly defined object (see Chapter Three). Rather than erupting in spectacular horror, the film cultivates a slow, ambient unease through yellow brightness itself. As already noted, Aster's use of intense daylight and saturated hues produces 'a background unease' precisely through hypervisibility and the impossibility of concealment (Clark 2020: 66). Yellow is thus part of an atmospheric logic where what is most radiant is also most oppressive.

Moreover, the colour attaches itself to Dani not only through atmospheric saturation, but as a persistent affective residue. From the beginning of the film, trauma and grief are yellow. Early on, before travelling to Sweden, she takes medication from an amber-yellow Ativan bottle – a small, clinical object that already ties yellow to the management of anxiety and emotional overflow. Yellow thus first appears not as sunlight or fertility, but as a colour of containment: a hue

bound up with psychic strain and affective regulation. At the same time, this pharmacological yellow both anticipates and contradicts the later herbal potions and ritualistic yellows in Hårga, suggesting a discrepancy between modern chemical regulation and ecological-collective forms of healing.

Dani's efforts to keep her emotions bottled up are crucial to her relationship with Christian, who is incapable of easing her anguish – if anything, he only makes it worse. Still, she blames herself for his failures, repeatedly taking responsibility for his selfishness and experiencing her own need for care as a burden: 'I'm always leaning on him ... I need him too often and it becomes a chore' (00:06:05). Returning to the theory of *statist individualism* as articulated by Berggren and Trägårdh (2010), this affective dynamic can be understood as more than a personal problem; it also indexes a deeper cultural and ideological tension. In the Nordic model, as previously outlined, ideal social relations are premised upon autonomy, equality, and a fundamental scepticism towards dependency. Love, in this framework, must be non-intrusive and non-binding, between sovereign individuals rather than interdependent beings. Dani and Christian's relationship exposes the fragility of this ideal. Their dynamic is marked by asymmetrical dependence, in which Dani's need for emotional support is experienced by Christian as excessive and embarrassing, something illegitimate in a paradigm that privileges independence. Accordingly, Christian's friends frame his continued commitment to Dani as pathological: Josh describes it as 'masochistic' (00:07:20), while Mark labels it outright abuse: 'That's not her [calling] again? Seriously!?! It's literally abuse. She's abusing you' (00:07:54).

This tension is further heightened by the film's gendered, epistemological structure. Dani's grief-stricken emotionality is consistently opposed to the cooler, masculine-coded forms of knowledge embodied by Christian and his friends. As in *Antichrist*, a schism emerges between a controlling, rational male intellect and a suppressed, visceral female emotionality, emphasised with Dani's psychology studies standing in opposition to her male travelling companions, who outrank her as doctoral researchers in anthropology, all busily treating Hårga as material for observation, interpretation, and career advancement. In that sense, their anthropological gaze comes to mirror the medical gaze of the male protagonist in von Trier's film, subscribing to a disembodied epistemological illusion of attaining

an infinite ‘conquering gaze from nowhere’, and thereby producing ostensibly omniscient conclusions detached from subjectivity, position, and context – a gaze that claims to see without being seen, to represent while escaping representation (Haraway 1988: 581).

Seen in this light, the Americans’ valuation of rational distance and examination over emotional relationality actively structures their behaviour. Throughout the film Christian apathetically disregards or appears to feel inconvenienced by Dani’s overwhelming grief, who then in turn constantly fights to suppress her emotional breakdowns, avoiding potential conflicts with phrases like ‘It’s OK’ or ‘Never mind’ and hastily withdrawing from crowded spaces while invoking self-restrictive ‘No, no, no’s’ before soundlessly breaking down alone in locked bathrooms, airplane toilets, abandoned garden sheds, quiet fields, and an empty dormitory. Ultimately, masculine emotional detachment produces isolation rather than care, which is further emphasised by the film’s early depiction of failed communication, where phones, emails, and interrupted exchanges are associated with emotional disconnection, rendering technologically mediated forms of contact emotionally inadequate – in contrast to the communal and embodied affective life later offered by Hårga. In this American setting, however, Dani’s suffering is internalised, almost toxic; a sealed-in poison not unlike the yellow gas that kills her family. Yellow therefore also comes to encode a form of melancholia in the Freudian sense: an inability to externalise loss, resulting in its absorption into the self. The colour clings to Dani as an affective stain, a visualisation of grief that cannot be metabolised in her social environment.

Dani’s quiet grieving brings us back to the horrific soundlessness Carson addresses in her poetic parable, where the apocalypse is signified by the loss of birdsong, or as the book title suggests, an oxymoronic silent spring where ‘there was no sound; only silence lay over the fields and moods and marsh’ (2002: 2). In *Midsommar*, however, the agony of silence only looms over the American outsiders and especially the grieving Dani, who repeatedly cries with her hands clapped over her mouth, as if emotion itself must be muted. This contrasts with Hårga, where community and empathy are performed through vocalisation: During the *ättestupa*, when one of the elders survives the fall and lies shrieking in agonising pain, the surrounding villagers immediately break into mimetic cries of their own,

collectively voicing empathy and partaking in his suffering. These communal vocalisations not only align with Carson's implication of birdsong as a proof of life, but are in line with Hårga's ethics of care for Mother Nature as well as their fellow clan members as part of a collective and emotive ecosystem. Ultimately, Hårga offers not only a different symbolic colour scheme, but another affective order.



Figure 9. Dani suppressing her grief in the aeroplane bathroom, covering her mouth to contain any emotional outbursts (*Midsommar* 2019, 00:22:11).

Hårga offers what appears to be the inverse of the *Swedish theory of love*: not sovereign independence, a total ecology of mutual affective entanglement (Berggren & Trägårdh 2022). Here, no emotion is borne alone; every feeling is mirrored and redistributed in the collective body. The question put to Dani – ‘Do you feel held?’ – encapsulates this alternative paradigm of relationality (01:09:46). Where statist individualism demands emotional self-sufficiency, Hårga promises absolute affective immersion – the antidote to loneliness and emotionally restrained masculinity embodied by the male members of the American group.¹³⁷ However, from an ecohorror perspective, this shift does not resolve the tension between individuality and collective entanglement, but radicalises it. If statist individualism produces an anti-ecological subject through its insistence on bounded autonomy, Hårga represents the opposite extreme: a dissolution of boundaries so complete that the

individual is subsumed into a collective organism. Dani's final transformation – crowned in yellow and merged with vegetal matter – literalises this transcorporeal condition. She is no longer an autonomous subject, but part of an ecological and affective assemblage in which selfhood is consoled only through its partial unmaking.

In this light, *Midsommar* stages a tension often portrayed in Nordic ecohorror: the impossibility of sustaining personal autonomy in an ecologically entangled world. Yellow, as both atmosphere and affect, is the medium by which this destabilisation is felt. In the film, it moves from sedative bottle to gas pipe, from floral wallpaper to ritual sunlight, binding grief to environment, emotion to atmosphere, and intimacy to forms of dependency that are at once comforting and annihilating. Yellow thus comes to figure confinement and transformation, trauma and healing, cultural isolation and socioecological immersion.

The Matriarchal Trifecta

As is often the case in the Nordic ecohorror genre's portrayal of feminine monstrosity, *Midsommar* is just as much about feminine interrelations and trauma bonding as it is about occultism and folk horror. Ari Aster highlights female experience and affective registers such as emotionality and empathy that the cultural zeitgeist has historically downplayed. Crucially, the film reactivates the long-standing association between women and nature by aligning femininity with cyclicity, embodiment, procreation, and affective relationality. These elements are not merely aesthetic motifs, but structuring principles of the Hårga commune, where emotional attunement, seasonal rhythms, and reproductive continuity organise both social life and ritual practice.

In doing so, the film also participates in the long-standing Western association between women and nature, by which women and nature have been bound together through a dense network of metaphors, epistemologies, and power structures. As several feminist scholars have already argued, this connection is never innocent; both women and nature have repeatedly been positioned on the devalued side of Western dualisms, aligned with body, emotion, and materiality, while man has been linked to reason, culture, transcendence, and superiority (Ortner 1974; Merchant 1980; Plumwood 1993; Grosz 1994).

This tension remains strikingly visible in contemporary discourse. In a recent cultural commentary, the Danish author Carsten Jensen argues that ‘the 21st century must be the century of women’ and points to ‘young women and care’ as central to the future, linking this development to ‘feminist and green politics’ (*Dagens Nyheter* 2025). His intervention is revealing because it shows how politically seductive the association between women, care, and planetary repair remains. At the same time, such claims risk reinscribing a familiar essentialist logic in which women appear as naturally more caring and ecologically responsible than men.

While ecofeminism emerges as a critique of precisely this structure, arguing that the linkage between women and nature has historically underpinned their joint subordination, *Midsommar* does not simply reject the woman–nature analogy, but rather intensifies it. The very traits historically used to subordinate women – emotionality, reproductive capacity, and proximity to nature – are elevated into the organising principles of the commune. Yet it is precisely through this intensification that the analogy begins to unravel. Similar to *Antichrist*, Aster’s film neither simply affirms nor rejects ecofeminist thought, but explores what happens when its underlying values are taken to an extreme.

In this respect, Jensen’s vision becomes unintentionally reminiscent of *Midsommar* itself. As he puts it, ‘the lost men of the far right receive all the attention. But it is young women and care that are the future’ (ibid).¹³⁸ Ironically, Aster’s film imagines precisely such a future, albeit in grotesquely distorted form: a seemingly nurturing, ecologically attuned, and female-centred community that simultaneously reproduces exclusionary and ethnonationalist forms of belonging. Rather than resolving the tensions between care and violent domination, *Midsommar* exposes how easily emancipatory and reactionary imaginaries can become entangled.

In Hårga, care and emotional relationality are not merely nurturing qualities, but constitute the mechanisms by which the matriarchal community exerts control, suggesting that the woman–nature connection, when absolute, does not dissolve hierarchy but reconfigures it. Patriarchal anthropocentrism is thus flipped on its head, giving rise to an ecofundamentalist matriarchy. Built upon a radically feminised ecological logic and in direct opposition to the male-led group of American visitors, the Hårga community is organised around a distinctly female-

oriented authority. The commune is led by the matriarch Siv,¹³⁹ while men are symbolically feminised – for instance through their attire, wearing ‘girly frocks’ described as a tribute to ‘nature’s hermaphroditic qualities’ (00:35:53).¹⁴⁰ The Hårgans do not merely reproduce Western dualisms, but invert them: femininity supersedes masculinity, folk knowledge displaces academic epistemology, community surpasses autonomy, care exceeds control, emotion overtakes rationality, relationality before atomism, and most importantly; nature over man. Consequently, the matriarchy of Hårga offers a radicalised enactment of ecofeminist Marti Kheel’s assertion that, ‘it is not just “humans” but men and the masculinist world-view that must be dismantled from their privileged place’ (1990: 129). Ultimately, in an exaggerated version of Jensen’s vision, the film weaponises the symbolic link between women and nature rather than simply reproducing it.

It is from this ambivalent framework that I propose reading *Midsommar* as what I term an uncanny matriarchal trifecta, consisting of three overlapping aspects of feminine monstrosity: woman as reproductive maker of life, woman as emotionally powerful, and woman as avenger. This trifecta is further inscribed visually and narratively in the film’s ritual structures, culminating in the sacrificial pyre shaped as a triangular form that signifies female genitalia in opposition to the linear male phallus – an iconography which Camille Paglia reckons has influenced and shaped Western society, where temporal perspectives are most commonly constructed as progressively linear ascent of sociocultural development driven upwards and forwards by man-made principles of free market forces, economic growth, and consumerism (1990: 19). In contrast, Hårga operates with a cyclical, seasonal understanding of time: ‘We view life as a circle. Recycle’, Siv states (01:02:35). In this sense, the film also aligns with Le Guin’s carrier-bag theory (1986), as it rebels against linear and teleological structures of traditional, masculine storytelling – such as the phallic, forward-moving progress described by Paglia – and instead embraces cyclical, relational, and collective modes, where life is viewed as an interconnected whole, or pans over tapestries in the opposite direction (00:43:35). In *Midsommar*, the main driving forces of the plot no longer consist of the conventional objectives of growth, ambition, individuality, and knowledge-seeking, as otherwise represented by the male members of the American group, but rather a striving to hold and be

held, to carry one another communally and to foster affective shareability and groundedness.

Male Rape

In relation to the first aspect of the uncanny matriarchal trifold – woman as reproductive maker of life – *Midsommar* stages a form of female monstrosity that centres explicitly on sexuality and the generative capacities of the female body, particularly those associated with reproductive horror and menstrual disgust. Crucially, the film frames feminine corporeal leakiness as a challenge to modern fantasies of bodily autonomy and containment. As Elizabeth Grosz argues, bodily fluids are culturally troubling because they ‘flow, they seep, they infiltrate’; they expose the body not as sealed and self-contained, but as unstable, permeable, and difficult to regulate (1994: 194). As Julia Kristeva has long argued, menstrual blood in particular carries this disruptive potential, since it visibly materialises the body’s openness, cyclicity, and reproductive capacity while collapsing the distinctions between interior and exterior, self and other (2024: 79).

Midsommar stages these anxieties most vividly through the red-haired Maja, a young member of the Hårga cult, who has reached adulthood and therefore must find a mating partner. Her choice falls on Christian, but instead of engaging in flirtatious courtship or other romantic advances that might mimic male fantasies, she resorts to ancient magic, love spells, and potions to sway him from afar. First, she places a love rune under his bed. Then, when they all gather for dinner later on, Christian pulls a red pubic hair from his mouthful of meat pie, immediately prompting acute feelings of repulsion from his friends seated beside him. In his effort to rinse the experience away, he reaches for his glass. However, in the long line of pale-yellow beverages set on the table, Christian’s drink stands out as orange. No one seems to notice it, but viewers know he has been served Maja’s menstrual blood (01:26.32).

In Hårga cosmology, however, the leaky female body is not framed as contamination or deficiency, but as an extension of the ecological logic of entanglement and material interconnectedness that structures the commune itself. Feminine embodiment – particularly in its reproductive and fluid forms – is not treated as sealed or self-contained, but as open and continuous with the surrounding

world. Accordingly, menstrual blood and other bodily emissions are cast as extensions of the same ecological ontology described by Tim Ingold, for whom living organisms persist only through ongoing processes of material interchange with their environments. As he argues, bodies ‘can exist and persist only because they *leak*’ through the continual ‘interchange of materials across the ever-emergent surfaces by which they differentiate themselves from the surrounding medium’ (2012: 438, original emphasis). Leakiness, then, is not merely a biological condition but the prerequisite for life itself.

The ritualised ingestion of Maja’s menstrual blood therefore marks more than a moment of disgust: it signals a destabilisation of bodily sovereignty, but more importantly, it challenges the sexual power structures that conventionally govern heterosexual relations. By quite literally infiltrating Christian’s body, Maja’s materiality transforms him from desiring subject into a penetrated, reproductively entangled organism. In this way, the scene marks a shift in power that does not simply reverse patriarchal relations, but unsettles the very assumptions upon which they depend: bodily autonomy, masculine control, and the ideal of the self-contained subject.

As Maja’s breeding ritual unfolds throughout the film, conventional Western assumptions surrounding sex, reproduction, and bodily agency are increasingly destabilised. One example of this can be found in Maja’s challenge to the Western idealisation of female virginity, which historically has given way to an array of misogynistic euphemisms describing a woman’s sexual debut – deflowering, taking or losing one’s flower, popping someone’s cherry, and other ecological metaphors – emphasising both women’s lack of agency and reproductive interrelation with nature while also highlighting a patriarchal conviction that penis-penetration serves as radically altering rite of passage that holds both redefining and existential meaning to the female condition while also irreversibly depriving the woman of something worth keeping; leaving her less valuable, less desirable, less pure. Yet, something about this deflowering metaphor seems backwards. In reality, a sexually active woman is much more likely to reproduce – or ‘bloom’ to stay in the ecological imagery – than a virginal one (just as flowers only propagate through the spreading and germination of seeds). However, following a patriarchal logic, female virginity must first be elevated and idealised in order for it to be desirable for men to conquer.

Instead of viewing sexual debuts as a newfound opportunity for women to ‘bloom’, it is reframed as a mythical quest for men to dominate and deflower women.¹⁴¹

In *Midsommar*, the opposite power structures prevail. In Hårga, women hold all sexual power. It is Maja who chooses to mate with Christian and even uses medicaments to have her way. During the May Queen competition, which Dani is about to win, Christian is offered a beverage by a villager, who cryptically describes the drink as a relaxant of inhibitions: ‘It breaks down your defences’, she explains, ‘and opens you for the influence’ (01:40:22). Christian is reluctantly persuaded and is soon hallucinating. To emphasise his disoriented cognitive state he asks an elderly man ‘What’s going on?’ Maja then leaves the festivities and nods her head for him to follow, yet he remains seated. Next, as Dani is escorted away to continue the May Queen celebration, another clan woman scatters flower petals on the grass in front of Christian, which he then follows. The path leads to a building, where a visibly stoned Christian is instructed to remove his clothes and to inhale a concoction ‘for vitality’, which appear to make him quite unwell (01:53:15). On entering the inner chamber, a confused Christian is shown nude, full frontal, leaving him both exposed and vulnerable. Yet again, the film resorts to a reversal of traditional Western dualism as female sexual exploitation and objectification are redirected onto the male body.

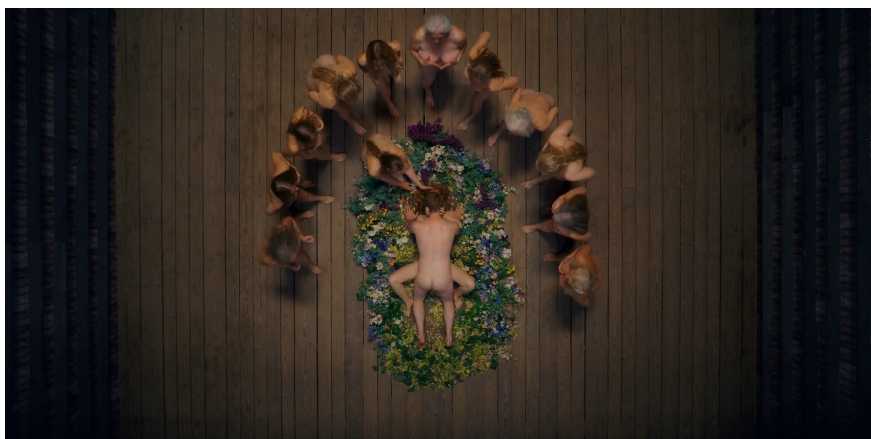


Figure 10. Shot from above, the drug-induced mating ceremony takes the shape of an eye (*Midsommar* 2019, 01:55:41).

Christian slowly approaches Maja, who lies nude on a bed of flowers surrounded by a semicircle of naked elderly women. Without further ado, Maja and Christian continue to engage in missionary intercourse, during which the encircling women sway, hum, and moan with Maja, turning the ritual into a shared emotive experience. The half-circle of women appear to form into an eyelid, while Christian and Maja come to resemble a pupil. From a bird's eye perspective, the ritual takes the shape of an eye; a feminine eye glancing back at the voyeuristic male gaze and hereby forcing it to reflect back unto itself. This feminine gaze is cemented by Maja who hardly looks at Christian, but much prefers to engage with the surrounding women. At one point, she even reaches out for one of them, who immediately takes her hand and starts to sing. The mating ritual is not in any way a masculine pursuit of triumph and glory, but a celebration of womanhood: a pleasurable collective experience shared and enjoyed both corporally and sensuously with and between women. In this instance, it is not man and women who 'become one flesh' as the Bible prescribes, but the coven of female villagers who merge into one voluptuous body who moves, feels, and climax as one.

To emphasise this carnal coalescence, one female participant actively partakes in the act as she forcefully pushes Christian into Maja until he ejaculates. At this moment, Christian is the one who is conquered and deflowered. As soon as his fertilising 'seed' has been extracted from him, he is no longer of use. 'I feel it! I can feel the baby!' Maja exalts, curling into a ball to preserve the semen within her, indirectly signalling that his function has been played out (02:01:28). He gets up and flees the scene, while hiding his exposed genitalia. In a striking reversal of the dynamics identified by Laura Mulvey, where the male gaze secures power over its object by positioning woman as 'the bearer of guilt' (1975: 13), Christian himself becomes the exploited and shameful object of the gaze.

Once again, *Midsommar* follows Le Guin's carrier-bag narration as the mating ritual exposes the limitations of the techno-heroic narrative embedded in American men's initial locker-room fantasies of impregnating 'Swedish milkmaids', by replacing such male-coded fantasies with maternal tales of communal sperm collection (00:07:49). While the dominant Western narrative, in Le Guin's terms, remains the 'killer-story' structured around the ascent of man and his triumphant hunt for prey – a story of conquest, penetration, and individual achievement – the

Hårga commune operates through an opposing narrative logic centred on containment, collection, and cyclical continuity. Consequently, relying on a techno-heroic understanding of desire and sexual access is fatal in Hårga, as when Mark is lured away by a female villager and immediately interprets her invitation as sexual rather than recognising that he is about to become an emptied ‘carrier bag’ of skin. Here, bodies are not targets to be conquered, but resources to be gathered, contained, and repurposed. Similarly, the mating ritual does not stage a conquest, but a process of extraction and incorporation, where Christian is neither seduced nor hunted in a traditional sense, but gradually absorbed into a reproductive system that dissolves the individual subject into a collective process.

Another thing that contributes to the monstrous femininity of this ritual, is how it flips the common narrative of sexual assault of female victims committed by male-coded monsters. In *Midsommar*, Christian is the one to be groomed, drugged and ritualistically gang raped by a group of women. Moreover, Aster not only turns the tables on the actual assault itself, but also flips the stigmatisation and society’s ambiguous response to rape onto a male victim. Despite witnessing an obviously drugged Christian in clear discomfort and distress, some critics and viewers are quick to accuse him of adultery and channel their sympathy towards Dani instead. On returning from her carriage ride as the newly crowned May Queen, Dani hears the rhythmic polyvocal moaning coming from the house where the mating ritual is taking place, and as she peers through the keyhole like the child in the Freudian *Urszene*, she sees her boyfriend with Maja for only a few seconds before collapsing in heartbreaking agony. Yellow also signifies betrayal, one recalls, and almost immediately the audience adopts Dani’s perspective. However, at this point in the film, Dani’s perspective is no longer entirely longer reliable. Not only does she not know about the drugging and coercion of Christian, unlike the viewer, but she is also in the process of giving in to the Hårga commune in all its crazed absurdity. Still, according to one empirical study, only four of 48 reviews accessible through Rotten Tomatoes referred to the ritual as rape, while a majority referenced the scene as ‘awkward’ or ‘weird’ (Katz et al. 2021: 2037). Correspondingly, many critics have referred to the mating ritual in more or less neutral terms as a ‘sex scene’ (Bradley 2019; Campbell 2019; Smith 2019; Goodsell 2019), often emphasising its strangeness or comic qualities. *Vanity Fair*’s Yohana Desta, for instance, finds it

‘hilarious in its strangeness’ (2019), while Benjamin Bigelow references the situation as ‘Christian’s betrayal’ (2023: 140) and Dawn Keetley calls Christian a ‘faithless boyfriend’ (2020: 270). Another reviewer sums it up: ‘Christian has cheated on Dani’ (Graham 2019).

Taken together, Aster utilises feminine monstrosity not simply to reverse the traditional male gaze of the horror genre, but to destabilise the structures by which visual and sexual power are ordinarily organised. By making room for distinctly feminine pleasure, the film does not merely deflate masculine-coded desire, but exposes the conditions upon which it depends: who gets to look, who is made visible, and who is subjected to control. Female objectification is therefore not only subverted into male humiliation, but displaced into a configuration in which the logic of spectatorship begins to break down. What emerges from this reversal is not simply an inversion of power, but a breakdown of the stable spectatorial position and epistemological order traditionally associated with the male gaze. Rather than mastering its object from a position of distance and control, the gaze in *Midsommar* is reconfigured as fragmented, embodied, and collective.

It is also through this destabilisation of normative subject positions and structures of spectatorship that the film is able to reframe sexual violence from an unfamiliar perspective. By inflicting sexual violence on a male victim, the mating ritual makes newly visible the gendered frameworks by which coercion and rape are culturally recognised and dismissed. In doing so, the scene exposes the societal blindness surrounding consent and the cultural reluctance to acknowledge sexual assault under non-violent circumstances. So although the Hårga matriarchy constitutes a reversed, yet paradoxical replica of the very patriarchal power structures and hierarchical binaries they seek to oppose, *Midsommar* uses this flipped perspective to highlight the ignorance and shortcomings of dominating Western discourses by which power, gender, and violence are ordinarily understood.

Female Rage

The second monstrous dimension of *Midsommar* – centering on woman as emotionally powerful – unfolds through a gradual intensification of Dani’s affective awareness, culminating in an eruption of female rage. During her stay at the Hårga midsummer festival, Dani’s perception of Christian slowly crumbles. From making

excuses and shouldering the blame for his shortcomings, the Swedish summer solstice now prompts her to see him in a different light. When a fellow outsider named Simon appears to have left the commune without his fiancée Connie, Dani recognises herself in her position. Similarly, when Josh goes missing along with a sacred artefact, Christian shows no concern and is quick to distance himself from his supposed friend in a gesture of self-preserving betrayal reminiscent of Peter's threefold denial of Jesus, while Dani – visibly unsettled by his disloyalty and self-interest – looks at him in disbelief (01:31:12).

These accumulating moments of recognition culminate when Dani witnesses Christian's apparent infidelity. After peeping through the keyhole, she breaks down, falls to her knees, and throws up. This disclosure marks the final straw that sets her rejection of him in motion. Once again, this scene evokes Kristeva's theory of the abject, particularly the act of vomiting, which symbolises the rejection of what is no longer acceptable. This moment marks a decisive break: what has previously been contained, suppressed, and internalised can no longer be held back. Dani's physical reaction to Christian's betrayal signals not only that she is emotionally overwhelmed, but a rejection of the relational dynamic she has endured, as her body itself is transformed into a site of expulsion for the trauma and pain she has been swallowing throughout the film.

The Hårga women quickly gather Dani, ushering her away to the dormitory, where she previously has cried in solitude. This time, however, and in a near claustrophobic reversal of her previous private mourning, Dani is now surrounded by women with their many comforting hands all over her (recalling the forest sex scene in *Antichrist*). The coven of women then bring her to the floor, where they all kneel and at last, Dani lets go of her inhibitions and screams. Heart-wrenching, guttural, deafening screams. The women around her immediately mimic her cries, frantic breathing, and tormented facial expressions, reflecting and vocalising Dani's trauma, experiencing her pain communally and echoing her rage. As they sway back and forth in one uniform movement, Dani's private emotions are transformed into a collective experience.



Figure 11. The women of Hårga sharing Dani's grief through collective keening (*Midsommar* 2019, 01:59:57).

Prevailing ontologies of pain object to such an interpersonal experience as they define pain to be a private phenomenon that only the suffering individual has exclusive access to; an 'unsharability', as the literary scholar Elaine Scarry writes in *The Body in Pain* (1985), which is reinforced 'through its resistance to language' (1985: 4). By this statement, the impossibility to express one's pain verbally translates into an inability to remedy and heal one's pain, which implicitly elevates language to the level of essential therapeutic remedy to obtain understanding, diagnosis, and recovery. Correspondingly, in *Midsommar*, Dani cannot explain or share her sufferings with her male partner.

The feminised space of Hårga, however, does not subscribe to such conceptions of unsharability, individualism, and the healing properties of language and intellectualisation. In fact, instead of verbalising, they vocalise. Instead of thinking, they feel. Rather than observing from afar, they partake. This affective togetherness demonstrates, in Ahmed's words, that while pain 'may be solitary, it is never private' (2004a: 29). In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed explains how pain itself 'involves the sociality of bodily surfaces', meaning that both the literal surface of the skin can be sensitive to pain, but also that pain needs to surface 'in relationship to others, who bear witness to pain, and authenticate its existence' (31).

Likewise, in this pivotal scene of *Midsommar*, Dani's anguish surfaces as the Hårga women acknowledge and mirror her pain and anger.

Throughout the film, looking glasses are used to illustrate Dani's loss of recognition. In every mirror, reflections appear distorted or surreal. Due to the lack of acknowledgement of her pain and suffering from those around her, and even in herself, she has lost her sense of self. It is not until Dani's rage is acknowledged by and reflected in the Hårga women, she can finally recognise herself and her inner emotional state. As the Hårga women keen with Dani, they witness her pain, and through this witnessing, they validate her trauma; her pain is granted 'the status of an event, a happening in the world, rather than just the 'something' she felt' (Ahmed 2004a: 29–30). This applies not only to the sorority of women, but also to the film in general, as it portrays female emotionality as complex and justified responses to patriarchal oppression rather than feminine-coded hysteria. Female rage thus emerges as powerful in its legibility: not as irrational excess, but as an affect that shows the structures it has emerged from and refuses to remain contained in the individual body.

Accordingly, *Midsommar*'s matriarchal cult inverts the Western hierarchies of intellect and emotionality. In fact, the villagers adhere to an emotive doctrine where individualist academic achievements and ambition are devaluated in favour of interpersonal emotional cohesion. At one point, Josh is introduced to Hårga's holy book, which ironically opposes the conventional scientific brainpower Josh stands for, both in form and subject. In a negation of semiotic and linguistic sign systems as well as the biblical Gospel of John, stating that 'in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God', Hårga's holy book – the Rubi Radr – is not written, but abstractly *painted* by the village's inbred oracle Ruben (00:38:40). Mirroring the Hårga murals, these patterns and drawings correspond with creativity and emotionality, superseding the written word of God and academia alike.

Further, the conventional forms of authority associated with scientific dissertations or the divine absolutism of the Bible are contrasted with Hårga's holy scripture, which remains an open work-in-progress, never to be finalised. Correspondingly, the book's contents do not revolve around deities and Gospels nor calculated equations and scientific facts, but *holy affects*. As their wise man explains, 'We

describe it like emotional sheet music. Each runic letter stands for one of the sixteen affects, which are graded from most holy to most unholy. This one for example is about grief (01:21:15). It is no coincidence that grief is accentuated here as it is crucial to Dani's emotional journey. More so, by highlighting grief as a primary emotion in their holy text, the Hårgans position grief not as a weakness or something to be hidden, but as a potent, transformative force that is integral to human life.



Figure 12. The inbred Ruben's oracle drawings in the sacred text Rubi Radr, produced through divine unclouded intuition (*Midsommar* 2019, 00:38:40).

This readiness to carry each other's feelings and trauma reflects back on the film's adaptation of Le Guin's concept of the carrier bag, as the realities of the Hårga community circumvent conventionally linear, truth-seeking and individualistic hero stories into a feminised, polyvocal, transformative, continuous, affirmational, and relational narration. At one point, Pelle even asks Dani if she feels *held* by Christian, indicating that emotive processes of gathering, holding, carrying, and healing one another communally is a significant doctrine in their matriarchal community. Following Le Guin, the true hero in *Midsommar* is that or those who 'holds something else' (1986: 166). While such practices of carrying and caring allude to great feelings of empathy, it is not only sheer compassion the Hårgan

women show Dani, but something much more extensive. As Ahmed explains, empathy remains a 'wish feeling', whereby one feels something else than what the subject in pain experiences (2004a: 30). However, the women surrounding Dani are not merely listening or comforting; they actively partake in her emotive state. They *recognise* it and absorb it as their own.

For the first time, Dani is held by a sorority of Hårgan women. Their wailing develops into a rhythmical lament that almost echoes the pleasurable moaning coming from the mating ritual, illustrating Georg Bataille's claim that sex and death are two sides of the same coin necessary to create life – or in this instance, rebirth (2001). This shared affective outlet unfolds into a ritualised healing act bordering on purging exorcism, as they move and cry as one single possessed body. According to Sandra Huber, such a lamentation is known as 'keening' and derives from the Gaelic verb 'caoineadh' which means 'vocalised cry' and refers to a funeral ritual performed by women in pre-Christian Ireland (Huber 2019).¹⁴² According to Anna Pidgorna, this tradition 'gave women living in patriarchal societies one of the only outlets for honest discussion and reflections on their relationships with men' (2022: 130), yet it came to be banned by the clergy as it was considered an example of paganism (Huber 2019). A similar phenomenon, Carol Clover argues, also appears in Old Norse sagas, where 'whetting speeches' – women's incitements to avenge the murder of relatives – often include features of lamentation (1986: 141). In *Midsommar*, the mourning session appears as a mix of these two traditions as the lament is not only motivated by the traumatic loss of her family and suppressed feelings of grief, but also functions as a collective reflection on her crumbling relationship with the apathetic Christian as well as an enraged invocation for retribution.¹⁴³

The communal lament does not only heal and hear; it also gives voice to a form of female rage that has been subjected to a long history of monsterisation. As Ahmed argues, feminist anger is often dismissed as excessive or irrational, functioning as a mechanism by which critique is excluded from the domain of reason and thereby undermines its political legitimacy (2004a: 170). Historically, this delegitimisation has taken various forms, including diagnoses of hysteria, madness, possession and other constructions of feminine irrationality. Such labels function as mechanisms of social control, transforming women's anger from a response to structural injustice

into evidence of individual pathology. This logic persists in contemporary stereotypes such as ‘the angry feminist’, a trope that is used to discredit feminist arguments before they are even articulated by reducing them to an allegedly unreasonable emotional state. It causes, in other words, feminist complaints to be rejected – not because of their content, but because of their form. Similarly, Audre Lorde demonstrated how the stereotype of ‘the angry black woman’ functions to delegitimise Black women’s testimonies by shifting attention towards anger itself as divisive and unproductive rather than to the structures of oppression that provoked it (1984: 124).

However, while these female figures have been monsterised in efforts to secure status quo, *Midsommar* suggests that the true horror lies not in female rage itself, but in its validation. Rather than presenting the raging woman as a pathological or ‘possessed’ figure, *Midsommar* illustrates that it is not so much the hysterical woman herself, but rather the justification of such emotive frenzy that sends shivers down the filmgoer’s spine. The horror lies less in her emotional intensity or the violent retribution that it might engender, but in the implication that she has been wronged – and that her anger therefore might be warranted. In this sense, the monstrous is not only a deviation from the norm, but what, as Margit Shildrick suggests, reveals the instability of the norm itself, exposing the limits of what counts as acceptable expression and behaviour (2002).

So rather than repeating monsterisation, *Midsommar* discloses Western culture’s stigmatisation, avoidance, and individualisation of emotions, personified in a gaslighting, insensitive group of men, and exposes patriarchal fear of the traumatised woman as a fear of self-exposing criticism and loss of power. As Lorde argues, feelings of anger can highlight differences in social position and expose structures of inequality. Rather than being merely destructive, anger contains valuable information about injustice and ‘can be a powerful source of energy serving progress and change’ (1984: 127).

Following Ahmed, it is now time to ask, ‘not so much what *is* pain, but what *does* pain do’ (2004a: 27, original emphasis). Through the communal keening, Dani finally gets to lash out, and by doing so, her pacifying, disempowering grief finds its outlet as a cathartic, furious rage. While grief has kept her in a directionless, meek, submissive haze, ‘there can be nothing ambiguous about one’s rage’ (Ngai

2005: 27). Although female rage challenges traditional conceptions of femininity and historically has been demonised and pathologised in public spaces and utilised in artistic works as monsterising scapegoat strategies, the final scenes of *Midsommar* portray Dani's rage as a site of resistance and self-resurrection that can be channelled into productive forms of transformation and justice. Because of rage, passive victimisation is flipped into agency, silent grief into loud complaint, and women's function as maternal caretakers into the forceful exertion of power. In Hårga, empowerment and emotional sensibility coexist and reinforce one another. Emotionality is not only praised as holy affects to be cultivated and worshipped, but also used as feminine power strategies of healing and protest. Through these practices, the Hårga women weaponise traditional notions of femininity, nurture, and care. Their cries of pain and grief are worshipped, not taboo; vocalised, not silenced; shared, not hidden; communal, not private, and thus channelled into a productive, empowering rage and the denunciation of injustice.

Maddest, Merriest Queen of the May

In the film's final scenes, the midsummer festivities culminate in the third link of Scovell's folk horror-chain: a sacrificial ritual. This final ceremony comprises the burning of the yellow wooden temple and requires nine human offerings to purge the Hårga community of evil elements (02:14:47). Four are members of the matriarch cult: two male volunteers, Ingmar and Ulf, and the two elderly villagers who launched themselves from a cliff in the *ättestupa* rite, now betokened by an assemblage of antlers and branches. The other four are the outsiders Mark, Josh, Connie and Simon, who have already fallen victim to the matriarch cult in ritualised killings symbolic of the four elements: Mark, who urinated on the sacred ancestral tree, is lured away by a flirtatious female villager to be killed off-screen, and has since been skinned and stuffed with hay as foreshadowed by the Hårga children playing 'skin the fool' the day before (00:40:20). Now consisting of highly flammable hay, Mark is placed in the yellow temple as ignition. The ambitious Josh, who sneaked out in the middle of the night to photograph the Rubi Radr holy scriptures for his thesis, fittingly has his head smashed in and bleeds out on the ground – materialising the Nazi ideology of *Blut und Boden* (01:30:04) – before being buried and composted in the earthy element of the commune crops

(02:02:23). In his escape from the mating ritual, Christian discovers how Josh has been *cultivated* in a very different sense than he had aspired to, with his lower leg sticking up from the soil like a plant, with a Mannaz rune (ᚱ) representing humanity, intelligence, and individuality, carved into the sole of his foot. Ingmar's guest Connie is also wheeled into the temple – blue, wet, and covered in seaweed – after being drowned off-screen, according to the script, in an ode to the water element, while her fiancé Simon has fallen victim to an old Norse execution ritual known as the 'blood-eagle', from which he is left hanging from the henhouse ceiling, strung up in a prone position, ribs severed from the spine and lungs pulled out from the back to signify a pair of wings. When Christian stumbles upon him too, the second person whose disappearance he uncaringly disregarded, Simon is still breathing, judging from the contractions of his exposed lungs, thus represents the element of air (02:02:53).

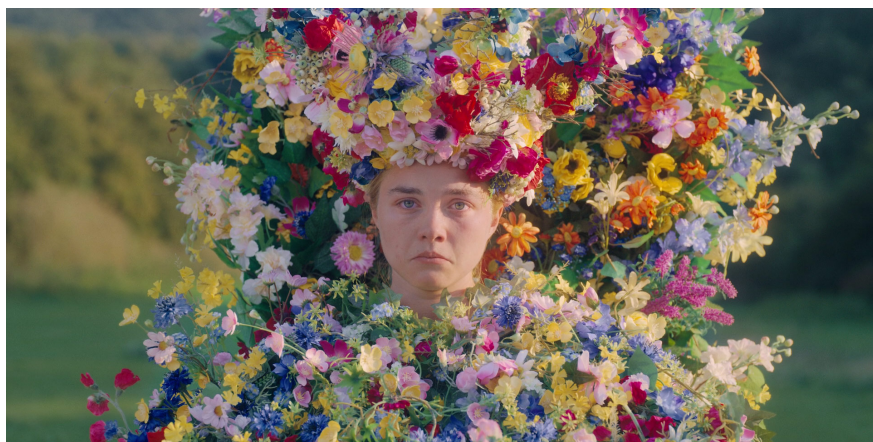


Figure 13. Dani as May Queen, enveloped by flowers and absorbed into Hårga's ecological and communal order (*Midsommar* 2019, 02:08:09).

As the newly crowned May Queen, Dani oversees the ritual as a figure of authority. This is even substantiated by her attire, which has begun to take on a growing triangular shape, making her the personification of both temple and the matriarchal trifecta. Her new status also bestows on Dani the right to choose the ninth victim.

Or rather, she gets to choose between Christian or a random member of the Hårga commune. To cement her freedom, she *appears* to pick her boyfriend, who is soon stuffed into a disembowelled bear carcass and placed in the centre of the triangular yellow temple with the words: 'Mighty and dreadful beast. With you, we purge our most unholy affects' (02:11:44). Correspondingly, through her apparent damnation of Christian, Dani gets to purge herself from a relationship that did not serve her. Aster notes that for the characters visiting the festival 'this is a folk horror movie'; however, for Dani 'it's a sort of perverse wish fulfilment fantasy' (Koresky 2019: 00.03.17).

Yet, although several critics have referred to this sequence as Dani's ultimate revenge (Keetley 2019; Bigelow 2023), there is something ambiguous about it. Significantly, the audience never actually gets to see or hear Dani sentence Christian to death in a cathartic fit of rage. Instead it is only implied, almost interpreted, from her silence or lack of protest. Correspondingly, the film critic Sandra Huber maintains that Dani's vengeance is not a typical one, as it is not well planned out, but rather a 'revenge that spills out in excess of the event that caused it, a reflex, an initiation, an incendiary action' (Huber 2019). While agreeing with the notion that Dani's vindication is not traditional nor strategised, I would infer that it is not so much excess, as it is a shortage of action. Having been invalidated and ignored by Christian throughout the film, she now weaponises the very suppression and negative emotive responses that he fostered in her in order to punish him. Relentlessly, Christian has ushered Dani to close off emotionally and suffer in silence, and in his final moments, this is ultimately what kills him. Mirroring his apathetic, invalidating, and dismissive actions towards her, while also playing the part of the silent and emotionally detached girlfriend that Christian implored her to be, Dani lets things run their course without objection, protest or speaking up – only this time it backfires on him. Instead of resorting to rage, a powerful affect with potential for (counter)action, Dani wallows in a much less dynamic emotional state, that recalls Sianne Ngai's Bartlebyan disposition of 'I prefer not to'. As with both Luna of the reading study and the female protagonist in *Antichrist*, her response is marked not by excess, but by a deliberate refusal to intervene.

While Ngai considers such an emotional response – or lack thereof – to be experientially, semantically, syntactically negative, and thus engenders pain and

stigmatisation, it also has the potential to highlight injustice and question societal structures (2005: 11). Unlike the rage Dani felt earlier when faced by Christian's apparent cheating, her choice to do nothing does not lead to a therapeutic release or immediate action, but is rather a catalyst for intentional Bartlebyan non-action, which highlights the abusive relationship she has endured while simultaneously turning her previous weaknesses into strength, oppression to liberation.



Figure 14. Dani's final smile, riddled with ambiguity, as the sacrificial temple burns (*Midsommar* 2019, 02:16:34).

The final shot of *Midsommar* is a striking image of Dani sobbing hysterically as she watches Christian being burned alive. The audience watches her frown slowly transform into a haunting smile. As the last one standing, Dani fulfils the common slasher trope of 'The Final Girl', yet the question remains whether she has defeated the 'antagonist' of the storyline or rather, if she herself has become one. On one side, and despite the drug rape of Christian and Dani's assimilation into a murderous matriarchal cult, most critics like Huber cannot help feeling 'a prickle of elation at Dani's pure, joyous smile' (2019).

In the film, this response is echoed by Dani's girlfriend, who at the beginning of *Midsommar* asserts that if Christian wants to break up because Dani is too emotional, 'then good riddance, right?' meaning she would be better off without

him (00:06:28). More broadly, this perspective has been coined as the ‘Good for her’ trope, which in recent years has been popularised by memes and portrayed in films such as *Jennifer’s Body* (2009), *Gone Girl* (2014), *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014), *The Witch* (2015), *Revenge* (2017), *The Nightingale* (2018), *Suspiria* (2018), and *Promising Young Woman* (2020).¹⁴⁴ While all these films explore monstrous femininity and flirt with the rape-revenge genre, they also allow for an honest portrayal of women as justified in their emotions. Instead of portraying the female lead as either altruistic, all-forgiving empaths or unhinged, psychopathic villains with nothing in between, the audience gets to revel in female rage and uncensored emotional outbursts as valid responses to abuse or oppression. However heinous their actions may be, this trope – strengthened by the narratological context – blurs the protagonists’ immoral conduct alongside the audiences’ moral judgement.

In this respect, Dani’s final smile may be understood through what Julia Kristeva terms an *intimate revolt*: a psychic process of breaking, remembering, and beginning anew (2000a). Throughout the film, Dani has undergone such a movement: from the traumatic loss of her family to the confrontation with repressed grief, and her final smile gesturing towards the emergence of a new, reconfigured self. As Kristeva states: ‘Revolt is not simply about rejection and destruction; it is also about staring over’ (2002b: 123). In this sense, Dani’s transformation resembles what Kristeva describes as a personal rebellion or emancipation – a painful recommencement born out of loss and disintegration.

Still, while some critics interpret Dani’s smile as the ultimate symbol of liberation from paralysing grief and a toxic relationship, others consider her final expression of joy to be more of an unsettling grin that marks her descent into madness. Correspondingly, the liberation from Christian seems facilitated by the assimilation into the Hårga commune. The question therefore remains: Has Dani survived by assimilating into the matriarchal cult or has she been broken by it to the point of insanity? In the film’s manuscript, Aster gives an ambiguous answer: ‘A smile finally breaks onto Dani’s face ... She has surrendered to a joy known only by the insane. She has lost herself completely, and she is finally free. It is horrible and it is beautiful’ (Aster 2017: 115). With this, there appears to be a larger reflection at play. While the film is structured through the exaggeration, inversion and critical repetition of

gendered stereotypes and ecological ideals, Aster may also be suggesting there is a danger in inhabiting such roles and imaginaries with the intent to subvert them, and that is, that they may ultimately swallow you up.

In the final moments of *Midsommar*, Dani's May Queen gown grows larger and larger until it almost seems to consume her. Dressed in a lush, almost grotesque abundance of pulsating blossoms, Dani is absorbed into Hårga's floral backdrop – an assimilation foreshadowed earlier when Dani experiences hallucinogenic visions of grass growing up through her hands and feet (an imagery similarly facilitated in *Antichrist*, when the female character is instructed to turn green and merge into the grass bedding). It is as if Dani has stepped into a world of yellow; into the floral wallpaper of her parents' bedroom, merged with the Hårgan tapestries, enmeshed with the Swedish wilderness. In the film's closing moments, the boundaries between self and surroundings seem to dissolve, leaving Dani almost indistinguishable from the world that enfolds her: one final grotesque exaggeration of the bright-green ecomimetic fantasy of being one with nature. Or as Morton writes, 'There is a word for a state without a foreground-background distinction: madness' (2010: 30).

Importantly, *Midsommar* refuses to decide. Dani's smile remains suspended between liberation and madness, rebirth and annihilation, inviting the audience to experience the simultaneous allure and terror of monstrous transformation.

8. Arctic Ecohorror: White Ecology and Haunting Histories

The second ecotrope in question – *Arctic ecohorror* – designates a recurring narrative configuration in which Arctic environments are imagined not simply as dramatic settings, but as charged contact zones where ecological crisis, colonial history, racialised imaginaries, and supernatural disturbance converge. While frequently subsumed under broader notions of the global North, significant parts of the Nordic region – including Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland – are themselves located in Arctic or sub-Arctic areas, placing the region in a complex relation between the material realities of the Arctic and its cultural imaginaries.

Within this tension, the Arctic ecohorror trope emerges at the intersection of Nordic ecohorror and Arctic noir, where crime plots, Gothic unease, and ecological anxiety are used to probe the region's self-image as environmentally exceptional. Rather than presenting the North as sublime, Arctic ecohorror reimagines it as a haunted, contested space shaped by slow violence and colonial transgressions in Sápmi and Greenland. In this chapter I therefore explore how such narratives complicate dominant ideas of the Arctic, suggesting that it is not only an aesthetic construct, but also ideologically tied to Nordic imaginaries of social progressivism and environmental virtue.

The representation of the Arctic North as a haunted and contested site shaped by ecological anxiety and supernatural disturbance can be traced back to Mary Shelley's introduction of the Arctic region as a narrative space in her 1818 novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. The novel opens and closes in the Arctic, where Captain Walton's expedition into a landscape of glittering yet treacherous ice fields, untouched desolation, and optical illusions stages the region as stretched out

between romantic sublimity and supernatural monstrosity – ‘never before visited . . . never before imprinted by the foot of man’ (1996: 7). Since its publication, Shelley’s rendering of the sublime Arctic landscape – interweaving themes of creation, scientific hubris, gender, and the law of nature – has been repeatedly revisited in contemporary Gothic literature, ecohorror, and crime fiction where the region serves as a potent creative reservoir for staging ecological crisis in the framework of the Anthropocene. As Walton himself admits, however, the Arctic ‘presents itself to my imagination as the region of beauty and delight’ (ibid.), underscoring how it emerges less a geographically stable reality than a symbolic and narrative projection.

Importantly, such imaginative representations do not reflect the Arctic as it is, but participate in shaping how it is perceived, narrated, and culturally mobilised. Accordingly, as Morton argues, ‘*Frankenstein* is an ecological novel precisely not because it compels us to care for a pre-existing notion of nature, but because it questions the very idea of nature’ (2008: 260), positioning Shelley’s novel as an early instance of ecohorror in its exposé of humanity’s hubristic tampering with the laws of nature and the monstrous creation of a more-than-human being from revived matter. This entanglement of environmental crisis and cultural imagination is further underscored by the novel’s historical context, because Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* in the ‘Year Without a Summer’, when massive volcanic eruptions disrupted weather patterns, causing temperature drops and widespread agricultural failure across Europe (Carroll 2013: 215). Seen in this light, the novel anticipates later ecohorror narratives that stage nature not as a stable background, but as a site of disturbance and uncertainty. Long considered both a symbolic and material epicentre of climate change, the Arctic continues to emerge as a vigorous space for ecological speculation. Today, perhaps more than any other region, it continues to serve as a key barometer for gauging global warming, making it a particularly potent setting for contemporary fiction to explore the entanglement of environmental and societal crises.

Echoing this interplay of Gothic imaginaries of the Arctic and present-day climate anxieties, the Arctic ecohorror trope foregrounds a configuration in which supernatural ecohorror and Arctic ecology often intersect with Nordic noir crime narratives. By cutting across and recombining various genres, this ecotrope once

again points to how Nordic ecohorror operates as a mode, emerging as an atmospheric and aesthetic orientation rather than a bounded generic category. In doing so, the generic mix unsettles the realist framework that has long shaped Nordic literary and cultural production, particularly in investigative narratives, complicating established distinctions between realism and the supernatural (see Chapter Six). While the boundary between Nordic noir and Nordic ecohorror can be said to be defined by nature's degree of agency and the weight of realism, this division is increasingly negotiated in contemporary Nordic crime fiction and television drama, as the social realist premise is increasingly permeated by ecological anxiety, supernatural intrusion, and nonhuman agency. As Yvonne Leffler writes, 'In the past decade or so, a Gothic subgenre to Nordic noir has emerged. Here the police procedure is complicated by seemingly supernatural happening; the initially realistic depiction of the crime investigation is replaced by Gothic tropes, uncanny characters and a mythological world lurking beneath or beyond modern society' (2020: 66).

Extending this uncanny turn, recent screen fictions have also begun to fuse environmental anxieties with the ethical ambiguities of so-called 'white crime'.¹⁴⁵ Examples include the Norwegian TV series *Frikjent* (2015–16, *Acquitted*) and *Okkupert* (2015, *Occupied*), the Icelandic *Hamarinn* (2009, *The Cliff*), the Finnish *Karppi* (2018–2021, *Deadwind*) and *Ivalo* (2018, *Arctic Circle*), the Swedish *Midnattssol* (2016–2018, *Midnight Sun*) and *Partisan* (2020), the inter-Nordic *Tunn is* (2020, *Thin Ice*), the Faroese *Trom* (2022), and the first series of the Danish production *Bedrag* (2016, *Follow the Money*). These works, although distinct in tone and setting, all use crime investigation as a narrative vehicle for addressing ecological, economic, and geopolitical fault lines.

This merging of investigative logic with broader environmental concerns is not limited to screen fiction. In literature, the novels of the Swedish author Johan Theorin including *Skumtimmen* (2007, *Echoes from the Dead* 2008), *Nattfåk* (2008, *The Darkest Room* 2009), *Blodläge* (2010, *The Quarry* 2011), and *Rörgäst* (2013, *The Voices Beyond* 2015) – all set on the Baltic island of Öland – illustrate how crime solving and supernatural mystery do not necessarily cancel each other out. In fact, the crime can be solved even as Todorovian hesitation – between natural and supernatural explanations – lingers unresolved. And, speaking of lingering, the

Icelandic crime writers Yrsa Sigurðardóttir and Ragnar Jónasson fuse features of Nordic noir with ghost story elements in works such as *Auðnin* (2008, *The Day is Dark* 2011), *Ég man þig* (2012, *I Remember You* 2012), and *Porpið* (2018, *The Girl Who Died* 2021), where the supernatural is not merely suspected but ultimately confirmed. Likewise, television series such as SVT's *Jordskott* (2015–2017, *Jordskott: The Roots of Evil*), *Ángelby* (2015), and the Norwegian *Besatt* (2019, *Seizure*) also loosen their grip on reality, granting agency to the surrounding environment and Nordic mythological figures that breathe mystery and myth into the narrative structure. Other than simply combining genres, these works demonstrate how Arctic ecohorror operates in and through Nordic noir, unsettling its realist conventions and expanding its narrative scope.

Relatedly, several of these examples can also be understood as part of a subgenre adjacent to Nordic ecohorror: *Arctic noir*. Defined by Anne Marit Waade as a branch of Nordic noir (2020: 39), the genre constitutes a dark subset of crime fiction typically set in bleak, desolate, and melancholic Arctic landscapes, often centred on emotionally complex protagonists whose investigations of brutal crimes expose the dark underbelly of Nordic exceptionalism. Like Nordic noir, with its focus on the dark side of the otherwise ideal Nordic welfare state, Arctic noir likewise foregrounds crimes against women, ethnic minorities, and queer communities in order to expose the misogynist, homophobic, and racist flipside of the Northern *folkhem*.

However, as Anne Marit Waade and Anders Grønlund also observe, 'Arctic noir takes Nordic noir a step further by making the Arctic setting and climate significant to the plotline of the crime narrative as well as in the visual aesthetic, often approaching regional discourses of geopolitical tensions, postcolonial relations and the rights of Indigenous peoples' (2024: 355). By this thematic expansion, Arctic noir extends the notion of crime beyond interhuman wrongdoings to include crimes against nature, forging an important link with Nordic ecohorror.

Building on this, the Arctic ecohorror trope pushes the noir framework into the realm of ecological horror, coupling environmental dread with supernatural disturbances and ethical hauntings, while bringing to the fore the often-downplayed histories of Nordic colonialism in the Arctic – particularly in relation to Sápmi and Greenland, where processes of territorial control, resource extraction, and the

displacement and relocation of Indigenous populations have shaped both land and ways of life. In this sense, the Arctic emerges not as a purely geographical setting, but as a natureculture: an entangled space in which ecological conditions, colonial histories, cultural imaginaries, and contemporary climate change are inseparable.

White Ecology

In the light of these cultural imaginaries of the Arctic, I argue that at the core of the Arctic ecohorror trope lies a critique of what I understand as ‘white ecology’; not simply a reference to snow-covered landscapes, but a cultural and environmental discourse through which Arctic whiteness becomes associated with ideals of purity, sublimity, openness, and pristine Nature. In this sense, white ecology stands in contrast to Morton’s ‘dark ecology’ not only in its colour scheme, but in its ideological orientation: while dark ecology challenges romantic ideals of pure and separate nature, white ecology names the aesthetic and colonial mode by which such fantasies continue to organise dominant Western imaginaries of the North.

To clarify this concept theoretically, it is worth turning briefly to Bernd Herzogenrath’s original discussion of ‘white ecology’ in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* (2013), from which my own use of the term both draws and expands.¹⁴⁶ Here, he questions the assumed neutrality and purity traditionally associated with whiteness in Western environmental thought. Drawing on colour-symbolic meanings of *white* as ‘the standard, the non plus ultra, the default’ (3), he shows how these seemingly abstract associations are in fact constitutive of racialised formations of whiteness in dominant Eurocentric discourse. In doing so, he challenges the idea of ‘white’ as a neutral, unmarked background and reveals it instead as a position that structures and privileges particular ways of seeing and knowing. More than an aesthetic or philosophical construct, white ecology functions as an invisible standard or default mode of a Western worldview that privileges certain narratives of nature while marginalising others (3–4). Drawing on both the history of Western metaphysics and colonial imaginaries of Arctic space as a blank territory for exploration, he demonstrates how claims to universality and neutrality often obscure the cultural and historical conditions from which they emerge (8). In response, his critique opens toward a

plural ecological thinking attentive to the entanglement of history, race, and power that underlies seemingly neutral environmental imaginaries (1–2).

Importantly, while Herzogenrath develops white ecology as a more general intervention of Western environmental thought, the following chapter mobilises the concept within a specifically Nordic context. This does not mean that white ecology is exclusive to the Nordic region, but that it finds a culturally entrenched expression here owing to the region's ambiguous status as both a partly Arctic locality and a partially external agent of Arctic colonisation, and is thus actively mobilised and critiqued in Nordic Arctic ecohorror texts. In these works, I argue, white ecology does not remain an abstract framework but is aesthetically embedded in representations of Arctic and sub-Arctic landscapes. Here, snow, ice, and light are not merely environmental features of snow-white backdrops, but carry symbolic and ideological weight associated with purity and origin, reinforcing exclusionary narratives and romanticised visions of nature.

This distinctly Nordic iteration of white ecology is further specified by Anna Estera Mrozewicz (2020), who identifies a form of whiteness embedded in Nordic environmental imaginaries, especially in crime fiction and television drama. In these types of works, she argues, white ecology is above all an *aesthetic of whiteness*, heavily encoded with neo-Romantic and sublime spectacles of snowy mountainous terrains. This aesthetic does not simply depict nature but functions ideologically by actively framing it as distant, uncorrupted, and available for human control – often through elevated, panoramic viewpoints that separate observer and landscape. In doing so, white ecology taps into ‘an idealising green discourse, detaching the human subject from nature, which is objectified as a landscape’ (2020: 93). These images, Mrozewicz claims, not only reflect but actively produce a vision of Nordic nature as inherently pure, innocent and awe-inspiring (92).

Similarly, Anne Marit Waade highlights a strong artistic tradition in Nordic noir of portraying Arctic nature through the lens of the extraordinary and sublime (2020: 40). In *Locating Nordic Noir* (2017), Waade and Kim Toft Hansen refer to this aesthetic as ‘romanticism *light*’ or ‘sublimity *light*’ (262, original emphasis), characterised by an almost exaggerated use of fjord and mountain landscapes, recalling the dramatic, atmospheric paintings of the Norwegian artists Johan Christian Dahl and Peder Balke. As such, these visual strategies not only amplify

the sublime, but are also a form of cultural 'place-branding' for the region (257), almost resembling 'a tourist brochure' and contributing to the international circulation of a recognisable Nordic image as a spectacular wilderness (261).

In this way, Nordic screen cultures and literary texts do not merely reflect white-ecological aesthetics but participate in reproducing and circulating them as part of a broader cultural imaginary. As Waade observes, 'Arctic noir capitalizes on historical interest in the Arctic area by echoing romantic landscape paintings as well as cultural history in which internationally acknowledged scientists and adventurers have explored the North Pole' (2020: 39). Similarly, Arctic ecohorror representations of the Arctic do not merely reproduce aesthetic conventions of the sublime, but draw on a longer Nordic cultural history in which the North has been imagined as a site of exploration, heroism, and nation-building.

In many ways, this form of representation builds on the same Nordic perception of nature outlined in the preceding chapter on folk ecohorror, where nature is framed as sacred and restorative. In Arctic ecohorror, however, this romanticised perception re-emerges in a specifically white-ecological form, where ideals of purity, sublimity, and origin are attached to specific Arctic landscapes and the colonial and Indigenous histories embedded within them. Romanticisation is therefore not merely aesthetic, but ideological and political in its effects. By repeatedly framing white Nordic landscapes as visually striking and pristine, these representations construct an image of the region in which dramatic nature comes to represent Nordic identity itself – signalling cleanliness, moral integrity, and environmental responsibility – thereby reinforcing a discourse of Nordic eco-exceptionalism while masking the region's continued reliance on extractive industries such as oil, gas, and nuclear power, as well as its histories of colonial appropriation and territorial exploitation.

Additionally, Mrozewicz and others argue that Northern landscapes are mobilised as sites through which whiteness is linked to masculinity and Northern identity, repeating a colonial imaginary in which the Arctic is positioned as a space to be explored, conquered, and mastered by the male Western explorer. This leads Mrozewicz to suggest that white ecology can be understood in 'gendered terms' (2020: 87). In fact, she considers the interrelation between whiteness, ideals of masculinity, and Northern identity to dominate the narrative of national strength

and environmental stewardship. Mrozewicz finds support in Sabine Henlin-Strømme, who similarly argues that the ‘dominant white discourse equates white nature with white masculinity’ (2015: 188). This ideal, often depicted as a test of human endurance, is a recurring theme in male-centred narratives of exploration, which – according to Henlin-Strømme – is deeply related to the accounts of real-life polar expeditions and Nordic national heroes.

In the early twentieth century, the near canonisation of the polar explorers Fridtjof Nansen and Roald Amundsen confirmed this dominant cultural and historical construction. The trope of whiteness – as in snow, ice, and white men conquering remote regions in harsh conditions – furthermore generated particular assumptions of a masculinist Norwegian Arctic. (2015: 187)

In various works, this image of a solitary male figure braving an endless white landscape – from Shelley’s Captain Walton to the resistance fighters in the Norwegian Second World War drama *Kampen om tungtvannet* (2015, *The Heavy Water War/The Saboteurs*) – is still imbued with romantic ideals. As Gunnar Iversen notes, such works dramatise ‘symbolic stories of heroism, combat, resistance, male subjectivity, ethnicity, and identity, set in highly symbolic national landscapes, often barren mountains’, reflecting and reinforcing the ideology of white ecology (2012: 239). In this configuration, the Arctic becomes a symbolic stage for the testing of masculine subjectivity rather than a lived environment. Moreover, I would add that white ecology’s idealisation of purity, innocence, beauty, and openness is, as Morton also observes, structurally analogous to the patriarchal idealisation of women, insofar as both rely on forms of reverence that conceal relations of domination (2007: 13).

White ecology, then, is not about snow or climate alone but helps construct a neo-Romantic Nordic self-image rooted in sublimity, masculinity, and environmental superiority, while marginalising femininity and Indigenous knowledge. At the same time, I argue that the works of Arctic ecohorror also offer a more explicit and sustained critique of this framework. In this ecotrope, white ecology is not merely represented but exposed as a cultural construct that suppresses alternative ecological perspectives and reinforces existing power structures. Moreover, these works point to how women, Indigenous peoples, and the

nonhuman have played vital roles in shaping the Arctic – not as a blank, passive wilderness, ready for the taking, but as a queer, feminised, and affective space that resists heteronormative logics and colonial domination – alive with spectral agency and ecological vengeance.

White Ecology and Feminine Spaces in *Night Country*, *Auðnin*, and *Midnattssol*

In order to explore how white ecology is both reproduced and contested across different Nordic and transnational contexts, I analyse three works in the Arctic ecohorror trope. Together, these analyses trace how the Arctic emerges not as a passive setting, but as a constructed and haunted space shaped by ecological crisis, colonial histories, and shifting relations between human and more-than-human agency.

The first analysis examines the American anthology crime drama *True Detective: Night Country* (2024), written and directed by the Mexican filmmaker Issa López, focusing on feminine monstrosity and how it unsettles the masculine logics underpinning white ecology.¹⁴⁷ The second turns to the Icelandic author Yrsa Sigurðardóttir's novel *Auðnin* (2008, *The Day is Dark* 2011), where my emphasis shifts to the natural environment and the breakdown of a sublime, white Arctic imaginary. Finally, the third analysis examines the Swedish-French TV drama *Midnattssol* (2016, *Midnight Sun*) by Måns Mårild and Björn Stein, focusing on the entanglement of colonial histories, Indigenous hauntings, and environmentally harmful white crimes. Together, I examine how these Arctic ecohorror works both reproduce and resist the gendered, aesthetic, and geopolitical constructs of white ecological ideologies.

Each of these narratives explores contemporary ecological dilemmas specific to the Arctic by blending 'modern-day', realist conventions of Nordic noir with 'ancient', uncanny, and supernatural elements. All three stories follow complex female investigators drawn into deadly conflicts over Western mining companies encroaching on Indigenous lands and exploiting Arctic resources, disturbing ecological systems, and stirring old colonial trauma, long-buried secrets and ghostly monstrosities. Set against either the polar night or the midnight sun, these

investigations unfold in disorienting temporal and spatial conditions, where local mythologies and feminised forces resurface hidden crimes and repressed pasts.

While each work is introduced through a distinct analytical focus, they are not treated in isolation. Rather, they remain in dialogue, allowing motifs, figures, and tensions to re-emerge throughout the chapter: feminine monstrosity, haunting icescapes, and colonial trauma surface in shifting forms, linking the texts through a shared engagement with Arctic ecologies and the monsters they engender.

Notably, I approach ‘the Arctic’ much as ‘the Nordics’: as a cultural construct, shaped by historical narratives and artistic interpretations rather than a specific geographic locality. This approach is inspired by *The Imagined Arctic in Speculative Fiction* (2023), in which the literary scholar Maria Lindgren Leavenworth explores literary representations of the Arctic written by authors residing outside the Arctic hemisphere. This selection method helps her investigate artistic imaginations of the Arctic. However, while Leavenworth primarily engages with British or American novels, I consult Nordic ecohorror works, whose relationship to Arctic spaces is materially and historically entangled in different ways – particularly in relation to colonial histories and geopolitical boundaries. This approach allows me to examine how a Nordic form of white ecology is both mobilised and critically reworked in and through these narratives.

Monstrous Femininity in *True Detective: Night Country*

As an Arctic ecohorror work with strong ties to Nordic noir conventions, Issa López’s HBO series *True Detective: Night Country* (2024) stages the Arctic as a haunted and affectively charged space shaped by lingering colonial trauma and uncanny natural forces that exceed rational explanation. In this configuration, the series engages with the ideological framework of white ecology, exposing and unsettling its alignment of extractivism, masculinity, and environmental mastery. Focusing specifically on its two female detectives, the following analysis examines how the series mobilises feminine monstrosity and gendered nonconformity to challenge the masculine and colonial logics that have traditionally structured both Arctic imaginaries and the detective genre. However, before turning to the analysis, an outline of the series’ central narrative and characters is needed.



Figure 15. Police Chief Elizabeth Danvers and her partner, Inupiat trooper Evangeline Navarro (*True Detective: Night Country* 2024).

Set in the fictional mining town of Ennis, Alaska, the series unfolds on the brink of polar night, where long periods of darkness transform the Arctic environment into a volatile space marked by disorientation, isolation, and perceptual uncertainty. At the centre of the story are Police Chief Liz Danvers (played by Jodie Foster), a pragmatic and emotionally guarded investigator who has withdrawn from both her colleagues and the community following the death of her husband and son, and her partner, the Inupiat trooper and ex-soldier Evangeline Navarro (Kali Reis), a headstrong and intuitive investigator whose experiences of violence and loss in both her personal life and military past have left her restless and emotionally volatile. Their uneasy partnership is shaped by conflicting approaches to both the investigation and the community they serve. Whereas Danvers remains sceptical of the spiritual beliefs and uncanny occurrences circulating through the town, Navarro is more willing to engage with forms of knowledge that exceed rational explanation. Together with a young officer called Peter Prior and his ineffectual father, Hank Prior, whose strained familial dynamic mirrors the broader tensions in the Ennis community, Danvers and Navarro are tasked with solving the mysterious disappearance of eight scientists from the Tsalal Arctic Research Station, where a

highly secretive research project is being conducted beneath the ice.¹⁴⁸ However, after finding a severed tongue at the station, what initially appeared to be an isolated missing persons case is gradually linked to the unsolved murder of Annie Kowtok, a young Inupiat activist and midwife whose brutal death followed her resistance to the local Silver Sky Mining Company and its environmental destruction of the area. As the investigation unfolds, connections emerge between the mining operation, the research station, and the structural marginalisation of Indigenous communities in Ennis, situating the crime narrative in a broader network of ecological exploitation, industrial intrusion, and the ongoing afterlives of settler colonialism.

At the same time, Indigenous knowledge systems and spiritual frameworks pepper the narrative, complicating the rational framework of the investigation and introducing alternative ways of understanding the events in Ennis. Shortly before the disappearance of the scientists, a video recording from inside the Tsalal station captures one of the men trembling in terror: 'She's awake!' (episode 1, 00:03:59). While the identity of this feminine presence remains unresolved, it comes to signify a feminine, vengeful and ghostly presence tied to both the land and the fate and memory of Annie Kowtok. Rather than locating horror in a singular monster or identifiable threat, *Night Country* disperses it across environmental disturbance, spectral hauntings, gender trouble, and institutional corruption.

This becomes particularly evident when the bodies of the missing scientists are discovered in the outskirts of the white desert as a literary emblem of *transcorporeal enmeshment* – literally 'twisted and shouting' as the Beatles' song playing on repeat at the abandoned Tsalal station suggests – naked and frozen solid, grotesquely fused together into one 'giant block of flesh' made from ice; a macabre concoction of human limbs, scorched skin and disfigured faces – evoking a grotesque echo of Frankenstein's assembled creature – all too fittingly attributed in the autopsy report to a '*freak* weather event' (episode 5, 00:32:20, my emphasis). According to Lopéz, this 'corpse' was inspired by a variety of sources, ranging from Dante's *Inferno* and mummies to the zoological phenomenon of the Rat King (Huff 2024), but more importantly, it prefigures the series' broader investment in ambiguity and category crisis. Just as the scientists are rendered an indistinguishable mass of flesh and ice, the detectives Danvers and Navarro seemingly caused considerable viewer

controversy by destabilising normative boundaries of identity and social intelligibility.



Figure 16. The ‘corpseicle’ of frozen and fused bodies, forming a grotesque assemblage of ice and flesh that materialises the ecohorrific aesthetics of transcorporeal entanglement (*True Detective: Night Country* 2024, episode 2, 00:19:17).

Unintelligible Female Nordic Noir Detectives

Upon its release in 2024, *True Detective: Night Country* received a notably polarised reception. While many critics praised the series for its performances and engagement with Indigenous and ecological themes, some commentators expressed an unusual hostility towards the show, including the series’ original creator, Nic Pizzolatto, who publicly distanced himself from the season, insisting that, ‘I certainly did not have any input on this story or anything else. Can’t blame me’ (Murphy 2024). Significantly, much of this criticism appears to centre on the show’s two female detectives, Liz Danvers and Evangeline Navarro, who were repeatedly described as unlikeable, abrasive, emotionally inaccessible, and difficult to identify with. Before turning to this reception, however, I will first examine how

the series itself portrays its two female leads. Here, I argue that *True Detective: Night Country* aligns Danvers and Navarro with the female investigators of Nordic noir, whose social unintelligibility and non-conforming modes of investigation complicate the masculinist logics that have historically structured both detective fiction and white ecological imaginaries.

One apparent reason for the backlash revolves around the fact that while previous seasons of the iconic franchise present a predominantly male cast in Southern Gothic landscapes of scorched and sizzling Louisiana, California, and Arkansas, López's fourth season is cold, dark, and distinctly feminised. In doing so, *True Detective: Night Country* aligns with broader developments in Nordic and Arctic noir, which according to the literary scholar Catrine Bjerknes is starting to challenge a 200-year-old discursive tradition of heroic, white masculinity: rather than framing the Arctic as a desolate feminine landscape open for the taking by conquering male agency, Arctic crime fiction features hardy female characters who blur gender lines while engaging with both the landscape and its native inhabitants in ways that transcend conventional roles and expectations (2017: 292). Literary scholar Johan Höglund similarly observes this development, arguing that 'many of the texts that explore Nordic colonialism pay particular attention to gender, and ... more critical texts often place a young female character, rather than a white male, at its centre' (2020: 131).

Besides echoing this shift by placing two female detectives at the centre of a narrative traditionally dominated by male protagonists, the HBO series also imports a distinctly Nordic configuration of the female investigator. In the article 'The Female Detective as the Child Who Needs to Know' (2018), Camilla Schwartz and E. Ann Kaplan argue that contemporary Nordic noir has produced a new type of female detective: a figure who is simultaneously extraordinarily competent and distinctly maladjusted, occupying an ambiguous position between what the authors term 'stereotyped masculine potency' and 'shameful dysfunctionalities' (2018: 214). While these women excel professionally, they repeatedly fail in social and intimate spheres, rendering them difficult to categorise within conventional gender frameworks.

Building on this, I argue that although *True Detective: Night Country* is neither Nordic in setting nor production, the series clearly draws on the female Nordic noir

detective figure, as both Danvers and Navarro resemble what Schwartz and Kaplan describe as ‘the female investigator [who] functions extremely well at her job as detective while being inadequate and maladjusted when it comes to other areas, mainly in relation to communicative, social and emotional skills’ (2018: 214). Much like the Nordic noir detectives Saga Norén in *Broen/Bron* (2011–2018, *The Bridge*), Sarah Lund in *Forbrydelsen* (2007–2012, *The Killing*), Kahina Zadi in *Midnattssol* (2016, *Midnight Sun*), and Lisbeth Salander in the Swedish author Stieg Larsson’s *Millennium* series (2005–2007, *Millennium Trilogy*) – many of them adapted as British and American remakes – Danvers and Navarro are portrayed as abrasive, emotionally opaque, and socially standoffish investigators whose potency and non-conforming behaviour repeatedly place them in conflict with both institutional structures and the people around them.

Central to Schwartz and Kaplan’s notion of the female Nordic noir detective is her ambiguous relationship to gender. These investigators appear to be caught in ‘a constant struggle between a stereotyped masculine potency, on the one hand, that leads us to think of them as disguised men – or women who really are men’ (2018: 214). Yet, as Sara Kärrholm and Kerstin Bergman writes, while ‘female detectives or criminal investigators have not infrequently been portrayed as “women in men’s clothing”’, it is rarely ‘in the strictly literal sense’ (2011: 196).¹⁴⁹ The point, then, is not that these women simply become men. Rather, they occupy an unstable and ambiguous position in which traits stereotypically coded as masculine (especially in the detective genre) – such as professional competence, emotional detachment, sexual autonomy, and social nonconformity – become attached to female bodies and thus destabilise conventional gender binaries (197). In a similar way, one might argue that Danvers and Navarro, too, ‘at first glance embod[y] an otherwise typically masculine genre ideal’ (Schwartz & Kaplan, 2018: 216). This notion is subtly suggested early in the series’ opening episode, when police officer Hank, seemingly annoyed at having to take orders from Elizabeth Danvers, responds: ‘You heard the man’ (episode 1, 00:30:56), a remark that simultaneously invokes the conventional association of authority with masculinity while masculinising Danvers.

This ambiguous gender position extends into the private sphere, where the female Nordic noir detective frequently struggles to sustain intimate and familial

relationships. As Schwartz and Kaplan note, the female detective ‘shares the traditional male detective’s inability to sustain and nourish a normal family life’ (2018: 216). Danvers and Navarro exhibit a similar pattern. While both women are competent police officers who go on to outshine their male colleagues, they both struggle in the private spheres outside work, especially when it comes to ‘communicative, social and emotional skills’ (Schwartz & Kaplan, 2018: 214). In a conversation with her superior, the regional chief Captain Ted Connelly, Danvers makes it three for three,

Danvers: You were scared, I was gonna take your job.

Connelly: Okay, you want the truth? You were a better cop than me from day one. But you were terrible with people. And after—

Danvers: What? What? Go on. Say it.

Connelly: —Jake and Holden, it got worse.

Danvers: Bullshit. You say, I got too emotional?

Connelly: No, you just got fucking shittier. You told people they sucked at their jobs.

Danvers: Because they sucked at their jobs!

Connelly: Nobody wanted to work with you, Liz, nobody wants to work with you now. You’re still a fucking mess. Take a look around. It’s Christmas eve and you’re here busting my balls!

Danvers: Yeah, and you’re here, too, busting mine, aren’t you?

(*True Detective: Night Country*, episode 4, 00:37:09)

By having a one-night stand instead of celebrating Christmas with her family, Danvers exposes her struggles in the domestic arena, especially with motherhood, a role she appears to have retreated from since the death of her son Holden in a car accident that also killed her husband, Jake. Unlike young Peter Prior, Danvers is not torn between her career and family life; in fact, she is not only incapable of

sustaining a conventional family herself, but also manages to derail Prior's, as she completely ignores his many pleas to go home to his family.

Similarly, Navarro struggles to create a meaningful romantic relationship, in her case with the smitten local bar owner Qaavik. Flipping stereotypical gender dynamics, Qaavik is portrayed as the heart-on-his-sleeve, wholesome, and genuinely compassionate carer who gently tends to Navarro's wounds after she engaged in a drunken street fight and patiently waits for her to turn up for sex, while the no-strings-attached Navarro is emotionally distant, sexually motivated, and unwilling to commit. She never spends the night, leaving for work as soon as her needs are met. To the female Nordic noir detective, Kaplan and Schwartz argue, 'sexuality is not a matter of desire ... it is a matter of purely physical needs' (2018: 218). Relatedly, Navarro exudes an assertive, even phallic-coded sexuality, asking direct, unembarrassed locker-room questions about masturbation, porn preferences, or a plain 'Wanna fuck?' just as their sexual encounters often involve her dominating and half-dressed on top, selfishly pursuing climax while ignoring Qaavik's feeble requests to slow down (episode 1, 00:41:08). This dynamic can be understood in light of Ann Kaplan's argument that 'women tend to occupy the "male" position when they become dominant' (Kaplan 1983: 27, cited in Schwartz and Kaplan 2018: 218).

This kind of potency also applies to Danvers, who arranges men on the dating app Tinder like the line-up in fantasy football – the only two reasons she is on her phone outside work. While her numerous one-night stands with the married men of Ennis make her unpopular among their wives, sex – as for Navarro – is related to physical need more than desire. Indeed, much in line with the female Nordic noir detective described by Schwartz and Kaplan (2018: 221–222), female desire in *Night Country* is reserved only for the killer. This is also illustrated in how both women, whenever sex is needed, actively seek out their sexual partners outside their own domestic spheres: taking someone home would be too intimate, but the murder investigation's case files and gory photos of violated murder victims get to go home with them every time.

When it comes to emotionality, the two women appear to be at opposite ends of the scale as Danvers feels too little, while Navarro feels too much. This is illustrated in the first episode, when Danvers realises that Navarro cannot let go of Annie's case: 'We carry them all' Navarro says, to which Danvers snorts 'No, we

don't' (episode 1, 00:51:49). While Danvers' emotional insufficiency makes her come across as unemphatic, cold-hearted, and uncaring, Navarro's emotional overload results in violence and anger. Both reactions, although seemingly polar opposites, originate in grief and loss of identity and have since become strategies to make themselves unapproachable. Whenever a conversation between the two women evolves into a more sensitive matter that requires care or empathy, both women instantly turn cold and insensitive in order to block any possible emotional outlet. Such is the case when Danvers tells Navarro about the time she, as a 7-year-old girl, prayed so extensively to save her dying mother's life that her knees turned blue, only for her mother to die anyway, to which Navarro aversively answers: 'Maybe you didn't pray hard enough' (episode 4, 00:15:26).

This brings us to another defining characteristic of the female Nordic noir detectives: what Schwartz and Kaplan describe as tension between 'extreme potency on the one hand and shameful psychic problems on the other' (2018: 213). Similarly, Danvers and Navarro are also stretched between great capability while simultaneously struggling with emotional frailty. This makes for two paradoxical beings, who on one side appear to be strong, authoritative, and independent individualists while simultaneously coming across as lonely and traumatically grieving women in the midst of each their own identity crises. However, as Schwartz and Kaplan also point out, Danvers and Navarro are not great detectives despite these traits, but because of them (2018: 216).

While the 'psychic problems' among the Nordic noir detectives are directly connected to actual diagnoses such as autism, Danvers and Navarro struggle with emotional issues in the form of crippling grief and traumatic pasts. However, Navarro's 'psychic problems' also take on a more literal meaning as she experiences supernatural psychic visions that ultimately lead her to question her own sanity. Significantly, these experiences unfold in the context of a family history marked by mental illness, counting both her mother and suicidal sister Julie, and by an apparent sensitivity to the spiritual world. Rather than establishing a causal link between the two, the series uses this ambiguity to reflect Navarro's own position as torn between two epistemological frameworks: as a state police officer trained within a Western secular and institutional tradition and as an Inupiat woman

increasingly reconnecting with Indigenous forms of knowledge, which ultimately help her make sense of the crime case.

In addition, Navarro fits the well-known Nordic noir motif of detectives who have endured a traumatic childhood (Schwartz & Kaplan, 2018: 226), having grown up with a violent and absent father who abused and presumably murdered her mother. In this respect, Navarro's upbringing recalls that of Stieg Larsson's Lisbeth Salander, who, as Yvonne Leffler writes, 'represents a common fantasy of being abused, mistreated and weak, but still strong and capable, an ideal transformation from being the object of violence to being its acting subject' (2013: 62). Similarly, despite traumatic pasts, the female detectives of *True Detective: Night Country* are also bursting with vengeful agency. However, taking Leffler's observation one step further, I also argue that this transformation from violated victim to violent subject eventually destabilises the boundary between detective and perpetrator.

Just as the Tsalal scientists are 'encapsulated' into a grisly formation of ice and flesh, absorbed by the Arctic forces they sought to master and exploit, the female investigators come to mirror certain characteristics of the phallic killer they doggedly pursue. As in Clover's famous definition in *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (1992), the male slasher killer of horror cinema is portrayed as a queer outcast who is either emotionally impaired or has mental health issues because of a problematically ambiguous maternal bond or a traumatised childhood, and who is either unreceptive or indifferent to cultural norms of proper social and sexual conduct (26–30). While these features may describe a specific form of male perpetrator in American horror cinema, they also make for an accurate account of the female detectives who operate in the realm of Nordic noir. A central example can be found in the first season of *Broen/Bron*, when the detective Saga Norén rattles off the characteristics of the murderer they are currently pursuing, while her superior Hans seems to think she is listing her own qualities in an effort to secure a promotion.

Saga: Extremely focused, single, successful in their career, clear goals, and well organised.

Hans: Yes, you said it yourself.

Saga: What do you mean?

Hans: Yes, you said it yourself.

Saga: Well, I mean ... that's our perpetrator's psychological profile.

Hans: I think you should go home and get some sleep now.

(*Broen/Bron* 2011, season 1, episode 3, 00.47:48)¹⁵⁰

The breakdown between investigator and perpetrator is also visible in Danvers and Navarro, who exhibit many of the traits identified by Saga Norén and Carol Clover: both women are single workaholics with detached love lives, presenting as potent and emotionally hardened outcasts in the Ennis community. The series even pushes this overlap further by revealing that the female detective duo not only mirror the traits of the male killer – they, too, are killers themselves, having once taken the law into their own hands by shooting a man who had brutally murdered his girlfriend. In fact, this willingness to operate outside institutional and legal frameworks resurfaces in the series' conclusion, when Danvers and Navarro discover the perpetrators behind the Tsalal murders to be a group of Iñupiat cleaning women from the local community, who enacted vigilante justice in response to Annie Kowtok's murder and the ongoing exploitation of Indigenous land and bodies. Rather than arresting the women, however, Danvers and Navarro choose to conceal the truth, thereby abandoning the procedural logic of the detective genre in favour of an alternative moral code rooted in communal justice and vigilante retribution.

By reconfiguring the detective archetype, *True Detective: Night Country*, like many of its Nordic noir predecessors, unsettles the white-ecological ideals that have historically structured both Arctic exploration narratives and the detective genre itself. Instead of reproducing Western imaginaries grounded in legal authority and fantasies of mastery over land, bodies, and knowledge, López's series foregrounds female figures marked by emotional excess, lawlessness, and gendered hybridity, whose investigative practices repeatedly blur the boundaries between detective and perpetrator, justice and revenge, rational inquiry and supernatural intuition. By doing so, *True Detective: Night Country* also pushes its Nordic noir framework beyond its realist foundations by intertwining the investigative narrative with colonial hauntings and the intrusion of the supernatural. In this way, the series

mobilises the core elements of Nordic Arctic ecohorror, reframing the northern hemisphere from a mere backdrop for white masculine conquest into a space of feminine resistance and non-conforming existence (Henlin-Strømme 2015; Hansson & Ryall 2017; Mrozewicz 2020).¹⁵¹

Unlikable Unwomen

The female Nordic noir detective, Schwartz and Kaplan argue, often emerges as a figure that audiences ‘fail to identify with’ (2018: 228). Correspondingly, the reception of *True Detective: Night Country* seems to bear out this characteristic as the series’ portrayal of its two female investigators provoked strong reactions among critics and viewers alike, many of whom described Danvers and Navarro as fundamentally unlikeable figures. Not unlike several participants in my reader study, who felt Luna was difficult to recognise, emotionally opaque, or even unreadable, viewers of *True Detective: Night Country* struggled to make sense of Danvers and Navarro. Moving on from what the series presents to how these representations were received, it is worth beginning with the film critic Erik Kain’s notably visceral response to the female detective duo.

None of the characters are particularly likable. That’s a big problem, though it could have been a tolerable one if the story they inhabited was compelling enough to make such miserable people watchable ... Jodie Foster’s Liz Danvers has barely a single redeeming quality and her partner, Detective Navarro (Kali Reis) is just as hard to stomach. You can get away with having a detective be this awful of a human being only if they make up for it with a Hercule Poirot-like intellect. Neither Danvers or Navarro possess much in the way of little grey cells, however. In the end, I felt nothing but disdain and disgust for both characters. (*Forbes* 2024)

Kain experienced Danvers and Navarro as miserable, awful, unwatchable, and without ‘a single redeeming quality’ and therefore ‘hard to stomach’, with this last alluding to his feeling of ‘nothing but disdain and disgust for both characters’. His visceral response, however, is not prompted by a single shocking act or grotesque image; rather, it stems from his perception of their characters – unredeemable,

unlikely and presumably beyond the boundaries of what a female detective should be or how she should behave.

This response is not unique to Kain alone. Across mainstream media reviews, a recurring critical pattern emerges in which Danvers and Navarro are framed as abrasive, socially antagonistic, or otherwise difficult to engage with. Writing in *The Guardian*, Gwilym Mumford views them as ‘unpleasant to the point of being unwatchable’ (2024), while a review by Sebastian Smith in *The Boar* goes further in its affective register, describing the female characters as ‘unlikeable ... annoying ... petty’ (2024). Danvers in particular is repeatedly framed through a vocabulary that emphasises her emotional detachment and interpersonal difficulties. In *Time Magazine*, Judy Berman describes her as ‘brusque, misanthropic, self-destructively libidinous’ (2024), while *Entertainment Weekly*’s Kristen Baldwin similarly characterises her as ‘an abrasive, sarcastic workaholic’ (2024). Audience responses in diverse online forums, however, push this critical framing towards outright rejection. On the social discussion platform Reddit, one user writes that ‘Danvers is too unlikeable to seat ourselves inside of. And we’re not getting enough clarity to seat ourselves in Navarro’s character’ (Angie-Fenimore 2024), explicitly linking unlikeability and emotional reserve to a failure of identification. Another user similarly describes both protagonists as ‘so unlikeable, incompetent, and destructive individuals’ (Wolfsb4ne74 2024), while a user review on IMDb, the online database and review platform, dismisses Danvers as ‘uninteresting’ and ‘unlikeable’ (iautom8u 2024).

While these responses position Danvers and Navarro as unacceptable and fundamentally disagreeable characters whose behaviour is framed as intolerable, the specific grounds for why viewers find them so objectionable remain far less evident. Rather than being tied to any singular action or narrative transgression, the criticism appears to hinge on a more generalised sense of affective and moral discomfort. As a result, the question of likability emerges as a central framework by which viewers evaluate Danvers and Navarro.

According to Anna Bogutskaya, likeability operates as a gendered evaluative norm that structures responses to female characters. In her book *Unlikable Female Characters: The Women Pop Culture Wants You to Hate* (2023), she examines how female figures – particularly in the horror genre – are judged through a gendered

lens that demands likeability and emotional accessibility, revealing how traits admired in male characters are often condemned in women. As she argues, “Unlikeable” is code. It’s code for “fair game”. If a woman is unlikeable, she is stepping out of bounds, which makes it fair game to decimate her socially, emotionally, or physically’ (47). Here, Bogutskaya reframes ‘unlikeability’ as a disciplinary mechanism: once a female character fails to conform, she can be treated as a legitimate target of rejection, hostility, and even narrative punishment. As she says, ‘Likeability gives us permission to annihilate women who don’t bend to its rules’ (ibid.). This suggests that ‘unlikeability’ operates as a specifically gendered monsterisation by which women who fail to conform to sexual, social, aesthetic, and professional norms of femininity are recast as excessive, deviant, and fundamentally intolerable. Feminine monstrosity, in other words, does not emerge from inherent abnormality, but from noncompliance.

In addition to likeability as a structuring norm, Kain’s response is marked by a strong visceral affect: disgust. In his own words, Danvers and Navarro are ‘hard to stomach’. This sensation does not stand apart from evaluative judgement, but rather amplifies it, giving bodily expression to the same cultural expectations and moral boundaries that render the detective duo ‘unlikable’. Following Sara Ahmed, it is therefore important to understand why or how someone or something comes to be experienced as disgusting, because disgust is not a neutral response, but rather a mechanism by which social and cultural boundaries are reinforced (2004a: 86). In other words, Ahmed explains, disgust is seldom an inherent quality, but rather an act by which one assigns affective value to an ‘other’. Through this act of attribution, disgust causes surfaces and borders to materialise which in turn allows the attributor to protect themselves by setting boundaries and distancing themselves from a now concretised object. Ahmed writes, ‘The object that makes us ‘sick to our stomach’ is a substitute for the border itself, an act of substitution that protects the subject from all that is “not it”’ (ibid.), meaning that the disgusting object comes to stand in for what must be expelled in order to maintain the integrity of the self. In these terms, disgust is not only a reaction but a form of boundary-making: through this designation of the object as ‘not it’ – or in Kristeva’s words: ‘Not me’ (2024: 2) – one installs distance and difference, while simultaneously obstructing identification. Here, Ngai offers a complementary insight, explaining that the

obstruction of identification is often tied to perceptions of disgusting or amoral conduct: 'Disgust and envy, which are not immoral but *amoral* – and thus inevitably prone to uglification by moralists – block sympathetic identification' (2005: 340, original emphasis). This dynamic is evident in the reviewer Kain's response as well, as his inability to relate to Danvers and Navarro coincides with an intensified experience of disgust: 'They want us to connect with these detectives and the choices they make. Unfortunately, it's never earned' (*Forbes* 2024).

Examining Kain's experience of disgust further, several aspects begin to surface. First, his disgust presents itself as a multifaceted emotion, manifesting both as a visceral reaction and a form of moral condemnation. On a physiological level, he describes a feeling of revulsion – his disgust is situated in his stomach and makes him recoil from the female detectives, whom he finds 'unbearable to watch'. At the same time, this reaction is not purely corporeal; it is also driven by his moral judgement of Danvers and Navarro as 'awful human beings'. Accordingly, disgust is not just a visceral or instinctive response, but also functions as a means of reinforcing moral boundaries. As the literary scholar Michel Chaouli explains, art can evoke repulsion not merely through shocking imagery or depictions of violence, but transgression itself (2003). This prohibition is based on the idea that representations, or artworks, should adhere to a moral order and avoid showing things that would disturb or violate our sense of humanity. This also explains why Kain's repulsion extends beyond the female detectives and their perceived moral failings to encompass the series as a whole, which he also believes has 'an identity crisis': "'True Detective: Night Country' is one of the worst mystery shows I've ever seen. I'm struggling to think of another detective series that I despised as much as I despised this one' (*Forbes* 2024).

Additionally, I would suggest that feelings of disgust not only block identification, as Sianne Ngai argues, but also, conversely, that a lack of identification can be a key driver of disgust. In fact, one could argue that the seemingly unlikable, miserable, awful, amoral, and unrelatable Danvers and Navarro evoke feelings of 'disdain and disgust' because they do not fit into traditionally gendered categories: As discussed in the previous analysis, the series portrays the female detectives as emotionally detached workaholics with sex drives and big egos – traits that could easily be stereotyped as archetypically masculine

behaviour. Each in their own way, the two women are presented as either introverted or unsociable, uncompromising if not selfish, insensitive bordering on rude, and therefore also alienated from themselves and their surroundings.

Some viewers appear to perceive Danvers and Navarro as ‘improper’ women or unintelligible in dominant frameworks of femininity – not just due to their brute behaviour, but also in the sense Margaret Atwood lays it out in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), where the ‘Unwomen’, a grouping of queer, post-menopausal, unruly, radical women are sent to the Colonies to clean up nuclear waste. In *True Detective: Night Country*, both characters are similarly ‘punished’ for failing to conform to normative expectations: Navarro, bisexual and unruly, is degraded to state trooper for disobedience and unlawful conduct, while Danvers, cold-hearted and presumably menopausal, is exiled to the northernmost coastline of Alaska, a deeply provincial and barren outpost, as a backhanded compliment on her abrasive attitude, to work on a case concerning poisonous black water.

Viewed from a monster theorist perspective, such perceived failures to conform to conventional gender expectations can easily be construed as a form of monstrosity. As Jack Halberstam argues in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995), the monster functions as a site of ‘category crisis’, in which stable distinctions such as male–female, human–inhuman, and normal–abnormal begin to break down (6). Rather than simply representing difference, the monster disrupts the classificatory systems that organise identity itself. It is this ambiguity that renders the monster queer – not necessarily in terms of sexual identity, but in its capacity to challenge and exceed normative structures. As Butler explains, the monster is a spectacle of gender trouble: ‘The monster may well be carrying that excess of gender that fails to fit properly into ‘man’ and ‘woman’ as conventionally defined’ (2014: 47).

Read against this framework, Danvers and Navarro can be understood as occupying a similarly unstable position. They do not appear monstrous because they are inherently deviant, but because their behaviour resists the conventional scripts which make femininity legible. As Halberstam notes, ‘improperly or inadequately gendered bodies represent the limits of the human’ (1995: 141), and it is in this sense that Danvers and Navarro’s emotional detachment, sexual autonomy, and social abrasiveness render them ‘improperly gendered’ subjects,

positioned at the threshold of human intelligibility. While Danvers occasionally leans towards the inhuman due to her insensitive and antisocial disposition, Navarro borders on the superhuman – particularly through her intuitive or extrasensory capacities – thereby exceeding the boundaries of normative femininity as well as those of the recognisably human. From this perspective, the detective duo can be seen in terms of Michel Foucault's conceptualisation of the monster as a figure that constitutes both a 'violation of the laws of society' and a 'violation of the laws of nature', thereby combining the forbidden and the impossible (2003: 56), where Danvers aligns with the former and Navarro with the latter.

Ultimately, their misalignment with normative expectations of femininity does not simply register as unlikeability, but as a form of gendered monstrosity: a disruption that renders them difficult to categorise and, therefore, culturally and affectively unsettling. In this sense, feminine monstrosity cannot be separated from gendered legibility, as Dianne Taylor notes, 'women's monstrousness depends upon their violation of gender norms' (2010: 142).

Female Masculinity

At the centre of this gendered ambiguity, however, lies an unresolved tension between subversion and repetition. The question remains whether Danvers and Navarro's 'inadequately' or 'improper' female positions challenge and renegotiate dominant gendered representations, or do they – frequently depicted as dysfunctional and tormented – merely reinforce the perception of such figures as unwanted, unhealthy, and problematic. More importantly, can they be understood as feminist figures revolting against normative gender roles, or do they, as Schwartz and Kaplan ask, simply 'fill out an already established position, that is, the position of the potent male detective?' (2018: 217).

A case could be made that the female detective duo simply mirror and thus reproduce existing masculine structures of authority. In many ways, Danvers and Navarro can be read as female counterparts to the infamous male duo of Rust Cohle and Marty Hart from the first series of *True Detective*. The male pair, each unsympathetic in his own way, but still potent – made obvious by Marty's introduction of himself as 'just a regular type dude, with a big ass dick' – also end up working together despite not liking each other, and frequently engage in long

conversations about religious, existential, and unearthly matters. This dynamic is similar to the one between Danvers and Navarro, who also share a tense yet productive partnership.

Yet, as already discussed, the traits that define this dynamic – interpersonal antagonism, moral ambiguity, and determination – do not carry the same meaning or validation across gender. Where these qualities consolidate the authority of the male detectives, their reappearance in female characters produces a more ambivalent effect. While Cohle and Hart are widely celebrated for their complexity and coarse demeanour, the same traits in Danvers and Navarro are more readily dismissed as ‘unlikable’, once again echoing Bogutskaya’s argument about the gendered limits of audience empathy, whereby traits such as anger, cynicism, or emotional unavailability are perceived as repulsive in women but associated with depth, strength and authority in men (2022: 47–48). This gendered pattern has also been observed in the empirical reader study, where Luna’s opacity and perceived inability to respond in emotionally appropriate ways invite hesitation, resistance and ultimately frustration from readers, while comparable traits in the male counterpart enable immediate recognition and narrative traction.

Moreover, this asymmetry does not merely concern how such traits are received, but also affects the position from which they are enacted. As Kaplan suggests, when women occupy roles traditionally coded as masculine, they do not necessarily transform those roles, but risk reproducing them. The issue here is not only that female characters are judged differently, but that they are inserted into an already established framework of authority – one that remains structurally masculine. Consequently, the adoption of this position comes at a cost, Kaplan concludes, as the woman – in the process of stepping into the masculine position – stands to lose her traditional feminine traits such as ‘kindness, humaneness and motherliness’, becoming instead ‘cold, driving, ambitious, manipulating, just like the men whose position she has usurped’ (1983: 27–28).

However, while this framework may initially seem applicable to Danvers and Navarro, Kaplan’s argument ultimately proves essentially reductive, as it fixes specific traits to specific genders. That said, it is also not an entirely accurate description of the female detectives in *True Detective: Night Country*, who are not static figures but nuanced characters undergoing continual personal development.

Navarro, for example, remains kind to the native community and acts as a maternal figure to her sister, while gradually opening up to both Qaavik and, eventually, Danvers. Similarly, Danvers demonstrates moments of compassion and vulnerability that complicate her otherwise detached demeanour: she intervenes to protect Navarro's sister Julie during a psychotic episode, gently brushes her step-daughter Leah's hair as she sleeps, and insists on celebrating Christmas: 'We're doing Christmas this year. I'm gonna cook' – a phrasing that suggests an advance on previous years (episode 1, 00:43:53).

Following Halberstam rather than Kaplan, then, both Danvers and Navarro can be considered to perform 'female masculinity' (1998) – a position that breaks with binary conceptions of gender. By female masculinity, Halberstam does not mean an imitation of maleness, but rather a form of masculinity that exists independently of men. Unlike Kaplan, who conflates maleness with masculinity, Halberstam seeks to decouple the two, understanding masculinity as an aesthetic, ontological and elastic position that can be occupied by any gender and therefore irreducible to the male body and its effects (1998: 1).

While Halberstam acknowledges that 'female masculinity is generally received by hetero- and homo-normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment', he also recognises its potential to codify a 'unique form of social rebellion' (1998: 9). In *True Detective: Night Country*, Danvers and Navarro embody this rebellion through their nonconformity and indifference to societal expectations, thereby unsettling the gender norms that inform the imaginary of the Arctic as a historically masculine space.

Further, aligning with Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's assertion that societies reveal themselves 'through the monsters they bear' (1996: 4), Halberstam suggests that one can also learn a lot about conventional white masculinity and how it is constructed as masculinity by looking at alternative, queer and female masculinities. In these terms, Danvers and Navarro not only embody Halberstam's concept of female masculinity, but also expose the fragility and shortcomings of conventional white masculinity by existing outside it, revealing how its dominance and sheer existence depend on the suppression of alternative gender expressions.

Thus, rather than simply occupying the place of the 'potent male detective', Danvers and Navarro complicate and expand the representation of gendered power

in the Arctic imaginary. Their performances of female masculinity do not substitute one fixed position for another, but instead reveal the instability of those positions altogether. Whereas Kaplan's framework suggests a rigid transference of masculinity from men to women at the expense of femininity, Halberstam's perspective allows for a more fluid understanding in which masculinity is not something inherently possessed, but something negotiated. In this sense, Danvers and Navarro do not merely step into the roles traditionally reserved for white male detectives; instead, they embody a form of female masculinity that destabilises the rigid binaries upon which these roles have been built. Rather than reproducing the figure of the masculine Arctic hero, Danvers and Navarro expose the conditions that make such authority legible in the first place.

This shift also reframes the Arctic imaginary. While the region has long been structured by the ideological and aesthetic framework of white ecology – where whiteness signifies purity, neutrality, and availability for mastery, sustaining narratives of masculine dominance – *True Detective: Night Country* disrupts this framework by refusing to present the Arctic as transparent or controllable. Instead, it emerges as a dense and contested space marked by ecological crisis, gender fluidity, and competing perspectives on colonial history. If the white ecological vision of the Arctic has reinforced a sublime, nationalistic vision of whiteness and masculinity, the series offers a counter-narrative: a haunting, liminal space where gender, identity, and knowledge are no longer fixed, but negotiated and reimaged. In doing so, it does not resolve these tensions, but sustains them – pointing to new narratives that embrace ambiguity, relationality, and alternative ways of knowing.

Haunting Icescapes and Feminine Spaces in *Auðnin*

From the discussion of feminine monstrosity, I now turn to the Arctic environment itself. In line with the Arctic ecohorror trope, where ecological crisis, colonial histories, and supernatural disturbance converge, Icelandic author Yrsa Sigurðardóttir's *Auðnin* (2008, *The Day is Dark* 2011) reconfigures the Arctic not as a passive setting, but as an active and destabilising force. Here, monstrosity does not reside in nonconforming bodies, but emerges through ice, scale, and temporal disorientation, as the landscape itself begins to exceed the investigative logic that seeks to contain it. I begin by examining how the novel both mobilises a white-

ecological gaze through intra-Nordic perspectives, particularly in its Icelandic framing of Greenland, in which the Arctic is viewed as a pure and sublime white expanse. I then explore how that gaze is progressively dismantled by environmental opacity, spatial disorientation, and supernatural disturbance. Finally, I argue that *Auðnin* reconfigures the Arctic as an unstable and feminised space that resists the masculine, extractive logic associated with white ecology, thereby opening up alternative, more relational ways of inhabiting and perceiving the North.

Like *Night Country*, the narrative in *Auðnin* revolves around Western mining companies encroaching on Indigenous territories and appropriating Arctic natural resources, disturbing the ice and shaking up latent colonial trauma along with more elusive, spectral presences. Set on the east coast of Greenland, the novel follows the female Icelandic lawyer and investigator Thóra Guðmundsdóttir and her German partner Matthew, who are sent to investigate the mysterious disappearance of two men working for an Icelandic laboratory affiliated with the British company Arctic Mining. Their mission follows the earlier vanishing of a female employee, an event that has driven the remaining staff to abandon the outpost and refuse to return until the mystery is solved.

Thóra and Matthew are joined by a small Icelandic team – Thóra's secretary Bella, the computer specialist Eyjólfur, the geologist Friðrikka, the doctor Finnþogi, and the safety officer Alvar – and together they attempt to reconstruct what has taken place at the remote site. However, the investigation quickly begins to unravel. Communication systems fail and the weather turns increasingly hostile as the surrounding environment becomes progressively more disorienting and difficult to navigate. As the group grows more isolated, strange occurrences accumulate: inexplicable signs, old Greenlandic myths, and traces of something – or someone – that should not be there. What initially presents itself as a conventional investigative narrative thus gradually slips into the ambiguous register of Arctic ecohorror, where rational explanations coexist uneasily with suggestions of the supernatural.

Crucially, these eerie disturbances are tied to buried histories – literal and cultural – embedded in the ice, where past violence lingers beneath the surface. As the investigation progresses, it is revealed that the disappearances are caused by the Icelandic laboratory's interference with the Arctic environment: the excavation of Indigenous remains releases a dormant and lethal pathogen and awakens ghosts.

The ‘crime’ is thus both biological and neocolonial – an instance of what I term white crime, where environmental exploitation and colonial appropriation intersect in Arctic contexts, where ‘whiteness’ signifies both the snow-covered landscapes targeted by such acts and the Western actors who carry them out.

Representation and the White Ecological Gaze

Written from an Icelandic perspective yet set in Greenland, *Auðnin* stages a distinctly Nordic but internally fractured Arctic imaginary that both mobilises and critiques white-ecological ways of seeing. This is demonstrated early on through the Icelandic visitor’s first encounter with Greenland. As they fly in from Iceland, their initial impression of the icy-white landscape beneath them can best be characterised as a cliché of the Arctic sublime: a vast, barren and empty white landscape, where the snow-covered expanse devoid of life blends into the sky. As the antithesis of modernity, Greenland emerges as a strange and spectral place – infinite, cold, and seemingly unpeopled.

The country looked very unwelcoming. It was covered with snow except in a few places where the mountainsides were too steep for it to settle, and on a slender strip near the coast where the encroaching sea had melted it. Icebergs were floating everywhere off the coast and the overriding impression was that the land was being ground into pieces and driven out into the sea. The jaggedness of the coastline did nothing to diminish this effect. The same went for the interior: there were no level areas, and the mountain peaks were innumerable. There were no visible signs of human inhabitation. ‘Has the pilot got confused and taken us to the North Pole?’ Thóra asked Matthew, after turning away from the glacier’s glare. ‘No one could possibly be living down there’ ... The travellers disembarked, full of expectation tempered with anxiety ... terrible memories lingered here. (2011: 44–45)

At the same time, this aerial perspective mirrors what the literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt has termed the ‘imperial eye’ (1992): a detached, surveying gaze that apprehends the land below from a distance, abstracted from habitation and history, and made available to overview and potential appropriation. Accordingly, the scene enacts a distinctly white ecological perception, in which whiteness signifies purity

and openness while simultaneously smoothing over complexity and difference. Thóra herself articulates this reductive perspective, admitting that to her ‘it was all one endless ice sheet that led either to the mountains or out to sea, but for him [the native Igimaq] the landscape must look much more diverse’ (2011: 218).

This mode of perception, however, is not simply produced in the moment but is shaped by pre-existing cultural imaginaries by which the Arctic has long been understood. In this respect, *Auðnin* reflects what Arctic historian and literary scholar Chancey Loomis describes as ‘inherited images’ in which the Greenlandic landscape is represented as ‘vaster, more mysterious, and more terrible than elsewhere on the globe’ (1977: 96). This notion is echoed by Thóra, who has some ‘inherited images’ of her own: ‘Thóra’s mind had begun to wander when she heard the name. Greenland. One of the few countries that was colder and more unbearable at this time of year than Iceland’ (2011: 16).

The impression carries over into the Icelandic visitors’ first encounter with the region. As seen, they are immediately overwhelmed by the harsh and inhospitable Greenlandic landscape, describing it as uneven, deserted, encroaching, deteriorating, jagged, and confusing, the only sign of life is the cold and unyielding stare of the glacier, glaring at them like an unblinking eye in the harsh whiteness. This confrontation fills the visitors with both expectation and anxiety, presumably strengthened by the sensation that ‘terrible memories linger here’. Such an uncanny encounter aligns with Loomis’ observation of the Arctic as ‘a region in which natural phenomena could take strange, almost supernatural, forms, sometimes stunningly beautiful, sometimes terrifying, often both’ (1977: 96). Relatedly, Thóra’s experience of the ‘sheer white surroundings’ evokes a distinctly Arctic form of sublimity, suspended between awe and dread: ‘The scenery was indescribably beautiful, but at the same time it awakened dread in her heart’ (2011: 113).

This sense of dread is increased by the environmental dangers posed by intense cold, ‘which attacked their lungs with each breath’ (115), devious ‘crevasses in the ice’ or the perceived threat of ‘dangerous wild animals’ (307). In describing these Arctic perils, Thóra invokes the Norse explorer whose naming of Greenland implies both an early act of appropriation and its subsequent misrepresentation of the landscape.

Erik the Red must have been colour-blind when he named the country. Everything down there is white. I don't know how we're going to avoid polar bears – if they close their eyes they'll be invisible. (2011: 44)

With this statement, Thóra indirectly acknowledges the constructedness of Arctic representation, yet immediately falls back into it, projecting familiar assumptions onto the landscape – such as the perceived threat of polar bears – later debunked by a seemingly annoyed Greenlandic police officer: 'No one has died here from a polar bear attack for seventeen years, and the last one happened by mistake ... Polar bears don't attack people except under very unusual circumstances' (335).

Thóra's remark also foregrounds the hazardous relationship between whiteness and invisibility, where polar bears might vanish into the surrounding white landscape. This notion leans into a broader account of the Greenlandic environment as a space in which great scales and endless levels of both blinding and indistinguishable whiteness washes out the boundaries between land and ocean, solid ice and fluid water, snow pile and polar bear – posing not only a safety threat of moving or amassed ice or the risk of being lead 'farther and farther out into the wilderness' (95), but also an illusionary maze-like mirror effect where one can no longer trust one's eyes: 'A thick fog bank now covered both pier and the foreshore, "I don't want to drive into the sea"' (136).

In such a white environment, inferences with the sense of sight also tamper with the sense of reality and closes in on the realm of the uncanny. As Fred Botting explains it, the Gothic includes 'the partial visibility of objects, in semi-darkness, through veils, or behind screens ... denying a clearly visible and safe picture of the world' (1996: 6). This is a recurring theme in *Audnin*, where navigating is made difficult by the weather conditions and overwhelming whiteness, to the extent that 'Thóra had so entirely lost her sense of direction' (2011: 141) and 'Matthew didn't take his eyes off the road as he spoke, but instead squinted to shield them from the sun as it reflected off the broad expanse of snow' (239). As Peter Davidson remarks in *The Idea of North* (2005): 'Direction is suspended at the North and South Poles; they are places outside place' (13).

Yet, while the Icelandic search team at times reproduces a white-ecological gaze – perceiving the landscape as empty, sublime, and available – the environment itself, alongside Greenlandic histories and realities, increasingly resists and destabilises this

mode of perception. Soon, the blinding whiteness is countered by extreme darkness. While recent Arctic Noir television series adhere to a white ecology aesthetic – previously described as a form of ‘romanticism *light*’ or ‘sublimity *light*’ (Hansen & Waade 2017: 262, original emphasis) – the weather conditions and general atmosphere in *Auðnin* – and especially in *Night Country* – is also influenced by intense darkness, amplified by the northern phenomena of polar night. This shift from light to darkness is explicitly registered in the novel: ‘The light was so peculiar: even though the sun hung in the sky it only gave off a dim glow, and was already preparing itself to sink back down into slumber’ (2011: 135). And later: ‘The pure white snow glittered in the gentle daylight, but as darkness began to descend the landscape displayed its true face: here ... the strongest survived and the weak were shown no mercy’ (328). Ultimately, this relentless nocturnal state actively intervenes with the narrative, setting an equally dark and uncanny mood while intensifying supernatural undertones and affecting the characters mentally. As one character reflects, ‘The atmosphere changed, you might say ... the group’s spirit deteriorated quickly. In the end I couldn’t bear the idea of being here any longer’ (2011: 61). In contrast to the visual clarity, purity, and distance associated with white-ecological aesthetics, darkness obscures, disorients, isolates, and resists overview. Rather than presenting the Arctic as a sublime and contemplative landscape, *Auðnin* depicts an environment that unsettles perception and undermines the possibility of detached observation. In this sense, the interplay of whiteness and darkness follows a different logic – one that disrupts the visual regime of ‘sublimity light’ and exposes its limitations.

Supernatural Arctic Space

In addition to the white aesthetic – or rather as an ingrained part of it – the Arctic is often imagined as an otherworldly or even underworldly place in which the distinctions between the real and the unreal, truth and illusion, life and death begin to dissolve. Such conceptions are not unique to contemporary texts but have long shaped representations of the North. In medieval historiography, Saxo Grammaticus described Northern Norway as populated by ‘peoples of monstrous strangeness’, while Iceland was ‘noteworthy for marvels, both strange occurrences and objects that pass belief’ (1905). Similarly, in Old Norse mythology, the

Norwegian-Swedish Jötunheim and the Finnish Kalevala locate the underworld, or the realm of death, in the far North, reinforcing an enduring association between Arctic space and otherworldliness (Davidson 2005: 30).

These long-lasting associations of the Arctic with otherworldliness were further developed in horror and speculative literature. In what has been termed Polar Gothic, writers such as Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and H.P. Lovecraft all depict ice as ‘a negative space, which gives rise to supernatural beings that reflect the self’ (Bowers 2017: 72). While such works primarily emphasise the Arctic as a space of sublimity, they also reconfigure it as an inverted or unknowable realm. In Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) – from which the Tsalal Research Station in Night Country takes its name – the polar regions constitute, as William Lenz observes, a ‘reversed world’ in which conventional distinctions between life and death collapse; ‘a purely imaginative realm of symbol, supposition, and superstition’ (1997: 35). Across these texts, then, Polar Gothic frequently casts the polar regions, in Rune Graulund’s words, as liminal spaces in which ‘reason and knowledge ends and madness and the mysterious begins’ (2024: 38), accompanied by a breakdown of ‘the boundary between this world and the next’ (37) and the emergence of ‘the alien, the monstrous and the nonhuman’ (35).

These imaginaries persist in *Auðnin*, mostly among the Icelandic visitors, who often refer to Greenland as ‘the end of the world’ (2011: 134), while the city sign of Ennis in *Night Country* states: ‘Welcome to the end of the world: Ennis, Alaska’. Correspondingly, Thóra experiences Greenland as ‘closer to outer space than any other earthly country’ (166), with an ‘unreal atmosphere’ while also perceiving its inhabitants as ‘not of this world’ (135). More specifically, imaginaries of the Arctic as a hellish underworld are indirectly addressed in the novel, when the alcoholic, homosexual engineer Arnar reflects on his reading of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Feeling torn between the Seventh Circle of Hell, reserved for those guilty of sodomy and doomed to wander in a burning desert, and the Ninth Circle, where those who have betrayed those closest to them are ‘trapped in a frozen lake’, Arnar nevertheless prefers a sea of flames above eternal cold; at least then ‘he wouldn’t be as lonely as he’d be in the frozen lake, where no one could speak, and the souls could only gaze helplessly at the other wretches stuck in the gleaming ice’ (281). Something about

this image recalls the ‘corpsicle’ of Tsalal-scientists in *Night Country*, which also, as confirmed by Lopéz, draws on Dante’s *Inferno* as a source of inspiration.

This infernal imagination of the Arctic as an inverted world of ice and death also intersects with another recurring trope: the Arctic as a hallucinatory dreamscape. As postcolonial critic Graham Huggan notes, the Arctic exists as ‘a free-floating idea ... between dream and nightmare states’ (2016: 72). Digging deeper into this argument, Maria Lindgren Leavenworth also notes how artistic portrayals of the Arctic as well as historic documents, such as logbooks and journals of polar explorers, often refer to the Arctic as an illusory and dreamlike space (2023: 3), and so the Canadian archaeologist Robert McGhee considers the Arctic ‘not so much a region as a dream’ (2005: 10) in accordance with Margaret Atwood, who proclaims that ‘the journey north has the quality of a dream’ (2005b: 33).

This perception of the Arctic as an otherworldly space of reverie is substantial in *Auðnin*. At one point, the character Eyjólfur is woken up by a sudden knocking on his window by one of the missing men, but immediately attributes the pounding to the wind, and the sight of Bjarki as a drowsy misperception: ‘The weather’s getting worse. My window woke me up shaking and rattling ... I was so confused when I woke up that I thought for a moment there was someone outside knocking on my window ... I even thought it was Bjarki’ (2011: 187).

According to Todorov, this moment of hesitation between belief and disbelief of a supernatural event is what defines the fantastic (1975: 25). When *Auðnin* presents a familiar world in which sudden supernatural occurrences encroach in vague glimpses, both characters and audience are left in a wavering state of uncertainty. As Thóra states, after hearing footsteps in the dead of night: ‘In the morning she was unsure of whether it had actually happened or whether it has been part of the dream she’d been having’ (2011: 109). The novel relentlessly oscillates between stark, violent realism and mysterious, inexplicable events, ‘which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world’ (Todorov 1975: 25); yet, due to a combination of an optically delusive Arctic dreamland setting causing visual impairment and various characters’ unreliable psychological states, the actual sightings of ghostly or unearthly activities remain questionable. Environmental factors, including thick disorienting fog, blinding white expanses, and raging weather, together with personal issues such as consumption of alcohol, depression,

judgement-clouding grief, and past trauma all present themselves as alternative explanations or rational excuses for the otherwise supernatural events.

Similarly, the characters in *True Detective: Night Country* often find themselves slipping in and out of dreamlike states that hold them suspended between reality and the supernatural, which is accentuated further by the question raised in the show's intro song by pop artist Billie Eilish, who sings 'When we all fall asleep, where do we go?' Navarro often falls deep into daydreaming or strong reminiscence, leaving her, and the viewer, unsure whether she had in fact had a vision, a PTSD-triggered flashback or if she inherited her mother's mental illness, while Danvers gets caught in nightmarish in-between states where she, whenever she is on the brink of falling asleep or waking up, senses something strange or uncanny, often in the form of her deceased son, leaving both Danvers and the viewer unsure whether it was just a dream. Underscoring this ambiguity, Navarro's friend Rose warns, 'Don't confuse the spirit world with mental health issues' (episode 2, 00:12:17).

Regardless, Todorov maintains that hesitation is temporary and eventually both fictional character and reader must decide on one of two explanations: either the supernatural is confirmed as an inherent part of the fictional world, by which the narrative tilts into the realm of the marvellous; or, conversely, the supernatural is revealed to have rational explanations indeed, most commonly psychological ones such as hallucination or madness, whereby the narrative falls into the mode of the uncanny. While Todorov proclaims that this hesitation 'may evaporate at any moment' (1975: 41), neither *Auðnin* nor *Night Country* provides any clarification.

In *Auðnin*, this unresolved tension is articulated through the clash between the Icelandic lawyer Thóra's Western rationalism and the native Igimaq's spiritual beliefs. Igimaq explains that the people who died in the area 'have no descendants, because they also died', and therefore their souls were never able to be reborn into future generations but remain tied to the landscape; as a result, 'they are still here ... They will be here forever' (2011: 217). In this worldview, the boundary between the living and the dead is permeable, and the landscape itself is inhabited by past suffering. Thóra's response – 'We speak and think in a different way where I live. For example, our souls don't move around after we die' (218) – both acknowledges and rejects this perspective, reasserting a secular epistemology that separates the material from the spiritual. Crucially, the narrative does not resolve this conflict:

Igimaq's explanation is not entirely confirmed, yet Thóra's rational framework also fails to fully account for the events. Thus, *Auðnin* sustains Todorov's hesitation, leaving both character and reader suspended between competing ways of knowing.

A similar tension surfaces in *Night Country*, where the narrative flickers between the real and the surreal, which is partly embodied in the apparent rationalist Danvers, who leans towards uncanny explanations ('ask the question', episode 3, 00:15:53), and the more spiritually inclined Navarro, who is more open to the marvellous (and thus opposes Danvers' Socratic method: 'fuck your games', episode 3, 00:15:56). Whenever Navarro hints at the possibility of a supernatural cause, Danvers objects, 'Oh come on! Don't give me that voodoo, ET, cosmic choompalompa bullshit ... there is no magic. There's a real explanation for this' (episode 3, 00:23:24). Yet neither Danvers nor Navarro, for all their apparent conviction, seems entirely certain. In fact, ambiguity is sustained throughout the series – from start to finish – and even, to borrow Todorov's phrasing, 'beyond the narrative itself' (1975: 43), as many viewers continue to waver between uncanny and marvellous explanations after the final episode aired.¹⁵²

In line with the central genre feature of Nordic ecohorror concerning *time and scale*, *Night Country* hesitates in every conceivable way. First, the series starts by showcasing the last sunset of the year before descending into polar night, putting a brutal end to the sequence of day and night and bringing diurnal time to a standstill. Second, the preserving properties of ice also produce curious corporeal temporalities, macabrely illustrated when one of the scientists, Anders Lund, still partially trapped in the frozen 'corpsicle', suddenly awakens, growling in agonising pain and terror, and momentarily exists in a liminal state between life and death. Third, the main characters are suspended in their own traumatic past as Danvers is repeatedly confronted with apparitions of her son, while Navarro is continually drawn back to her military service and troubled childhood through painful flashbacks, producing a form of traumatic temporality that prevents both of them from fully inhabiting the present. And fourth, mirroring the impassability of the Arctic environment, the storyline moves sluggishly and arrhythmically, producing a form of narrative time and pacing characterised by an uneven rhythm of sudden activity and long periods of stagnation. Most negative reviews of the series emphasise this slow and unsteady pace: 'a hot mess', says director and writer of the

first three seasons of *True Detective* Nic Pizzolatto, echoing Gwilym Mumford in *The Guardian*, who also found it to be ‘a bit of a mess’ (2024), while the *Forbes* reviewer Erik Kain writes, ‘The messy plot is bogged down in dreary, tedious exposition and repetitive dialogue. Pacing is all over the place. Every time something exciting or interesting happens, the show slams on its brakes, devolving into yet another tedious conversation or leaping to a new scene in the most jarring way possible’ (2024). What Kain describes here is an uncomfortable coexistence of sudden transformation and stale stasis, which perfectly mimics the perceived temporal ambiguity of Arctic spaces.

Ultimately, the series ends as open as the snow-white expanses of endless Arctic space, with Navarro walking out into the icy desert in the final scenes. It is an open-endedness that López employs knowingly: ‘I think that the entire series has two readings. One of them is that everything is connected to the supernatural. The other one is there’s absolutely nothing supernatural happening ... It’s up to you to decide which one of those readings you are going to embrace’ (Blake 2024). This irresolution is even accepted by rationalist and relentless questioner Danvers, who ultimately declares that ‘some questions just don’t have answers’ (episode 6, 01:09:31).

Preservatory Ice and Haunting Ghosts

While Jeffrey Jerome Cohen posits that monsters are products of their time-specific culture, functioning ‘as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place’ (1996: 4), the Arctic appears to unsettle those coordinates. Suspended between Indigenous lifeworlds and Western appropriation, between real and imagined spaces, and between environmental transformation and pre-modern stasis, it resists being anchored in a single temporal or spatial frame, so raising the question of what monsters can be said to be fabricated there. The answer, as suggested by *Auðnin* and *Night Country*, is that colonial trauma in such white spaces as the Arctic produces ghosts lingering in the icescape. Accordingly, ice functions not merely as preservation, but as a temporal medium that suspends, stores, and eventually reactivates past violence.

This is demonstrated in *Auðnin* where deep-core drilling leads to physical and spectral consequences. As the investigation unfolds, it is revealed that the missing

workers, Bjarki and Dóri, had excavated human remains buried in the ice: scattered bones, a skull, and eventually a well-preserved century-old corpse of a Greenlandic man. Rather than treating these remains with care, they remove them with brute force and bring them back to the station – partly as macabre souvenirs, partly as a practical joke – storing the corpse in the basecamp’s cold room. However, this extractive act of possession, display, and desecration has fatal consequences, as the body carries a dormant contagion, which infects the two men, who soon die in agonising circumstances, bleeding from their eyes, nose, and mouth. Those exposed to the disease leave behind a distinct mark: four drops of blood forming the shape of a small, distorted face, suggesting that the illness is not strictly biological, but bears the qualities of a curse. Meanwhile, local Greenlanders – who have been observing the outsiders – remove the bodies to contain the threat of further contamination, reasserting a local worldview that recognises the danger of disturbing the dead. Adding to the supernatural dimension, the bones and skull are later revealed to belong to Usinna, a young Greenlandic woman and daughter of Igimaq, who had previously fallen ill with the same disease and was taken by her father to the outskirts of the settlement to die, and whose presence continues to haunt the narrative.

It is worth mentioning that this vision of thawing ice releasing dormant dangers is not confined to fiction. Scientists have discovered microbes more than 400,000 years old in the Siberian permafrost and estimate that ‘zombie viruses’ such as bubonic plague and smallpox lie dormant in ice since prehistoric times (Claverie 2023). In 2016, eight years after *Auðnin* was published, an outbreak of anthrax caused by a thawing reindeer carcass buried in the Siberian permafrost on the Yamal Peninsula killed one child, hospitalised several people, and led to the death of one million reindeer.

Night Country extends this logic as the investigation gradually reveals that the research conducted by the Tsalal scientists is destabilising the frozen landscape. By artificially accelerating the thawing of permafrost, they not only contaminate Indigenous water supplies, but also seem to awaken a spectral feminine presence tied to the land, to Indigenous cosmology, and to the murder victim Annie Kowtok. The series deliberately withholds any definitive explanation of this ghostly force: it may be read as Annie’s spirit, as an older native force associated with the sea goddess

Sedna, or as a more diffuse Arctic revenant produced by the entanglement of ecological damage and historical trauma. Both narratives thus reflect enduring imaginaries of the Arctic as an underworld: a liminal space where the boundaries between past and present, life and death, dissolve, allowing spectral forces and suppressed traumas to emerge from the glacial icescape.

When Arctic spaces are used in this way, it likely stems from the imaginings of the region as a space that – materially, imaginatively, and temporally – aligns with the ontology of ghosts, making it ideal scenery for their introduction. Echoing conceptions of the Arctic North, ghosts also challenge time and space through their untimely return and indefinite gestalt; partly there, partly gone. Additionally, the camouflaging properties of the Arctic landscape, the illusionary visibility conditions of its northern climate, and the ill-defined geographical boundaries of these white spaces all contribute to the elusiveness of ghosts. In constant defiance of binary oppositions, they linger between manifestation and invisibility, revelation and dream, the real and the unreal, human and nonhuman – neither dead nor alive, neither corporeal nor absent. Moreover, in the figure of the ghosts, the past and the present cannot be neatly separated from one another. In Arctic ecohorror, the ghost is therefore not only a metaphor for memory but an epistemological mode – one that resists the binaries of Western knowledge systems. Ghosts, in this sense, are not merely symbolic figures of the past, but the form by which unresolved histories persist and exert pressure on the present.

This spectrality resonates with Derrida's concept of hauntology, where the past, never fully laid to rest, continually returns to unsettle the present (1994). In *Audñin* and *Night Country*, the thawing or disturbed ice reveals unresolved histories and violent pasts, long hidden but never forgotten, now conjured forth as active forces shaped by colonial trauma and ecological violence. While figures of the past – tokens, corpses, spirits – repressed and preserved in Arctic ice, both literally and symbolically, point to a history of colonial oppression and resource extraction, they also manifest these traumas in the form of ghosts, forcibly (re)awakened by environmental changes and Western exploitation, which call into question an array of practices. What returns is not only biological matter or spectral presence, but also what previous modes of representation failed to recognise. *Audñin* and *Night Country* therefore not only depict a Freudian return of Indigenous trauma, but also

forge connections between the colonial violence of the past and present-day climate disasters accelerated by the Anthropocene hegemony. Ultimately, the fears and anxieties of the past are reappearing in the present – not as mere recollections of a history long gone, but as a return; a haunting that forces readers and fictional visitors to the Arctic to re-evaluate their preconceived ideas of ontology, time, and reality. In the Arctic – a space characterised by uncertainty and inaccessibility – these ghosts, like Derrida’s hauntological spectres, embody the impossibility of fully escaping the past and ultimately challenge linear notions of time otherwise favoured in the Anthropocene. As Derrida writes, the present is marked by a ‘*non-contemporaneity with itself*’ (1994: xix, original emphasis), a temporal condition in which unresolved histories remain operative in the present.

The connection between Arctic spaces and ghosts is further reinforced by the preserving properties of ice. Things long buried in the ice are kept in a suspended, hibernated state awaiting resurrection, thereby distorting the boundaries between life and death as well as conventional perceptions of time and space. Moreover, it also recalls Timothy Morton’s ‘haunt-ecological’ insistence that nothing ever truly goes away: ‘When we flush the toilet, we imagine that the U-bend takes the waste away into some ontologically alien realm’ yet, as he continues, ‘ecology is now beginning to tell us something very different: a flattened world without ontological U-bends. A world in which there is no ‘away’ ... we are stuck with it’ (2013: 115). The Arctic ice materialises this ecological condition in which nothing escapes but instead returns in haunting ways.

In both works, the icescape’s cyclical return structures the narratives at the level of form and theme. In *Auðnin*, native Greenlandic Igimaq reflects on finding a small piece of fabric his wife had lost 30 years before: ‘The ice is melting and revealing what it’s been keeping. It’s bad to be here, now more than ever’ (2011: 217). Here, the ice serves as a form of memory – it preserves remnants of the past and bears evidence of both historical events and contemporary human environmental impact. As Derrida suggests, the past is never truly past; it lingers, reappearing in contemporary political and social forms, demanding our attention and recognition.

Correspondingly, in *Night Country*, everything is repetitively circling round and round. From Holden’s one-eyed teddy bear to the real-life, half-blind polar bear

roaming the town at night. From Hank, rescuing his son Peter from falling through the ice, to Peter, killing his father and dumping him back into the ice sea. From the poisonous research conducted deep down in the ice cave where they ultimately kill Annie Kowtok, to the poisoning of Indigenous women causing their babies to perish in their bellies (episode 6, 01:03:20). From Navarro's mother's mental illness and death to Navarro's sister's similar fate. Even seemingly minor details participate in this logic of return. When Navarro throws an orange into the dark snow-covered landscape, it comes rolling back as an omen of death (episode 3, 00:12:58) – a clear reference to its symbolic use in *The Godfather* trilogy. Likewise, the fate of the scientists mirrors their own wrongdoings as their painful deaths, enmeshed into a frozen 'corpsicle', mirrors the permafrost they have purposely been thawing; an assemblage of soil, rocks, and sediments amalgamated into a hyperobjective whole.

This monstrous looping-mechanism of haunting and return finds its visual counterpart in the spiral symbol that recurs throughout *Night Country*. The spiral, appearing first tattooed on the lovers Annie and Clark, later carved on Lund's forehead and scattered across the landscape on a stone and in abandoned buildings, functions as a temporal emblem of repetition and consequence, the logic of preserving ice, the hauntings of ghosts, the inherent mechanisms of trauma and revenge as well as the consequences of environmental appropriation. 'It's old', one character confirms, 'older than Ennis. It's older than the ice, probably' (episode 2, 00:13:25). Later, a friend of Qaavik's explains that the spiral marks places where the ice will 'swallow you whole'. His grandmother told him that if he went through the ice and into the caves below, 'the Night Country was gonna take us' (episode 5, 00:31:30). This notion of a 'night country' as an underworld – both physically beneath the ice and metaphorically as a realm of the dead – reinforces the Arctic as an otherworldly space where boundaries between the living and the dead collapse, as echoed in *Auðnin*, where ghosts linger in the icescape: 'It was a cave. It became more visible with each year that passed ... the place that pulled anyone who came too close down into the abyss. The spirit would be dragged out of the body leaving behind an empty, hollow carcass' (2011: 344). Much like in other speculative writings about the far north, both *Auðnin* and *Night Country* portray the Arctic as a space where the boundary between this world and the next dissolves. It is an unearthly place where one might stumble upon gateways to other realms or, as

Leavenworth suggests, ‘imagined entrances to actual or symbolic underworlds’ (2023: 21). This idea of the Arctic as an entryway into liminal, otherworldly spaces is mirrored in the quotation above, where Igimaq reflects on the melting ice, which reveals what was once hidden beneath the snowy surface.

However, while the preserving ice undoubtedly affects history in curious ways, it does not return things once swallowed by the ice in a pristine, untainted state. Rather, as the ice melts, what once seemed pure now appears dirty, challenging the white ecological myth of the sublime, homogeneous, and unchanging virgin landscapes of the Arctic North. The native perspective, in contrast, acknowledges the dynamic and unsettling reality of the Arctic, which is not merely a place of untouched purity, but one marked by trauma and transformation. This challenge to the white ecological narrative is reflected in both *Auðnin* and *Night Country*, where drastically changing environments – such as black poisonous water, famine, and deadly diseases – not only contradict the neoromantic aesthetics of an original wilderness, but also expose the violence of white, masculine pursuits of exploration and exploitation. In Kaanneq and Ennis, the lushness and possibilities for expansion contrast with darkness, disorientation, and shrinking personal space, underscoring the tension between the idealised and the lived experience of the Arctic. This clash is further illustrated by the stark contrast between Igimaq’s view of the cave as an entrance to a deadly underworld – a ‘black hole’ that pulls the living into its abyss – and the Icelanders’ initial view of the cliff, described as a sublime, angelic formation: ‘Directly behind the pit appeared an arched line of stone in the cliff, which rose up through the ice and formed a sort of halo’ (2011: 121).

As the melting ice exposes what has long been buried, both *Auðnin* and *Night Country* blur the distinction between the living and the dead, preservation, and decay. What emerges from the ice is neither fully alive nor entirely gone – bodies, histories, and materials caught in a state of suspension. This collapse of boundaries between animate and inanimate matter introduces a new kind of monstrosity, one that is both spectral and material. It is this liminality that made the Danish poet Theis Ørntoft think of Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection when he first encountered the permafrost during his travels to Yamal in Siberia (2016: 57).

Ørntoft describes the abject as ‘all the body’s excretions – flakes of skin, urine, shit, semen, clipped nails, menstrual blood – phenomena that occupy a zone of

meaning between the body and its surrounding world, between subject and object, and in this way confront us with our own fluid unboundedness'. He then concludes, 'The craters on the tundra were such objects ... They are hyper-objects' (2016: 57).¹⁵³ With hyperobjects, Ørntoft synthesises Kristeva's idea of the abject with Morton's concept of hyperobjects (2013) – vast, complex entities that defy full perception or understanding. Like the abject, the permafrost does not 'respect borders, positions, rules' but exists in a liminal zone of 'the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (Kristeva 2024: 4). Neither subject nor object, dead nor alive, the permafrost – consisting of bodily excretions and other residues – confronts us with the interwoven boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. It forces us to confront the intersections of human violence, ecological change, and the illusion of purity. Like the abject, the frozen earth defies categories, presenting a world that resists separation and clarity. Instead, as a hyperabject, the ice contains entangled histories and bodies, blurring the distinctions between life and death, natural and unnatural, preserving yet decaying. It becomes even more confrontational when the Siberian permafrost is mirrored in a human replica – the 'corpse' in *Night Country*. The permafrost, as described by Ørntoft, does not merely preserve; it recontextualises and complicates the idea of the Arctic as an untouched wilderness.

While both *Audnin* and *Night Country* repeatedly address the thawing permafrost as an acute climate change issue, they also emphasise a more hauntological aspect of its degradation. Mirroring the spiral symbol, the thawing of the permafrost gives rise to an uncanny feedback loop: as temperatures rise, permafrost thaws, releasing methane gases that not only cause explosions, but also increase atmospheric heat, which in turn accelerates the thawing process, creating a cycle of self-perpetuating destruction. The hauntological effect comes into sharp relief when the ancient remains – preserved deep in the ice for thousands of years – begin to thaw alongside the permafrost, resurrecting long-dead entities, substances, and diseases, thus disrupting our present while unsettling our notions of time, life and death. Ørntoft writes,

By these routes, we thus ingest ourselves and the remnants of civilisation in monstrous ecological loops. The last remnants of the imagined border between nature and culture have in this way definitively disappeared, life and non-life are “once again” woven together, but in a new unprocessable and catastrophic manner. The cosmology of animism has returned, everything is alive, but in a new and incomprehensible way. (2016: 58)¹⁵⁴

Similarly, in *Auðnin*, the Arctic icescape emerges as a transcorporeal enmeshment of bodies, myths, histories, fabrics, memories, spirits, and trauma – and, more significantly, lethal viruses and bacteria. ‘The ice preserves many things, and destroys nothing’, Igimaq assures Thóra: ‘In the end it returns what it has swallowed’ (2011: 217). This all reinforces Morton’s notion of spatial inescapability and the cyclical nature of time, as epitomised in *Night Country*’s final episode. ‘Time is a flat circle,’ says the scientist Clark, echoing Detective Rust Cohle’s line from the first season, diving deeper into the spiralling cosmology of the series.

Like Rust Cohle’s Nietzschean statement, *Night Country* and *Auðnin* give the phrase a more ecocritical sentiment, challenging Anthropocene conceptions of time as linear, exponential progression while also connecting time to place. As Morton puts it, ‘place deeply involves time’ (2016: 11), suggesting that a place is always marked by its past. This philosophy proposes a more entangled view of time, where places are not merely shaped by their history, but also carry it, demanding that we recognise time as a force that continually re-enters and reshapes our understanding of the world. This contrasts with Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s idea that monsters are products of time-specific cultures (1996: 4), and not the places or pasts in which they linger. Contrary to this, both Sigurðardóttir’s novel and Lopéz’s TV series introduce a deep, planetary temporality, where time is not just a product of human activity or cultural moments but is intrinsically tied to the environment, past histories and spectral returns. Through such a cyclical temporality, the past is not gone but ever-present, forcing us to recognise and reckon with it in order to make sense of the present.



Figure 17. Photographs arranged in the shape of a spiral, suggesting that mysteries cannot be solved through linear modes of reasoning alone (*True Detective: Night Country* 2024, episode 1, 00:49:00).

This precise notion is also illustrated when Danvers initiates her detective research by neatly laying out photos and evidential documents related to the Tsalal case (episode 1, 00:49:00), but as she slowly starts to uncover more information, particularly connecting Annie's murder to the wider web of events, the orderly square patterns of evidence transform into a spiral of interrelations, ultimately revealing the true connection of things.

Feminised Spaces and Queer Ecologies

Beyond their temporal and colonial dimensions, the hauntings in *Auðnin* and *Night Country* are also profoundly gendered. In fact, what emerges in both works is an Arctic that is feminised: not merely in an essentialist sense, but as a spatial and material configuration structured by toxic reproduction, feminine hauntings, and geological interiority. From this perspective, the Arctic in these Arctic ecohorror works aligns with Stacy Alaimo's notion of 'feminist space', a concept that denotes neither an ecofeminist utopia nor a fixed identity or stable location, but a critical practice that works to unsettle the nature–culture divide and reclaims the historically feminised association with nature as a site of agency and resistance (2000: 17). Rather than viewing such associations as necessarily regressive, Alaimo,

drawing on Luce Irigaray, argues that they may be strategically mobilised instead. Therefore, ‘rather than encouraging women to abandon their roles as “guardians of nature” and to step into the “culture” side of the equation’, Alaimo points to a different route by which women ‘inhabit the feminine space in discourse in order to transform it’ (6). Or as Irigaray herself states: ‘One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it’ (1985: 77). Read through this lens, the feminisation of the Arctic in *Auðnin* and *Night Country* does not simply reproduce an essentialist equation between woman and nature, but reworks it by rendering the landscape itself an agential ‘undomesticated’ domain that destabilises the epistemological and extractive frameworks imposed upon it.

In *Auðnin*, this configuration is anchored in Igimaq’s daughter Usinna, who studies biology in Copenhagen and has returned to Kaanneq to investigate a striking reproductive imbalance in the region. Her research traces the movement of pollutants through Arctic food chains into maternal bodies, where they interfere with hormonal processes and alter foetal development, resulting in a disproportionate number of female births. The novel further substantiates this hypothesis through references to broader demographic irregularities: ‘Among the Inuits in Russia and in northern Greenland it’s not uncommon for two girls to be born for every boy. In some villages no boys are born’ (2011: 262). Reproduction thus emerges as a site where ecological disturbance is materially inscribed upon the body, exposing what Alaimo terms the transcorporeal condition of human existence: the inseparability of bodies from their environments. The Arctic is not simply contaminated; it itself contaminates through intimate, material exchanges, collapsing the distinction between organism and environment, womb and world. In *Auðnin*, then, feminised space is not metaphorical, but embodied: an ecological system in which reproduction becomes the site where environmental violence is registered and avenged.

More broadly, the novel’s portrayal of reproductive disturbance reflects a greater pattern of environmental injustice. Since the toxins affecting Arctic communities originate elsewhere, circulating through atmospheric and oceanic systems before accumulating in northern ecosystems and bodies, the result is a form of uneven exposure in which those least responsible for environmental degradation are most

profoundly affected by it. The feminised Arctic space therefore also emerges as a site where ecological crisis and global inequalities intersect, underscoring how environmental harm is unevenly distributed along geopolitical, socioeconomic and gendered lines.

In this sense, the disruption of reproductive futurity depicted in *Auðnin* also points to a deeper instability: the systems of industrial extraction and perpetual economic growth that define the Anthropocene begin to undermine the very conditions of their own continuation. While achieving short-term advancement, they simultaneously produce the conditions of their own long-term collapse. If pollution is a product of an industrial and historically male-dominated system, its unintended side-effect in *Auðnin* is the disruption of the demographic foundations upon which that system depends. From the opposite perspective, the Arctic also appears to retaliate indirectly through a feminised mode of selective reproduction, seemingly aimed at mitigating the threat of environmental collapse by producing more girls than boys – a logic already presented in ecofeminist utopian novels such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) or Sheri Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988).

Usinna's story intensifies this feminised resistance. As she attempts to substantiate her thesis by collecting blood samples from deceased inhabitants buried outside the settlement – intended to compare past and present toxin levels – she, too, is infected. Subsequently, her father and brother remove her from Kaanneq and leave her outside the settlement, effectively condemning her to die in order to protect the community. Her exposure to the materials she studies collapses the distinction between observer and object, undermining the epistemological distance on which scientific inquiry depends. The toxins she traces in others' bodies circulate through her own, such that she can no longer remain external to the system she analyses. As Alaimo argues, transcorporeality entails not only connection, but also 'unpredictable and unwanted actions' across bodies and environments (2010a: 2). Usinna's death renders this entanglement literal, as she returns as a ghost absorbed into the very toxic circuits she sought to map, now turning the disease into a curse-like instrument of retribution against those who mistreated her. Her spectral transformation thus marks a movement from empirical investigation to an embodied and haunting mode of knowing that exceeds scientific epistemology.

This haunting mode also disrupts linear temporality. The past – embodied in the buried settlers whose bodies she attempts to locate – lives on in the present, while the future, figured through reproduction, becomes uncertain and unstable. This temporal dislocation resonates with Halberstam’s understanding of *queer landscapes* as forms of ‘anarchitecture’ structured by collapse, failure, and the breakdown of dominant systems of order (2024). For Halberstam, queerness is not simply a matter of gender or sexuality, but a spatial and temporal condition that emerges in sites of dereliction, abandonment, and unbuilding, where linear progress and productive futurity give way to discontinuity and alternative forms of existence. Timothy Morton similarly describes dark ecological thought as a ‘necessarily queer idea’ (2007: 185), insofar as it exposes seemingly stable categories as contingent and entangled, thereby rejecting the notion of Nature as a ‘transcendental, unified, independent category’ (13). A similar logic underpins Alaimo’s understanding of queer ecology, in which nature is not a stable or pure domain but a field of multiplicity and relational complexity (2010b: 55). Exemplifying these formulations of queerness, the Arctic landscapes in *Audnin* and *Night Country* emerge as sites of ongoing transformation and relational instability that continuously unsettle the dualistic categories that the heteropatriarchy treats as natural and self-evident, collapsing the distinctions between nature and culture, life and death, past and present, human and nonhuman.

Moreover, following Halberstam’s notion that ‘queer life unfolds in the ruins and eschews improvement and development for demolition and destruction’ (2024: 45), Ennis and Kaanneq are marked by environmental degradation, infrastructural failure, and the eventual closure of mines. They are also populated by institutions that appear provisional and improvised: police investigations conducted from abandoned laboratories, repurposed dental clinics, or makeshift school buildings that undermine the authority typically associated with legal systems. This ‘unprofessional’ spatiality signals a world in which Western systems of knowledge and institutionalisation have lost their coherence, and where authority is fragmented and unreliable. Here, meaning does not arise through linear progression or reproductive futurity, but through breakdown and the reconfiguration of what remains. Usinna’s ghost further exemplifies this disturbance, enduring as a remainder that unsettles both temporal, spatial, and ontological boundaries alike

and inhabiting a landscape in which past and present fold into one another rather than unfolding in sequence.

A parallel dynamic can be observed in *Night Country*, where the figure of Annie Kowtok similarly returns as a feminised haunting. In both texts, these feminine presences do not simply signify loss or trauma; they function as forms of counter-knowledge – grounded in embodiment and memory – that resist incorporation into scientific or institutional frameworks. Haunting does not signal epistemic failure, but a reconfiguration of knowledge: a mode by which ecological violence, reproductive disruption, and historical erasure are registered and made perceptible, even when they cannot be fully measured or contained.

That said, the feminisation of the Arctic is not limited to maternal bodies or spectral figures; it is inscribed in the landscape itself. In *Auðnin*, the recurring image of a cave – an expanding opening in the rock associated with Usinna's dwelling place and suggestive of a female genital imagery – presents the terrain as an interior, bodily space.

Only a black hole in the cliff-face where the heart of evil beats. Now it was clearly visible that it was a cave. It became more visible with each year that passed, though at first only a very thin streak of black had distinguished it from the grey surrounding rock. This was the place that people had to be kept away from, the place that pulled anyone who came too close down into the abyss. The spirit would be dragged out of the body leaving behind an empty, hollow carcass, like the seashells Igimaq discarded after he had sucked out the meat. But it was not the small cave that disturbed him most. He had seen it many times before and always made sure to keep himself at a suitable distance, like now. No, it was not the expanding opening in the cliff wall that made his heart ache and filled him with despair. (2011: 344)

What this traces is not simply the emergence of a geological feature, but the gradual articulation of an opening: from 'a very thin streak of black' to an 'expanding opening', a movement that at once evokes the dilation of a body in labour and the slow, material transformation of the landscape – 'more visible with each year that passed' – thereby subtly registering the effects of climate change. The cave thus figures a kind of distorted birth: an opening that widens over time, not in order to

bring forth life, but to expose and release what has been buried. Continuing in this uncanny register, the cave is later described in corporeal terms reminiscent of the vagina dentata: 'the mouth of the cave had been dug out and could be seen properly now for the first time in almost a hundred years ... the icicles at its entrance resembled irregular, pointed teeth that glistened in the sun and dared him to look into the open mouth' (2011: 420).

Here, the cave as a feminised interior is not figured as generative in a romantic or pastoral sense, but as a site of death, toxicity, and concealment. It holds the dead and gives voice to them – 'he heard the sound of faint crying coming from in the cave ... it was Usinna ... now innumerable other voices joined in ... demanding release' (420-421) – transforming the landscape into a site where past violence is not buried but continues to speak. Rather than aligning with narratives of purity or progress, the feminised landscape here corresponds with Alaimo's 'undomesticated ground', exceeding and resisting regimes of control while remaining fundamentally ungovernable.

A parallel dynamic emerges in *Night Country* through the underground cave system beneath the research station, referred to by the local population as 'the night country'. Like the fissure in *Auðnin*, it emerges as a feminised interior. The Tsalal scientists' activities – drilling, ice melting, extraction and contamination of the water causing miscarriages and infant death in the Indigenous community – can be read as invasive penetrations into a bodily space, mirroring the intrusion of toxins into the maternal body in *Auðnin*. This connection is made explicit in the series' own language, where the Tsalal scientists' research is described as taking place 'in *her* stomach' – where the scientists ultimately kill '*her* daughter' Annie, linking the geological interior directly to a feminised, reproductive body while also mimicking poisoning of native women's pregnancies (episode 6, 01:03:20). The cave thus serves as a site where ecological and reproductive processes intersect, and where the connection between landscape and womb is materially enacted rather than merely symbolic. What emerges in both works is not simply a symbolic parallel between landscape and feminine body, but a shared structure of violation. The same extractive logic that renders the cave penetrable and knowable also operates upon the bodies of Indigenous women, by which environmental toxicity becomes reproductive harm.

In *Auðnin* and *Night Country*, then, the Arctic is feminised but also queer. The feminine denotes a temporally and materially untameable space defined by toxic reproduction, feminine haunting, ecological interiority, and all-female births, while queerness emerges through the destabilisation of heteronormative structures governing reproductive futurity, dualistic logics, and the idea of a coherent ‘natural’ order. Here, the fantasy of purity dissolves through contamination, the fantasy of control through entanglement, and the promise of reproductive continuity through the dismantling of Anthropocene ideologies of growth. What remains is not a spectacular or elevated Arctic, but an ‘undomesticated’ space that exposes white ecological imaginaries as untenable, insisting instead on vulnerability, interconnection, and the impossibility of standing outside the systems that sustain – and unsettle – life.

Colonial Trauma and Sámi Spectres in *Midnattssol*

Finally, this last analysis turns to the Swedish-French crime television series *Midnattssol* (2016, *Midnight Sun*), set in the sub-Arctic town of Kiruna in northern Sweden, and its theme of colonial trauma that continues to haunt the Arctic landscape. Moving well beyond a conventional Nordic noir narrative, the series typifies the Arctic ecohorror trope, portraying Sápmi – the region where the Indigenous Sámi people live across the northern reaches of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia – as a contested and otherworldly space where environmental pollution, extractive industries, and Indigenous dispossession intersect. In doing so, *Midnattssol* both mobilises and unsettles dominant narratives of Nordic exceptionalism, drawing on familiar white-ecological tropes of Arctic sublimity and Indigenous otherness while simultaneously exposing the entanglement of ecological, capitalist, and racialised power structures. Through this lens, the series emerges not merely as a crime drama, but as a cultural text that is part of the ongoing debates about Nordic neocolonial violence and national identity.

To fully understand *Midnattssol*’s thematic concerns it is crucial to situate it in the historical realities of Nordic colonialism. More broadly, colonialism can be defined, in the words of Ania Loomba, as ‘the conquest and control of other people’s land and goods’ (1998: 8). While it is most commonly associated with the overseas expansion pursued by European empires – explorers, missionaries, traders,

teachers, and soldiers crossing the Atlantic or Pacific Ocean to invade and settle distant lands far beyond their own national borders – it also operated internally, within national borders. In the Scandinavian context, the Danish–Norwegian union engaged in extensive overseas colonial ventures in the Caribbean, West Africa, Asia, as well as in the Nordic Atlantic, including Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands, while Sweden similarly maintained colonies on the other side of the Atlantic but also engaged in what scholars term ‘internal colonialism’, targeting the Indigenous Sámi population (Höglund 2020).

Building on this historical reality, the literary scholar Johan Höglund argues that contemporary Nordic authors and filmmakers have increasingly turned to Gothic storytelling to explore and critique internal colonialism, using fiction to confront suppressed histories and the enduring legacies of territorial conquest (2020: 134). These narratives serve not only to acknowledge historical injustices, but also to interrogate how colonial mindsets continue to shape Swedish society. *Midnattssol* can be read as part of this tradition as it presents the Sápmi landscape not as a passive backdrop for crime investigations, but a natureculture – a politically charged terrain shaped by intertwined histories of resource exploitation, cultural erasure, and environmental harm that return with uncanny force. Like *Night Country* and *Auðnin*, it presents a dual-plotted crime story that, on the one hand, reproduces familiar images of Arctic sublimity, Nordic exceptionalism and the exoticisation of Indigenous peoples, while, on the other, mobilising a cultural critique of the environmental and colonial violence that underpin these white-ecological imaginaries.

Sámi Spectres and Neocolonial Violence

Echoing the narrative structures and thematic concerns already identified in *Night Country* and *Auðnin*, *Midnattssol* centres on a female investigator: the French-Berber police officer Kahina Zadi (Leïla Bekhti), who has been dispatched from Marseilles to Sweden to investigate the murder of a French citizen. Here, she quickly becomes embroiled in a larger investigation to capture a serial killer, all while negotiating the tensions between Sámi activists, local miners, environmentalists, and international investors. As noted by the critic Gunilla Brodrej, Zadi is ‘an unvarnished version of Lisbeth Salander’, who somewhat

reluctantly teams up with Anders Harnesk (Gustaf Hammarsten), a Swedish assistant prosecutor who, similar to Navarro in *Night Country*, is half-Sámi, queer, and has supernatural senses.¹⁵⁵ In keeping with the tradition of female Nordic noir detectives exemplified by Navarro and Danvers, Zadi is portrayed as psychologically complex and emotionally fragile, struggling with her personal and professional relations. Haunted by her past – and particularly a traumatic teen pregnancy that has led to fractured maternal bonds and ongoing struggles with self-harm – Zadi carries both visible and invisible scars, which in many ways mirror the violence and trauma in the local community she is now investigating, where buried secrets and unresolved histories lie beneath the surface – much like what is hidden in Kiruna's unstable underground.

Zadi's identity as a second-generation Algerian Berber also gives her a history of racism and marginalisation rooted in colonialism. Her lived experience of exclusion and otherness reflects the ethnic and geopolitical tensions in Kiruna, drawing a powerful parallel between her personal history and the region's neocolonial struggles that enables her to recognise the structural inequalities faced by the Sámi people. As she articulates, 'I am French, but I am also Berber ... Indigenous people, like you ... I know what it feels like when people stare, because of your colour, your name' (episode 3). As such, Zadi does not merely investigate the community – she embodies it.

It is no coincidence that the series is set in Kiruna, which unlike Ennis in *Night Country* is not fictional but an actual mining town situated in the Sápmi region. Due to its isolated location, harsh northern climate, and geopolitical unrest, the town lends itself to being portrayed as a deeply politicised space – a microcosm of broader territorial struggles, where neocolonial and capitalist modernity is pitted against marginalised indigeneity. This tension is made clear in the first episode: as the detectives fly over the Kiruna iron mine – nicknamed 'Mother' by the locals – Kahina is told that mining is so extensive that it now threatens the foundations of the town, necessitating its relocation. In the series, the real relocation of Kiruna serves as an analogy for the ongoing colonial practices of land exploitation and Indigenous displacement, forcing the region's residents to confront the tensions between resource extraction and the preservation of the region's ecocultural heritage. More so, the relocation makes it abundantly clear that it is not the people,

but the mine – repeatedly feminised throughout the series – that wields true power over the community. As one character remarks, ‘Without her, there is nothing’ (episode 1).

A similar dynamic underpins *Auðnin*, which, like *Midnattssol*, is also partly rooted in real historical events of Indigenous dispossession, as it depicts the settlement of Kaanneq – whose inhabitants were forcibly relocated by Greenland’s Danish colonial authorities under their twentieth-century modernisation policies – slowly being encroached upon by a nearby mine.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, both works stage a comparable dissonance between the old and the new, framing it as a dilemma with profound implications for the Indigenous sense of identity. While the traditionalist Igimaq rages against the Arctic Mining Company, his old friend and *angakkuq* (spiritual leader) Sikki believes, with a heavy heart, that it is time to face the truth: ‘The world has changed, Igimaq’ he pleads. ‘What we were taught no longer applies, and the fact that you are trying to uphold the old way of life doesn’t change the fact that it’s on the way out’ (2011: 177). Torn between honourable yet increasingly insufficient self-preservation and their discreditable but viable postcolonial dependency, conventional Greenlandic identity and ways of life is compromised. Still, according to Sikki, the choice between identity and viability is an obvious one.

This mine is the best thing that has happened here in years. Maybe we’ll finally have work for the young folk. You have no idea how badly they want respectable jobs. It’s not healthy for anyone to live on what comes in an envelope once a month for doing nothing at all. They’ve got to have something to do and it should be as clear to you as it is to me that they can’t make a living in the old ways. That time has passed. (2011: 177)

Also trapped in this same dilemma, the residents in Ennis have become entirely dependent on Silver Sky Mining. Like Sikki, who believes that ‘these days everything is at stake. If there is no mine there will be no village’ (2011: 178), Annie’s brother Ryan confesses ‘You kill the mine, you kill Ennis. No jobs, no mine taxes, no schools. Nothing’ (episode 1, 00:25:38) – a fact Danvers later reiterates: ‘Without the mine, there is no town. Fifty per cent of the population works for it’ (episode 3, 00:22:45). Do not bite the hand that feeds you, seems to be the point, but in truth, in all three works discussed here the mine gives with one hand and

takes away with the other, as it is ultimately discovered that the mining companies are threatening the citizens of Kaanneq, Ennis, and Kiruna by polluting their home towns with ice drilling, melting permafrost, or nuclear waste. In each of the narratives, the dilemma takes the form of an evil spiral (evoking the spiral symbol in *Night Country*): communities are dependent on the thing that is killing them. The town's residents are no longer only trading in their Indigenous identity, but their lives too.

Beyond its material and political conditions, Kiruna is also constructed as an aesthetic and narrative space. Described as 'the land of the midnight sun' (in radical opposition to the 'night country' surrounding Ennis), Kiruna is presented as a white space that reproduces dominant imaginaries of the Nordic North and its natural environment through the visual rhetoric of Arctic sublimity. As Anne Marit Waade observes, the series capitalises on the region's barren, desolate beauty with its low forests and wolf-inhabited open spaces, presenting the grey-green tundra and snow-capped mountains through a highly stylised lens (2020: 47). In line with white ecology, the Sápmi region is 'imagined in scholarly as well as fictional writing as a repository of Otherness, a sublime and wild landscape, and a site of tremendous resources' (Höglund 2020: 135). Gunilla Brodrej further reinforces this sublime framing, observing that the audience is 'meant to gape in horror and admiration' (*Expressen* 2016).¹⁵⁷ Yet, at the same time, the significance of Kiruna's landscape exceeds its aesthetic function; it is not merely something to be looked at but something that acts – a force that permeates atmosphere, psychology, and plot.

Kiruna and the Sápmi region as a whole are therefore not simply scenic, but profoundly agential, actively influencing the characters' mental states and the narrative's general atmosphere. As the critic Les Roberts observes, it is almost as if 'the stories can be said to have grown out of the landscapes' (2016: 374). In this regard, all three works discussed in this chapter mirror each other in their use of extreme weather phenomena: while *Night Country* and *Audnin* unfold under the oppressive darkness of the polar night, *Midnattssol* is bathed in the unending brightness of the midnight sun that never dips below the horizon, leaving daylight to linger for weeks on end.¹⁵⁸ Similar to Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019), *Midnattssol* is also set at midsummer, where the midnight sun exerts a powerful influence on Zadi, triggering insomnia, emotional disorientation, and peculiar dream-like

visions, which appear to prompt the resurfacing of her own personal traumas, once again exemplifying a defining feature of ecohorror in which affect and atmosphere prove inseparable. In this sense, her inability to sleep serves as a metaphor for the unresolved tensions – personal, political, environmental – that permeate the series, echoing the unsettled landscape of Kiruna where nothing remains at rest.

Relatedly, the supernatural permeates the narrative. As in *Auðnin* and *Night Country*, *Midnattssol* portrays its sub-Arctic environment as an otherworldly realm where time and climate are disorienting forces, operating outside the normal rhythms of the world. As Johan Höglund notes, the series associates this sense of temporal and spatial dislocation with the Sámi, and particularly the figure of the Nâjd, a female shaman, who makes an unsettling prediction (2020: 139), telling Anders Harnesk that ‘since I was a child, I’ve had the feeling that something is going to happen. Something wicked ... and this feeling I still call: The great suffering’ (episode 3). Her prophecy is a collective omen, foreshadowing the larger crisis that is already unfolding in Kiruna, while the shaman herself echoes Zadi, whose first name Kahina is tellingly homophonic with Kiruna and means ‘the sorceress’ or ‘fortune teller’ in Arabic. The series deliberately constructs these parallels, implying that Zadi is attuned to forces that exceed the realm of Western rationality.

Later, the Nâjd is brought to the police station, where three elderly Sámi men – soon revealed to be Nâjds themselves – gather outside the former schoolhouse turned police headquarters and begin to sing a traditional *joik*. As the female Nâjd joins in, the overcast sky shifts rapidly across the heavens. In the visual grammar of the series, this weatherly transformation appears to synchronise the joik’s affective power with atmospheric resonance, suggesting a deep attunement between the Sámi and their environment. This aesthetic choice reinforces a recurring trope in *Midnattssol*: the depiction of an Indigenous cosmology so intimately bound to nature that it appears capable of interacting with the elements themselves. Through the figure of the Nâjd, the series presents a visual form of temporal and spatial agency – an ability to alter weather, atmosphere, and mood – that lends the scene both emotional intensity and ecological resonance. Yet this same framing risks reiterating the familiar colonial association of Sámi spirituality with mystical naturalism (a tension I return to below) – a trope that echoes the Western alignment of woman and nature.

Once again, this interference with time and space – another defining feature of the Nordic ecohorror – is also tied to ghostly occurrences. Like *Night Country* and *Auðnin*, the supernatural in *Midnattssol* revolves around the cold case of the Sámi activist Evelina Geatki, who – like Annie Kowtok and Usinna – dies before the events of the present storyline. While initially believed to have taken her own life by jumping off a waterfall, Evelina's body was never recovered. Her unknown fate serves as a poignant reference to the fraught relationship between the Sámi people and Swedish colonisers, particularly to the Swedish state-owned electricity company Vattenfall (lit. waterfall), whose construction and water regulation in the 1950s and 1960s ignored the rights of the Sámi and devastated their lands, disrupting their traditional ways of life. The environmental desecration inflicted by the state's infrastructural projects is mirrored in Evelina's ambiguous fate, where water is both a literal and symbolic site of loss.

However, as the story progresses, it is revealed that Evelina is hiding at her brother Eddie's house. Eddie has learnt that a group of miners have been paid a large sum to bury radioactive waste from a French nuclear bomb in a sealed-off area of the mine. Crucially, this overtly white crime engages with complex, obscure renderings of 'time and scale' as the nuclear waste – a hyperobject in itself – disperses through what Anna Mrozewicz describes as 'slowly evolving and invisible processes' that span temporalities and spatial dimensions exceeding human perception (2022: 37–38). The series thereby literalises Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence (2011: 2), described already as a form of harm that is gradual, unspectacular, and often imperceptible, yet no less destructive. In *Midnattssol*, the slow violence manifests in the concealment of toxic waste in marginalised Arctic territories and Indigenous lands, hidden away in the mine – or, in 'Mother' – repeating the image of a polluted maternal space also seen in *Night Country* and *Auðnin*.

Slow violence is also central to *Auðnin* and *Night Country*. In *Auðnin*, the Greenlandic corpse, long entombed in ice, is unearthed by Icelandic drillers, causing it to release a century-old lethal contagion, while in *Night Country*, slow violence manifests through the gradual melting permafrost and the contamination of Indigenous water systems, carried out in the name of scientific advancement while wilfully ignoring long-term consequences. As the Tsalal scientists justify their actions by appealing to potential medical breakthroughs, the damage is assumed to

remain local and containable. Yet, as the thawing ice suggests, such effects will be felt on an expanded temporal and planetary scale, resisting containment and ultimately undermining the future they claim to secure. Nevertheless, with cynical negligence, the Tsalal scientists turn a blind eye to the contamination in the short-sighted belief that the damage will remain local and the reward will outweigh the cost. As one scientist defensively claims, the minerals extracted from the ice could cure cancer. Yet the consequences of the thawing permafrost cannot be contained in time nor space. Over time, as Theis Ørntoft observes in his travel journal from the Yamal region (2016), it will presumably unleash far-reaching repercussions on a global scale – ecosystem collapse, rising temperatures, and the unearthing of dormant viruses capable of spreading far beyond the Arctic, rendering any cure of cancer meaningless in a world no longer habitable. This blind spot exposes the myopic hubris of the scientists and the corporate powers behind them, who – echoing Victor Frankenstein – privilege short-term profit and scientific prestige over long-term survival. Slow violence thus emerges as a defining ecohorrific logic in all three works, where harm remains out of sight yet never out of time, unfolding gradually while accumulating across deep time and planetary space.

After discovering the truth about the toxic waste lying dormant in the Kiruna mine, Eddie, encouraged by his sister, embarks on a symbolic killing spree, murdering all involved parties with Sámi artefacts in order to avenge the pollution of the Sápmi region. However, in a decisive twist, Evelina's remains are finally found, revealing that Eddie has merely been sheltering his sister's ghost. With this revelation, Evelina's ghost now emerges as a hauntological manifestation of slow violence: like the buried nuclear waste that underpins the crime, Evelina exceeds human temporal and spatial frameworks, resurfacing belatedly in forms that resist containment. Her spectral presence renders visible what the series has already suggested; that toxic matter, colonial violence, and unresolved histories do not disappear but linger, returning to haunt both landscape and subject.

Evelina's true fate reconfigures the narrative, adding a personal layer to Eddie's quest for revenge, as he already knows his sister was murdered by the miners for trying to expose their dark secret. Like Annie Kowtak in *Night Country*, Evelina sent Eddie a video recording shortly before her death, exposing the miners' crimes. The siblings' revenge is ultimately achieved when Eddie orchestrates a flood in the

mine, recalling the colonial connotations of Vattenfall and his sister's presumed suicide, drowning the miners and himself in its depths, enacting a form of poetic justice in which the site of neocolonial violence is quite literally overwhelmed by its own submerged past.

Once again, as in *Night Country* and *Auðnin*, the true crime in *Midnattssol* is not so much the ritualised killings of French investors and fraudulent miners, as the ongoing exploitation and destruction of Sápmi lands. Like many Arctic ecohorror works, *Midnattssol* suggests that what truly haunts Nordic societies is not an abject monster, unruly nature or the threat of otherness, but rather an amalgamation of extractive industries and toxic waste. As Linda Haverty Rugg writes, 'ecocrime fiction does not create a human-as-criminal/nature-as-victim dichotomy, but instead imagines the kind of enmeshment Morton proposes' (2017: 605). The investigation's ultimate revelation in *Midnattssol*, then, is the exposure of white-ecological imaginaries of Nordic innocence, social progressivism and exceptional ecological stewardship as self-congratulatory ideologies that function less as forms of protection than as narratives that continue to mask ongoing colonial violence and environmental exploitation.

The Imperative to Listen

Midnattssol's portrayal of the Sámi population as spectral presences and prophetic figures endowed with paranormal powers has ignited critical debate about whether the series reinforces colonial tropes or stages a postcolonial intervention. The critic Gunilla Brodrej, for example, argues that the series confines Sámi representation to narrow, exoticised roles, depicting them either as 'militant young activists or as peculiar oddballs' with 'something very mysterious in their eyes'. She further critiques the portrayal of the Nâjd by the Sámi musician Sofia Jannok, as a 'clairvoyant and peculiar' character 'speaking in riddles', concluding that *Midnattssol* continues to 'limit the role of the Sámi in society – first as reindeer herders, now as props' (*Expressen* 2016).¹⁵⁹

Following Brodrej's critique, *Midnattssol* does reproduce hierarchical binaries of Western colonial discourse, framing Indigenous peoples as the other – aligned with nature, mysticism, and the supernatural, and in stark contrast to Western rationality. In doing so, the series draws on a white ecological imaginary in which

the sub-Arctic is framed as an untamed and exotic wilderness in need of conquest and stewardship, while Indigenous figures are pushed to the margins as premodern and mysterious ‘props’. As Johan Höglund infers, partially in line with Brodrej, there seems to be a form of othering, and possibly even exoticism, at play in the series. Likening the Sámi portrayal to that of the ‘magical negro’ or ‘magical Indian’ in mainstream cinema, Höglund argues that *Midnattssol* depicts Indigenous characters as ‘a strange and not entirely human entity: an Other’ (2020: 132). Yet, he also identifies a certain duplexity at play, noting that contemporary Nordic horror narratives generally ‘dismisses the notion that indigeneity is abject and Other even as [they] rehearses this very trope’ (144).

This ambivalence lies at the heart of *Midnattssol*, as the series continually both repeats and challenges the entanglements between colonial hauntings and postcolonial critique, between white ecological aesthetics and the dark, hyperobjective realities of environmental destruction, and between white mythology and Indigenous representation. On one hand, the series taps into a white ecological imaginary, depicting the far North as an exotic, pre-modern space, characterised by desolate yet spectacularly sublime sub-Arctic landscapes, populated by mystical Sámi figures and supernatural shamans. On the other hand, it engages directly with urgent contemporary geopolitical issues, particularly concerning Kiruna’s mining industry and the ongoing conflicts over land and resource ownership.

The postcolonial theorist Edward Said’s discussion of authoritative texts illuminates this dilemma. For Said, such texts do not merely reflect reality but actively participate in shaping it through their representational power, producing forms of knowledge that structure perception, authorise certain power relations, reinforce prejudices, and sustain existing hierarchies (2003: 94). *Midnattssol* can be understood as such a text, constructing the North through familiar Western imaginaries of neo-romantic sublimity and indigenous othering, while contributing to the persistence and legitimisation of these representational frameworks.

In a broader sense, this representational tension extends into Nordic ecohorror texts: the tendency to frame Indigenous, folkloric, and nonhuman figures of the North through lenses of mysticism and alterity. Whether in *Midnattssol*, *Auðnin*, transnational works like *Midsommar* or non-Nordic productions such as *Night*

Country, cultural and epistemological differences in the Nordic and Arctic North are frequently aestheticised as something enigmatic and difficult to access, often mediated through external or distanced perspectives. In *Midsommar*, for example, the Swedish Hårga commune is framed almost entirely through the gaze of American visitors – and, on a meta level, through the lens of its American director Ari Aster – transforming local traditions into spectacles of otherness. Likewise, in *Night Country*, Indigenous epistemologies are partially approached through Western investigative frameworks that struggle to fully comprehend them, while *Auðnin* stages a similar epistemic gap between Icelandic ‘rationality’ and Greenlandic cosmology.

This representational logic is central to white ecology and is even evident spatially in the recurring construction of the Arctic as a blank and receptive surface. In *Midnattssol*, the portrayal of Kiruna’s vast and seemingly empty landscape aligns with classical Western imaginaries, where white spaces often invoke exhilarating feelings of openness and boundless possibility. In this framing, whiteness can function as an inert canvas – a blank surface upon which meaning can be inscribed. By this logic, white expanses, though seemingly unfilled and devoid of history, are not presented as mere void or absences, but rather a space of vast unspent potentiality. Pure as driven snow, the white landscapes of the Arctic North serve as receptive backdrops open to the projection of Western narratives and desires. As Maria Lindgren Leavenworth notes, the Arctic serves as ‘an empty stage’ where unbounded imaginary scenarios can frolic freely in ways ‘modernity has made impossible elsewhere’ (2023: 4). These limitless imaginary possibilities are further intensified by the persistent framing of the Arctic as a premodern, mysterious, otherworldly, unknown space, allowing for more speculative and transcendent narratives.

However, following Said, this sense of openness and availability not only inspires artistic creativity and imaginary representations, but also renders the Arctic an enticing canvas for external actors to forcibly impose their own sociocultural convictions and narratives in colonial and appropriative ways. As Homi Bhabha argues, colonial discourse operates through processes of fixation that render colonised spaces and subjects legible as both empty and available, while simultaneously marking them as sites of difference and projection (1984: 131) – a

fundamentally ambivalent dynamic by which such figures are not only rendered intelligible but also, one might argue, prone to processes of monsterisation.

Across *Midnattssol*, *Auðnin*, and *Night Country*, the monstrous emerges as an effect of representation: figures that come to embody cultural anxiety because they resist transparency and epistemological control. What appears as ‘mysterious’, ‘irrational’, or excessive is thus less an inherent quality than an effect of perspective – produced at the limits of comprehension. Representation, in this light, is inseparable from the power of monsterisation: a question not only of how subjects are depicted, but of who is looking, who is interpreting, and under what conditions meaning is rendered legible or dismissed. Looking, in this sense, is not neutral observation but a structuring force – one that, in the act of seeking to know, produces the monstrous.

At the same time, as Herzogenrath points out, whiteness also carries with it a sense of firstness (2013: 3). Everything requires a point of origin – a background, a canvas, or a blank page upon which it can be defined. In this view, Herzogenrath suggests that the world may not have begun with ‘the word’, as many creation myths propose, but rather with the white (3). This inversion offers a powerful counter-narrative to traditional narratives of origin, creation and ownership which is echoed in the final episode of *Night Country*, when Detective Liz Danvers asserts that the area of Ennis existed ‘long before the mine, long before the APF, long before Alaska was even named Alaska’, highlighting that the ‘white’ icescape indeed predates the colonial naming, framing and inscription (episode 6, 01:12:51).

It is this duplicity of firstness – signifying both native origin and white appropriation – which is a contested theme in *Midnattssol*, as well as in *Auðnin* and *Night Country*. In these narratives, the Arctic landscape – often figured through motifs of ancient ice and mythical spirits – is portrayed as a ‘resting place’ that is intruded upon by external forces, accentuating the conflicting claims of firstness and authenticity. In *Midnattssol*, the firstness of the Sámi people is expressed by Anders Harnesk, who says that ‘this land belonged to them before the Swedish came and grabbed everything. They took everything except the reindeer probably because it’s such hard work’ (episode 1). In *Night Country*, Inuit activists also voice their claim, chanting ‘We were here before’ in protest against the mining company’s destructive activities, asserting their connection to the land that predates the

encroaching industrial forces. In doing so, these assertions of prior presence not only contest colonial narratives but disrupt the logic of whiteness as empty and available, reconfiguring it as already inhabited, lived, and known.

Thus, while *Midnattssol* reproduces certain stereotypical tropes and assumptions about the Sámi and the North, it also complicates and destabilises them. By accentuating the structural violence of extractivism and highlighting the political tensions surrounding Indigenous autonomy and territorial claims, *Midnattssol* both participates in and interrogates the discursive authority it wields. Aware of this duplicity, Maxida Mäarak, who portrays Evelina in the series, argues that sometimes one must harness the power of authoritative texts as a means to reclaim and reshape one's own Indigenous narrative: 'Many Swedes are completely uninterested or know little about the political situation of the Sámi, and in these cases, popular culture is a good way to reach an audience. It is our most effective weapon' (*Göteborgsposten* 2016).¹⁶⁰ In contrast to Brodrej, this shifts the narrative from mere exoticisation to an act of reclamation, enabling Sámi self-representation in a public, culturally resonant and accessible framework.

Crucially, Mäarak's perspective highlights and problematises how colonial processes of othering are perhaps less about monsterising difference than a failure – or refusal – to *listen*. In the Arctic ecohorror trope the imperative to listen therefore emerges as a counterpoint to the external representational gaze, shifting attention from visual mastery towards auditory attunement. Sound – in opposition to the written word – emerges across *Midnattssol*, *Night Country*, and *Auðnin* as another critical counter-narrative device. Unlike the authoritative text, which inscribes meaning onto seemingly passive landscapes and invisible peoples, sound resists fixation, ideals of rationalisation or conventional meaning-making. Listening, in this context, is an act of decolonisation. In opposition to the white ecological mythology and its need to control and dominate the narrative, a counter-imperative rises across all three works, where identity, affect and interconnection are pursued – not through the act of narrating, but through attentive, immersive listening.

This conflict, between Western inscription and Arctic listening, is emphasised in *Auðnin*, when Greenlander Igimaq pleads with Thóra and the Icelandic search team to leave: 'I *have* told you. This is an evil place. Leave immediately ... You don't

understand and you don't belong here. Go and tell the others to leave. This place is evil' (2011: 216, original emphasis). His warning, however, falls on deaf ears.

'I *was* telling you. You do not listen'. The man had become angry again. 'Yes, I [Thóra] was listening but I have trouble understanding what you're saying. We speak and think in a different way where I live. For example, our souls don't move around after we die.' (2011: 217-218, original emphasis)

The exchange underscores an interesting correlation between listening and understanding. In her seminal essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988), the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak interrogates the structural conditions that render marginalised subjects unheard, arguing that dominant discourses systematically foreclose the possibility of subaltern speech through what she terms 'epistemic violence' (24). Such violence does not merely silence through force, but through the imposition of interpretive frameworks that fail – or refuse – to recognise alternative ways of knowing. Following Spivak, Igimaq and the Indigenous inhabitants of Kaanneq are rendered voiceless not only through physical oppression, such as the removal of a tongue as demonstrated in *Night Country*, but also through the systematic dismissal of their knowledge and belief systems. Igimaq's warning does not register in Thóra's interpretive framework; it exceeds what can be recognised as meaningful speech. His words thus resonate not only as an immediate plea, but as part of a longer colonial pattern of refusal, in which Indigenous voices are repeatedly unheard and dismissed – a pattern that echoes in Igimaq's final statement: 'I have done what I came to do. I came to ask you to leave ... But you do not listen, any more than those who came here before you' (2011: 219).

Extending this imperative to listen, Igimaq's plea is reverberated in *Night Country*, where Navarro's visions and ghostly encounters repeatedly urge her to 'listen' (episode 1, 00:26:33; episode 3, 00:38:33). In one of her many flashbacks, Navarro finds herself in full military gear in a rusty-red war zone. A fellow soldier, seemingly unaffected by what ought to be a fatal injury, whispers into Navarro's ear: 'Listen'. To Navarro, this imperative – also repeated by Danvers' son Holden in another vision – has become an incentive to live by, echoed in one of Navarro and Danvers' car conversations.

Danvers: What do you do, when you are lonely?

Navarro: I pray.

Danvers (mockingly): You talk to God?

Navarro: No, I listen. (episode 3, 00:24:28)

Unlike the first season of *True Detective*, where episode 2 is even titled ‘Seeing things’, the sense of sight is highly amputated in the dark and delusory Arctic icescape of season four. Instead, the great white landscapes of *Night Country*, *Auðnin*, and *Midnattssol* are presented as highly tonal territories, where hearing is paramount. In *Prismatic Ecology*, Herzogenrath describes the Arctic region in terms of its ‘sonic geography’, where the landscape is not just seen but heard – through the creaking of ice, the sound of glaciers, and the howling wind (2013: 7). Similarly, the Arctic soundscape also resonates with Morton’s notion of ambient poetics, where ecological awareness emerges not through distant observation, but through exposure to diffuse, surrounding auditory environments that resist clear boundaries between subject and landscape (2007: 32–34).

The sonic space of *Night Country*, *Auðnin*, and *Midnattssol* hereby engages with a central feature of Nordic ecohorror: the prominence of affect and atmosphere by which meaning is not secured through clear representation and rationalisation but through attunement and sensory orientation. This perspective challenges the visual regime of traditional Western aesthetics – previously sedimented by Paglia as ‘the westerner knows by seeing’ (1990: 5) – and reimagines the Arctic as a dynamic, resonant space. Whether Sámi joiks or Iñupiat throat-singing, sound-making and attentive listening has religious undertones, ghostly messages from the underworld, and affective attunement, contributing to an Arctic soundscape that defies Western ocularcentrism.

This tension is further reflected in the heightened auditory sensitivity of Indigenous characters – as a conduit for presence, relational awareness, and shared experience – which stands in stark contrast to Danvers’ struggle with being present in her grief. Instead she tries to escape via distracting noises that prevent her from listening. On multiple occasions, when Danvers is working at home or falling asleep, she plays white noise, using it not to attune but to anaesthetise. Whenever

silence descends around her, it would seem, she fills her ears or the room with steady static background noise characterised by a constant spectral density. While white noise is believed to be beneficial for relaxation, concentration, sleep and sometimes is used as a sound-masking source to drown out tinnitus, Danvers first and foremost employs it to mask her grief. In constant efforts not to feel, not to listen attentively to her inner thoughts and emotive state, she uses white noise as an audio blanket to drown her trauma out. This, in many ways, mirrors Zadi's struggle to sleep or suppress her own dark, traumatic memories under the unyielding spotlight of the midnight sun.

In contrast to Danvers' sonic solitude, functioning as an emotional barrier, the collective practice of throat-singing among the Indigenous women of Ennis in *Night Country* serves the opposite purpose: similar to the keening in *Midsommar*, it draws individuals into a communal web of shared affect. In these collective vocal séances, a chanting female community gives voice to pain and shrouds the sufferer – whether the pain is emotional or physical – in a consoling sound blanket of polyphonic vocals and presence, more interpersonal and intimate than Danvers' white noise therapy. Here, sound is a balm; a bridge that not only comforts, but also participates in the experience of pain and grief. What Danvers tries to drown out, the community embraces – and in doing so, they transform pain into collective resonance; an affective togetherness that demonstrates, as Sara Ahmed reminds us, that while pain 'may be solitary, it is never private' (2004a: 29).¹⁶¹

This crescendo of sonic resistance culminates in the haunting motif of Annie Kowtok's severed tongue in *Night Country*. Found at Tsalal station in the first episode, it is initially a symbol of brutal silencing, but eventually becomes an undeniable signifier: a voice that could not be muted. Like Edgar Allan Poe's telltale heart, Annie's tongue speaks for itself by its mere presence at the research station, connecting the cases and raving out her killers. Pointing towards the truth of her death, it ultimately reveals that she was murdered in the ice cave – the very site of the scientists' operations – where she was collectively stabbed to death after uncovering their involvement in environmentally destructive mining practices. However, as the last episode reaches its end, the tongue still remains a mystery. Who cut it out, and who left it in Tsalal station? Throughout the series, the excision of Annie's tongue is interpreted as a hate crime, yet the full circumstances are never

confirmed. Perhaps it was not a violent act of racial oppression, but rather an expressive tool – left behind by the ghost of Annie herself – to expose buried truths. Echoing this sentiment, the last episode contains a climactic interrogation where Annie’s voice is used as an effective interrogation device to lure out the truth of the sole surviving scientist Raymond Clark. Using sound as both testimony and torment, Navarro and Danvers forcibly fasten headphones to his ears using duct tape and play an audio recording of Annie’s final moments with her agonising screams set on repeat. Annie’s voice, that once appeared to be silenced, resounds as the final, inescapable reckoning.

Ultimately, in these narratives, sound emerges as resistance: a counter-discourse that defies colonial inscription. Where white mythology seeks to mute and possess, these sonic interventions rupture the colonial narrative, asserting the presence of Indigenous histories, grievances, and knowledge. Sound – elusive, resonant, embodied, and communal – not only enables the subaltern to speak, as Spivak phrases it, but insists on being heard. *Midnattssol*, *Auðnin*, and *Night Country* together invite us to attune to voices that exceed visual capture, where meaning is not only inscribed on surfaces, but carried through resonance.

In these three Arctic ecohorror works, the Arctic emerges not as a sublime setting, but as a haunted and contested space that resists the epistemological and aesthetic frameworks imposed upon it. While the central crimes in each narrative are ostensibly resolved, none of the texts offers closure in any conventional sense. Instead, they end in uncertainty and unlawfulness, sustaining forms of narrative and ontological openness in which investigative logic breaks down and key elements remain unresolved, withheld, or only partially knowable. Thus, these three works embody what Halberstam describes as a refusal of resolution: a turn away from structures of completion, mastery, coherence, and fulfillment towards modes of absence and unmaking (2011: 124).

The refusal is closely tied to the spectral and the monstrous. In the corpus, feminine ghosts and other nonconforming figures do not function as fully legible antagonists, but as disruptive forces that unsettle both the investigative process and the worlds it seeks to stabilise. Their presence reconfigures crime itself, shifting attention from individual perpetrators to longer histories of environmental and colonial violence. What ultimately emerges is a form of resistance centred not on

solving the crime, but on refusing to restore the symbolic order that produced it. In *Auðnin*, *Night Country*, and *Midnattssol*, the most significant act is not resolution but noncompliance: a refusal to reinstate the normative, Western logic of law, knowledge, and control that underpins white ecological thought. Rather than delivering clarity, these narratives leave us with partial truths, suggesting that what matters is not closure, but the capacity to recognise what exceeds it.

9. Body Ecohorror: Transcorporeality, Maternity and Red Ecology

While folk ecohorror borrows its grammar from folk horror's landscapes of pagan superstition, folklore and the rural uncanny, and Arctic ecohorror is structured around the investigative narrative and supernatural characteristics of Nordic noir, body ecohorror inherits its form from body horror's visceral aesthetics of transformation and excess. Yet while classical body horror cinema usually centres on sexuality, technology and desire, the body ecohorror trope names a fleshy zone where biopolitics, ecology, and carnal dread interface – with reproduction, maternity, nonhumanity, and transcorporeality as central sites. It focuses on the porous, somatic exchanges of the body as an ecological mesh, where flesh is environment and reproduction an interchanging process that links the intimate to the planetary. Perhaps more explicitly than any other ecotrope, body ecohorror foregrounds Nordic ecohorror's defining logic of *transcorporeal enmeshment*, portraying the human body not as separate from its environment, but as materially embedded in and permeated by it. It is not a sealed organism but an ecological system – a milieu of fluids, energies, and affects in which distinctions between inside and outside, life and death, and nature and culture continually break down. Consequently, the body participates in a network of exchanges – of air, bacteria, hormones, water, waste, technologies, and social norms – in which the boundaries of the subject are continually, monstrously undone.

This perception of an embodied ecology is also in tune with Morton's expanded understanding of ecology, which does not only include 'nature "out there"' (2007: 77), but permeates art, culture and human bodies – the entire mesh of existence in which no being or materiality stands alone. Rather than treating ecology solely as a separate green sphere, Morton understands it as an ontology of interconnectedness

in which everything exists in reciprocal relation. This perspective also resonates with Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality, arguing that the human body is 'inseparable from the environment' – absorbing and excreting the world through toxins, microbes, hormones, and emotions. The body is never purely human, but 'always intermeshed in the more-than-human world', revealing how the personal is inseparable from the planetary (2010a: 2).

In line with this framework, the embodied ecology that underpins the body ecohorror trope unfolds as what might be described as a *red ecology*, where the body's entanglement with its environment finds expression in a crimson palette of flesh, blood, and affective intensity. In contrast to more idealised forms of green and white ecology associated with harmony and purity, red ecology foregrounds the violent and precarious material relations that bind bodies together through systems of extraction, contamination, consumption, and waste. In *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* (2013), Tobias Menely and Margaret Ronda, too, describe red ecology through this volatile interconnection: the slaughterhouse in Oregon, the contaminated sludge in local waterways, the globalised circuit of blood, waste, and flesh – all scenes of a red economy by which human and more-than-human bodies are interconnected through systems of ecological commodification (2013: 32).¹⁶²

In keeping with the green ecology of folk horror, where ecofundamentalist fantasies of unity and harmony rule, and the white ecological ideologies of Arctic horror, which traces the imperial gaze that aestheticises icescapes and sublime snow-covered expanses, body ecohorror turns towards a red register – a pulsing ecology of corporeal exchange and decay, where the boundaries between body, matter, and society dissolve. Red ecology moves its primary focus from pastoral to pulse, scenery to substance. It reimagines ecology not only as landscape or atmosphere, but as flesh and flow – foregrounding the bodily intensities that simultaneously sustain and threaten life: blood, heat, pain, flesh, vulnerability, hunger, death.

Importantly, in the works of this ecotrope, red is not a mere colour-code – visualised through images of the secreting, mutating, and reproductive body – but a vital materialism in which care and destruction, growth and decay, birth and rot, love and violence, life and loss are rendered indistinguishable. Red ecology is not only an aesthetic lens, but an ethical one, insisting on an ethics of entanglement that rejects Anthropocene ideals of cleanliness, containment, and individualism.

Crucially, while the green and white ecologies of the previous chapters are *exposed* by Nordic ecohorror fiction as extreme and exclusionary ideologies underpinning a Nordic self-perception, red ecology functions more as a critique in itself – a mode *mobilised* by ecohorror fiction to reveal cultural fantasies of purity.

As a result, the red ecology of the body ecohorror trope is often set up against notions of *pure nature* – understood both as physical cleanliness and moral virtue, as well as the fantasy of a nature that exists in isolation, untouched by human interference. This conception of nature as a self-contained and unspoiled realm has long shaped Western thought. As Kate Soper observes, Western culture has historically imagined nature as a realm of purity and authenticity, set against the corruption of the social (1995: 32). The purity of nature, she suggests, is less a description of the world than a moral metaphor: a projection of human longing for stability and virtue. Yet, as Val Plumwood argues in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), such ideals rest on hierarchical dualisms that cast nature as the passive and separate realm of ‘pure nature’, severed from culture (38). In this way, purity functions as a structure of power: it determines what must remain untouched, who is tasked with guarding it, and which bodies are deemed clean, proper, and worthy of protection. This ideal of purity is precisely what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, echoing Morton, identifies as foundational to the green imaginary. In *Prismatic Ecologies*, he argues that green ecological thinking has long been tethered to ideals of harmony and order: in what he terms ‘bright green’ ecology, wilderness is imagined as ‘a purified place’ that is ‘separate from the human, empty, foundationally pure’ (2013: xxi). Yet these fantasies are not only shadowed by latent violence – the impulse to optimise, cleanse, and discipline life itself – but also work to erase the destructive, emotional, and messy corporeal flows by which life persists. As such, ideological investments in purity are not only untenable, given the inherently entangled and unstable conditions of life, but also perilous, as they obscure the processes that sustain existence (Ingold 2012: 438).

In response, the body ecohorror trope offers a site where corporeality and ecology intersect in chaotic, disgusting, and life-threatening ways. Embedded in this mess/mesh, the body’s entrapment, porosity, and unpredictability dramatise the same tensions that structure ecological crisis and its imaginary: contamination anxiety, excess, and mutation, the loss of pureness and virtue, and reproduction

regulation. What these dynamics all have in common is an eerie confrontation with the human (body) not as separate from or elevated above the rest of the world, but as uncannily, grotesquely enmeshed with it.

Literary and cinematic works in the Nordic region stage this leaky entanglement. One thematic strand engages with the body ecohorror trope through contagion, often drawing on the Hollywood tradition of representing epidemics and infection as embodied symptoms of ecological imbalance. This tendency is exemplified by the Danish Netflix series *The Rain* (2018–2020), Finnish author Leena Krohn's *Hotel Sapiens* (2013, *Hotel Sapiens and Other Irrational Tales* 2013), the Swedish novelists John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Hantering av odöda* (2005, *Handling the Undead* 2009) and Lizette Edfeldt's *Brännmärkt* (2017, 'Branded'), all of which envision a post-apocalyptic or quarantined posthuman society marked by both ecological, corporeal, and ethical degeneration. Here, Estok's twin affects of ecophobia and abjection illuminate how contamination functions as both ecological and corporeal anxiety: the fear of nature and the revulsion towards matter that exposes our proximity to it (2020). While ecophobia names the culturally ingrained fear and hostility towards nature – the rejection of our interrelation with nonhuman life and the risks of contamination it entails – abjection marks the visceral response to matter that exposes that entanglement. In the works of the body ecohorror trope, the interplay of these affects is mobilised to collapse the boundary between external and internal threat, showcasing how the body – through its fluids, infections, and openings – renders visible the fragile continuity between self and environment. Most importantly, such eruptions of bodily infiltration and excess return as the repressed reality of the ecological condition – an uncanny reminder that purity, whether environmental or corporeal, is always an ideological construct.

Closely related to the contamination narrative, another trajectory of the body ecohorror trope centres on the physical interrelations of body and nature, where metamorphic and hybridising processes further erode the distinctions between the human and the nonhuman. This strand is especially resonant with Alaimo's notion of transcorporeality, highlighting the movement of substance, affect, and agency across bodily boundaries. In the works in this strand, such permeability often extends beyond mere exchange to actual transformation, where the body becomes a locus of interspecies crossings and ecological symbiosis. This dynamic is illustrated

in contemporary literary works such as Danish authors Siri Ranva Hjelm Jacobsen's *Dafnesyndromet* (2021, 'The Daphne Syndrome') and Kristian Byskov's biocyborg novel *Mitose* (2013, 'Mitosis'), and Finnish authors Laura Gustafsson's play-turned-novel *Anomalia* (2013, 'Anomaly'), Johanna Sinisalo's *Enkelten verta* (2011, *The Blood of Angels* 2014) and Leena Krohn's epistolary novel *Tainaron: Postia toisesta kaupungista* (1985, *Tainaron: Mail From Another City* 2004). Similarly, instances of mutating and becoming-other entanglements also appear in contemporary Nordic film and television, such as the Icelandic Netflix series *Katla* (2021), the Danish horror film *Når dyrene drømmer* (2014, 'When Animals Dream') and the Swedish TV series *Jordskott* (2016–2017, *Jordskott: The Roots of Evil*). In these works, the body is imagined as a transcorporeal interface where human and nonhuman forms intermingle, dissolving species boundaries and revealing identity itself as a mutable ecological process.

In dialogue with these configurations, perhaps the most prominent expression of the body ecohorror trope in recent Nordic literature and film is the preoccupation with the female body and its associated themes of coming-of-age, menstruation, conception, pregnancy, birth, motherhood and postpartum. These facets of female embodiment have been given (eco)horrific inflection in recent Nordic films such as the Norwegian *Thelma* (2017), the Danish–Swedish *Shelley* (2016), the Icelandic *Dýrið* (2021, *Lamb*), the Danish *Breeder* (2020), the Swedish series *Partisan* (2020), and the Finnish *Pahanhautoja* (2022, *Hatching*), where reproduction is haunted by societal anxieties related to queer awakenings, purity and genetic inheritance, monstrous births, class exploitation, and the biopolitical privileges of parenthood. Similar concerns also surface in the literary sphere where the recent surge of interest in motherhood has likewise acquired an ecohorrific undertone.¹⁶³ Works such as John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Gräns* (2006, *The Border* 2013) and Cecilie Lind's *Bristefærdig* (2025, 'Bursting') reimagine maternal bodies as volatile sites of creation and rupture, where reproduction itself is rendered inseparable from excessive transformation and death. Notably, Nordic literature has even turned towards futuristic and dystopian explorations of reproduction reminiscent of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* from 1985. In novels such as Ninni Holmqvist's *Enhet* (2006, *The Unit* 2009), Johanna Sinisalo's *Auringon ydin* (2013, *The Core of the Sun* 2016) and Maren Uthaug's trilogy *11 %* (2022, *Eleven Percent* 2025), 88 %

(2024) and *I %* (2026), Nordic writers imagine futures where fertility becomes a terrain of control and resistance. Ultimately, these works reveal the intimate proximity between ecological collapse and biopolitical regulation of the reproductive body.

While many of the abovementioned works draw upon more than one of the thematic strands of contamination, metamorphosis, and reproduction, all of them mobilise ecohorrific embodiments to expose the coercive underbelly of ‘green’ ideals of purity. Accordingly, many works of the body ecohorror trope may be read as a double gesture – at once symptom and critique: on the one hand, repeating the oppressive logics of Nordic welfare systems and environmental virtue, which seek to regulate and discipline bodies; on the other, rendering the body as a red ecological force that resists such containment.

Nonhuman Kinship and Maternal Becoming in *Gräns* and *Pahanhautoja*

To examine how contemporary Nordic literature and film mobilise monstrous nonhuman embodiment to unsettle ideals of purity, bodily autonomy, and normative kinship, I look at reproduction and motherhood as central sites in the body ecohorror trope in two works: the Swedish author John Ajvide Lindqvist’s short story *Gräns* (2006, *The Border* 2013) and the Finnish director Hanna Bergholm’s film *Pahanhautoja* (2022, *Hatching*). Although differing in form and aesthetic expression, both works give female embodiment and reproduction a monstrous hue, using the excessive aesthetics of red ecology to explore how maternal bodies emerge as transcorporeal sites where ecological anxiety, biopolitical regulation, and more-than-human relations intersect. Rather than presenting motherhood as stable or morally redemptive, the works foreground it as a volatile process marked by bodily excess and species instability, exposing how the ideals embedded in the self-congratulatory discourse of Nordic exceptionalism – founded on welfare, equality, maternal sanctity, and harmony with nature – operate as apparatuses of bodily discipline, exclusion, and control.

The analyses therefore trace how body ecohorror works redirect ecological attention away from landscape alone and towards the vulnerable, interconnected,

and more-than-human body. In both *Gräns* and *Pahanhautoja*, monstrous births are inseparable from questions of (species) belonging and ecological coexistence, utilising reproduction as a site where the limits of the human are negotiated and destabilised. While *Gräns* approaches this through transcorporeal becoming and posthuman kinship, *Pahanhautoja* stages feminine containment and monstrous adolescence in the pressures of the nuclear family. Read together, the works illuminate how red ecology operates not only as an aesthetic register of flesh, blood, and bodily transformation, but also as a critique of the ideological fantasies of purity and coherence that structure Nordic modernity.

From Passing as Human to Becoming Mother in *Gräns*

John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Gräns* situates feminine monstrosity in a distinctly red ecological register, using the figure of the troll to rethink motherhood, bodily transformation, species boundaries, and the porousness of the human. The short story is focalised through the troll-protagonist Tina, who excels in her job as a customs officer due to her exceptional sense of smell and heightened intuition. This extraordinary ability allows her to detect not only illicit substances but also hidden emotions that are not necessarily criminal, as when Tina stops a nervous-smelling priest only to discover that his emotional distress merely stems from carrying a bag full of science fiction books: 'Asimov, Bradbury, Clarke. The man had looked around nervously, his bag wide open on the counter and when she spotted his clerical collar she had closed and bid him a good day' (2013: 2).

Yet while Tina can readily detect what lies hidden beneath the surface of others, she remains unaware of her own true self. Or, to invoke the short story's central metaphor: Tina excels at policing borders yet fails to recognise that she herself inhabits a borderland. This is despite the fact that her troll identity – initially unknown to both herself and the reader – comes with abnormal physical features and uncanny instincts, which causes her to live a lonely, isolated life at the margins of society in a secluded house bordering a forest. As the story unfolds, Tina's sense of belonging or lack thereof is further complicated when she meets Vore, a mysterious man who shares her troll-like appearance and bodily scars. This encounter prompts a deeper exploration of Tina's true identity while raising unsettling questions about what it means to be human – or something else

altogether. From here, the story gradually reframes her difference not as a lack, but as a monstrous potential by which new configurations of kinship and motherhood become imaginable.

From this perspective, *Gräns* can be read as a central example of the body ecohorror trope, as it locates its horror in the transcorporeal and excessive body – permeable, reproductive, and materially continuous with its environment – by which boundaries between human and nonhuman are constantly negotiated. While other aestheticisations of monstrous motherhood often hinge on explicit scenes of corporeal excess and biopolitical violence, Lindqvist's story opens maternity as a broader ontological question: what does it mean to belong, to inherit, to become? Here, motherhood is no longer tied to normative reproduction or the preservation of the human, but emerges as a contested site where kinship, species, and embodiment are renegotiated. In this way, *Gräns* exposes how ideals of proper femininity, maternity, and belonging depend on the exclusion of bodies that do not conform – while simultaneously imagining forms of relationality that exceed these norms. The critique that emerges is therefore not only corporeal but structural, directed at the ideals of purity, normality, and belonging that underpin both anthropocentric and gendered orders of the Swedish *folkhem*.

Central to this negotiation of monstrosity and belonging is Tina's existence as a troll, by which *Gräns* foregrounds the unstable boundary between the human and the more-than-human. As the novella gradually reveals Tina's nonhuman ontology, the story aligns itself with the body ecohorror trope's engagement with monstrous and more-than-human bodies, while, more broadly, participating in Nordic ecohorror's sustained interest in liminal female figures rooted in Nordic folklore. Among these mythical creatures, the troll occupies a particularly complex position in Nordic cultural history. As the literary scholar Ann-Sofie Lönngren notes, the figure is rooted in folklore yet continually rearticulated in modern discourses of power, thus 'challenging the Enlightenment's concept of *human* as a stable entity' (2015: 205, original emphasis). Traditionally depicted as both similar to and radically different from humans, the troll has historically embodied a destabilising duality: capable of intimacy, family structures, and sociality, yet persistently framed as excessive, deviant, or untrustworthy. Contemporary Nordic texts such as *Gräns* reactivate this folkloric figure not as a static remnant of myth, but as a dynamic site

where ecological anxiety, corporeality, gender, and monstrous othering intersect, unsettling distinctions between self and other, nature and culture, and human and nonhuman.

In this context, *the nonhuman turn* offers a useful framework for understanding how such figures unsettle the boundaries that have traditionally defined the human as a coherent and autonomous subject. As Richard Grusin writes: ‘The nonhuman turn more generally, is engaged in decentering the human in favor of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies’ (2015: vii). Such a perspective resonates strongly with body ecohorror, where the human body can no longer be understood as autonomous or superior, but instead appears materially entangled with the environment.

While this decentring of the human, as Grusin describes it, has at times been criticised as misanthropic, it is more productively understood as part of a broader rethinking of the category itself. Over the past decades, this reassessment has become increasingly urgent, particularly in light of ecological crisis and species extinction, which are now challenging long-standing assumptions about human exceptionalism. Building on this, I argue that *Gräns* stages a confrontation with the limits of the human through the figure of Tina, who occupies a liminal space between the human and the nonhuman. The narrative thus mobilises monstrosity as a critical lens by which the figure of the ‘not quite human’ comes into view, raising fundamental questions about what it means to be recognised as fully human, and under what conditions such recognition is possible.

In the following, I therefore explore Tina’s nonhuman ontology and the ethical implications it raises for understanding existence beyond the human. More specifically, I trace Tina’s movement from *being monsterised* – rendered unfeminine, unattractive, different and childless, and therefore failing to conform to Western dualistic ideals – towards a *monstrous becoming* that embraces more-than-human kinship and maternity. Finally, I argue that *Gräns* mobilises the transformative potential of red ecology to reimagine motherhood as a transcorporeal and ecological condition that ultimately unsettles conventional distinctions between the human and nonhuman, and invites reconsideration of the boundaries by which human ontology and maternity are culturally defined and regulated.

Trolling: Passing as Human

Central to the body ecohorror trope is the unstable boundary between the human and the nonhuman. In fact, one of the horror genre's most enduring anxieties is the figure who appears to be human but is not. The unsettling possibility that the monstrous moves unnoticed in the ordinary – behind a familiar face, inside a seemingly human body – ignites fears about infiltration, contamination, and broken trust, while also exposing just how unstable the category of 'the human' truly is. *Gräns* springs from this premise. From the outset, Tina moves through the world as human. She holds a regular job as a customs officer, maintains a domestic life with her partner Roland, and participates – albeit uneasily – in the routines of everyday sociality with neighbours and colleagues. In this sense, she is socially legible in the human community, yet her body betrays her.

Tina's excessive exterior, heightened senses, and natural instincts do not fully conform to human standards, and she constantly wrestles with a sense of feeling different: she is drawn to the forest and feels most at ease outdoors, while enclosed domestic spaces leave her restless and uneasy; she has a strange affinity with nonhuman entities of nature, visiting an old tree which she considers her friend (2013: 8) just as wild animals do not fear her, and the elks she meets on her woodland walks allow her to pet them (33); she suspects she suffers from an 'electricity intolerance', experiencing headaches and discomfort when exposed to television, suggesting a heightened sensitivity to technologies and modern environments (31); her sense of smell borders on the preternatural, allowing her to register fear, shame, guilt, or desire where others perceive only neutral bodily scents; and finally, her inability to tolerate sexual intercourse – dismissed by doctors as a physical abnormality – marks her as reproductively deviant, reinforcing her exclusion from normative femininity and motherhood. Taken together, Tina's life is marked by a fundamental ontological misalignment that is readily perceptible yet fundamentally misunderstood by everyone, including herself. She is a troll *passing* as human.

Passing, in this sense, refers to the performative alignment with a dominant or socially legitimised group. Or as monster theorist Ingvil Hellstrand argues: 'To pass is arguably to (re)present or display characteristics and traits considered to belong to certain socially or ontologically defined groups' (2016: 2). Passing, in this sense,

is not merely a matter of resemblance, but of recognition: it depends on being read and accepted as belonging to a given category. At the same time, such practices are rarely neutral. Rather, passing operates in hierarchical structures, where one usually passes upwards into more privileged categories associated with authority, desirability, and legitimacy. Here, passing takes place in asymmetrical power relations, in which access to recognition, acceptance, or safety hinges upon one's ability to embody the norms of the superior group. As Tina herself states, passing allows her to 'continue to live in the – *lie* – security that had been her life to this point' (2013: 42, original emphasis).

In Tina's case, however, the dynamics of passing take on an unusual form. Since she is unaware of her troll identity, Tina does not perform humanness deliberately or strategically in the conventional sense, with manipulative intent to obtain a dominant position. Rather, her efforts to approximate normative human behaviour emerge as an ongoing, largely unconscious attempt to mitigate her difference and – with limited success – secure social acceptance in the only framework available to her. Or as Tina herself admits, mirroring human behaviour 'had become second nature but it really wasn't her, only a necessary mask' (2013: 30). The human is not a category she chooses to inhabit – out of desire for privilege, deception, or as a cunning ambush – but one that has been imposed upon her from birth, leaving her with no alternative ontological vocabulary by which to understand herself. As Rita Felski argues, recognition relies on pre-existing schemas (2008: 25), but since no such schema exists for trolls in the human world, Tina remains trapped. Her passing is thus not a calculated performance, but a condition produced in an Anthropocene regime that lacks the capacity to recognise her as anything other than human. Passing is therefore never simply an individual act; it is a social event that reveals, often painfully, the boundaries and regulatory power of the human position. Or as Tina states herself: 'Even though her daily life felt like a prison, there are moments in every person's life when they realize where their walls are placed, where the limits of their freedom exist' (2013: 5).

This also speaks to Butler's notion of recognition as constitutive of the subject. In 'Longing for Recognition' (2000), Butler argues that recognition is not merely a neutral act of 'seeing' another, but a socially disciplining process by which the self is 'formed by and through' its relations to others (110). Crucially, such recognition

operates through what Butler elsewhere calls a 'regulatory frame' that governs who can appear as what, and on what terms (1990: 43). In *Gräns*, this means that Tina does not exist prior to the category of the human, only to be misclassified by it; rather, she is constituted as a human subject through the very process that misrecognises her.

This installs a fundamental duplexity in Tina's passing, foregrounding the ambivalent structure of recognition itself. As the empirical reading study has already shown, recognition always involves misrecognition because to recognise someone is to render them intelligible through pre-existing normative categories, which simultaneously reduces or excludes aspects of their difference. As Felski cautions, 'to recognize is not just to trivialize, but also to colonize' (2008: 27), pointing to how acts of recognition risk appropriating alterity by assimilating it into familiar frameworks.

Similarly, in efforts to fit in, Tina is compelled to abide by such regulatory frameworks, which ultimately confine her true self: 'She had learned to endure the life in the cage, accept her limitations' (2013: 6). This imagery also positions her as an inverted double of the caged fighting dogs that her boyfriend breeds, a parallel further reinforced by her role as sniffer dog at customs, where her abilities are put to use in a system that depends on her difference while denying it. As such, her passing does not secure full inclusion, but places her in a subordinate position in the human hierarchy.

This dynamic is visible in Tina's everyday life. On the one hand, she has always felt different and others have consistently confirmed that difference. On numerous occasions, Tina makes statements that unwittingly gesture towards her liminal condition, as when she thinks to herself that 'No one knows me' (2013: 38) or 'She was living a lie' (50), even admitting that, 'From time to time I feel as if I'm somewhere outside of my body' (37). Indeed, Tina's otherness is first and foremost embodied. From childhood, she has been acutely aware that her excessive body – bigger, coarser, more primordial, even beastly – deviates from what is considered normative human appearance, particularly in relation to femininity. Or in Tina's own words: '*I'm an abomination*' (44, original emphasis). Her trollhood – unknown yet inscribed in her physicality – renders her not only strange looking but unfeminine. This dynamic is painfully illustrated in the memory of her high school

crush, who confesses ‘I wish I could meet someone just like you but who doesn’t look like you’, admitting that although he cares for her, she is ‘too ugly to be with’ (2013: 6). Here, recognition takes the form of rejection: Tina is recognised, but only as a failure to meet the normative ideals of femininity, which ultimately renders her own body a site of confinement: ‘Her body wasn’t even her prison, more like a cage where she could neither sit nor stand nor lie down’ (18).

This pattern continues into adulthood. Daily run-ins with smugglers repeatedly expose how her body is read as excessive and abject, as they shout insults about her appearance, ‘screaming about the way she looked. Something about mercy killings, mongoloid’ (2013: 6–7). These everyday encounters not only reinforce her status as different, but also shape her own self-perception, eventually causing her to stop looking at herself in the mirror, ‘The revulsion she saw in peoples’ eyes when they met her for the first time was mirror enough’ (6). By refusing to look at herself, Tina outsources her self-perception to others. As a result, Tina’s sense of self is not grounded in an internal identity, but mediated through the distorted recognition she witnesses in others, who – in line with Sara Ahmed’s famous account of the ‘stranger’ – recognises her not for who she is, but how she fails to conform to social standards (2000: 3). Accordingly, her passing does not eliminate difference, but recasts it as deviation in an already established framework. Her monstrosity thus does not lie outside the human, but emerges in it, through the same norms that seek to contain her.

On the other hand, however, despite her visible differences, Tina is nevertheless recognised as human. Although her coarse features and superhuman sensory capacities may mark her as odd, even unsettling, she is never interpreted as nonhuman, but instead rather as a deviant or defective human. As she herself explains, her face has ‘a permanent dark red tinge’ (2013: 9) and ‘tiny inscrutable eyes set deeply into her head’ (15) while her body is described as ‘angular’, making any attempt to wear feminine clothing akin to ‘putting pants on a pig to make it more representable’ (25). This interplay of recognition and misrecognition reveals the ambivalent nature of her passing. It functions well enough to grant her access to the human world, but only by confining her in the very system that has constrained and erased her true reality. She is included, but she does not belong; she is human, but only in a deviant register; recognised, but only through misrecognition.

Ultimately, Tina's ambivalent passing resonates with Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry. In 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse' (1984), Bhabha describes mimicry as a demand placed on the colonised other by the colonial authority: to be legible in the norms of the dominant culture and to approximate its forms, gestures and modes of being closely enough to be recognised as a 'proper' subject. Yet this demand is internally contradictory. The colonised is required to resemble the coloniser, but only up to a point; too much resemblance would collapse the distinction on which colonial hierarchy depends. Mimicry therefore enables a kind of passing, rendering the other reformed and recognisable, while simultaneously securing the mimic as '*a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*' (126, original emphasis). What emerges is not simply imitation, but an unstable position in which resemblance and difference are continually negotiated rather than resolved.

Read through this perspective, Tina's passing can be understood as a form of Bhabhaean *ontological mimicry* (Hellstrand 2016: 255), where the question is not simply one of appearance, but of being: she is not merely taken for human, but constituted as human through a framework that cannot recognise what she really is – a troll. As the novella states: 'People did not believe in trolls. And if they found any, they locked them up in mental institutions, removed their tails, sterilized them, and forced them to learn human language. Tried to forget that such things existed' (2013: 51). With a colonial logic similar to the one described by Bhabha, this statement signals how normative frameworks work to reinforce and, to borrow Bhabha's term, 'fix' the human as a superior ontology by establishing its appearances and practices as a universal standard for embodied existence (1994: 94). Moreover, in line with Bhabha's account of mimicry, Tina is recognised as human, but only just. Her body, however, repeatedly betrays her. Her sense of smell, her strength, her inability to tolerate sex, her intuitive knowledge: these 'slippages' reveal her 'not-quite-ness' (1984: 126). Passing is never complete; mimicry never stabilises. As such, Tina highlights how the boundaries of 'the human' are interwoven and negotiable rather than fixed.

Colonial Echoes

Crucially, Bhabha's account of mimicry not only illuminates the ambivalent structure of Tina's passing, but also foregrounds its entanglement with colonial relations of power. Mimicry, as he insists, is inseparable from practices of regulation, classification, and control by which dominant orders produce and manage difference. Although Tina is not a colonised subject in a literal historical sense, her relation to humanity is structured by a similar logic: the human operates as a normative centre, against which her existence is measured, adjusted, and made to fit. This colonial dimension is further substantiated when *Gräns* situates Tina's story in practices of displacement and erasure that closely echo the Nordic region's historical treatment of marginalised peoples.

This dimension is made explicit in the novella's gradual revelation of Tina's past. When she confronts the man she believes to be her father about her bodily difference, he reluctantly admits that she was not his biological child, but taken from her parents as an infant. In justifying why she was forcibly removed and placed for adoption, he describes her parents' way of life as incompatible with the standards of the Swedish *folkhem*.

I don't know how much of this you want to hear, but it was a case of severe neglect. You were running around naked even though it was October, and they did not have much in the way of food. No electricity, no running water, and you couldn't speak. Nothing. They didn't even have a real house, just a kind of shed. Just a couple of walls. They made fires straight on the ground. So you were ... removed. (2013: 47)

With these words, the removal is presented as a necessary intervention grounded in normative judgements about care and proper domestic living conditions, rather than as an act of violence or displacement. As Sofia Wijkmark observes, it also flips the changeling myth on its head: instead of trolls abducting human children, it is the human authorities that remove the child (2011: 353), recasting an act of displacement as protection in a paternalist, colonial register. This logic is made even more explicit when Tina situates her own removal in the broader ideological and institutional framework of the time.

They had known how to care for their child. But in the early sixties, with social engineering – smiling mothers in flowery aprons and boom years, ambitious new programmes.¹⁶⁴ Making open fires on the ground and having no food in the cupboard – probably not even a cupboard. That couldn't be tolerated. (2013: 48)

As Ann-Sofia Lönngren has already argued, this passage directly situates Tina's story in the ideological framework of the *folkhem* (2015: 216), a welfare model that, as Andrew Nestingen argues, 'codif(ied) the idea that the state is a benign institution protecting and nurturing the nation' (2008: 11). However, drawing on Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren's study of the *folkhem*, this quote can also be read in terms of what they describe as a form of 'silent socialization' in which 'the physical arrangements of the home' reflect cultural norms and expectations (1987: 6). Importantly, the passage also ties the welfare state's civilising project to normative ideals of femininity and domestic motherhood 'in flowery aprons', positioning maternal care as a site by which proper citizenship and social belonging are regulated. Still, as the novella also makes clear, this vision of social harmony is predicated on the exclusion and regulation of those who fall outside its norms. The contrast between the trolls' living conditions and the rigid standardised ideals of the *folkhem* reveals how difference is not accommodated, but corrected, thereby exposing the exclusionary underside of Nordic exceptionalism.

Moreover, Tina's removal from her biological parents echoes broader histories of Nordic internal colonialism, in which Sámi and Greenlandic children were forcibly removed from their families through institutional intervention and social engineering. In Sápmi, such interventions formed part of a longer process of assimilation, in which state policies increasingly framed Sámi households as deficient or in need of regulation, leading to the placement of Sámi children in educational institutions or foster arrangements designed to separate them from their language and culture (Lindmark 2013; Naum & Nordin 2013; Fur 2006). Similarly, in Greenland, Danish colonial authorities carried out systemic forms of intervention, including child removal programmes such as the 'Little Danes' experiment in the 1950s, in which Greenlandic children were forcibly removed from their families and sent to Denmark to be re-educated as Danish-speaking citizens. As scholars of Nordic colonialism have shown, such practices were

underpinned by racialised and civilisational hierarchies that positioned Indigenous ways of life as deficient and in need of reform, and thus legitimised state intervention in the family and the home in efforts to conform Indigenous populations to dominant domestic norms (Keskinen et al. 2009; Palmberg 2009).

This logic extends beyond social regulation to the level of the body itself. As Tina comes to realise, the scar above her tail bone stems from the surgical removal of her troll tail when she was a toddler – a procedure forced upon her in efforts to render her body compliant with normative expectations, literally reshaping it to fit the category she is expected to inhabit long before she had a chance to understand or resist it. In this sense, Tina's bodily modification aligns with Ingvil Hellstrand's contention that ontological categories such as the human are imposed long before subjects can negotiate them (2014: 127), making Tina's passing not a matter of choice, but rather the consequence of a world in which the human occupies the unquestioned normative centre by which all hierarchical and normative structures are filtered.

Tina's scar is therefore not only the mark of (forced) inclusion, but also of erasure through alteration. It points to the violence required to make Tina intelligible in a human framework, situating her body as a site where this logic is materially inscribed. In this way, *Gräns* mobilises a distinctly body ecohorror logic, exposing how bodily difference is subjected to biopolitical control. Tina's body bears the marks of this violence, having been actively reconfigured – cut, disciplined, and regulated – in order to sustain the illusion of a stable human ontology. She addresses this head on in the short story, stating that trolls are forced into 'images' of humans – 'They try to re-create us in their image' (2013: 52) – a dynamic that both echoes Bhabha's formulation of mimicry as enforced resemblance, while also serving as a critique of humanity's God complex. Here, mimicry operates as a power strategy: a means of reshaping bodies and identities in accordance with the human norm.

The intervention on Tina's body is not an isolated act, but part of a broader regime of control. This is made explicit in the novella's depiction of how troll bodies are systematically targeted: 'People ... locked them up in mental institutions, operated to remove their tails, sterilised them and forced them to learn the language of human beings' (2013: 69). The passage details a sequence of erasing interventions directed at the troll body: confinement, surgical alteration, reproductive control,

and linguistic assimilation – the latter explicitly exemplified by Tina’s renaming from her original troll name, Reva. Each act targets the body as something to be corrected, contained, and ultimately neutralised, transforming difference into a problem to be eliminated rather than accommodated.

At the same time, the passage draws uncanny parallels to documented practices in the Nordic region throughout the twentieth century, where Indigenous communities were subjected not only to Christianisation, land dispossession, and state-led assimilation, but also to racial classification and medical intervention. As Chris Holmlund notes, Sweden alone sterilised approximately 63,000 individuals between 1930 and 1975 under state-sanctioned racial hygiene programmes, disproportionately targeting marginalised populations, including Sámi communities (2021: 158). Such measures were, as Gunnar Broberg and Mattias Tydén argue, directed at those considered ‘unwanted in the People’s Home’ (2005: 97).

This historical framework is explicitly echoed in the short story, as Tina/Reva reflects that she has ‘heard that people had been involuntarily sterilised far into the seventies. Was that what had happened to her parents?’ (2013: 65). In *Gräns*, the treatment of the trolls follows the same logic: they are identified as deviant, subjected to medical and institutional intervention, and ultimately rendered disposable in a system organised around racial or species hygiene. This is further underscored by the description of Tina’s parents’ grave as unmarked and indistinguishable, resembling ‘a mass grave’ (71). Trolls, in this sense, are positioned alongside historically marginalised groups subjected to systematic violence and erasure, emerging here as victims of a form of genocide, ultimately rendering Tina/Reva, in her words, ‘the spoils of war in her own country’ (72).

By translating these historical practices of Nordic eugenics into a mythic register, *Gräns* renders them newly visible, recasting regimes of bodily control in the figure of the troll. As demonstrated in the previous Arctic ecohorror chapter, where colonial trauma persists as spectral undercurrents, folklore creatures here too serve as vehicles for negotiating histories of colonialism and environmental degradation. This tendency is also captured by Johan Höglund’s reading of trolls in Nordic Gothic as figures of ‘metaphorical indigeneity’, entangled with the colonial history of the Nordic region and the construction of the nonhuman as an abject Other (2017: 117–118). Read in these terms, the troll does not merely signify the

nonhuman, but participates in broader processes of othering, where distinctions between human and the more-than-human are bound up with larger issues of race, nation, and colonial power. Extending this logic, Tina's passing is not simply a matter of belonging, but of enforced assimilation in a hierarchical ontology that leaves no room for alternative forms of existence. She does not choose to become human; she is made into one. Her mimicry is engineered, her body disciplined, and her difference (partially) managed.

Yet, returning to Bhabha, mimicry is never complete. No matter how thoroughly the subject is disciplined, traces of what has been cut away persist, returning as slippages that unsettle the norms they were meant to secure. In *Gräns*, this instability increasingly surfaces through a recurring formal device in which Lindqvist inserts small, italicised interruptions into Tina's internal monologue.

Tina made a concerted effort not to hate her neighbours for being happy. One moment she had been sitting at the desk, staring, wishing that Elisabeth would give birth to a stillborn child just to get a little taste of the other things that life had to offer.

But Tina pushed the thought away since she wasn't like that.

Oh, Tina is exactly like that.

I'm not like that at all. Haven't I promised to drive them in when it's time if I'm home?

You hope you won't be home. You don't want to.

Only because I don't like hospitals. That's all.

You saw it so clearly, how she bent over by the clothing line, holding her belly. The sheets that were torn from their fastenings and bunched up in her struggling arms. How she screamed and—

Stop, stop, stop! (2013: 21)

These recurring italicised sentences function almost as eruptions of an alternative consciousness – as slippages of Tina's alter-troll persona Reva's suppressed nonhuman ontology breaking through the disciplined surface of her human

identity. As such, Tina does not simply reproduce the human through mimicry, but begins to expose its instability from within.

Ultimately, Tina's mimicry functions as a mirror held up to humanity itself. While she appears to reproduce the human through acts of passing and assimilation, her 'not-quite-ness' simultaneously exposes the instability and violence upon which the category itself depends. The human, *Gräns* suggests, is not a natural or coherent ontology, but a construction sustained through continual acts of erasure, regulation, misrecognition, and exclusion. As such, the novella mobilises the nonhuman not merely as monstrous otherness, but as a critical 'outsider' perspective by which the fragility and constructedness of the human are rendered newly visible. As Bhabha argues, the '*almost the same, but not quite*' poses 'an immanent threat to normalized knowledges and disciplinary powers' because it exposes the instability of the dominant order itself (1984: 126, original emphasis). In this sense, *Gräns* positions Tina as an ethical and ontological challenge to anthropocentric conceptions of identity, belonging, purity, and femininity, exposing the recognition regimes that regulate who may appear as human and the violence enacted upon those who deviate from its norms.

Monstrous Kinship: Meeting Vore at the Border

Throughout her life, Tina's bleak existence as almost-but-not-quite human has both produced and depended on a life of solitude and isolation. This changes when she encounters a strange-looking man named Vore in the customs control, whom she immediately imagines 'could have played a Russian assassin in an action film' (2013: 1). As a border officer – as well as someone who herself passes as human – Tina is trained to detect deviations, and Vore immediately registers as just that. Taking on an internalised not-quite-human point-of-view, she subjects him to the same evaluative gaze that governs her own existence, interpreting his appearance as repulsive and nonconforming: 'If she had been asked to explain what it was that was off-putting about his appearance, she would have said: excessively masculine. He looked *too much* like a man. The coarse, wide face. The thick-set, muscular body. The beard and the heavy eyebrows' (17, original emphasis). Significantly, she does not immediately recognise that his excessive masculinity mirrors her own

failure to conform to gender norms. While Tina is ostracised for not being sufficiently feminine, Vore on the other hand is too manly.

Drawn to him by an inarticulate sense that he is hiding something, Tina calls him over. In his belongings, she finds a metal container that at first looks like a time bomb, but turns out to be an insect incubator. Still, certain that something is off, Tina insists that her male colleague conducts a body search. Although her initial suspicion proves justified, it is not in the expected sense: what Vore is concealing is not contraband but his body itself. While the search reveals that Vore carries 'nothing that is illegal', he still has 'something to hide', because beneath his hypermasculine exterior, Vore has a female sex, and is therefore labelled trans by Tina's colleague: 'He ... or I should say she ... does not have, to use the technical term, a penis but a vagina' (2013: 17). Only at the end of the story is the true extent of his hidden secret fully disclosed.

Despite this unfortunate altercation, Vore later rents Tina's guest cottage, bringing him into her immediate proximity. Her boyfriend Roland reacts with immediate hostility to this decision, describing him as a criminal: 'A suspicious character ... He looked like some kind of, I don't know, arsonist or something' (27), once again confirming that from a normative human perception, Vore's monstrosity is tied to his physical appearance, which exudes a gendered excess that positions him at the limits of the human norm.

Still, the decisive turning point comes when Vore insinuates to Tina that she is not human. He does so reluctantly, aware of the trauma this knowledge also entails. 'There aren't many of us left. It's better for you to ... to forget about this', he states, gesturing towards a history of violence and erasure (42), while also recognising the precariousness of her life as passing: 'You've arranged a life for yourself. Adapted to the human world' (2013: 24). Nevertheless, this revelation reconfigures both Tina's self-perception and the narrative framework itself. Up until this point, the short story has presented Tina as a not-quite human subject who perceives herself through the eyes of humans, measuring her body and behaviour against human norms; now, however, this ontological hierarchy of perception is reversed, as the narrative is situated in Tina's nonhuman perspective, from which humanity itself emerges more clearly as the object of scrutiny. Importantly, this shift allows Lindqvist's story to not only engage with otherness from an insider perspective of the other(ed)

themselves, providing unique and situated insight into their nonhuman lives and experiences, but also enables readers to view humanity from an outsider perspective, ultimately mobilising a critical perspective by which the category of the human can be interrogated.

In doing so, the text also destabilises the previously dominant epistemological framework of the story, in which human perception is positioned as both primary and universal. This reorientation is further reinforced on a formal level through the inclusion of excerpts from Tina's diary, which shift the narrative from third-person focalisation to moments of first-person narration. More than a stylistic variation, this shift redistributes narrative authority: rather than being mediated through an external, quasi-omniscient narrative perspective, Tina is allowed to articulate her experience directly. As a result, the human viewpoint loses its dominance, and the definition of reality is no longer anchored in human perception.

While Tina's encounter with Vore brings her nonhuman perspective into sharper focus, the story has already provided glimpses of it in Tina's perception of the humans around her. Her boyfriend Roland, for instance – engaged in seemingly ordinary, everyday activities – appears increasingly grotesque. In an interesting reversal of the normative human/monstrous nonhuman dichotomy otherwise established in the short story, Tina also registers him as a monster; sitting in front of the television for hours on end, the flickering screen light casts a greyish hue over his skin, accentuating 'the rolls of fat around his throat' and creating a grotesque effect that 'made him look somewhat monstrous' (2013: 27). Tina even compares Roland's compulsive television watching to alcohol addiction, observing how both he and the neighbour's children sit transfixed in front of the screen (2013: 31–32).

In the eyes of Tina, human behaviour appears excessive, parasitic, and strange, marked by repetition and passivity rather than agency and freedom. As Sofia Wijkmark also notes in her analysis of Lindqvist's short story, there is almost something mechanical about Roland, a kind of lifelessness that contrasts sharply with Tina's sensory attunement to the natural world outside (2013: 358). In a sense, Roland comes to embody a form of artificiality: his pathological attachment to mediated reality renders him detached from his surroundings, which also mirrors how Tina's mimicry of human norms has rendered her estranged from herself. This parallel ultimately frames human ontology as superficial – no less constructed than

Tina's own performed humanness or Vore's perceived monstrosity. The story therefore explores the shifting boundaries between the monster and the human, demonstrating how these categories are not fixed nor inherently opposed, but overlap, collide, and transform depending on who sees.

Parallel to this reversal of the human/monster dichotomy is a broader opposition between the artificial and the natural. Throughout the novella, institutions and technologies are described as sterilised, purified, and synthetic, from the 'terrible ... institutional juice' served at her father's nursing home (2013: 25), to the 'static ... white noise' emanating from the television (20) and 'the smell of disinfected clothing and antiseptic soap' at the hospital (24). This artificiality is repeatedly framed not merely in opposition to nature, but as a threat to it; a point that is condensed in Tina's observation of Roland watching 'hockey, even though it was only September. There were no seasons anymore' (26) – a double entendre that collapses sports seasons into ecological ones, associating technological mediation with environmental degradation. A similar tension emerges when Tina describes the fate of a pine tree, tracing a movement from an ecocentric imaginary to Anthropocene ruin. As a child, she had imagined the tree as 'the center of the earth, the axis around everything turned like a towed sled' (8), yet in the present the tree has been struck by lightning – an image resonating with the novella's broader suspicion of electricity and technological advancement – and now remains 'only a ghost of a tree: a broken trunk with a couple of naked branches stuck out its side' (8). Vore articulates the criticism more explicitly: 'I like these kinds of forests that humans haven't been allowed to destroy' (28). Like the tree, Tina has also been struck by lightning, establishing an analogy between her and the natural world, which is further reinforced by the novella's recurring portrayal of both her and nature as something human society tries to discipline and contain: 'Tears blurred her sight as she continued to gaze at the spruce trees along the edge of the road, fenced in with wilderness fencing. *Keep the forest away from us. Tame it. Fence it in*' (48, original emphasis). The fenced forest here echoes the short story's broader logic of bordering.

With this critical view on Roland and humanity more generally, Tina's mimicry gradually shades into *mockery*. For Bhabha, mimicry is never simply imitation, but a form of repetition that can never fully reproduce the authority it copies, and it is

this failed resemblance that causes mimicry to slide into parody (1984: 127–128). The mimic does not intentionally ridicule the dominant order; rather, the act of almost reproducing it inevitably exposes its artificiality and performative nature. As Bhabha argues, colonial authority becomes vulnerable when confronted with its own disciplinary double: a near-copy that reflects its norms back in exaggerated and estranging ways (126). This dynamic runs throughout *Gräns*. Tina's attempts to perform normative humanness – domestic partnership, television watching, social restraint, domestic routines, reproductive normality – do not secure recognition, but instead reveal how constructed and exclusionary these norms already are. Her passing therefore turns parodic: not because Tina consciously mocks humanity, but because her failed assimilation exposes the absurdity of the standards she is expected to embody. Much like the exaggerated and parodic performances of Swedishness in *Midsommar*, Lindqvist mobilises a performance of humanness not simply for satire, but to estrange the familiar and expose the cultural customs, behaviours, and norms that otherwise pass unnoticed as natural.

As the authority of the human perspective begins to erode, the novella also opens space for alternative forms of relation and belonging. As Tina states:

But Vore. His smell, his scent was like coming home. It could not be described in any other way. To lie in his sheets was like crawling into Mom and Dad's bed. Tina's parents had had separate beds and it was not that smell she was thinking of, it was another, more cozy and familiar than anything grounded in an actual memory. (2013: 38)

What emerges between Tina and Vore is not simply a sense of sameness, but develops into what can be understood as a form of *monstrous kinship* – a connection that does not rely on resemblance, assimilation, or recognition within dominant normative categories, but is grounded in a shared position outside them. As Ulrika Dahl argues, such forms of kinship arise through non-normative attachments, where difference is not resolved but persists as the basis for relation (2018: 196). Tina and Vore's bond exemplifies this: he reintroduces her to the forest as a space of belonging, encourages her to trust her senses rather than suppress them, and draws her into practices that deviate from human conventions – eating insects and

engaging in queer forms of intimacy. In her diary, Tina attempts to name this form of kinship, one that transcends conventional human relationships:

I'm going to test it by writing it down: I've fallen in love with Vore. I'm in love with Vore. (I'm saying it to myself as well.) No. It isn't true. I can tell when I write it, say it. That's not what it is. It's something else. Something... better? I don't understand it. (2013: 35)

Importantly, their relationship does not stabilise identity but opens a space where the demand to pass and conform – central to Tina's previous existence – is no longer operative. This also explains why Tina does not experience this newfound connection as clarity, but as something more elusive: 'she felt a kind of ... kinship with him ... As difficult to grasp as grabbing a fish with your bare hands, but there nonetheless' (2013: 29). Rather than resolving Tina's previous condition of misrecognition and isolation into a stable sense of belonging, the story instead traces a shift from enforced mimicry to a form of relationality in which difference is no longer something to be concealed or corrected.

Becoming Mother, Becoming Troll

While Tina's everyday life has been defined by the demand to reproduce humanness through mimicry and normative conformity, the novella's final movement instead turns towards maternal reproduction as an unsettling and material site of transformation, relationality, and more-than-human intimacy. Crucially, it is by *becoming mother* that Tina is gradually released from the exhausting recognition regimes that have governed her existence thus far.¹⁶⁵ Whereas passing required her to suppress and regulate her own bodily difference in order to approximate normative humanness, becoming mother gradually allows her to fully inhabit her troll embodiment and move towards more relational modes of existence. Here, 'becoming' is understood in a new materialist sense as a relational, processual transformation rather than the achievement of a fixed identity, aligning with Donna Haraway's notion of 'becoming-with', where bodies and beings emerge through ongoing entanglements with others and their environments (2008: 244). Rather than approaching motherhood as a stable biological or social category tied to normative femininity and human reproduction, *Gräns* gradually reimagines it as a

porous and transformative process unfolding through bodily mutation, ecological entanglement, and nonhuman forms of kinship. Aligning with the body ecohorror trope, Tina's transformation unfolds in a red ecology: a fleshy, sensitive register in which reproduction is no longer aligned with purity, continuity, or nurture, but with bodily mutation and transcorporeal exchange.

As outlined earlier, Tina's body never fully aligns with normative femininity. This misalignment is particularly pronounced at the level of reproduction, where her body resists incorporation into heteronormative sexual and reproductive structures. Her relationship with Roland is largely non-sexual, not only by choice but by necessity: her body resists penetration, causing her intense pain, leaving her aching and ashamed. Once again her restrictive caged-up body forces her to live a life in celibacy, but worst of all it strips her of the possibility of having children of her own: 'She would have liked to have children herself but since she was unable to engage in that act that made them it would never happen' (2013: 14). When the next-door neighbour Elisabet becomes pregnant, it brings out a darker side in Tina. Rather than responding with joy, she experiences a surge of aggression and resentment, culminating in violent fantasies of miscarriage and infanticide: 'A bullet to the head. I am an evil person' (2013: 34).

While this instinct traces back to folkloric traditions of trolls as child-stealers, it is also grounded in Tina's own embodied exclusion from reproduction, which ultimately deepens the misrecognition of Tina, revealing her body to be materially incompatible with the heteronormative reproductive script that structures human femininity. As Judith Butler argues, femininity is not a natural essence but a repeated performance tied to, among other things, heterosexual reproduction (1990). Tina's inability to inhabit this script, both corporeally and emotionally, does not simply position her outside motherhood; it produces a reversal, a form of monstrous anti-maternity. In a body ecohorror framework, Tina's condition reveals the fragility of maternal ideal itself. Rather than participating in the 'green' imaginary of harmonious, life-giving nature, her corporeality belongs to a red ecology of blockage and affective overflow, where maternity is no longer aligned with continuity and nurture, but rather with hostility, pain, and exclusion. In this sense, Tina's failure to reproduce does not position her outside femininity; it reveals femininity itself as a mere construct dependent on reproductive conformity.

This destabilisation intensifies when Tina grows intimate with Vore. When he first moves into Tina's guest house, she remains suspicious of him, holding on to the sense – first formed at the ferry terminal – that he is concealing something. When confronted, Vore pulls out a box containing a strange, infant-like being. He explains that the creature is an unfertilised egg known as a *hiisit* – a term from Finnish folklore (Lönnngren 2015: 224) – and that he has propagated it through asexual reproduction, giving birth to it in the woods. He has been feeding it insects from the incubator she had previously discovered in his belongings at customs. He also informs her that a *hiisit* is a being that exists on the threshold between life and death. Although it resembles a human infant, the *hiisit* is cold, waxy, soulless, and short-lived: an uncanny and abject double of a living child. Significantly, it can be formed 'like clay' into the shape of a human infant and used as a changeling (*Gräns* 2013: 43).

As a naturecultural being, the *hiisit* reflects several central tensions in the story. First, it mirrors Tina's own condition of passing: just as the *hiisit* is moulded into the likeness of a human child, Tina has been compelled to mimic human norms: 'they had forced her into the hospital, operated on her, spoken to her in a language she had not understood and tried to press her into their mold, make her into one of them' (2013: 51–52). Second, the *hiisit* destabilises the notion of stable identity and fixity upon which, as Bhabha argues, the construction of otherness depends (1994: 94), instead foregrounding hybridity in its most excessive form. And third, it unsettles the boundaries between the natural and the artificial, the human and the nonhuman, organism and construct.

Further, the *hiisit* radically reconfigures the concept of reproduction by detaching it from sexual difference and biological origin. Instead of being born through a reproductive union, it is literally produced and shaped through a process of matter, moulding, and manipulation. In this sense, reproduction is rendered queer: hybrid, fluid, open-ended, and detached from binary sex and natural continuity. The *hiisit* does not simply imitate life; it exposes life itself as something that is constructed, rather than naturally given. Like Donna Haraway's notion of the cyborg, the *hiisit* blurs the line between what is born and what is made, a hybrid between biology and technology, exposing how these categories are not as stable as they appear (1991: 181).

Lastly, the *hiisit* also exposes the violence embedded in reproductive systems, as it is revealed that Vore uses it to replace with human babies whom he abducts and sells, an action that draws on the folkloric motif of trolls stealing human children but also serves as a kind of revenge against humans who have abused and dispossessed trolls. As Tina's subconscious troll alter ego expresses, '*They try to re-creative us in their image. We make images of them*' (2013: 52, original emphasis). Within this framework, reproduction becomes entangled with biopolitics, trauma, and retaliation. The maternal is no longer a site of care but a terrain of conflict, where bodies are artificially produced, exchanged, and weaponised. In line with the body ecohorror trope, reproduction here emerges not as a natural or innocent process, but as a disturbing site where bodily boundaries, species distinctions, and moral frameworks are rendered unstable and contested.

At the same time, the narrative does not remain in this register of monstrous anti-maternity. Tina's transformation takes a decisive turn through her encounter with Vore and the rediscovery of her own body. As they initiate sexual intercourse, Tina tries to warn Vore that she is not right 'down there', but soon realises that her previous pain on penetration was not because she is deformed, but rather because troll bodies confound interiorities and exteriorities. Although Tina's body bears several features culturally associated with femininity, it also appears to include a protruding organ, as 'a stiff erection was sticking out of what she had thought was her vagina ... she had been turned inside out' (2013: 41). Conversely, Vore, despite his hypermasculine demeanour, possesses an opening, 'a wet, soft darkness' (41).

Importantly, their sexual encounter is described not in gendered terms, but as a merging of bodies: 'They were no longer man or woman, just two bodies that found each other in the dark' (2013: 41). Although many reviewers have described this intercourse as intersexual or non-binary, there is something more radical and distinctly agential about Tina and Vore's genitals as they reach for one another, which points to a fundamentally different understanding of sexuality beyond the human. Rather than being organised through predefined gender positions, their encounter unfolds at the level of embodied relation, where bodies are not fixed in advance but emerge *through* contact. In line with Barad's notion of *intra-action* (2007: 139), where entities do not pre-exist their encounters but emerge from them, their bodies do not precede the encounter but materialise through it. Accordingly,

troll sexuality does not simply rearrange gender categories but exceeds them, gesturing towards a mode of relation in which bodies do not simply meet, but actively transform through one another.

The troll's intercourse marks a crucial shift from mimicry to becoming. Where passing depends on external conformity and recognition, becoming unfolds as an ongoing internal, material transformation shaped through the entanglement with other bodies and environments. Similarly, Vore and Tina's sexual encounter is not staged as an interaction between two stable and separate individuals, but as a process of mutual infiltration in which each body responds to and reconfigures the other. Sexuality here is not something possessed by the subject, but something that emerges through the dynamic interplay of material bodies, where, as Jane Bennett suggests, 'the us and the it slip-slide into each other' (2010: 4). What is central in this moment is not simply a redefinition of sexual identity, but a disruption of the epistemological divisions that organise human experience – between human and nonhuman, subject and object, self and other – as these distinctions begin to lose their coherence.

Additionally, Tina's becoming is also driven by her sensory relationship with her natural surroundings. Throughout the novella, she repeatedly seeks out the forest, drawn to its smells and textures, where she feels a sense of calm and familiarity absent from human environments: 'She just wanted to keep going past the lights and the warmth into the woods. Penetrate its dark wall and find solace in the mingled smells of badger, pine needles, moss. Let the trees protect her' (2013: 26). After meeting Vore, however, Tina's sensibility deepens, helping along her transition from passing to becoming; an ontological shift articulated through what the text describes as a 'shimmering movement': 'Under the pier, on a sunny day. The warmth of the planks against the stomach, the glitter of sun on the water. A shimmering movement' (29). In contradiction to the artificial flickering images of the humans' television consumption, Tina experiences the natural world as shimmering – whether in the glittering surface of water, the 'light green shimmer in the eternal gloom of the fir forest' (7), or in the flickering light after her sexual encounter with Vore, when she 'looked up at the ceiling. The cottage wasn't airtight, the light flickered in the draft and moved the shadows in the ceiling. There was life everywhere' (42). In a sense, 'shimmer' becomes a way to address what

Bennett describes as vibrant matter, the vital liveliness and buzzing agency of the natural surroundings, but also, as Anna Estera Mrozewicz has already noted, it ‘encapsulates the process of Tina discovering her own identity, constituted by means of relations rather than essence’ (2020: 14–15) – having discovered her true self, she too senses the world differently.

In opposition to the dominating sensory regime of the novella, Tina displaces the dominance of sight in favour of smell and touch – sensibilities that align with Alaimo’s notion of transcorporeality (2010a): the movement of matter, affect, and agency across bodily boundaries. Similar to Arctic ecohorror’s imperative to listen, *Gräns* mobilises smell as a mode of care and relational attunement. As Vivian Sobchack argues, perception is not merely a means of knowing the world but a relational process in which bodies are both subjects and objects of experiences, capable of touching and being touched by others (2004: 290). Whereas a human or god’s-eye view operates at a distance – rendering the world an object through separation and classification – Tina’s sensory ways of knowing situates her within such a relational field, where boundaries between self and world are no longer governed by distance, but by contiguity and exchange. By smelling what others feel – shame, guilt, rage, desire – bodies are registered as porous and penetrable. To smell is to take the outside in; it collapses the boundary between self and other, outside and inside. Tina’s sensory experience thus reconfigures perception itself. Where sight tends to objectify, fixate, and govern, smell and touch entangle, drawing her into a form of embodied proximity with the world around her.

Through these new bodily intimacies and material sensibilities, Tina’s maternal potency is reconfigured. In *Gräns*, motherhood cannot be understood in its conventional sense as a natural or essential condition tied to biological femininity or reproduction alone. Rather than emerging from the ability to bear and nurture a child, motherhood is reconfigured as a material and relational process that does not belong to a fixed subject. In this sense, maternal is not something one is, but something that unfolds through the body’s capacity to host, transform, care, and enter into relation with other forms of life. Motherhood is less a fixed social role or biological function than a relational process of becoming mother-matter: a material(ising) process in which the body is opened, reworked, and entangled with other bodies and environments. This understanding is further underscored by the

etymological link between *mater* (mother) and *matrix* (matter, generative ground, womb), which foregrounds the maternal not as identity, but as a site of ongoing formation and creation. What is at stake for Tina is not the achievement of maternal identity, but a transformation of her bodily relation to life itself: as she recognises that ‘there was life everywhere’ (2013: 42), motherhood is no longer tied to the production of a child, but to a newly opened capacity to sense and enter into relation with life beyond the limits of the human. Ultimately, *Gräns* challenges ideals of maternal purity and naturalness, exposing them as a ‘regulatory frame’ that depends on exclusion and control. Instead, the novella offers a red ecological understanding of bodies as porous, reproductive processes as unstable, and maternal care as relational rather than reproductive.

However, Tina’s becoming-mother is also set in motion in a more literal reproductive sense through her sexual encounter with Vore, in which a troll child is conceived. After parting ways with Vore due to his violent use of the *hiisit*, switching it with the newborn baby next door, Tina later receives a letter in which he informs her that he is carrying their child. With this revelation, her everyday life of passing as human finally unravels. In contrast to the beginning of the novella, where ‘work was still the place where she felt most comfortable’ (2013: 10), she now realises that, although her colleagues had never been friendlier, she had ‘never felt more distanced from them’, ultimately acknowledging: ‘*I don’t belong here*’ (54, original emphasis). Tina’s rejection of the *hiisit* and its artificial imitation of human life simultaneously becomes a rejection of her own performed humanness, drawing her closer to an embodied sense of trollhood that culminates in Vore’s pregnancy: the anticipated birth of a troll child inseparable from Tina’s own rebirth.

This movement from passing to becoming thus marks a decisive shift from representation to relation. While passing relies on mimicry, fixity, and external conformity, becoming mother entails an interrelational, embodied transformation that reconfigures her place in the world. As she relinquishes the illusion of being human, she does not simply adopt a new identity; she enters into a dynamic process of becoming-with others. In line with most Nordic ecohorror fiction, the novella ends with an open ending and without a final resolution, just as her becoming is not an endpoint but an ongoing negotiation of identity and entanglement beyond the limits of the human.

Becoming Animal, Becoming Woman in *Pahanhautoja*

In line with the exploration of passing, nonhuman embodiment, and monstrous maternity in *Gräns*, Hanna Bergholm's ecohorror film *Pahanhautoja* (2022, *Hatching*) likewise explores feminine monstrosity through unstable animal-human boundaries, maternal pressures, and corporeal transformations that unsettle normative ideals of femininity, motherhood, and embodiment. While Lindqvist's short story approaches 'monstrous becoming' through nonhuman ontology and multispecies maternity, Bergholm's film is an allegory of adolescent rage that situates its horror in female coming-of-age anxieties. Set in a sunny Finnish suburb surrounded by towering pines, the film centres on the 12-year-old girl Tinja (played by Siiri Solalinna), whose pre-teen body becomes a particularly contested site on which ideals of purity, bodily control, emotional self-discipline, and perfect femininity are violently imposed by her mother through the aesthetic of purity and unity of the contemporary nuclear family.

As a central example of the body ecohorror trope, *Pahanhautoja* also invokes both nonhuman forces and body horror aesthetics to mobilise uncanny corporeal transformation, affective excess, and monstrous reproduction, which ultimately unsettle and reveal the violent disciplinary structures underpinning normative ideals of femininity and motherhood. Much like *Gräns*, the film challenges the fantasy of the body as autonomous, coherent, and controllable, imposing instead a red ecological understanding of embodiment as porous, transcorporeal, and fundamentally entangled with more-than-human life. I thus consider how *Pahanhautoja* stages corporeal containment through the regulation of affect, bodily discipline, and performative femininity, before tracing how these structures gradually collapse through processes of monstrous coming-of-age, transcorporeal entanglement, and red ecological excess.

Corporeal Containment

The opening scene of *Pahanhautoja* compresses the entire narrative into a miniature version of itself: a précis of the plot to come. The mother (Sophia Heikkilä) moves through the house with a selfie stick, filming her beautiful family in their immaculate home for her lifestyle blog, *Wonderful Everyday Life*, which bears the tag-line: 'an ordinary Finnish family's ordinary everyday life' (00:06:24). The house

is decorated with great symmetry: glass ornaments, soft pastel tones, gauzy curtains, and striking floral wallpaper that mirrors the carefully cultivated pink roses in the garden, but contrasts the dense spruce forest immediately beyond the garden fence – dark, endless, and untamed. The household thus emerges as a carefully regulated interior space, separated from the threatening unpredictability of the outside world through maintenance and aesthetic control.

In a sense, the family home can be said to be maintained through what Morton terms *ecomimesis*: an aesthetic strategy that attempts to produce the impression of natural intimacy, harmony, and authenticity while concealing the constructedness underlying that effect. As Morton writes: ‘Ecomimesis wants to deliver nature in the raw, but always arrives with a slight smell of burning ... Some nature writers think that they are receiving a direct transmission from nature, when in fact they are watching a mirror of the mind’ (2007: 68). This logic finds its clearest expression in the mother’s blog, where family life is aestheticised into a purified surface stripped of excess and material instability. Here, images of bright interiors, dried floral arrangements, carefully curated meals, and smiling family members produce an atmosphere of effortless domestic equilibrium, while simultaneously masking the immense labour of emotional regulation and bodily discipline required to sustain it.

This cultivated domesticity, however, is soon disrupted when a crow flies into the living room in the midst of the mother’s vlog and destroys not only the home’s fragile décor – crystal chandeliers, glass vases, candlesticks, the glass table top, and other reflecting ornaments – but also the ecomimetic illusion itself, forcing uncontrollable nonhuman materiality back into view. Tinja manages to catch the bird by wrapping it in a blanket and attempts to carry it outside, but her mother stops her and calmly snaps the bird’s neck with a satisfied smile.



Figure 18. The family's carefully staged selfie, visualising the performative ideal of domestic perfection (*Pahanhautoja* 2022, 00:01:50).

The mother's violent act functions as an early articulation of the film's fundamental logic of *corporeal containment*: bodies, affects, and forms of unruly life that threaten the harmony of the domestic sphere must be subdued and controlled before they can contaminate the carefully curated image of familial perfection. Corporeal containment is therefore an ecophobic strategy that works to regulate bodies and emotions through ideals of discipline, composure, cleanliness, and self-control. In *Pahanhautoja*, this logic is especially imposed upon the feminine body, which is expected to remain aesthetically pleasing and emotionally restrained despite the unstable affects and bodily transformations associated with adolescence and puberty. Moreover, this corporeal containment is shaped by a neoliberal investment in self-optimisation, performative perfection, and the continual maintenance of an immaculate and marketable family image.¹⁶⁶

Here, ecomimesis becomes a neoliberal strategy – a connection that resonates with Timothy Morton's discussion in *Ecology without Nature*, where he ties Romanticism to consumerism (2007: 110). Rather than understanding nature as something unruly and authentic, he argues that Romanticism turns it into a self-fashioning aesthetic object through which subjects perform and construct themselves: 'Consumerism is a reflexive kind of consumption. One does not just eat carrots, one styles oneself as a carrot eater' (111). Similarly, the family in

Pahanhautoja does not merely decorate the home with floral wallpaper and pastel colours, but actively ‘styles’ itself through the mother’s curated blog as a harmonious family that eats highly colour-coordinated breakfasts, wears flower crowns and flowing garments, lives in pastoral surroundings, and excels in competitive sports.

Correspondingly, in *Pahanhautoja*, the mother’s blog emerges not simply as exaggerated satire of a superficial and consumer-driven influencer culture, detached from reality, but as a cultural fantasy of domestic perfection sustained through practices of corporeal containment – an ideal that stands in stark contrast to the *red ecological* framework, which exposes precisely these sanitised and artificial constructions. In the words of Tobias Menely and Margaret Ronda, red ecology ‘draws on the semiotic and symbolic conspicuousness of red to turn attention to the otherwise invisible sites, the slaughterhouse and the market, where organisms and ecological matter are transformed into commodities’ (2013: 25). Where red ecology foregrounds porosity, leakage, transcorporeal entanglement, and bodily excess, corporeal containment attempts to preserve the fantasy of the body as closed, controllable, pure, and untouched by disorder.

The implications of this regime of containment become particularly evident in the family dynamics. The pre-teen Tinja closely resembles her mother – ‘You’re like two drops of water’, one person remarks (00:50:56) – yet she struggles beneath repressed emotions, impossible expectations, and the onset of adolescence. Throughout the film, she wears pristine white dresses, has long blonde hair, and produces a sweet, rehearsed smile whenever her mother films her. Her body carries avian qualities: thin, awkwardly elongated, birdlike, with her spine visibly protruding beneath her skin. Living out the broken dreams of her mother Äiti, once a figure skater whose career was ended early due to injury, Tinja is a competitive gymnast, and she works tirelessly in order to qualify for an upcoming competition, which her mother plans to livestream. Her body is therefore never allowed to exist autonomously, but is constantly monitored, corrected, and aestheticised – transformed into a project of optimisation and display. The film thus repeatedly frames Tinja’s preteen body as something that must remain controlled and in control, despite the affective and corporeal transformations unfolding beneath its polished exterior.



Figure 19. Tinja's birdlike posture, foreshadowing her transcorporeal entanglement with the creature she hatches (*Pahanhautoja* 2022).

Äiti, meanwhile, is beautiful, statuesque, hyper-feminine, and immaculately put together: manicured nails, curled hair, floral dresses, just like her vlogs, which are also carefully edited to convey effortless beauty and serenity. She sleeps beneath a pink canopy, something more commonly associated with little girls than adult women. This aesthetic is repeated throughout the house, where the curtains themselves resemble translucent veils. Beyond signalling an exaggerated – almost caricatured – femininity, this visual imagery also suggests that the mother's existence is itself veiled: hidden behind layers of silk-like beauty by which nothing authentic can ever truly be seen. Throughout the film, the mother wears various large, ornate earrings that mirror the aesthetics of the home itself: golden leaves and crystal hearts – objects shaped after authentic and organic components of life, yet dipped in gold and encrusted with imitation jewels. Much like the ecomimetic household itself, these decorative objects transform living matter(s) into stylised surfaces emptied of unpredictability and disorder.

The father (Jani Volanen) is conflict-averse and wilfully turns a blind eye to both his daughter's deteriorating mental state and his wife's infidelity. The younger brother, Matias (Oiva Ollila), is effectively a miniature copy of his father: dressed in the same clothes and occupying the same diminished secondary position in the

household. Where the mother shares an inappropriately intimate relationship with Tinja – treating her like a confidante or girlfriend, brushing her hair, embracing her, showering her with gifts – Matias is almost entirely neglected. His attempts at physical affection are rejected, and he receives no gifts at all. He constructs a white mask with tiny eyeholes, a visual representation both of his invisibility in the family and of the artificiality underpinning the influencer household itself (00:35:05). The mask also reflects the family’s broader logic of containment, in which emotional life is concealed behind rigid surfaces and carefully managed appearances.



Figure 20. Matias wearing a mask, reflecting both his invisibility within the family’s and its carefully yet superficially curated façade (*Pahanhautoja* 2022, 00:35:16).

The symbiotic relationship between Tinja and her mother is reinforced by Tinja’s social isolation. She has no genuine friendships outside the home. When the other girls from gymnastics invite her to join their social activities, she unwillingly declines because she ‘has to go running’ (00:11:39). Her refusal reveals how she – just like Tina in *Gräns* – has internalised the household’s regime of self-discipline, regulating her own behaviour according to ideals of optimisation and productivity. Similarly, when a new family moves in next door with a daughter her own age, Reetta, their interactions take place only through the white, rose-covered picket fence dividing

the properties. Here, Tinja also meets Roosa, the neighbour's dog, whom she tries to pet through the fence, only for it to snap aggressively at her (00:04:34). These repeated visual barriers – fences, veils, masks, windows, screens – reinforce the film's fixation on regulated boundaries and superficial facades. This is further enforced when Tinja tells her mother about Reetta, to which Äiti replies, 'I thought you were focusing on the competition' (00:07:33). Throughout *Pahanhautoja*, corporeal containment emerges not only as emotional discipline, but as an entire ideological structure organised around bodily regulation, performative perfection, feminine self-management, and the preservation of a pristine domestic image – an ideology fundamentally at odds with the red ecological realities foregrounded by the body ecohorror trope.

The emotional containment is most explicitly illustrated when Tinja returns home from training one day and discovers her mother kissing another man named Tero. Rather than expressing guilt, the mother confides in her daughter about the affair and makes her promise to keep it a secret. Later, in a scene set in the mother's bed, the two lie together like teenage girls at a sleepover while the mother explains that she is in love with Tero and that he is 'the best thing that has ever happened' to her. She claims that throughout her life she has merely 'given and given' because she believed that 'perhaps that is a woman's lot' (00:19:53), but that now, 'for the first time in my life, I truly feel that I love' (00:20:12). Tinja, visibly unsettled by this deeply inappropriate emotional disclosure, responds only with a strained smile. Rather than expressing discomfort, anger, or confusion, she is expected to absorb and contain both her own emotional response and her mother's affective excess in silence.

The containment extends beyond emotional repression to encompass Tinja's body itself, which is continually regulated both aesthetically and performatively. She is repeatedly instructed to wash herself and maintain a clean, groomed appearance, while gifts such as a pink hairbrush reinforce the expectation that femininity must be carefully maintained. Throughout the film, she is frequently shown either brushing her own hair or having it brushed by her mother, emphasising how bodily discipline is embedded in everyday routines of care and intimacy. Likewise, her physical performance is closely monitored and controlled: meals are sparse, picturesque, and carefully measured, while her gymnastics training

is rigorously supervised by Äiti. At one practice session, it is made clear that Tinja is among the strongest candidates for an upcoming competition in which only one gymnast will be selected. However, she struggles to land a routine perfectly, and suddenly the neighbour girl, Reetta, appears. To Äiti's immense disappointment, Reetta performs flawlessly and is generally the superior gymnast, prompting the mother to force Tinja to repeat the routine over and over until her hands blister (00:17:37). The tearing of Tinja's skin momentarily ruptures the film's otherwise polished surfaces, exposing the bodily cost concealed beneath ideals of perfection and self-optimisation.

This kind of performativity and containment of one's authentic self is also central to Lindqvist's *Gräns*. While Tina's everyday life depends upon passing as human through the workings of social recognition, Tinja is likewise compelled to perform normative intelligibility – not through humanness, but through idealised femininity and domestic happiness. Whereas Tina's body is disciplined into mimicking the human, Tinja's adolescent body is continually regulated through ideals of cleanliness, composure, beauty, and self-control. Another peculiar likeness between the two works is the phonetically similar names: Tina and Tinja. While Tina is a diminutive commonly associated with notions of 'purity' and Christianity, Tinja's name derives from a Finnish term for a small wooden container or vessel, evoking the dual qualities of both 'containment' and 'protection'. Significantly, both have been assigned a name that is also an imperative that controls and undermines their true subjectivity. In both cases, subjectivity emerges as something performative and precarious: a condition sustained through constant affective regulation and the suppression of forms of embodiment that threaten normative order. At the same time, however, both works also move to demonstrate that normative notions of humanity and femininity are something actively produced and violently maintained through social pressure and self-regulation.

Monstrous Mirroring: Like Two Drops of Water

One night, Tinja is awakened by the sound of a bird screaming. The cries come from the nearby forest. She ventures into the woods and discovers the injured bird from earlier lying on the forest floor, shrieking in pain. Out of pity, Tinja picks up a stone and strikes it violently, but the bird refuses to die, forcing her to hit it

repeatedly (00:09:20). Much like the crow in von Trier's *Antichrist*, which dies and resurrects over and over again, Bergholm's crow possesses a similarly insistent quality – an embodiment of nature's inevitable return. Beneath the bird, Tinja discovers an egg, which she brings home and hides it inside her pink teddy bear like an incubator.

From here on, the egg grows larger and larger. As she continues to repress her feelings of anger, shame, loneliness, and jealousy – while simultaneously carrying the unbearable emotional burden of her mother's secret – these affects appear to migrate into the egg itself, causing it to grow. The connection between them is repeatedly visualised through touch: when Tinja places her blistered hands upon the shell, it lights up in response, signalling a profound connection between them, as though the egg absorbs her emotional suffering (00:18:32).



Figure 21. The glowing egg responding to Tinja's repressed anger and pain (*Pahanhautoja* 2022, 00:18:38).

The egg therefore functions not merely as a symbol of repressed emotion, but as a transcorporeal externalisation of Tinja's own body and psyche; a monstrous organ by which her suppressed affects acquire material form. In this sense, the egg literalises the red ecological logic underpinning the film: emotions are not contained

in autonomous subjects, but leak outwards, circulate between bodies, and intertwine with nonhuman matter. The more Tinja attempts to maintain the family's regime of composure and self-control, the larger and more unstable the egg becomes, suggesting that monstrosity emerges not from failed containment, but from the violent demand for containment itself.

Eventually, the teddy bear splits open because the egg has grown too large. As Tinja weeps onto the shell, it hatches, revealing an enormous and grotesque creature: part bird chick, part human. Slimy, featherless, skinny, and grotesquely vulnerable, it quickly becomes apparent that the creature is linked to Tinja in an emotional and embodied sense: when she covers her eyes in horror, the creature mirrors the gesture exactly (00:25:16) and when Tinja dreams at night, she sees through the creature's eyes, and so witnesses it going to the neighbour's house and brutally killing the dog that bit her. The violence unfolds through a transcorporeal consciousness in which Tinja's suppressed emotions are enacted by her monstrous double, allowing the film to render adolescent rage materially visible.



Figure 22. Tinja bathing Alli, visualising the negotiation between more-than-human kinship and the mother's disciplining demands of cleanliness, care, and bodily propriety (*Pahanhautoja* 2022, 00:26:15).

The creature lives hidden beneath the bed and concealed inside Tinja's wardrobe: spaces traditionally associated with monstrosity and repressed subjectivity. Yet these spaces also suggest that Alli does not emerge from outside the domestic sphere, but from its very structures of containment. The monster is not an external invader disrupting the family; it is the inevitable product of the household's emotional violence and impossible ideals of feminine perfection. The creature can therefore be understood as both a product of and a response to these pressures. It externalises what cannot be expressed in the normative order imposed by the mother, while simultaneously enabling Tinja to engage in a different, more excessive form of relationality.

Tinja feels a maternal bond towards the creature. She bathes it and promises to take care of it. Her care for the egg functions throughout the film as a direct counterpoint to the neglect she herself experiences from her mother. Significantly, Tinja names the creature Alli after the lullaby sung by her mother earlier in the film: 'Aa aa aa, Alli's child, little baby bird. You have no father, you have no mother to take care of you' (00:05:17). Significantly, the melody resembles the repetitive cries of mockingbirds, reinforcing the film's broader motifs of mimicry. At the same time, the lyrics foreshadow how Tinja, mirrored in Alli, exists in a condition of abandonment and parental neglect.

In this regard, *Pahanhautoja* closely parallels *Gräns*, where identity likewise emerges through processes of doubling, mirroring, and destabilised selfhood. Just as Vore functions as a reflective figure by which Tina gradually recognises her own troll ontology, 'twin souls' (2018: 55; 2013: 36), Alli similarly operates as a monstrous mirror that renders Tinja's hidden self visible.¹⁶⁷ Both narratives therefore employ the doppelgänger motif through Tina/Reva and Tinja/Alli not simply as a horror device, but as a mechanism of ontological revelation. In *Gräns*, the *hiisit* also expose the instability of the category of the human by unsettling normative distinctions between original and copy. Likewise, Alli initially appears as Tinja's distorted reflection before gradually moving towards replacement, increasingly resembling her physically and behaviourally throughout the film. Identity in both works thus emerges not as something stable or internally coherent, but through the mechanisms of repetition, mimicry, displacement, and relational mirroring.

Mothering the Monster: Abject Care and Maternal Becoming

The transcorporeality in *Pahanhautoja* is further illustrated through the film's exploration of maternal care and bodily nourishment. Tinja's maternal role towards Alli emerges as a distorted repetition of the mother–daughter dynamic between herself and Äiti. However, while Tinja's bond to her mother is structured through containment, control, emotional restraint, and aesthetic discipline, her relation to Alli unfolds through bodily expenditure, excess, pain, and self-consuming forms of care. In this way, the film stages two contrasting yet equally consuming modes of mothering, which Harriet Gross explains as follows: 'women are simultaneously assigned to a passive role, as recipients of care and containers for their infants, and to an instrumental role, whereby their actions will determine their child's future health, intelligence and success' (2000: 296–297). Yet both relations ultimately position the feminine body as something consumed by the demands of maternal caretaking; while Äiti's motherhood is organised around discipline, governance, and proper upbringing, Tinja's relation to Alli unfolds through messy bodily labour and self-consuming intimacy.

The transcorporeality of Tinja's maternity is rendered particularly visible through the film's unsettling depiction of feeding and nourishment. Since Alli is bird-like, Tinja must feed the creature as birds feed their young: she therefore eats food only to regurgitate it again for Alli to consume (00:29:44). Here, nourishment is circular and self-consuming, evoking a grotesque parallel to breastfeeding. As Tinja regurgitates food in order to sustain the creature, the act recalls maternal nourishment as a bodily process in which the self nourishes the other through bodily depletion. The film thus exposes the ambivalence inherent in maternal relations: to nurture is also to give of oneself, to be partially consumed by the demands of the other. Yet unlike breastfeeding – culturally framed as natural and nurturing – Tinja's feeding of Alli is rendered abject and excessive; and not just because of the plain disgust-inducing viscosity of vomit-eating, but more because it shows the material and corporeal dimensions of maternal nurture usually concealed beneath idealised cultural imaginaries of motherhood. In the framework of horror Tinja's feeding of the bird transforms an act typically associated with care into something ambiguous and disturbing.

In addition, the horror of Tinja's regurgitation also lies in how it parallels breastfeeding with an eating disorder, further collapsing distinctions between inside and outside, care and consumption, nourishment and depletion, maternal devotion and self-erasure. Significantly, the bodily depletion caused by Tinja's regurgitation is not recognised as alarming in the family structure but subtly rewarded. When Äiti approvingly remarks, 'Have you lost weight? The last of the baby fat is gone' (00:48:32), her use of the phrase 'baby fat' carries a striking double meaning, referring both to the bodily changes associated with puberty and to the postpartum body. In this context, Tinja's pubescent body is also framed in a maternal vocabulary in which feminine success depends upon the ability to nurture others while simultaneously erasing the bodily traces of that labour.

Importantly, however, *Pahanhautoja* does not frame Tinja's regurgitation/bulimia through vanity or bodily insecurity alone. Rather, the behaviour emerges through pressures of control, perfection, and self-harm. Significantly, Tinja's bodily self-destruction is directly linked to her inability to perform correctly: when she fails athletically in gymnastics or emotionally in the family, the body itself is the site upon which discipline is enacted. More broadly, the film captures how eating disorders often operate not simply through ideals of thinness, but through attempts to regain control in environments structured by emotional repression and impossible expectations to contain and perfect oneself.

More specifically, the act of regurgitation also evokes Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection by which bodily expulsion is central to the formation of subjectivity itself. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), Kristeva argues that the subject establishes its boundaries by expelling substances associated with bodily contamination and maternal dependency: vomit, blood, pus, excrement. Such substances occupy an uncomfortable liminal position between self and other, inside and outside, because they originate from the body while simultaneously being cast away from it. This abject leaking therefore confronts the subject with the instability of its own borders, revealing embodiment itself as fundamentally porous and precarious, which prompts the subject to reject it.

One such leaking abject is the maternal body. While the pre-Oedipal stage is described in psychoanalytic theory as one in which the mother's body is assumed to be an extension of the self, much like Tinja is a copy of her mother Äiti, the

process of gaining personal autonomy therefore requires, in Kristeva's terms, a violent rejection of maternal sustenance: 'That trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is thus that *they* see that "I" am in the process of becoming another at the expense of my own death. During that course in which "I" become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit' (2024: 3, original emphasis). By this logic, Tinja's regurgitation stages an abject gesture of bodily revolt, by which she attempts to expel overwhelming emotions and impossible maternal demands imposed upon her. The act resembles the logic Kristeva describes, where the subject individuates itself through the rejection of what threatens its autonomy.

At the same time, *Pahanhautoja* simultaneously complicates this movement of separation. The projected substance is not fully expelled; Alli immediately consumes it. The vomit therefore remains materially relational, circulating between bodies rather than being definitively cast off. Kristeva also touches upon this, when she describes the abject as something radically excluded from the self yet never fully detached from it: a 'jettisoned object' that returns 'like an inescapable boomerang', placing the subject 'literally beside himself' (2024: 1–2). Alli occupies such a position in the film. Emerging from Tinja's own repressed affects and bodily fluids, the creature functions as an externalised yet inseparable part of herself. As Kristeva writes, 'Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either' (2).

However, as the plot thickens, *Pahanhautoja* radicalises this. Rather than remaining a haunting externalised double, Alli becomes increasingly intertwined with Tinja. In doing so, the film extends Kristeva's theory of abjection from a psychoanalytical model of bodily separation into a red ecological logic of bodily enmeshment. Whereas abjection in *Powers of Horror* primarily describes subject formation through an ambiguous separation from the maternal body, *Pahanhautoja* instead stages becoming through maternal transcorporeal entanglement between a pre-teen body and nonhuman life. Consequently, Tinja's subject formation – or coming-of-age – does not emerge through purification or separation from monstrosity, but through embracing the excesses and affects that normative femininity demands she repress.

Moreover, this abject entanglement also opens onto something else: a reconfiguration of maternal relationality. Here, *Pahanhautoja* again parallels *Gräns*, where motherhood and selfhood likewise emerge not as a natural or stable identity,

but as a relational and material process of becoming. In *Gräns*, motherhood is reimagined beyond biological reproduction through multispecies kinship and corporeal transformation, while in *Pahanhautoja*, Tinja's relation to Alli demonstrates how maternal bonds emerge through bodily practices of incubation, feeding, and care rather than predefined social roles. In both narratives, motherhood is therefore not something one simply is, but something one becomes through transcorporeal entanglement with other forms of life. At the same time, these maternal processes facilitate transformation itself, allowing Tina and Tinja to embody their authentic selves in intimate relations of care, nourishment, and bodily exchange.

Monstrous Adolescence and the Collapse of Containment

As Alli develops, it begins to resemble Tinja more and more, rendering the distinction between girl and creature increasingly unstable. No longer merely a grotesque bird-like double hidden beneath beds and in wardrobes, Alli increasingly functions not only as the embodied accumulation of Tinja's repressed emotions, but as the violent force by which those buried impulses are finally acted out. After Roosa, the neighbour's dog, snaps at Tinja through the white picket fence, Alli later brutally kills it, fulfilling a violent impulse that Tinja herself could never consciously acknowledge. Likewise, when Reetta's athletic superiority threatens both Tinja's fragile self-worth and her mother's fantasy of perfection, Alli attacks her too, tearing off her hand entirely and effectively ending her gymnastics career. When Tinja later visits Reetta in hospital, the collapse between self and creature is unmistakable: Reetta screams in terror because she mistakes Tinja for Alli (00:55:20). At this moment, the social world can no longer reliably distinguish between the obedient girl and the monster who enacts her rage. Alli appears less as an externalised animal other – featherless, wet, skeletal and instinct-driven – than as a feral extension of Tinja's own subjectivity, by which the fragile containment of ideal girlhood gradually collapses into a more monstrous and nonhuman mode of embodiment.

In the latter half of the film, Alli no longer functions merely as a monstrous double, but as the site by which Tinja's bodily transformation unfolds. As the distinction between Tinja and the creature begins to erode, *Pahanhautoja* increasingly stages adolescence as a process of becoming animal. Here, 'becoming

animal' should not be understood as a simple regression into bestiality or instinct, but in the Deleuzian sense of a process by which fixed identity begins to dissolve. For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, becoming animal does not describe a literal imitation of an animal, nor a stable transformation from one category into another; rather, it names a movement away from the bounded, rational, coherent human subject and towards a mode of existence defined by relations, multiplicities, affects, and corporeality (1987: 272). Becoming is therefore not a destination, but a process: a movement of undoing and reconfiguration. In *Pahanbautoja*, this movement is made horrific because it does not remain abstract. It is staged in flesh, blood, vomit, and violence. Tinja does not simply imagine becoming animal; an animal double manifests materially and gradually overtakes the human form she has been forced to maintain.

Yet this becoming is not only destructive. While the dissolution of subjectivity appears horrifying insofar as Tinja gradually loses control over both her body and identity, it also exposes what was already violent about the supposedly stable and 'proper' human subject she was expected to inhabit in the first place. As argued earlier, the household's regime of corporeal containment attempts to make Tinja's body closed, obedient, clean, attractive, productive, and emotionally harmless. Her femininity is organised around discipline and display. Rather than signifying a simple loss of humanness, becoming animal reveals the coercive norms and regulatory structures by which the category of the 'human' is itself produced and maintained. What initially appears as a terrifying collapse of identity therefore also carries a paradoxically liberating potential: to lose one's coherence as a subject is simultaneously to loosen the hold of the structures that sustain it. As Deleuze and Guattari contend, becoming an animal is not a fall, but an opening: a way of thinking existence as fluid, non-hierarchical and undetermined (1987).

In this regard, *Pahanbautoja* aligns with the body ecohorror trope, where processes of becoming often emerge through monstrous bodily transformations that unsettle the fantasy of the autonomous human subject. Tinja's gradual transformation into Alli externalises the tensions produced by the normative frameworks governing her life – ideals of femininity, maternal control, bodily perfection, and emotional containment – until these pressures can no longer remain internalised. Alli erupts from the impossibility of this containment. The more Tinja

is required to suppress her anger, jealousy, disgust, hunger, pain, and desire, the more these affects accumulate elsewhere, taking monstrous and nonhuman form. The film thereby reveals corporeal containment is ecologically untenable: the body cannot remain sealed off from its affects, its environment, or its more-than-human entanglements. What is refused expression returns instead as red ecological excess – as blood, vomit, animality, reproduction, and violent bodily exchange. Rather than depicting becoming animal simply as regression or degeneration, as often seen in horror fiction, the film ultimately stages it as a reconfiguration of subjectivity itself – a fitting metaphor for coming of age. Accordingly, the process of ‘becoming animal’ operates simultaneously as critique and transformation: it exposes the constraints imposed upon the subject while also enacting a shift beyond them.

This is also what gives *Pahanhautoja* its distinctly Nordic ecohorrific charge. The film repeatedly juxtaposes the pastel, influencer-curated home and the dark forest that surrounds it. The trees are not simply a background, but an uncanny ecological pressure: a nonhuman outside that repeatedly seeps into the domestic sphere, first through the crow, then through the egg, then through Tinja herself. When Tinja drives with her mother, the forest is reflected in the car windows and across her face (00:49:30), visually overlaying her body with the dark, living world beyond domestic containment. The image suggests that Tinja can no longer remain separated from this nonhuman outside. What initially appeared as a stable distinction between interior and exterior, domesticity and wilderness, human and environment, gradually collapses into a state of corporeal and ecological enmeshment.

Because of the mounting chaos, her mother decides to take Tinja away for a weekend with Tero. Tinja does not want to go and attempts to speak to her father about it, but, true to his passive nature, he merely mutters that Tero is ‘a good person’ (00:49:26). Upon arrival, Tinja is introduced to Tero’s infant daughter, Helmi, whose mother died in childbirth. Helmi functions as an idealised possibility of rebirth and replacement: a new child, a new family, a new maternal role by which Äiti can project fresh fantasies of happiness and fulfilment. Watching Äiti with Tero and Helmi reveals that she has been living a double life in more ways than one. In keeping with the film’s broader logic of mirroring and duplication, her carefully

staged influencer persona and parallel family both expose the artificiality of the ideal life she performs.

Watching her mother coo over the baby – ‘Who’s mummy’s little treasure? Who?’ (01:03:50) – Tinja experiences a stab of jealousy, which Alli immediately absorbs and acts on. During the gymnastics competition, Tinja suddenly senses that Alli is approaching Helmi with an axe. In order to stop her, Tinja deliberately throws herself into a fall, injuring her own hand so that the axe slips from Alli’s grasp (01:06:35). This moment is significant because Tinja’s self-inflicted injury recalls the mother’s earlier skating scar, establishing a striking parallel between the two bodies. The daughter wounds herself in order to interrupt the violence produced by the mother’s desires, raising the unsettling possibility that Äiti, too, may once have injured herself in response to similarly impossible demands, thereby suggesting a cyclical pattern of feminine sacrifice and inherited trauma.

Returning home from the competition with her hand bandaged, Tinja and her mother are confronted by Tero, who is furious because he believes Tinja attempted to harm Helmi. However, his anger is directed primarily at Äiti, whom he calls selfish. ‘You see nothing but yourself. Your daughter has serious problems’ (01:08:14). He then ends the relationship, puncturing the mother’s fantasy of romantic rebirth and exposes the narcissistic structure of her care. Äiti’s response is not maternal concern, but rage at the loss of her own happiness. In the car, her carefully maintained facade, previously veiled in floral softness and aesthetic composure, begins to crumble as she repeatedly smashes her head against the steering wheel while screaming and redirecting blame onto Tinja: ‘I had hoped that at least you would have let me be happy’ (01:09:10).

Back at home, Tinja desperately tries to return to the role of the pleasing child: a good girl, a pretty girl, a talented gymnast. Yet Äiti responds only with disgust: ‘You stink!’ (01:12:56). The accusation is crucial because smell here marks the failure of containment. Tinja can no longer pass as pure. Something animal, bodily, and excessive clings to her. While Tinja obediently bathes, brushes her hair, and attempts once more to be clean and pretty, Äiti discovers Alli in the wardrobe mistaking her for Tinja, and unleashes a torrent of verbal abuse against her dishevelled appearance: ‘Your hair looks awful. Look at yourself! How can you be so disgusting?’ (01:13:39). With disciplinary violence normally concealed beneath

maternal care, she continues to violently brush Alli's hair until a clump tears from her scalp, drawing blood. The hairbrush, earlier a symbol of feminine grooming and maternal intimacy, becomes an instrument of bodily punishment. The scene literalises the violence embedded in the production of ideal femininity: beauty is not natural, but enforced through pain.

This violence angers Alli and soon the confrontation escalates into a strangely double-sided struggle. From the front, Alli appears to be strangling the mother, yet from behind it looks like Tinja is embracing and caressing her. The image condenses the film's entire doppelgänger logic while simultaneously recalling its broader framework of monstrous maternity, where care and violence, intimacy and aggression, nourishment and destruction are visually and affectively indistinguishable. When Tinja finally enters and separates them, Äiti finally sees the two figures side by side – the clean, contained daughter and the abject, animalised double.



Figure 23. Tinja and her monstrous double Alli side by side (*Pahanhautoja* 2022, 01:15:09).

This scene is crucial because it exposes not only Alli, but the ecohorrific reality of the family's ecomimetic imperative. While ecomimesis, as Morton writes, 'resists the uncanny, in its effort to present an original, pristine nature not 'infected' with the consciousness, the mentality, or the desire of the perceiver' (2007: 68), the film's red ecological register pushes this logic to its extreme. Rather than offering an image of harmonious communion with nature, becoming one with the nonhuman emerges as an uncanny encounter with the self. In this way, *Pahanhautoja* collapses ecomimetic self-fashioning into unsettling doppelgänger self-reflection. As Morton states elsewhere, 'this is why doppelgängers are uncanny and why the strange stranger in general is uncanny – both remind us of us' (2010: 53).

Horried by this disclosure, Tinja attempts one final return to normative girlhood by rejecting Alli outright: 'I don't want you! I don't want you anymore!' (01:15:17). With this act of renunciation, Alli flees the scene while Tinja, in turn, chooses once more to be the 'good girl': she submits to expectations and conforms to social norms, thus restoring the illusion of innocence and purity. Because of this, Äiti immediately forgives her: 'Oh sweetheart. Mummy's little girl. Mummy's little treasure' (01:16:17).

This brings the film to its final reckoning, which – echoing one of Nordic ecohorror's defining features – pans out as a circular return to the film's opening scene. Once again, a bird-like intruder has disrupted the household's fragile perfection; and once again, Äiti must capture and kill the unruly creature in order to restore order. Armed with a kitchen knife, she searches through the house while Tinja reluctantly follows behind her. Yet when they finally corner Alli and the mother prepares to stab her, Tinja hesitates and says: 'I hatched it' (01:20:09). This confession matters because it marks Tinja's first full acknowledgement of kinship. Alli is not merely a monster she has hidden, nor an animal she has raised, nor a double she can discard. Alli is of her. She is the creature Tinja has incubated, nourished, protected, punished, and tried to destroy. She is daughter, animal, self.

Therefore, when Äiti thrusts the knife at Alli, Tinja steps between them and is stabbed through the heart. Blood pours from her wound into Alli's mouth, producing the film's most explicitly red ecological image. The scene evokes menstruation, pain, and bodily transformation – a final symbolic transition into puberty. Tinja's dying body nourishes Alli just as she has nourished her throughout

the film, but now the exchange is final and irreversible. The girl collapses, or rather, the girl *as she was* collapses. Alli rises in her place, fully transformed, and speaks for the first time. Fittingly, her first word is 'Mother'.

This ending ultimately stages becoming animal as a monstrous process of becoming woman. Tinja's coming-of-age does not culminate in social maturity, romantic awakening, or successful incorporation into normative femininity. It culminates in the death of the obedient child and the emergence of something feral, wounded, impure, and powerful. As such, *Pahanhautoja* turns the familiar horror of female puberty into an ecohorrific process of nonhuman transformation. Adolescence is not represented as a smooth developmental passage, but as a violent rupture in which the body becomes strange to itself, leaks beyond its assigned boundaries, and forms alliances with what the family and the social order attempt to expel.

Importantly, however, the film's conclusion should not merely be understood as Tinja's death or replacement by an external monster. Rather, Alli emerges throughout the film as an extension of Tinja herself: born from her affects, nourished by her body, enacting her repressed desires, and gradually becoming indistinguishable from her. The final transformation therefore signifies not annihilation, but assimilation. In this sense, becoming animal operates as an allegory for becoming adolescent, where childhood itself must be ruptured in order for another form of subjectivity to emerge. At the same time, this monstrous transformation also carries a paradoxically liberating potential. Alli materialises everything that the regime of corporeal containment attempts to suppress – rage, jealousy, bodily excess, feminine aggression, and animality – and in becoming Alli, Tinja ultimately escapes the impossible ideals of purity, discipline, and perfect girlhood that have governed her existence throughout the film. The final gaze towards the mother is therefore pivotal: much like Dani's smile at the end of *Midsommar*, Alli/Tinja's expression contains both defiance and release (01:21:58). The child who desperately sought maternal approval no longer exists. In her place stands something monstrously powerful: a body no longer contained.



Figure 24. Tinja/Alli's unflinching stare of defiance, signalling her monstrous becoming beyond the ideals of proper girlhood (*Pahanhautoja* 2022, 01:22:17).

Ultimately, *Pahanhautoja* reframes monstrous transformation not as a fall away from humanity, but as an exposure of the violent norms required to sustain it. In doing so, the film turns female adolescence into a distinctly ecohorrific process of becoming, where bodily excess, animality, and transcorporeal entanglement no longer signify failed femininity, but the collapse of the fantasy of containment itself.

Together, the analyses of *Gräns* and *Pahanhautoja* therefore reveal how the body ecohorror trope expands ecological attention beyond nature as landscapes to also encompass the intimate materialities of flesh, care, affect, and propagation. Ecology here is no longer 'out there' in forests, oceans, or melting icecaps, but unfolds in the body itself: in hormones, fluids, wounds, through pregnancy, hunger, touch, smell, and bodily exchange. What these works ultimately expose is therefore not simply the fragility of the human body as a coherent or exceptional subject, but the fragility of the cultural imaginaries upon which these ideals depend: fantasies of purity, subject autonomy, reproductive normativity, and harmonious coexistence.

Once again, Nordic ecohorror is found to mobilise monstrosity not merely as negation or terror, but as a critical and even productive force. The monstrous body becomes a site from which dominant norms surrounding femininity, motherhood, kinship, nature, and humanity can be estranged and reimagined. Thus, Tina's

becoming-troll/mother and Tinja's becoming-animal/woman are horrifying because they dissolve stable categories of selfhood, revealing the discursive violence required to sustain those categories in the first place. At the same time, these monstrous transformations also carry a generative potential, opening onto alternative modes of embodiment, care, kinship, and relationality beyond the fantasies of purity and containment. Ultimately, body ecohorror invites a more-than-human ethical thinking, suggesting that what is otherwise framed as monstrous excess or otherness may instead disclose the red ecological condition of existence itself: that life does not persist through separation, autonomy, and control, but through unstable relations of dependency and becoming.

10. Concluding Remarks

Throughout the course of this study, the one question I have been asked the most, but found the hardest to answer, is: what is Nordic ecohorror? This difficulty did not stem from a lack of words, but rather from an overabundance of them, caused by the genre's complexity and 'essentially betwixt-and-between nature' (Hogle 2002: 17). For that reason, I cannot condense Nordic ecohorror into a single one-line definition. Rather, as many have done before me, I offer a list instead.¹⁶⁸ Although this kind of list-making risks losing precision through accumulation – which, as Timothy Morton also points out, may 'put into question the idea of making a list at all' (2007: 12) – it may also enable a form capable of accommodating hybridity. Inspired by Morton, then, my list is not exhaustive but metonymic; a form as elusive and open-ended as the subject it attempts to describe (14).

Nordic ecohorror is a genre that a) exceeds generic containment, operating simultaneously as *genre, mode, and affect*; b) fuses the Nordic region's longstanding preference for *social realism with supernatural, speculative, and folkloric elements*; c) visualises a distinct *Nordic ecology* shaped by boreal forests, regional folklore, Indigenous cosmologies, and seasonal extremities of long winters and midnight suns; d) portrays environment and space as agential *transcorporeal entanglements* in which bodies, landscapes, climates, and material surroundings leak into one another, rendering ecology a mesh that challenges both Anthropocene notions of independent human subjectivity and Nordic ideals of 'statist individualism'; e) has a distinct *atmospheric and affective* register through which ecological crisis is rarely represented solely through spectacle or apocalypse, but instead through lingering moods and emotional intensities such as melancholy, grief, estrangement, and numbness; f) connects ecology to questions of *temporality and scale*, particularly

through Nordic folklore, national symbolism, and the region's colonial history which persist within the present as uncanny haunt-ecologies; g) mobilises (*feminine*) *monstrous agency* in ways that disrupt and reconfigure seemingly stable categories of gender, body, species, and national identity.

Importantly, what underpins most of these features is a sustained *sociocultural critique* of anthropocentric fantasies of mastery and Nordic exceptionalism. Again and again, the works examined in this dissertation challenge idealised Nordic self-perceptions tied to environmental innocence, gender equality, integration politics, welfare policies, and romanticised notions of nature as pure and recreational. It is therefore central to Nordic ecohorror to expose how such cultural imaginaries rely upon violent forms of exclusion and purification. In this regard, Nordic ecohorror becomes historically and ethically loaded, foregrounding how hostile landscapes and retaliatory ecologies are entangled with racism and sexism.

With this in mind, it is fair to say that Nordic ecohorror engages in *naturecultural* negotiations, repeatedly unsettling dualistic distinctions between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, realism and enchantment, past and present, purity and abjection, ideology and reality, environment and embodiment. Significantly, over the course of this project, natureculture gradually became more than a theoretical concept or aesthetic theme; it became an analytical lens through which I could remain attentive to, and critical of, the ways environments, landscapes, climates, and nonhuman forces are culturally mediated, historically produced, and ideologically charged. To approach Nordic ecohorror through a naturecultural perspective is therefore to examine how ecological relations are shaped by – and in turn reshape – Nordic imaginaries, identities, and ways of life.



In addition to textual analysis, this dissertation also includes an empirical reading study designed to explore how feminine monstrosity and ecohorror are experienced by readers. Given that horror is a genre named after the affect it seeks to produce, I found it necessary to engage with readerly responses. Moreover, the reading study

also became a way of moving beyond the well-trodden pathway of psychoanalytical analysis that has dominated discussions of feminine monstrosity and towards more new materialist and postcritical directions, focusing on actual emotions by actual readers rather than dusty patriarchal notions of castration anxiety, penis envy, and female hysteria. That being said, this ambition proved far easier to formulate than to realise. Emotions are notoriously difficult to grasp – fleeting, contradictory, and resistant to language – not only for the researcher attempting to analyse them, but also for the participants experiencing them. Studying readerly emotions therefore poses a series of methodological and ethical tensions that made balancing the demands of empirical research with the interpretive openness of literary studies tricky. No wonder Rita Felski is not interested in actual readers. They are messy, rarely fitting the theoretical categories as neatly as one hopes. Yet, if we are not talking about real readers, then who are we talking about? And if we only ever talk *about* readers rather than *with* them, are we really escaping the self-referential habits of critical theory that Felski critiques, or merely replacing one abstraction with another?

Still, Felski's modes of engagement offered valuable vocabulary for understanding readerly encounters with ecohorror literature, yet there were also moments where readers seemed to rebel against her un-manifesto. For one, readers are people and people change their minds. Especially when put in social situations such as a group discussion where interpretations shifted and opinions evolved as participants built upon and challenged each other's readings. Here Sara Ahmed's understanding of emotions as social and semantic economies proved indispensable, allowing emotions not only to become detectable but also performatively transformable.

One emotion that took place during the reading study, but which I did not address in the analysis, was my own: dissatisfaction. I had my research questions in mind – questions I hoped the study would help answer – but the readers, for obvious reasons, did not approach the texts through the analytical concerns that guided my research. They did not put much energy into the nuances between recognition and acknowledgement; they were not entirely sure of what an antagonist was, or an affect for that matter; and they showed little interest in talking about identification, but kept digressing in unexpected directions. In retrospect,

this may be the most important lesson I take away from the reading study. The researcher can set the framework for the study, but what happens within it remains unpredictable. And while that unpredictability can be uncomfortable, it is also what makes it real and, in a sense, mutual – making the participants co-producers of knowledge rather than just objects of study. Moreover, it allowed me not only to confirm but also to discover things I did not anticipate. Indeed, one of the study's most central findings emerged from the participants' persistent focus on realism, which ultimately led to the chapter on Nordic realism (Chapter Six).



With these definitions and tensions in place, I now turn to a set of closing reflections, tracing three patterns or trajectories that continued to surface across this study. I begin with the pervasive question of *purity*. Many of the cultural imaginaries examined in the dissertation – Nordic exceptionalism, nationalism, romanticism, folkloric pasts, ideals of femininity and motherhood, white ecological fantasies of untouched landscapes, colonialism, ecofascist longings, and corporeal integrity – seem structured around the same underlying desire for purity. In this sense, purity functions not merely as a question of cleanliness, but as an ideological logic organising distinctions between natural and unnatural, healthy and degenerate, human and nonhuman, belonging and exclusion, the altruistic Madonna and the transgressive femme fatale.

Correspondingly, Nordic ecohorror repeatedly returns to precisely those moments where purity begins to collapse. Across the ecotropes examined throughout this thesis, ecological horror emerged through abjection, decay, bodily leakage, mutation, reproductive excess, and transcorporeal dissolution. These motifs do not simply produce disgust or fear, as Julia Kristeva has famously accounted for; they actively dismantle fantasies of separation, autonomy, coherence, innocence, and control. Folk ecohorror unsettles romanticised fantasies of harmonious and spiritually pure nature through ecofundamentalism and pagan extremity. Arctic ecohorror reveals how white ecology and Nordic environmental

innocence depend upon colonial erasures and violent fantasies of untouched landscapes. Body ecohorror, meanwhile, confronts ideals of bodily integrity, maternal purity, and normative reproduction through bodily excess, mutation and transcorporeal entanglement. What links these ecotopes together is therefore not simply contagion and monstrous entanglement, but an exposure of ideals of purity – whether ecological, national, bodily, racial, or gendered – and the fragility of the boundaries that sustain them.

Crucially, this also helps explain why nature and feminine monstrosity become so deeply entangled in Nordic ecohorror. As this thesis has critically revisited, both women and nature have historically been constructed through remarkably similar ideological frameworks: as domains associated with embodiment, reproduction, irrationality, materiality, and affect, and therefore as forces requiring regulation, containment, purification, and control. This shared position becomes particularly visible through the logic of purity. Just as nature is idealised within Nordic imaginaries as pristine, untouched, balanced, and restorative, femininity is likewise organised around ideals of bodily integrity, maternal virtue, emotional moderation, and altruistic morality. In both cases, purity depends upon the exclusion of what appears as excessive, leaking, hybrid and contaminated. Ecological disturbance and feminine monstrosity therefore become structurally connected insofar as both expose these fantasies of coherence and purity. Importantly, ecological agency and female monsters do not merely provoke abjection; they reveal purity itself to be a violent cultural construct sustained through Anthropocene-patriarchal violence. In this sense, Nordic ecohorror repeatedly orchestrates the collapse of the very boundaries upon which Nordic ideals of nature and femininity have historically depended.



The second central pattern concerns feminine monstrosity as a possible *ecological method*. Across the analysed works, feminine monstrosity is both constituted by and constitutive of practices of re-marking, deconstruction, reversal, mimicry, strategic

essentialism, listening and intimate revolt. What these monstrous gestures all have in common is that they do not necessarily confront dominant structures directly, but inhabit, distort, exaggerate, mirror, flip or redirect them from within. In this sense, feminine monstrosity frequently appears less as stable representation than as a disruptive mode of reorientation: a way of exposing what otherwise remains naturalised within Nordic imaginaries of nature, gender, purity, and belonging.

Within the reader study, feminine monstrosity became legible precisely through failed recognition, affective disturbance, and interpretive opacity as participants struggled to stabilise the figure of Luna within familiar frameworks. In *Antichrist*, exaggeration and hyperbolic representation of gendered structures merge into a strategic essentialism that pushes Western imaginaries of womanhood and nature to grotesque extremes, exposing the violence and absurdity embedded within Western constructions of femininity. Similarly, the feminine monstrosity in *Midsommar* operates through inversion, reversing patriarchy into a matriarchy, in which ritualised violence and reproductive control are redirected towards men, thereby making existing gender inequalities newly perceptible by turning them inside out. In *Night Country*, hybrid forms of female masculinity unsettle colonial authority through gendered inbetweenness and nonconformity, destabilising the coherence of both heteropatriarchal and imperial power. Similarly, *Midnattssol* and *Auðnin* challenge colonial modes of visual mastery by foregrounding *listening* as an alternative ecological mode of attunement through which Arctic space becomes sensed rather than simply seen, mapped, or possessed. And in *Gräns* and *Pahanhautoja*, mimicry and doubling manoeuvres destabilise normative assumptions surrounding species, kinship, motherhood, and belonging by filtering the Anthropocene world through more-than-human perspectives whose partial estrangement from humanity renders its norms newly visible and precariously fragile.

In these works, feminine monstrosity operates through deconstruction rather than straightforward destruction. And while these strategies of excess, inversion, mimicry, and estrangement are what render these female figures monstrous, they also help expose how anthropocentric and patriarchal structures are sustained by the same dualistic fantasies of hierarchy, autonomy, purity, mastery, and rational control to which both women and nature have historically been subjected. In this

sense, feminine monstrosity can function as an ecological method for exposing hidden violences, unsettling human-centric ways of seeing and gaining new perspectives on more-than-human life and ecological crisis. It is a way of, in Morton's terms, *re-marking* dominant structures by making the familiar appear unstable and constructed rather than natural or given (2007: 41).



The third and last reflection pertains to Nordic ecohorror's tendency toward *open endings*. As already touched upon, *Morgenstjernen* does not end, but rather fizzles out. *Antichrist* concludes with one of the most cryptic endings in Danish film history as Willem Dafoe's character walks through the forest while faceless female figures emerge from the landscape and move silently toward him. *Midsommar* culminates in the sacrificial pyre, which in a sense marks a categorical end for some of the film's characters, yet simultaneously gestures toward rebirth and the beginning of an undisclosed future for Dani. In *Night Country*, *Auðnin*, and *Midnattssol*, only partial explanations are offered for the half-solved crimes, while the supernatural continues to linger beyond narrative closure. In *Gräns*, Tina once again encounters Vore at the border and walks toward him, though what follows remains uncertain. And finally, *Pahanhautoja* ends with Tinja's transformation being finalised, yet what will become of this new monstrous femininity is left open.

Interestingly, two things about these open endings come to mind. For one, they resonate with dark ecological thinking because they refuse to frame ecological crisis as an isolated happening that culminates in a definitive ending. If, as Morton suggests, the world as we know it has already ended, then what remains is not closure but the ongoing negotiation of life in its aftermath (2010: 98). In addition, the realities of ecological crisis resist narrative closure because they exceed the teleological structures of classical humanist storytelling – stable subjectivity, linear progression, narrative resolution, futurity, and moral clarity – where problems emerge, are confronted, and eventually resolved. Instead, Nordic ecohorror frequently remains suspended within what Morton describes as an 'open,

questioning mode' that is 'radically open – open forever, without the possibility of closing again' (2010: 8). In this regard, Nordic ecohorror's absence of catharsis or final redemption comes to reflect an ecological condition in which catastrophe is not a singular future event, but an ongoing condition we are already living within that cannot be neatly concluded or escaped.

At the same time, there also seems to be something specifically monstrous about this openness. While the monster has always disturbed order and stable meaning, or as one of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's theses states: 'the monster always escapes' (1996: 4) – all the works in this dissertation repeatedly frame feminine monstrosity through distinct forms of openness, suspension, and what Jack Halberstam describes as *radical passivity* (2011). Rather than overcoming crisis through heroic action or violent mastery, these characters often remain within states of withdrawal, deferral, or what Julia Kristeva describes as forms of 'intimate revolt' (2002a); that is, not open political revolution or direct confrontation, but an ongoing psychic and affective process of questioning, displacement, estrangement and refusal that unsettles normative coherence from within by disrupting fixed identities and symbolic structures.

Such a framework becomes particularly productive for understanding feminine monstrosity in Nordic ecohorror. The monstrous feminine rarely appears as a fully emancipatory or sovereign figure who escapes power altogether. Instead, she often inhabits unstable thresholds between human and nonhuman, victim and aggressor, care and violence, subject and object. Her monstrosity unfolds through opacity rather than through clear political resolution. In a sense, feminine monstrosity performs a kind of intimate ecological revolt: not by mastering ecological crisis, but by being and becoming through processes of unruly entanglement that mirror nature itself, thereby exposing the fragility of the symbolic and ideological systems through which Nordic culture attempts to organise wildlife, gender, and belonging.

Taking the argument a step further, one could suggest that the female monsters' refusal to fully resolve, explain, restore, or return begins to resemble what Jack Halberstam describes as forms of unmaking and withdrawal. In this sense, feminine monstrosity in Nordic ecohorror not only exercises deconstruction but also *destitution* (2024). Following Halberstam, destitution does not seek to seize power, restore order, conquer institutions or replace dominant structures with improved

alternatives. Rather it withdraws from the very logics upon which those structures depend, emptying them out, watching them expire and become inoperative. It is a withdrawal from capitalist norms by letting things rot, refusing to be productive, divesting.

This logic resonates with the forms of feminine monstrosity examined in this thesis. These monstrous figures rarely defeat patriarchal or anthropocentric systems through direct opposition (as the 'hero story,' in Le Guin's terminology, would otherwise prefer). Instead, they destabilise such systems by withdrawing from normative scripts altogether: refusing reproductive futurity, resisting narrative closure, dissolving bodily boundaries, embracing opacity, or remaining unintelligible. In the reader study, Luna's complaint functions as a form of feminist method: a non-compliance that disrupts reader expectations of emotional regulation and moral legibility. In *Antichrist*, the female protagonist's choice not to intervene in her son's fatal fall ruptures the ideological fantasy of ideal motherhood by privileging erotic desire over maternal responsibility. In *Midsommar*, Dani likewise weaponises emotional withdrawal and non-action, allowing Christian's death to unfold through silence and passivity rather than direct condemnation. In *Night Country*, *Auðnin* and *Midnattssol*, partially unresolved murder investigations and disrupted judicial processes similarly undermine the authority of state institutions and other man-made systems of order. And in *Gräns* and *Pahanhautoja*, feminine monstrosity ultimately emerges through forms of becoming that exceed the limits of normative femininity and bodily containment altogether. As Halberstam notes, 'to destitute ... is to make ourselves ungovernable' (2019), and in Nordic ecohorror feminine monstrosity emerges precisely through this refusal to become domesticated or containable.

At the same time, such destitute gestures also align with dark ecological thinking, which rejects fantasies of a harmonious return to nature, insisting instead that ecological existence is fundamentally entangled with uncertainty, coexistence, and decay. Perhaps this is also why these open endings feel ecological. Throughout Nordic ecohorror, nature rarely moves toward purification or restoration. Instead, it suspends characters, readers and viewers alike within unstable forms of coexistence where no final escape is possible. Here, survival no longer depends upon overcoming crisis through control or transcendence, but upon learning to inhabit

compromised and unstable conditions without guarantees of resolution. In this sense, the open ending becomes more than an aesthetic choice or uncanny effect. It becomes a formal expression of ecological and monstrous existence itself.

Ultimately, this dissertation has not sought to stabilise Nordic ecohorror into a closed category, but rather to follow the ways it continuously unsettles every conceivable dualistic and cultural construct. If Nordic ecohorror teaches us anything, it is perhaps that ecological crisis is never merely environmental. It is also cultural, gendered, affective, ideological, and deeply entangled with the stories societies tell about themselves, purity, belonging, and what it means to be human. This does not mean that Nordic ecohorror or its monsters offer us any resolutions. Rather, it offers disturbance: a mode of unsettling dominant imaginaries, exposing hidden violences, and reconfiguring forms of ecological entanglement.

There is no way out, only staying with the trouble.

Summary

This dissertation examines the emergence of Nordic ecohorror as a distinctive genre and mode through which contemporary Nordic literature, film, and television negotiate ecological crisis, feminine monstrosity, and the region's entangled narratives of environmental and social exceptionalism. Situated within the context of the Anthropocene, the study argues that Nordic ecohorror is characterised by its unsettling representations of naturecultures, where boundaries between ecology and society, human and nonhuman, myth and modernity, past and present, body and environment become increasingly unstable.

Drawing on ecocriticism, new materialism, monster theory, and affect theory, the dissertation investigates how feminine monstrosity functions as a critical conduit for articulating ecological anxieties and renegotiating dominant understandings of gender and environmental relations. Rather than treating ecological and feminine monstrosity solely as a projection of Anthropocene-patriarchal fear, the study approaches the female monster as a disruptive and transformative figure of revolt that exposes the ideological structures underlying Nordic imaginaries of purity and ecological virtue.

The dissertation is organised around three interconnected trajectories: the first conceptualises the defining features of Nordic ecohorror, including its representation of a distinct Nordic ecology shaped by *transcorporeal entanglements*, a distinctive *atmospheric and affective register*, and a *temporal and scalar sensibility* expressed through folklore, colonial histories and slow ecological violence. The second examines readers' affective engagements with feminine monstrosity and ecohorrific narratives through an empirical reading study, exploring how processes of recognition, estrangement, enchantment, and Nordic realist conventions shape both critical responses and readerly experiences of female monsters and the uncanny

supernatural. The third investigates the ecological and cultural work performed by female monsters in contemporary Nordic ecohorror fiction, demonstrating how feminine monstrosity functions as a subversive force through which dominant ideals of nature, gender and human exceptionalism are unsettled and reimagined across the naturecultural domains of folk ecohorror, Arctic ecohorror, and body ecohorror.

The findings suggest that Nordic ecohorror operates as both a mode of sociocultural critique and a form of ecological thought. Across the works examined, ecological disturbance and feminine monstrosity emerge as mutually constitutive phenomena that expose the fragility of dualistic distinctions embedded within ideals of purity, national identities and regional exceptionalism. Rather than rejecting the historically fraught association between women and nature, Nordic ecohorror reworks this inherited connection by turning it against the patriarchal logics that produced it, transforming a mechanism of subordination into a source of critique and transformation.

Ultimately, the dissertation argues that Nordic ecohorror provides a critical vocabulary for understanding the entanglements of ecology and gender in a time of planetary uncertainty. By foregrounding ecological anxieties, gendered power structures and human-environmental relations, these narratives illuminate how environmental crises are inseparable from cultural histories and social imaginaries, while also opening towards new ways of sensing and inhabiting a rapidly changing world.

Notes

¹ Shipbreaking Platform, accessed 15 July 2025. <https://shipbreakingplatform.org>

² Global Forest Watch, accessed 15 July 2025.

<https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/BRA/>

³ Jonathan Amos, 'Terrawatch: Mystery of Siberian Explosive Craters Solved'. *The Guardian*, 23 October 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2024/oct/23/terrawatch-mystery-of-siberian-explosive-craters-solved>

⁴ Jenessa Dunscombe, 'Greenland Ice Sheet Beats All-Time 1-Day Melt Record', *Eos* 100, no. 2 (August 2019). <https://eos.org/articles/greenland-ice-sheet-beats-all-time-1-day-melt-record>

⁵ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2024: Key Messages. New York: United Nations 2024.

https://population.un.org/wpp/assets/Files/WPP2024_Key-Messages.pdf

⁶ 'et bizart monstrøst økologisk loop eller kredsløb, som endegyldigt gør det umuligt at tale om, at der er noget der hedder natur og noget der hedder kultur' (Ørntoft 2018: 34).

⁷ The term *Anthropocene* was originally proposed by the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and the biologist Eugene Stoermer (2000) for a new geological epoch defined by the profound, lasting impact of human activity on the Earth. The concept has since been widely debated and criticised – not least by Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg (2014), who argue that the notion of 'the human' as a unified geological force risks obscuring the uneven, capitalist and fossil-fuel-driven structures that actually produce climate change. Ecofeminists have likewise noted that the term tends to attribute responsibility equally to 'humanity', thereby concealing the gendered, colonial, and socioeconomic dynamics underlying ecological destruction. While I agree with these critiques, I still use the term 'Anthropocene' in this thesis, but in a more descriptive sense to refer to our present era – marked by climate change, ecological tipping points, and planetary instability – and to a particular contemporary worldview dominated by what Michael Zimmerman describes as a complex of dualism, atomism, hierarchical thinking, rigid autonomy, and abstract rationalism (1990: 141).

⁸ The literature on Nordic outdoor education emphasises how relationships with nature are institutionally integrated into Nordic educational cultures by national curricula and outdoor pedagogies, which treat direct engagement with natural environments as central to learning, well-being, and sustainability (Remmen & Iversen 2023; Sandseter & Lysklett 2017).

⁹ 'I Norge er friluftsliv noget helt særligt. Faktisk en hel filosofi. En livsstil' and 'For nordmænd har ordet en dybere mening. Det er noget med at "tage en pause fra den daglige stress" og være en del af det kulturelle "vi", der binder os sammen som mennesker i samspil med naturen' (VisitNorway 2025).

¹⁰ Variations of the 'right to roam' – Swe. *allemansrätten*, Nor. *allemannsrett*, Fin. *jokaisenoikeudet*, Ice. *almannaréttur* – are embedded in Nordic legal and cultural tradition. These principles grant public access to forests, lakes, and uncultivated land, provided such access is exercised with care and there is no economic exploitation. In Sweden, for example, the right is protected by the constitution, ensuring that 'everyone shall have access to nature', while simultaneously requiring those who make use of the right to show consideration and caution in their interactions with the environment. Although Denmark does not have a right to roam per se, access to shared natural spaces has been structured through commons-based land practices – called *fælled* (commons) – that similarly frame nature as a collective good rather than private property.

¹¹ The *folkhem* (lit. 'people's home') is a central ideological concept in twentieth-century Swedish politics, particularly associated with the Social Democratic welfare state from the 1930s, though the term was known in an earlier nationalist and liberal discourse. The postwar *folkhem* envisioned the nation as a cohesive, egalitarian home in which all citizens were cared for, with the state providing extensive social services, economic security, and a sense of collective belonging – a welfare model reflected across the Nordic countries. While originally framed as inclusive, the *folkhem* has also been critiqued for marginalising those who did not fit its normative ideals of ethnicity, class, and conformity.

¹² In the 2016 World Happiness Report, Jeffrey Sachs suggests that well-being depends not only on economic and social conditions, but also on access to nature, whether through biophilia or the material services ecosystems provide: 'there is some evidence ... that happiness depends directly on nature as well, whether because of biophilia (love for nature as a facet of human nature) or because of the natural services provided by the environment' (Helliwell, Layard & Sachs 2016: 57). In the Nordic context, such assumptions are institutionalised through frameworks such as the right to roam, where access to nature is treated as intrinsic to collective well-being rather than a private privilege.

¹³ 'Digtning, der ikke beskæftiger sig med menneskehedens største trussel (KK) er ikke værd at beskæftige sig med. Fordi alt andet er at spille violin, mens skibet går ned' (Skinnebach 2023: 24).

¹⁴ 'Jeg har nok sagt, at den litteratur som gør menneskets sociale verden, og kun den, til sit genstandsfelt, er en del af ondskaben' (Ørntoft 2018: 39).

¹⁵ Etymologically, the word ‘monster’ derives from the Latin *monstrum*, a term associated with the verbs *monere* (to warn) and *monstrare* (to show), referring originally to a divine omen or portent, but also a being or phenomenon that evokes fear and wonder. Throughout this thesis, however, I invoke both the monstrous and processes of monsterisation. While *monsterisation* denotes the discursive and social processes of othering through which subjects or objects come to be constructed as monsters in relation to dominant norms, the *monstrous* refers to more disruptive ontologies or forms of agency that challenge established boundaries and normative frameworks. In other words, monsterisation serves as a warning, while the monstrous shows what that warning seeks to contain. Some theorists also distinguish between the monster as the end-product of monsterisation, and the monstrous as that which exposes and exceeds such a mechanism (Nirta & Pavoni 2022), however, I find that these two terms often slip-slide into one another.

¹⁶ The debt owed to Kristeva’s *Power of Horror* (1982) is unmistakable in the theoretical framework under discussion here, as well as in my own work; however, where Kristeva’s abjection theory is anchored in psychoanalytical structures of subject formation, I draw on new materialist monster theorists, who foreground embodiment, relationality, and material processes over Freudian–Lacanian frameworks in order to underscore the material, affective, and ontological dimensions of monstrosity, an emphasis that aligns more closely with my theoretical and conceptual commitments.

¹⁷ It should be noted, however, that Creed’s more recent work has increasingly engaged with posthumanism. The *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine* (2022) features a brief chapter entitled ‘Furiosa: Eco-Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine’ although she does not define or develop the term in any substantial way, while the revised 2023 edition of *The Monstrous–Feminine* includes a new final part devoted to ‘Embracing the Nonhuman’. In both works, however, psychoanalysis remains her primary theoretical framework.

¹⁸ While Cohen’s theorisation of the monster remains formative for the discipline as a whole, my approach follows a different theoretical trajectory. In his thoroughly Foucauldian essay ‘Monster Culture (Seven Theses)’ (1996), he famously helped establish a new paradigm for thinking about monstrosity, defining monsters as ‘pure culture’ (4): reflections of historically and culturally specific anxieties, desires, and hence mechanisms of social regulation. However, like Barbara Creed, he risks disembodiment of the monster by reducing it to a symbolic or discursive construct deprived of material or ontological weight. I instead seek to extend such theories by foregrounding the material dimensions of feminine monstrosity, thus treating the monster not merely as a metaphorical figure of transgression, but as an unruly naturecultural force with corporeal and ecological agency.

¹⁹ At the outset of this project, only one edited volume, *Nordic Gothic* (Holmgren Troy et al. 2020), had been published on this topic, and as the title suggests, it is about the Gothic mode rather than ecohorror or feminine monstrosity specifically, although it touches on both. Despite

its ostensibly pan-Nordic scope, its case studies of literature, television, and film are largely Swedish.

²⁰ Ecofeminism is perhaps not as central to my thesis as one might expect. Ecofeminist scholarship has of course been instrumental in drawing attention to the historical association of women and nature, but its human-centred, often idealising ecological framework does not always align productively with the affective, monstrous, and dark ecomaterial dimensions central to both horror and feminine monstrosity. Rather than positioning ecofeminism as a primary focus, I engage with it as a starting point from which to extend the conversation beyond its parameters to explore alternative possibilities for thinking about femininity, ecology, and monstrosity.

²¹ Throughout this thesis, I refer to ecohorror as both a genre and a mode, depending on the context.

²² In this thesis, the terms female and feminine frequently overlap. Nevertheless, I do distinguish between them, using female to refer to biological women or female-assigned bodies, while feminine denotes culturally, symbolically, performatively, and discursively produced forms of femininity that may be embodied by subjects of any gender, as well as by nonhuman entities, spaces, and constructs. This distinction is important insofar as feminine monstrosity is not exclusively tied to female bodies, but also refers to radical modes of being, forms of agency, and a method.

²³ This is not to suggest that all American ecohorror is exclusively spectacle-driven or devoid of sociopolitical and ecological critique. Indeed, a growing body of scholarship has demonstrated the genre's capacity to engage critically with the environmental, colonial, and affective dimensions of the Anthropocene. For these tendencies, particularly in the Anglo-American Gothic tradition, see Edwards et al. 2022.

²⁴ Notably, my dissertation also does not engage children's and young adult ecohorror literature, although it is definitely on the rise with books such as Annika Luther's *Skogen som Gud glömde* (2005, 'The Forest that God Forgot'), Emmi Itäranta's *Teemestarin kirja* (2012, *Memory of Water* 2014), Sarah Engell's *Skoven* (2022, 'The Forest'), Stina Nilsson's *Det svarta regnet* (2020, 'The Black Rain'), and Lise Adbåge's *Furan* (2021, 'The Pine Tree'). This tendency has also recently been identified by the Swedish Institute for Children's Books in the influential survey Bokprovnig 2025, where Helena Ahlin describes how contemporary Swedish children's literature increasingly portrays the forest as 'a living being' capable of responding violently to human transgression (2026: 35).

²⁵ The corpus includes Swedish, Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Icelandic examples. While cinematic ecohorror is present in all the Nordic countries, there are considerable national variations in literary ecohorror. Swedish and Danish literature frequently explores dark ecological themes and uncanny representations of nature; Norwegian literature often gravitates to nature writing, reflecting the deep-ecological legacy of Arne Næss; and Finnish fiction tends to intersect with speculative and science-fictional traditions – popularly referred to as 'Finnish

Weird' – rather than conventional horror. Icelandic fiction, meanwhile, often brings supernatural and folkloric traditions into dialogue with Nordic noir narratives, while also tapping into the weird and speculative tendencies associated with Finnish fiction and the more poetic, ecophilosophical traditions of Norwegian nature writing. Despite an extensive search, no works from Sámi, Greenlandic, or Ålandic contexts were included, as none aligned with the specific selection criteria defined for this study, and some are inaccessible because of language barriers, reflecting my linguistic limitations rather than the value or significance of cultural production from these regions.

²⁶ While ecohorror takes in multiple cultural forms in the Nordic countries – including poetry, graphic novels, visual art, and computer games – I have deliberately limited my corpus to media that share broadly comparable narrative conventions – plot development, character formation, thematic world-building – and hence novels, short stories, feature films, and TV series, in order to maintain analytical scope and methodological coherence.

²⁷ Although affect theory and monster theory are often associated with poststructuralism, I explicitly engage with materiality and embodiment. In affect studies, the likes of Ahmed (2004a) approach affects as forces that circulate, materialise, and take form, and similarly I understand affects and emotions not as states located solely in the human psyche, but as immanent in the material world – shared between, sticking to, and circulating through bodies, objects and spaces. Affects are thus entangled with and influenced by their surroundings, shaping how 'matters come to matter', how they act on us, and how we respond to them. They are also socially and politically significant, structuring power relations and shaping the conditions under which bodies move and relate. In this sense, materiality encompasses not only physical objects, but also the emotional and affective relations that bind bodies to the worlds they inhabit. Similarly, feminist and posthumanist developments in monster theory, particularly in the work of Shildrick (2002), Braidotti (1996; 2011), and Haraway (2020), foreground the embodied, relational, and more-than-human dimensions of monstrosity. It is in this expanded, materially attentive sense that I consider both affect theory and monster theory part of the broader material turn employed in this study.

²⁸ 'Humanvidenskaberne fødtes som en bestræbelse for at befri mennesket og beskæftiger sig derfor kun med det menneskelige. De beskæftiger sig ikke med dyr' (Collin & Køppe 2014: 27).

²⁹ 'The balance', Massumi argues (2002: 12), 'has to shift to affirmative methods' – a necessary paradigm shift he justifies as 'So why not hang up the academic hat of critical self-seriousness, set aside the intemperate arrogance of debunking – and enjoy? If you don't enjoy concepts and writing and don't feel that when you write you are adding something to the world, if only the enjoyment itself, and that by adding that ounce of positive experience to the world you are arming it, celebrating its potential, tending its growth, in however small a way, however really abstractly – well, just hang it up.'

³⁰ Another affect theorist, Claire Hemming, agrees with Ahmed, arguing that certain bodies are historically constrained by structural inequality, which makes critical engagement not only

necessary but inescapable. She points to the black body, which ‘carries the weight of, and is suffused with, racial affect’, and the female body, which bears ‘the burden of the affects that maintain sexual difference’ as bodies that cannot afford to simply take on reparative, affirmative attitudes because their life experiences and affective responses are shaped by entrenched systems of power and oppression (2005: 562). Hemming argues that affect is neither random, ‘choosable’ nor easily detached from its social and historical context, or as she puts it, ‘Some bodies are captured and held by affect’s structural precision’ (2005: 562). Affective experiences are tightly bound to specific societal conditions that dictate who can experience joy and who cannot.

³¹ Astrida Neimanis similarly emphasises the methodological value of story in *Bodies of Water* (2017), where she describes how scientific ‘proxy stories’ – even when outdated or scientifically ‘wrong’ – can function as ‘sensitizers’, cultivating embodied awareness and opening imaginative pathways toward otherwise inaccessible material realities (55). For Neimanis, the point is not factual correctness but the generative potential of a story: its capacity to activate felt knowledge, bodily memory, and alternative modes of relation.

³² While all four of Felski’s modes of engagement are introduced here, I only have recognition and enchantment as central analytical concepts, primarily applied to my empirical reader study (Part II) where recognition is developed in dialogue with affect theory as a tool to trace readers’ identificatory and estranging responses to feminine monstrosity, while enchantment is used to illuminate the tension between dominant realist conventions and moments of supernatural or uncanny disturbance in both Nordic ecohorror narratives and readers’ responses to them. Shock and knowledge, on the other hand, are not employed in this study, not that such modes of engagement are inapplicable or ‘useful’ – on the contrary, knowledge could further support my broader argument, insofar as it cannot be reduced to factual information alone – but, as Felski herself emphasises, they are best understood as a sensuous mode of understanding by which literature’s mimetic and aesthetic strategies open up new ways of seeing the world and reorient readers’ perceptions of ecological relations and human-environment entanglements (2008: 84, 86–87). Shock likewise is highly relevant to ecohorror, a genre that frequently unsettles readers’ expectations through disturbing encounters with ecological crisis and feminine monstrosity that disrupt familiar frameworks of interpretation and provoke both affective and ethical reflection. Their absence reflects considerations of analytical focus and scope rather than relevance.

³³ ‘hun sad på bunden | en krans af champignonner havde besat hovedet | de voksede ud af hendes kranium | gennem det glatte hår | små, larmede spøgelser | de åd lyset og kastede det op | hun havde ramt bunden | med hovedet fuld af champignonner | ud og ind ad kraniet | de åd og sugede hende’ (Vestberg 2016: 52).

³⁴ This, however, does not preclude me from using the term Gothic interchangeably with, or alongside, horror, given their close relationship – Gothic often being understood as the historical precursor or foundational mode of modern horror.

³⁵ 'Naturbegrebets mangfoldighed kan logisk sammenfattes til to grundbetydninger: Det begrænsede naturbegreb, hvor natur er noget, som har visse grænser til noget andet, fx til byen, kulturen, det tillærte eller Gud; og det grænseløse naturbegreb, hvor naturen omfatter alt værende' (lex.dk 2025).

³⁶ The Cartesian–Newtonian model, foundational to modern materialism, defines matter as extended, inert substance composed of discrete, measurable parts governed by predictable laws of motion. In this framework, material objects are passive and move only upon encounter with an external force or agent, following a linear logic of cause and effect, while humans are positioned as rational, self-aware, free, and self-moving agents. This conception underpins the view of nature as quantifiable and controllable, positioning the human subject – the thinking 'cogito' – as ontologically distinct and endowed with mastery over a passive natural world. As Frost and Coole note, 'The Cartesian–Newtonian understanding of matter thereby yields a conceptual and practical domination of nature as well as a specifically modern attitude or ethos of subjectivist potency' (2010: 8).

³⁷ The characterisation of the Romantic position in this text is necessarily schematic. Many Romantic writers complicate or reject the notion of nature as a wholly harmonious realm (Wordsworth's poetry navigates loss, alienation and affective instability alongside sublimity, for example, and Coleridge repeatedly foregrounds the uncanny, self-dividing and even terrifying dimensions of nature), and indeed, recent scholarship argues that Romanticism should be read not as a unified 'green' worldview, but as a heterogeneous field marked by ambivalence, irony, and internal critique.

³⁸ When Morton speaks of Romanticism, he primarily has in mind the tradition of German Idealism (2007), particularly its investment in organic wholeness and the overcoming of subject-object dualism; however, while his critique of this tradition is compelling, his claims are not always historically precise and can at times lack nuance. As Torsten Bøgh Thomsen (2019) has also observed, the idealising tendencies Morton critiques, particularly those related to ecomimesis, can be traced back to the Renaissance and earlier. It is therefore, as Kate Rigby notes, more accurate to understand Romanticism not as the origin of idealised conceptions of nature, but rather as a reformulation and revival of already existing ideas of nature (2004: 24).

³⁹ 'Skräck i konst är någonting som skildras som skrämmande, genom en kombination av det onaturliga och brott mot den rådande mänskliga ordningen' (Fyhr 2017: 19).

⁴⁰ Freud even prefigures Todorov's concept of hesitation by describing the uncanny as arising from the ambiguous boundary between reality and imagination – a tension central to Todorov's fantastic. Moreover, Freud's literary analysis of Shakespeare's Hamlet in 'Trauer und Melancholie' (1917) even highlights hesitation as a key narrative device, foreshadowing Todorov's formalism.

⁴¹ Needless to say, 'the Nordic' does not constitute a culturally homogeneous, internally coherent entity, and the present discussion necessarily involves a degree of regional generalisation. Significant historical, linguistic, political, and ecological differences exist in and

between each Nordic country, just as experiences of nature vary by class, gender, ethnicity, geography, and indigeneity. Nevertheless, much like Morton's broad invocation of 'Romanticism' or ecocritical discussions of 'Western' nature ontologies more generally (2007), the term 'Nordic' is employed here as a heuristic and cultural imaginary rather than a fixed or essential category. My aim is not to claim there is a single Nordic identity, but to trace a recurring set of aesthetic, ecological, and affective tendencies circulating in contemporary Nordic ecohorror fiction.

⁴² 'De ønskede at eliminere det skræmmende skel mellem inde og ude; de ville trække deres verden udenfor ... Deres børn skulle vokse op og se at verden var holdt sammen af orden og harmoni' (Lützen 1997: 8).

⁴³ It is important to note that dark ecology should not be construed as the opposite of romanticism. Doing so would simply reproduce the kind of binary opposition that dark ecology seeks to challenge. Instead, both dark ecology and Nordic ecohorror work to expose and undo dualistic structures that underpin romantic thought.

⁴⁴ Recently, Bigelow has described Nordic ecohorror as a 'transcorporeal meshwork' (2023: 6). While his account resonates with what I identify in Nordic ecohorror as 'transcorporeal enmeshment', also drawing on Alaimo's notion of transcorporeality (2008) to underscore the interpenetrating relations between human and more-than-human bodies, my emphasis is slightly different. Bigelow bases his 'meshwork' somewhat loosely, almost backhandedly, on Morton's concept of the mesh (2010) while largely ignoring his wider framework of dark ecology. My take, by contrast, highlights how Nordic ecohorror engages with Morton's dark ecology more extensively, presenting the entangled environments and spaces not only as uncanny and destabilising aesthetic forces, but as a critically charged ethical vision.

⁴⁵ 'Følelseslevering affaldslevering sproglevering ikke affaldstransportering og affaldsdestruktion affaldet er nemlig ikke til at slippe af med det er et delresultat af produktionen af alting kald det lort men du må æde det her eller lade være det forsvinder aldrig ingenting forsvinder fra verden jorden højst en heldig satellittraket men selve universet slipper den aldrig ud af vi står i lort til stratosfæren' (Strunge 1996: 862).

⁴⁶ The concept of 'statist individualism' was first developed by Berggren and Trägårdh in *Är svensken människa? Gemenskap och oberoende i det moderna Sverige* (2006), translated into English as *The Swedish Theory of Love: Individualism and Social Trust in Modern Sweden* (University of Washington Press, 2022), but is also presented in their essay 'Pippi Longstocking: The Autonomous Child and the Moral Logic of the Swedish Welfare State' (2010).

⁴⁷ The dual perception of 'atmosphere' as both spatial phenomenon and mood is a continuing concern for philosophy and cultural theory. In *Being and Time* (1962), Martin Heidegger describes human beings as affective creatures, always already attuned (*gestimmt*) to the world they inhabit. For him, moods are not just inner feelings but ways in which the world comes across to us. As he puts it, 'A mood assails us. It comes neither from "outside" nor from "inside", but arises out of Being-in-the-world, as a way of such Being' (1962: 176). In this sense,

Stimmung highlights that we are always in some mood, and that mood colours how the world appears. Gernot Böhme's aesthetics of atmosphere develops it into the notion of *Gefühlsräume* – felt spaces of moods and sensations (1993). Inspired by Hermann Schmitz (2005), Böhme argues that atmospheres are neither fully reducible to the environment nor to individual psychology, but rather occupy a threshold between them, 'filling space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze' (1993: 114). The anthropologist Tim Ingold (2011) adds to this perspective with his notion of 'weather-worlds', emphasising that human life unfolds in the fluxes of wind, rain, light, and sky – elements that are as affective as they are meteorological, and that form the medium of our immersion in the world. Heidegger, Böhme, and Ingold together show how atmosphere can be understood as both existential attunement to our surroundings and sensuous, spatial mood.

⁴⁸ 'Gegenüber dem diskreten, abgehackten, sich isolierenden Aufzucken, schrillen Anhalten und kurzatmigen Nachlassen der Angst ist Bangnis das atmosphärisch Ungreifbare, ungeteilte Ganze des Unheimlichen' (Schmitz 2005: 283).

⁴⁹ This is where Le Guin's carrier bag theory (1986) is a fruitful alternative. Rejecting the linear, conflict-driven, 'heroic' model of narrative – the spear's flight toward its target – Le Guin proposes the novel instead as a 'bag', a container that holds and relates disparate elements without subordinating them to a singular telos. In such a form, stories need not march toward resolution; they can gather and hold multiple forms of agency, temporalities, and scales, including those of the nonhuman. 'A novel', she writes, 'is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us' (1986: 169). This reorientation allows us to imagine narrative as a site where humans and nonhumans alike act as carriers of stories – an approach that expands our phenomenological sense of ourselves, our origins, and our entanglements with the world.

⁵⁰ As Schiebinger notes, 'The presence of milk-producing mammae is, after all, but one characteristic of mammals, as was commonly known to eighteenth-century European naturalists. Further, the *mammae* are 'functional' in only half of this group of animals (the females) and, among those, for a relatively short period of time (during lactation) or not at all', which, she argues, makes Linnaeus' choice of term more a matter of gender politics than of scientific accuracy (1993: 382–383).

⁵¹ In August 2015, the reporter and Fox News host Megyn Kelly opened the Republican presidential debate by quoting Donald Trump's past insults toward women – calling them 'fat pigs' and 'dogs' – prompting the then-presidential candidate to imply that Kelly was untrustworthy because she was menstruating (Maya Rhodan, 8 August 2015).

⁵² Françoise d'Eaubonne coined the term 'ecofeminism' in her book *Le Féminisme ou la mort* (1974), proposing that women had the potential to lead an ecological revolution. A year later, in *New Women, New Earth* (1975) Rosemary Radford Ruether argued that women's studies and ecology movements must be united in order to radically transform the socioeconomic structures and core values of modern industrial society. In 1978, Susan Griffin's unconventional book

Woman and Nature examined 'man's attitude that woman is both inferior to him and closer to nature'. However, ecofeminism only began to gain recognition as a significant area of scholarly inquiry with the publication of Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980).

⁵³ Much can be and already has been said about Camille Paglia's infamous *Sexual Personae* (1990), with its overstatements, broad generalisations, flaccid use of Freudian theory, and sensationalism verging on the absurd, mimicking the style of Marquis de Sade whom she so admires, and adding an anti-humanism bordering on nihilism. Speaking of tone, Paglia makes her arguments in an erudite, tautological, aphoristic style, which sometimes makes it unclear whether she is asserting something is a true, indisputable fact or she is holding up a common belief in critical tongs for our inspection. In fact, it varies depending on the topic or position, thus ironically falling prey to the same contradictions she is so keen to reveal in others. Most problematic, perhaps, is her essentialist, deterministic perspective on gender, holding male and female biologies to be distinct, fundamental, and vital to the very being and capabilities of men and women, which ultimately gives an anti-feminist or at least a catching-up feminist tone to her work, when she considers men to be superior to women in almost every way possible, yet maintains that women can learn to become decent Apollonian citizens.

⁵⁴ This turning point also occurs in von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996). Gammelgaard (2013: 94) calls it a 'breaking point', where the well-known, orderly reality is replaced by chaos, perversion and destruction: 'a point where sense turns into non-sense and where mythical and dreamlike pictures regress into perverse scenarios that leave the audience as defenceless spectators of death and destruction'.

⁵⁵ Dudenhoeffer even interprets the prologue of *Antichrist* as an inversion of the birth of Christ, describing Nic's death as 'the birth of tragedy' (2014: 194).

⁵⁶ Paglia overlooks or ignores several nuances in Nietzsche's philosophy. One example is how Paglia simplifies Nietzsche's idea of 'will to power', which should not be condensed down to a primeval and aggressive urge to gain supremacy (a common misconception also appropriated by Nazism), but rather a broader drive of self-overcoming and self-transformation; a conscious channelling of one's instinctive impulses toward productive and creative purposes.

⁵⁷ Freud's division between grief and melancholy (1917) is mirrored in Clark's differentiation between *ecological grief* as 'an emotional experience brought on by the actual or anticipated loss of cherished natural spaces, ecosystems, species, etc. caused by environmental change' (Cunsolo & Ellis 2018a, quoted in Clark 2020: 61) and *Anthropocene horror* that 'need not be anchored to any particular place, but which are both everywhere and anywhere' (Clark 2020: 61). In a Nordic context, Torsten Bøgh Thomsen has also studied the schism of eco-grief and climate melancholy in the article 'Lykke i ulykkens tid: Økosorg og klimamelankoli i Victor Boy Lindholms *Guld* og Theis Ørntofts *Digte 2014*' (2016).

⁵⁸ 'Begreppet melankoli har åtminstone tre dimensioner: ett stämningsläge, en känsla och en sjukdom' (Johannisson 2009: 29).

⁵⁹ Similarly, Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia* (2011) also vividly illustrates how all three aspects of melancholia interrelate and co-exist, as the characters' psychological depression unfolds alongside pervasive feelings of anxiety, despair, and hopelessness, and an impending ecological catastrophe in the form of the planet Melancholia's collision with Earth.

⁶⁰ 'Att varken ha förlorat eller vunnit' (Ekelöf, 'Melancholia,' in *Färjesång*, 1941).

⁶¹ *Haltefanden* is a Danish and Norwegian name for the Devil, who in Nordic folklore is described as a limping and often hooved creature.

⁶² The film draws on a long-standing cultural association between witchcraft and motherhood. Historically, both women and witches have been granted authority primarily within the domestic sphere just as traditionally female-coded attributes are linked to imageries of the witch, who flies on brooms and makes potions in caldrons. The witch then appears as a distorted mirror of the mother figure – not nurturing, self-sacrificing and devoted, but independent, childless, ambitious, sexually autonomous, and unmarried.

⁶³ Like Mulvey (1975) and Kristeva (1982), Creed argues that whenever women are represented as monstrous, it is almost always in relation to mothering or reproductive functions (2024: 9). In her application of abjection theory to the 'monstrous-feminine', Creed examines archetypes of female monstrosity which either interlock with the fear of female generative power, as it is embodied in the primordial archaic mother in *Alien* (Scott 1979); the monstrous womb in *The Brood* (Cronenberg 1979); the castrating mother in *Psycho* (Hitchcock 1960); the cultural association of female sexuality with sin, perversion or the exclusion of male desire, as exemplified by the possessed girl masturbating in *The Exorcist* (Friedkin 1973); the lesbian vampires in *The Hunger* (Scott 1983); and the menstruating witch in *Carrie* (De Palma 1976).

⁶⁴ 'genom att ställa det manliga förnuftet mot den kvinnliga och onda naturen'; 'manligt och kvinnligt, gott och ont, lust och död' (Malmberg 2009).

⁶⁵ 'en uppsättning åsikter som under hundratals år har förknippat kvinnan med naturens oregerlighet och grymhet'; 'från den natur som blivit ett argument för deras avrättning' (Wennström 2009).

⁶⁶ 'Jeg skal heller ikke skjule, at jeg faktisk aldrig har set de værste billeder i Antichrist, men har lukket øjnene under ben-gennemboring, testikel-smadrang og klitorektomi' (Rösing 2011: 157).

⁶⁷ An application was submitted to the Swedish Ethical Review Authority on 16 November 2022 for the project titled 'Reader Reception and Affective Response to the Female Antagonist in Horror Literature' (DNR: 2022-06228-01). The decision read: 'The Swedish Ethical Review Authority rejects the application, meaning it will not be considered for review', with the following reasoning: 'The proposed project does not involve any intervention on a research subject or other procedures as defined in Section 4 of the Ethics Review Act. Therefore, the study is not subject to Sections 3-4 of the Ethics Review Act and does not require ethical review'.

⁶⁸ Participants are referred to by pseudonyms in order to support readability and to foreground their situated contributions, while each quote has a source code indicating its origin, where the letters identify the data source, and the number indicates the participant's unique ID. Hence GD P# refers to a participant in the group discussion, SV R# to a respondent in the *Vand* survey, and SD R# to a respondent in the *Delilas lokker* survey. All names have been anonymised and the master key linking names and codes is held securely by the author.

⁶⁹ I do not analyse the emotions from a clinical psychological standpoint; rather, mine is a literary-philosophical and discursive focus on the sociality of human affect. This aligns with Felski's conceptualisation of modes of reader engagement as 'neither intrinsic literary properties nor independent psychological states, but denote multi-leveled interactions between texts and readers' (2008: 14), underscoring that the modes of engagement function as analytic tools for tracing dynamic reader-text interactions rather than psychological diagnoses.

⁷⁰ Ahmed would immediately oppose any such valuation of affects as being either negative or positive, as she believes such assumptions are themselves constructed. However, important nuances are at play here. While Ngai's 'ugly feelings' are often socially *perceived* and *experienced* as negative, she does not claim that they possess any inherent or universal value. In this sense, the negativity relates not to any intrinsic quality of the affects themselves, but to their tendency to suspend agency. In line with Spinoza's idea of how positive affects invigorate the body while negative affects dull it (1997: 30-31), Ngai's negative or ugly feelings – similar to critical recognition – must instead be understood as affects that have a *suspending* effect on the subjects who feel them. Yet, this does not mean that ugly feelings are useless; rather, as Ngai argues, they possess a critical potential: a subtle counterforce that seeks to expose structural injustice.

⁷¹ By rightfully, I do not mean a universal moral or legal standard, but a socially, relationally grounded legitimacy of recognition – recognition granted successfully where it is warranted based on mutual acknowledgement, inclusion, and perceived relevance or belonging to a particular cultural or narrative context.

⁷² 'Hvis Luna havde været enebarn, ville det måske være gået ubemærket hen et år eller to endnu, men man skulle bare sætte hende ved siden af Lærke, og så stod det som i neon' (*Vand* 2016: 62).

⁷³ 'få hende til at se normal ud' (*Vand* 2016: 63); 'sorte blodårer dækker hele hendes krop nu' (72).

⁷⁴ 'Luna blev forvist til loftet, da de var tolv' (*Vand* 2016: 62); 'Det var deres far, der først besluttede, at nu var det nok. En sen lørdag aften fandt han det varmeste tøj, der passede hende, pakkede en rygsæk med mad og drikke og sendte hende ud i skoven bag huset. Sagde, at hun skulle gemme sig. De ville hente hende, når de var klar. Han sagde, at djævlébørn altid overlever. Satan ville tage sig af hende' (62).

⁷⁵ 'forældrene håbede, at hun aldrig ville komme tilbage' (*Vand* 2016: 65).

⁷⁶ 'Folk var begyndt at snakke. Luna opførte sig underligt. Stirrede. Før sammen, når hun så ting, der ikke var der. Snakkede om spøgelser og genfærd. Folk kaldte hende "den stakkels, lille

pige". Sagde, at hun var ved at blive skør. Mindedes, hvor meget potentiale, hun engang havde haft. Nogle gange skulle man tro, at de allerede anså hende for død' (Vand 2016: 62).

⁷⁷ For this reason, I maintain a distinction between antagonism and monstrosity. *Antagonism* refers primarily to a narrative function: the figure that structures conflict, danger, or opposition within the plot, while *monstrosity* refers to a broader cultural, affective, and symbolic category tied to bodily deviation, category instability, norm transgression, and the production of otherness. Although horror texts often align these two dimensions, I find they do not necessarily coincide.

⁷⁸ Davis enlarges on this, stating that empathy 'in the broadest sense refers to the reaction of one individual to the observed experiences of another' (1983: 113). In narratives such as horror movies, which often feature graphic violence and suffering, highly empathetic individuals may find themselves deeply connected to the characters. Studies suggest that such individuals develop strong associations with characters in distress, experiencing intense emotional reactions to the characters' painful events (Tamborini 1991; Tamborini et al. 1990). These individuals can even feel as though the suffering of the characters is actually happening to them, underscoring the emotional resonance of recognition-as-empathy in horror literature and film.

⁷⁹ Here, Frida explains her feelings by referring to Gillian Flynn's debut novel *Sharp Objects* (2006). Thus, another form of recognition arises, but of another fictional work, not herself, echoing what Felski calls alignment-as-identification (2020); a formalist form of identification concerning the way in which texts shape the reader's access to and engagement with its content; that is, the language, focalisation, narrative style, and other devices that drive the plot, and which, according to Felski, 'can strongly affect its power to resonate with particular audiences' (2020: 95). Other participants made similar associations, including references to the creepypasta internet meme Slenderman (2009), Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974), and George Cockcroft's *The Dice Man* (1971). This kind of reference density is to be expected, especially since it is typical of the horror genre to repeat and remake narratives, well-known formulas, and copy-pasted tropes and themes. Despite this, the horror genre remains popular among audiences and readers, which is a paradox that has intrigued horror research over the years (Carroll 1990; Clover 1992; Tudor 1997; Andrade & Cohen 2007; Bantinaki 2012). One possible answer to this could be that the genre's high intertextuality not only challenges, but also fosters fear; that one story can parasitise another, thereby benefiting from its horror, though this often comes at the price of predictability, which may seem a high price to pay for a genre that seems to rely on shock effects, chaos, and suspense. Nevertheless, the intertextuality of horror is not solely an occasion for numbing predictability, but also helps to cultivate suspense-filled expectations that reactivates stored emotion, acquired in other contexts; a kind of accumulation of affect, facilitated by recognition and misrecognition. From an Ahmedian perspective, it is not the literature or film that is scary, but rather the reader or viewer who is afraid, because of what they already (re)know and associate with something frightening or dangerous. In other words, it is in the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar that horror stories reach their zenith.

⁸⁰ The definition of white-knucklers can vary from study to study. I follow Clasen, Andersen & Schjoedt (2019).

⁸¹ Rationalisation can be seen as a way of employing antecedent strategies in managing fear, akin to how horror audiences remind themselves that zombies are just actors to avoid fear responses (Gross 1998; 2015). Such strategies work to prevent fear from escalating into an uncontrollable emotional response, which is harder to manage once it takes hold (Öhman & Mineka 2001).

⁸² This sense of recognition persisted even though the male antagonist is, textually speaking, a supernatural ghost haunting the holiday home; participants nevertheless responded to him as if the threat were realistic rather than otherworldly (see Chapter Six).

⁸³ 'Luna hæver ikke stemmen, mens hun siger det. Lyder hverken vred eller ked af det. Hun siger det bare, som om det er en nødvendig konsekvens. Ligesom to plus tre giver fem' (*Vand*, 2016: 71–72).

⁸⁴ 'Hun bliver stædig og stridbar og gider ikke lytte' (*Vand*, 2016: 61).

⁸⁵ 'Du lod dem gøre det ved mig. Da du var et barn, det forstår jeg godt. Børn har ikke den slags magt. Men senere. Du blev ved med ikke at gøre noget. Du ville være blevet ved med at lade dem gøre det' (*Vand*, 2016: 75).

⁸⁶ 'Med en autofiktionens tsunami har han översvämmat inte bara Norden. En skoningslös epik om resan från pojke till familjefar, intensivt realistisk, fanatiskt detaljerad – mer Balzac än Becker' (Wästberg 2019).

⁸⁷ For examples of the novel's ambivalent critical reception, see Jake Kerridge's review of *The Morning Star* in *The Telegraph* (30 September 2021), which concludes that Knausgaard's 'silly pulp fiction is a baffling failure'; Sam Leith's review in *The Spectator* (2 October 2021), which describes the novel as 'both fascinating and frustrating'; and the *Kristeligt Dagblad* review (4 December 2020), which asks whether the novel is 'Devilishly good or mind-numbingly dull?' ['Djævelsk god eller smask-kedelig'].

⁸⁸ 'Fri fantasi, eller ennå verre hallusinasjoner eller galskap'; 'forskjellige typer stoffer' (NRK Radio 2020).

⁸⁹ 'Er vi i stand til å ta det inn?' (NRK Radio 2020)

⁹⁰ Not to be confused with socialist realism, the Soviet Union's ideologically prescribed art doctrine.

⁹¹ Although the Nordic literary tradition has historically been characterised by a strong preference for realism (Langkjær 2002; Jenzen 2013), I do not consider 'Nordic realism' as a fixed, monolithic category, but rather an enduring inclination toward realistic narrative forms in the region.

⁹² In what follows, I use certain terms in a broadly descriptive sense to denote narrative elements that challenge the boundaries of mimetic realism rather than as strictly defined genre categories, though I generally use 'supernatural' for diegetic violations of mimetic reality; 'fantasy' or the fantastic for encounters with, or the imagining of, impossible or improbable

phenomena; and ‘enchantment’ for an affective or aesthetic experience of wonder – of being charmed, absorbed, or under a spell. While the supernatural and the fantastic describe similar narrative or ontological qualities, enchantment designates the reader’s or viewer’s affective response to such qualities (for a discussion of enchantment as an aesthetic experience of absorption and wonder, see Felski (2008)).

⁹³ In Brandes’ day, the Finnish writer Minna Canth, the Swedish writer Per Hallström, and the Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen also recognised his importance. Hallström considered Brandes ‘the man who gave [him] the first glimpses of the great wide world’ (Hallström to Brandes, 23 November 1897, in *Brevveksling*, Borup 1939), while Ibsen believed he had opened ‘a yawning gulf between yesterday and today’ (Ibsen 1964: 122). And according to the literary critic Toini Havu (1997: xi), Brandes was Minna Canth’s intellectual parent.

⁹⁴ Some trace a direct line from Brandes to the rise of social realism as a genre in early twentieth-century Nordic literature, which is also closely aligned with proletarian literature and its politically charged portrayal of the working class’s authentic life on the social margins (Naess 1982; Bjerring-Hansen & Wilkens 2023).

⁹⁵ Analysing over 800 Danish and Norwegian novels from 1870–1899, Jens Bjerring-Hansen and Matthew Wilkens find a striking rise of realism, as ‘around 1870 some 20% of the novels were predicted to be realist. By 1880, it was more than half, while by 1890 the share of realism was well above 80 %’ (2023: 348).

⁹⁶ In her brief 1939 study of the Gothic novel’s impact on Danish Romantic literature, ‘Skærøromanens Indflydelse paa danske romantiske Værker,’ Marie Louise Eibe argues that Denmark never developed a distinct Gothic literary tradition.

⁹⁷ Interestingly, all three authors have also depicted feminine monstrosity. In ‘Sphinxen’ (1820, ‘The Sphinx’), Ingemann’s character Goldini exudes an almost diabolic femininity and is repeatedly referred to as ‘a monster’, while Andersen’s ‘Tante Tandpine’ (1872, *Auntie Toothache* 1949) portrays a demoness with torture instruments for fingers. In Karen Blixen’s Gothic tales ‘there are no normal human beings’ [‘der ... ingen normale Mennesker findes’], as literary critic Frederik Schyberg points out, but only feminised men in women’s clothing and mannish women (*Berlingske Tidende*, 25 September 1935). In “The Supper at Elsinore” (1934), Blixen even strikes an ecohorrific nerve, when introducing Fanny, who is half woman, half bird.

⁹⁸ Likewise in *Nordic Gothic* (2020), one of the few books on the subject, Swedish literary scholars also marvel at the underresearched state of Nordic Gothic literature: ‘It is striking that Nordic Gothic remains a more or less unexplored territory in the internationally extensive field of Gothic Studies’ (2020: 1).

⁹⁹ ‘Den danske litteraturhistorieskrivning ignorerer eller foragter genren i en sådan grad, at den normalt skrives helt ud af historien’ (Dalgaard, 2015: 7).

¹⁰⁰ ‘Der forstaar sig, den hyggelige Dansker har ikke Tyskerens Magi’ (Jansen, 1958: 131).

¹⁰¹ The same can be said of the Swedish parallel to Andersen, the author Astrid Lindgren, whose more fantastical, darker, or melancholic works such as *Mio, min Mio* (1954, *Mio, My Son*

1956) and *Brøderna Lejonhjärta* (1973, *The Brothers Lionheart* 1979) are often overshadowed by her more widely recognised children's books, particularly the *Pippi Longstocking* and *Emil of Lönneberga* series.

¹⁰² The implication is that fantastical or speculative literature is primarily for children – 'a juvenile fancy, an immature and sensationalist aesthetic' – to be rejected by more mature writers (Gamer 2002: 89). Dalggaard makes the same point that 'science fiction literature for adults is largely invisible here at home' (2015: 7, *my translation*). In response, the Danish Horror Company has made it their mission to demonstrate the appeal of horror to adult readers: 'We also strive to spread the horror genre to an adult audience ... Plenty of good horror have been written and are being written for children and young adults – and some of them are also worth reading as adults, but where is the horror that is primarily aimed at adults?' (www.danskhorrorselskab.dk)

¹⁰³ 'Er det den same Andersen, vi kender? Er det digteren eller hans skygge, der er blevet verdensberømt' (de Mylius 2004: 35).

¹⁰⁴ A similar transformation took place when the work was translated into Swedish under the title *Sju Romantiska Berättelser* (1934, *Seven Romantic Tales* 1934).

Apart from Blixen, other female writers who use Gothic features are Elisabeth Hansen in *Dido og Don Pedro* (1821), Hanne Irgens in *Familien von Heidenforsth* (1820-22) and Astrid Ehrencron-Kidde in *Gothic tales* (1901-1904), in which the poor heroines of the novels are exposed to demons, poison, murder, forbidden desire, and gruesome death.

¹⁰⁵ 'I hele den danske Litteratur findes ikke nogen bog af denne Art, paa Engelsk er der mange, og de læses gerne. Englænderne ynder saadan en Vrølebog ... Jeg ved ikke andet Ord for Bøger, hvori der hænder alt muligt fantastisk. De kender vel Hoffmanns Eventyr? Det er noget af samme Art og dog ikke det samme. Det er heller ikke Edgar Poe, men alligevel ... hvis vi skriver saadan paa Dansk, maa det blive en Skuffelse for Folk, som venter en Bog med Mening i. Og det venter danske Læsere altid' (Jacobsen, *Politiken* 1 May 1934, in *Blixeniana* 1980: 163)

¹⁰⁶ Norway was part of Denmark until 1814 and long after was influenced by Danish culture, including Brandes' Modern Breakthrough, which may explain why the two countries are so similar in their lack of interest in a coherent Gothic tradition.

¹⁰⁷ Together with Gerd Karin Omdal's study *Grenseerfaringer: Fantastisk litteratur i Norge og omegn* (2010), this remains one of the few book-length studies about the fantastic and Gothic traditions in Norwegian literature.

¹⁰⁸ 'Store deler av den fantastiske litteraturen har med andre ord tilbrakt en skyggetilværelse i norsk litteraturhistorie' (1998: 13).

¹⁰⁹ 'romantiker, romantisk impresjonist, naturalist, nyromantiker, ungdomsfatter, nyrealist, premodernist og modernist' (Howlid Wærp 1998: 105).

¹¹⁰ 'Flere af hendes Bøger er mere dramatiske Udkast end Romaner' (Bukdahl 1924: 188); 'kontrasten mellom de romantiske og de realistiske innslag i Ragnhild Jølsens ... produksjon

først og fremst er symptomer på en personlig konflikt, og at denne konflikt avspeiler seg i stil og fortellerkunst' (Nettun 1972: 157).

¹¹¹ 'Den hardbarka sosialrealismen har nestet tatt knekken på den norske skrekkromanen' ('Gross: Nifst på norsk' by Øyvind Holen in *Urban* 1994).

¹¹² The thirteen books were *Samlede eventyr* (1841-1844, *Norwegian Folktales* 1963) by Asbjørnsen and Moe, *Troll 1 & 2* (1891-1892, 'Troll 1 & 2') by Jonas Lie, *Spøgelsesskibet* (1908, 'The Ghost Ship') by Sigurd Mathiesen, *Trollelgen* (1921, *The Trail of the Elk* 1922) by Mikkjel Fønhus, *Enhjørningen* (1963, 'The Unicorn') by André Bjerke, *Jernjomfruen* (1971, 'The Iron Maiden') by Frithjof Spalder, the anthology *Drømmen, draugen og daudlingen* (1978, 'The Dream, the Draug, and the Dead One') edited by André Bjerke, *Pinocchio-papirerne* (1978, 'The Pinocchio Papers') by Tor Åge Bringsværd, *Mørke over Dunwich* (1991, 'Darkness over Dunwich') by Øyvind Myhre, *Helvetesfabel* (1991, 'A Fable from Hell') by Nikolai Frobenius, *Den lange drømmen* (1992, 'The Long Dream') by Trond Buland, *Blod* (1993, 'Blood') by Ulf Tannberg and *Skyggelandet* (1993, 'Shadowland') by Tom Egeland (Øyvind Holen in *Urban* 1994).

¹¹³ Other than Yvonne Leffler's *I skräckens lustgård: Skräckromantik i svenska 1800-talsromaner* (1991), earlier influential studies on Swedish Gothic include the doctoral dissertations *De mörka labyrinterna: Gotiken i litteratur, film och rollspel* by Mattias Fyhr (2003), *Strindberg och skräcken* by Henrik Johnsson (2009), and Sofia Wijkmark's *Hemsökelse: Gotiken i sex berättelser av Selma Lagerlöf* (2009). See also Wijkmark's article "Naturen och det kusliga: Nedslag i samtida svensk skönlitteratur" (2012), which discusses uncanny ecological elements in contemporary Swedish literature.

¹¹⁴ 'Det är først med Erik Johan Stagnelius, Clas Livijn och Carl Jonas Love Almqvist som svensk litteratur får mer genomförda eksempler på skräckromantikes mysterieskapande och suggestiva berättarteknik' (Leffler, 2008b: 2).

¹¹⁵ 'Så sent som 2009 var den rådande synen, också bland litteraturvetare, att svensk skräcklitteratur föddes med John Ajvide Lindqvist' (Fyhr 2017: 9).

¹¹⁶ 'Det finns nästan ingen skräck skriven på svenska. Varför inte? Ingen aning. Rädslan för det låsta, mörka rummet där något krälar i hörnet är universell. Men tills nu har det där rummet funnits i USA eller England. Nu ändrar vi på det' (2004: 10).

¹¹⁷ 'någon egentlig tradition av skräckförfattare förekom knappast före honom. Åtminstone inte här i Sverige' (2009: 17); '*Låt den rätte komma in* var den första svenska i skräckgenren' (*Aftonbladet* 2006).

¹¹⁸ In the Finnish context, this connection is particularly visible in the cultural legacy of the national epic *Kalevala*, which continues to shape both Finnish national identity and literary imagination (Mehtonen & Savolainen 2013). Drawing on oral folk poetry and mythic narratives collected across Karelia and eastern Finland, the *Kalevala* is a foundational reservoir of mythic figures and narrative motifs.

¹¹⁹ Arne Melberg adds an important nuance to an otherwise rose-tinted view of realism by highlighting that it did not always guarantee critical acclaim. In *Fördömda realister* (1985, 'Condemned realists'), he argues that certain authors – such as Cederborgh, Benedictsson and Strindberg – have been marginalised, misunderstood or criticised by both contemporaries and later critics because of their realistic portrayals of society, sexuality, and morality.

¹²⁰ This tradition also includes Selma Lagerlöf and more contemporary writers such as Johannes Anyuru, Karin Tidbeck, Charlotte Weitze, Johanna Sinnisalo and Sjöon, who all consciously blend realism with speculative fiction, often taking their inspiration from Nordic folklore.

¹²¹ As Dirk Johanssen points out, the critical realism initiated by Brandes gained significant influence by which 'modern literature fundamentally changed the understanding of *religion*' (2016: 593, original emphasis).

¹²² A related tendency in contemporary Finnish literature is the 'Finnish weird', a mode of writing that blends everyday realism with uncanny or speculative elements. As Heidi Keinonen notes, the term emerged to describe works that blur the boundaries between science fiction, fantasy, and realism, often allowing the fantastic to emerge gradually from otherwise recognisably realistic worlds (2022: 45, 47–48).

¹²³ Not to say that the fusion of realism and fantasy is entirely new. Although Max Weber's famous proclamation of a 'disenchantment of the world' led to a 'widespread association of modernity with disenchantment', Saler considers it too simplistic and even disregarding of those 'nineteenth and early twentieth century thinkers who didn't fit this paradigm, and who attempted to reconcile enchantment with the rational and secular tenets of modernity' (2004: 138–139).

¹²⁴ Glotfelty and Fromm's definition of ecocriticism as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (1996: xviii) underscores the importance of understanding how literary works interact with, reflect, and shape our perceptions of the natural world; however, ecomythology does more than simply examine the environmental setting in literature; it also interrogates the ways in which narratives imbue nature with symbolic, spiritual, and mythological significance. As such, it explores the intersections between cultural representations of nature – often shaped by folklore, myth, and collective memory – and the ecological realities they both reflect and distort.

¹²⁵ While folk horror tends to follow a relatively formulaic narratological structure – anchored in Scovell's four-link chain – works with the folk ecohorror trope often adopt more fluid, less prescriptive forms. These narratives emphasise complex atmospheric immersion, ecological anxiety, and mythic entanglement with nature over rigid plot conventions. Interestingly, Scovell himself acknowledges this genre fluidity. Quoting Andy Paciorek's evocative metaphor, he underscores folk horror's resistance to strict categorisation: 'One may as well attempt to build a box the exact shape of mist; for like the mist, folk horror is atmospheric and sinuous. It can creep from and into different territories yet leave no universal defining mark

of its exact form' (Scovell 2017: 14). What Scovell describes here is also a defining feature of the Nordic ecohorror genre – previously noted by Tidwell (2021) – who also presents ecohorror as a hybrid form with an elusive, shape-shifting quality. This genre fluidity contributes to its evocation of the uncanny and the unresolved, as it slips across and between established narrative and generic boundaries.

¹²⁶ The intertextual resonance between *Midsommar* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) is evident in their shared staging of feminine psychological distress as inseparable from spatial and environmental conditions. In both works, the female protagonist is confined to a seemingly benign yet ultimately coercive setting – the rural commune versus the secluded mansion – where patriarchal authority operates through forms of gaslighting, rationalisation, and emotional regulation. This produces a dynamic of affective suppression, in which grief, anxiety, and anger are minimised, internalised, or dismissed as irrational. At the same time, both texts render the surroundings as an active, quasi-organic force: the wallpaper's proliferating, vegetal patterns and the pulsating Hårga landscape function not merely as backdrops, but as affective surfaces through which repressed perception begins to take form. In each case, the protagonist develops an intensified sensitivity to these environments, gradually perceiving what others cannot or refuse to see – a process that blurs the boundary between hallucination and insight. This culminates in a transformation that teeters between madness and emancipation, as both women move from states of containment to forms of embodied, if ambivalent, agency. The two works mirror one another in their exploration of how feminine affect is first disciplined and pathologised, and subsequently re-emerges as a disruptive, potentially liberating force.

¹²⁷ 'Som moderna karakterer, lefvande i en öfvergångstid [...] vacklande, söndergångna, blandade af gammalt och nytt' (Strindberg 1888: xi).

¹²⁸ *Áttatupa* is described in an Icelandic saga as elderly people voluntarily throwing themselves off cliffs to their deaths. Yet, it has been proved that such ritual suicides never actually took place (Kuusela 2021).

¹²⁹ While Timothy Morton describes this 'bright green' ecology as masculine rather than feminine (2010: 16), *Midsommar* deliberately inverts this coding as part of a larger critique that is, in many ways, not unlike Morton's own. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen similarly picks up on Morton's notion of bright green in *Prismatic Ecologies* (2013), describing it as 'too solitary, a romantic color through which individuals commune with nature and arrive at personal revelations and solipsistic calm – as if nature were an angel or messenger. To obtain such revelatory power the wilderness must be imagined as a purified place' (xxi).

¹³⁰ The English publication of *Økologi, samfunn og livsstil* (1976), translated and edited by David Rothenberg and published in 1989 as *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy* is heavily revised, so I have returned to the Norwegian original as it differs considerably (in terms of content, less so in meaning) from the scaled down English version. 'Alt har en indre sammenheng. Vi er ikke de samme uten disse forbindelsene. Økologiens behandling av

biosfæren under ett er egent til å vise denne indre sammenhengen, og dermed også at mennesket ikke er noen privilegert dyreart. Vi lever under de samme betingelsene som alt annet liv. Vi står ikke utenfor resten av naturen og kan derfor ikke skalte og valte med den uten at vi selv blir endret. Vi er en del av økosfæren like intimt som vi er en del av vårt samfunn' (Næss 1991: 265).

¹³¹ The term 'folkloresque' was introduced by the folklorists Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey Tolbert (2016) to describe the ways in which contemporary cultural products evoke or imitate folklore in order to create an aura of authenticity and cultural tradition. Rather than presenting genuine folkloric practices, the folkloresque refers to cultural artefacts that resemble or simulate folklore, thereby encouraging audiences to interpret them as rooted in ancient traditions. In film and television, folkloresque strategies often manifest through invented rituals, stylised mythologies and aestheticised representations of folk traditions that draw on recognisable cultural symbols without necessarily corresponding to historically documented practices. In the case of *Midsommar*, Aster constructs a deliberately ambiguous folkloric universe composed of runic iconography, midsummer rituals, pagan symbolism and pastoral aesthetics. While these elements evoke Scandinavian folk traditions and national romantic imagery, they are largely fictional or heavily stylised, thereby producing an atmosphere that feels culturally authentic while remaining narratively flexible.

¹³² As Vandana Shiva (1988) explains, deep ecology has primarily concerned itself with how greedy growth strategies of the Anthropocene have caused ecological demolition, while turning a blind eye to how these power structures have been bannered by a privileged class, race and gender, while those of marginalised demographics suffer alongside nature.

¹³³ 'Uthark' refers to a theory that Scandinavian runes are not a script but a code with hidden meanings. While this theory has never gained much validation in academia, Josh stumbles upon the Uthark code carved into a large stone in Hårga commune. Although the book is a fabricated movie prop and the Uthark theory has never been recognised in runic studies, Aster manages to highlight a link between white supremacy and the belief systems of the Hårgans.

¹³⁴ 'Stoppa massinvandringen till Hälsingland – rösta på Fritt Norr i höst' (00:23:55).

¹³⁵ The German Völkisch Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries consolidated a romanticised love of the great outdoors with the era's racial nationalist politics, which then, in many cases, progressed into racism and anti-Semitism.

¹³⁶ 'den kraftigaste värmeböljan i mannaminne' (00:37:45).

¹³⁷ The film's portrayal of emotionally detached masculinity resonates with contemporary debates about the epidemic of male loneliness in Western society, and especially in the US. Recent sociological and psychological research has linked traditional masculine norms centred on emotional stoicism, self-reliance, and restrained vulnerability to increasing experiences of loneliness, social isolation, and difficulties forming emotionally supportive relationships among men (Nordin et al. 2024).

¹³⁸ ‘2000-talet måste bli kvinnornas århundrade’; ‘det är de unga kvinnorna och omsorgen som är framtiden’; ‘kvinnors dragning till feministisk och grön politik’; and ‘De förtappade männen inom extremhögern får all uppmärksamhet. Men det är de unga kvinnorna och omsorgen som är framtiden’ (Jensen, *Dagens Nyheter*, 11 June 2025).

¹³⁹ When Rachel Carson first published *Silent Spring*, her book was highly criticised by American Cyanamid biochemist Robert White-Stevens, who derided her as ‘a fanatic defender of the cult of the balance of nature,’ (Lear 1997: 434) warning that ‘if man were to faithfully follow the teachings of Miss Carson, we would return to the Dark Ages’ (CBS 1963). Curiously, his description correlates with the cult leader Siv as well as the premodern matriarchal commune that adheres to a fanatical and feminised ecofundamentalist ideology where patriarchal dichotomies collapse, Western world-views are inverted, and ecofeminism and ecofascism converge.

¹⁴⁰ The film’s naming conventions further reinforce the symbolic opposition between the Hårga commune and the American visitors. Several members of Hårga have names associated with Old Norse mythology, Scandinavian folklore, or pre-Christian Nordic traditions such as Siv (or Sif), recalling the Norse fertility goddess associated with earth and harvest. By contrast, the American male visitors have names strongly tied to Christian and biblical traditions: Mark and Josh derive from the evangelists Mark and Joshua, while Christian himself is an overtly allegorical figure whose sacrificial fate at the film’s climax is a grotesque inversion of the Christ figure. Dani, however, occupies a more ambiguous position. As Clover (1992: 40) has famously observed in her theorisation of the ‘Final Girl’, female horror protagonists frequently bear gender-ambiguous or androgynous names, positioning them between masculine and feminine coded roles. Dani’s name subtly aligns her with this tradition, reflecting her unstable position between the individualist American worldview and the affective collectivity of Hårga.

¹⁴¹ This also resonates with the Swedish Midsummer tradition of young women picking flowers and placing them under their pillows in the hopes of dreaming of a future husband (00:43:46). However, in the context of *Midsommar*, this tradition takes on a darker, more subversive twist. The ritualistic offerings of flowers, associated with fertility and femininity, are turned into a tool of manipulation and control, as Maja, in stark contrast to the passive expectation, actively uses magic, potions, and love spells to draw Christian in, turning the metaphor of ‘blooming’ into one of predatory agency.

¹⁴² In *The Encyclopedia of Ghosts and Spirits* (1992), Rosemary Ellen Guiley presents the ‘banshee’ as a female spirit in Irish folklore and an omen of death who appears ‘all in white or all in red. Her eyes are fiery red from continual crying for the about-to-be-departed ... The cry reportedly is so mournful that it is unmistakably the sound of doom’ (2007: 40).

¹⁴³ In an interview on YouTube, Ari Aster explained how the Hårga midsommar festivities have been pieced together by tradition, folklore, and ‘pulling from a lot of different spiritual movements ... hundreds of things woven together’ (Rotten Tomatoes 2019, 13:22).

¹⁴⁴ What began as an internet meme of Lucille Bluth from the American television show *Arrested Development* (2005) unapologetically stating ‘good for her’ in response to a young mother releasing her car’s handbrake, sending herself and her children into a nearby lake, has evolved into a genre-defining trope recognised by internet culture.

¹⁴⁵ The term ‘white crimes’ is my coinage for the intersection of environmental exploitation and colonial appropriation in Arctic contexts, playing on the multiple meanings of ‘whiteness’: referring both to the snowy polar landscapes targeted by the crimes and to the predominantly white, Western actors who perpetrate them, thereby invoking the notion of white-collar crime and the profit-seeking corporate logics that underpin such exploitation.

¹⁴⁶ While my use of the term ‘white ecology’ draws on Herzogenrath’s discussion, it differs in scope and emphasis. Herzogenrath’s concept of white ecology is deliberately double: it is both a critique of whiteness as a normative framework and an attempt to develop alternative ways of engaging with the ecological possibilities and complexities associated with white environments and landscapes. In the chapter that follows, however, the term ‘white ecology’ is used first and foremost in a critical sense to describe a specific dominant Western imaginary of Arctic Nature structured by ideals of purity, openness, sublimity, emptiness, the supernatural, and fantasies of untouched lands of opportunity. The object of critique is therefore not the concept itself, but the worldview it describes.

¹⁴⁷ Though this HBO series is not a Nordic production, its inclusion here is justified by its strong intertextual and aesthetic dialogue with Nordic traditions: it draws heavily on Nordic noir, is narratively set in the Arctic region, was filmed in Iceland, features both Greenlandic and Icelandic actors, and references Inuit mythology. More importantly, it illustrates how Nordic ecohorror not only transcends international borders, but also inspires aesthetic migration beyond the region.

¹⁴⁸ The name of the research station, Tsalal, is an ancient Hebrew word used in the Old Testament, meaning ‘to be or grow dark’, which supports the duplexity of the weatherly circumstances as well as the overall uncanny atmosphere of the series. It is also a literary reference to Gothic writer Edgar Allan Poe’s novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) in which the title character travels to the South Pole and ends up on the island of Tsalal, where the initially friendly locals turn hostile. This very island even appears again 60 years later in Jules Verne’s novel *An Antarctic Mystery* (1897), but is also central to the American horror writer Thomas Ligotti’s ‘The Tsalal’ (1994) about a biblical apocalypse integrated into Poe’s cosmicism.

¹⁴⁹ ‘kvinnliga detektiver eller brottsutredare har inte sällan blivit gestaltade som “kvinnor i manskläder”, om än sällan i rent bokstavlig bemärkelse’ (Kärrholm & Bergman 2011: 196).

¹⁵⁰ Saga: ‘Extremt fokuserad, singel, framgångsrik i yrket, tydliga mål och välplanerad.’ Hans: ‘Ja, du hör ju själv.’ Saga: ‘Vadå?’ Hans: ‘Ja, du hör ju själv.’ Saga: ‘Ja, alltså. Det är vår gärningsmans psykologiska profil.’ Hans: ‘Tycka du ska gå hem och sova nu’ (*Broen/Bron*: Season 1, episode 3, 00:47:48).

¹⁵¹ This configuration is also evident in earlier Nordic Arctic ecohorror texts such as the Danish author Peter Høeg's *Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* (1992, *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* 1993), where the protagonist Smilla, like Navarro, occupies multiple and contradictory positions – coloniser and colonised, rational scientist and attuned to the supernatural. Høeg's novel deconstructs gender norms, recounting a Greenlandic creation myth that posits two men at the beginning of the world, claiming that there is 'a natural acceptance in Greenland that each of the sexes contains the potential to become its opposite' (1993: 28) ['i Grønland selvfølgelig viden om, at hvert af de to køn i sig som mulighed bærer det modsatte' (1992: 36)]. Rather than stabilising identity, such narratives foreground ambiguity, contradiction, and epistemological plurality.

¹⁵² On the finale's deliberate ambiguity – and the interpretive split it provoked among viewers and critics between rational and supernatural explanations – see Roxana Hadadi, 'Issa López Wants You to Decide', (*Vulture*, 18 February 2024); Meredith Blake, 'Who (or what) killed the scientists? Issa López explains the "True Detective: Night Country" finale,' (*Los Angeles Times*, 18 February 2024); Josh Wigler, "'True Detective: Night Country" Finale's Ambiguous Ending Explained,' (*The Hollywood Reporter*, 19 February 2024); Megan McCluskey, 'Breaking Down True Detective: Night Country's Cryptic Finale – And Separating Reality From the Supernatural,' (*TIME*, 19 February 2024); Aja Romano, 'An attempt to reckon with True Detective: Night Country's bonkers season finale,' (*Vox*, 19 February 2024); and Jack King, 'All Your "True Detective: Night Country" Finale Questions Answered, by Showrunner Issa López', (*GQ*, 20 February 2024).

¹⁵³ 'alle kroppens udskilninger – hudflager, urin, lort, afklippede negle, menstruationsblod – fænomener der befinder sig i en betydningszone mellem kroppen og dens omverden, mellem subjekt og objekt, og på denne måde konfronterer os med vores egen flydende uafgrænselighed'; 'Kratene på tundraen var sådanne objekter ... De er hyper-objekter' (Ørntoft 2016: 57).

¹⁵⁴ 'ad disse veje indtager vi altså os selv og vores civilisations rester i monstrøse økologiske loops. De sidste rester af den tænkte grænse mellem natur og kultur er på denne måde endegyldigt forsvundet, liv og ikke-liv er "igen" vævet sammen, men på en ny, uprocessérbar og katastrofal måde. Animismens kosmologi er vendt tilbage, alt lever, men på en ny og uforståelig måde' (Ørntoft 2016: 58).

¹⁵⁵ 'en avsminkad version av Lisbeth Salander med självskaðebeteende och bortträngda minnen i bagaget' (Brodrej 2016).

¹⁵⁶ The relocation of Kaanq's inhabitants in the early twentieth century must be understood in the context of Danish colonial modernisation policies in Greenland, which sought to centralise populations and concentrate labour in emerging urban centres such as Nuuk. As *Auðnin* recounts, the settlement's history is marked by gradual depopulation, environmental hardship, and eventual abandonment: 'from the First World War onwards the settlement's population grew larger and larger, until it could no longer accommodate itself ... [and] a percentage of the residents [were encouraged] to move [north]' (Sigurðardóttir 2011:

73–74). While this process of depopulation and relocation is historically documented, the novel dramatises its consequences, portraying the abandonment of Kaanq as a slow unravelling of a community, culminating in famine, disappearance and death: ‘In the spring three men went there ... but found all of the residents dead from hardship and hunger ... their graves were never discovered’ (75). Significantly, the novel highlights how Indigenous interpretations of these events differ from Danish rationalisations and that colonial epistemologies often undermine local cosmologies (75). Kaanq emerges as both a historical and symbolic site of displacement, where environmental precarity, colonial intervention, and cultural erasure intersect.

¹⁵⁷ ‘Publiken ska gapa av förfäran och beundran’ (Expressen 2016).

¹⁵⁸ There are many overlaps between *Night Country* and *Midnattssol*: Danvers and Zadi (complicated relationship with motherhood); Navarro and Harnesk (queer and half-indigenous, struggling with their origin); mail-order bride (a Russian no-show for Hank and a Thai woman for Sparen Andersson); extreme climate (polar night and midnight sun); holiday celebrations (Christmas and Midsummer); a wise woman (the Sámi shaman and Rose); an unprofessional police force (both in location and conduct, corrupt and unlawful); the murder of an Indigenous activist prior to the storyline (Evelina Geatki and Annie Kowtok); the present-day case involves the murders of scientists, investors, local miners and police officers; female ghosts (spirit believed to be Annie Kowtok and the ghost of Evelina Geatki); rapacious mining concerns in secret collaboration with scientific researchers to cover up the consequences of their ecocrimes (black water or French nuclear waste); and, finally, the murderers’ familial relations to the victims, acting out of vengeance (Evelina’s brother and Annie’s sisterhood).

¹⁵⁹ ‘militanta unga aktivister eller som udda kufar’; ‘något mycket hemlighetsfullt i blicken’; ‘synsk och underlig’; ‘talar i gåtor’; ‘begränsar samernas roll i samhället – förr som renskötare, nu som rekvisita’ (Expressen 2016)

¹⁶⁰ ‘Många svenskar är helt ointresserade eller dåligt insatta i samernas politiska situation och då är populärkultur ett bra sätt att nå ut. Det är vårt mest effektiva vapen’ (Maxida Mäarak cited in Andersson 2016).

¹⁶¹ The distinction between Danvers and the Inuit women mirrors Freud’s difference between mourning and melancholia: in mourning, ‘it is the world that has become poor and empty’, while in melancholia, ‘it is the ego itself that becomes impoverished (1917: 246). The latter seems to be the case for Danvers whose personality, behaviour and sense of self lie in shatters after the loss of her son. Her grief is also a lonely one, leaving her disengaged, hard-bitten and closed off; ‘lacking in interest and as incapable of love’. Therefore, Danvers’ efforts *not* to feel undermine her sense of self, her involvement with the world, social skills and ultimately her humanity. The Inuit women, by contrast, embrace mourning as an active, communal process. In doing so, they enact Levinas’s understanding of vulnerability as openness and Marshall Sahlins’s notion of kinship as ‘living each other’s lives and dying each other’s

death' (2013: 28). Their shared sonic mourning fosters intercorporeality that allows them to carry the pain as a group.

¹⁶² While inspired by Menely and Ronda's notion of red ecology (2013), my primary focus shifts away from political economy and commodity circulation to corporeality, affect, reproduction, and transcorporeal embodiment in Nordic society and the ecohorror aesthetic.

¹⁶³ In the past decade, motherhood has emerged as an increasingly prominent theme in contemporary Nordic literature and literary scholarship, often foregrounding the bodily, affective and socially conflicted dimensions of maternal experience (Maja Lucas 2016; Monica Isakstuen 2016; Cecilie Lind 2019; Olga Ravn 2020; Josefine Klougart 2021; Pooneh Rohi 2021; Anna Axfors 2022). The prominence of these works has prompted literary scholars to speak of a distinct 'motherhood literature' and has generated an expanding field of research on literary representations of mothering and maternal subjectivity (Schwartz 2021; Henriksson, Williams & Fahlgren 2023; Hamm 2023; Björklund 2024).

¹⁶⁴ Ajvide Lindqvist's original text refers here specifically to the ambitious building project known as the Million Programme.

¹⁶⁵ Tschofen (2023) likewise explores *Border* using a feminist, new materialist framework centred on processes of maternal becoming; however, she concentrates on Abbasi's film adaptation and scenes specific to the cinematic version, particularly its emphasis on haptics, touch, and the concept of 'wilding', whereas I am concerned with Lindqvist's novella and the shift from passing and mimicry to relational and more-than-human modes of embodiment and reproduction.

¹⁶⁶ In this way, the film also reflects broader transformations within the Nordic region. While the Nordic welfare model has historically been associated with collectivism and social democracy, several scholars have argued that the region since the late twentieth century has undergone significant processes of neoliberalisation (Felman et al. 2008), here understood as a form of capitalism that promotes free markets, privatisation, and individual responsibility while limiting state intervention. This shift has also influenced family politics (Ellingsæter & Arnlaug 2006). As Finnish sociologist Minna Salmi notes, contemporary parenthood culture in Finland is increasingly shaped by 'the logic and ethos of the market' (2006: 146), by which family life becomes organised through market rationalities of performance, productivity, optimisation and competition.

¹⁶⁷ This quote is my own translation of the novella's original term 'tvillingsjälär' (*Gräns*, 2018: 55), rendered as 'kindred spirits' in Ebba Segerberg's English translation (*The Border*, 2013: 36).

¹⁶⁸ After all, classificatory impulses are widespread across both ecocriticism and horror studies, especially when dealing with phenomena as unruly as nature or horror. Noël Carroll distinguishes between art-horror and natural horror; Tzvetan Todorov identifies the fantastic, the marvellous, and the uncanny (1975); Jeffrey Jerome Cohen formulates *seven* theses on monster culture and later edits *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* (2013), dividing

ecology into *fifteen* colours 'beyond green'. Similarly, Lawrence Buell offers a 'checklist' of *four* descriptions validating 'environmental texts' (1995) and *four* criteria for identifying 'toxic discourse' (1998); Greg Garrad outlines six 'key concepts' of ecocriticism; and Timothy Morton moves between *three* 'threads' in *Dark Ecology* (2016) and *four* thematic reflections – 'space, subjectivity, environment, and poetics' – in *Ecology Without Nature* (2007: 19).

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What happens when Nordic landscapes long associated with recreational *friluftsliv* and the egalitarian rights to roam cease to be a source of comfort and belonging, and instead become uncannily unfamiliar?

Nordic Ecohorror investigates the rise of Nordic ecohorror across contemporary literature, film, and television, tracing how ecological disruptions and feminine forms of monstrosity challenge dominant Nordic imaginaries of national identity, social progressivism and environmental exceptionalism.

Spanning slashers to arthouse cinema, highbrow literature and popular fiction, close reading and empirical reader studies, this book moves through ultra-green folkloric forests, white Arctic icescapes and red corporeal terrains to explore the ways Nordic ecohorror unsettles the boundaries between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, body and environment.

Ultimately, *Nordic Ecohorror* argues that Nordic ecohorror and its feminine monstrosities provide a critical vocabulary for engaging with naturecultural entanglements in a time of planetary change.



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