Agency on the Page
Melodrama and Ecodrama in 1960s Scandinavian Fiction

Ragnild Lome
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Abstract

A multitude of ideas about individual and distributed agency circulated in Scandinavian culture during the 1960s, a period often designated as the early information age. Through an analysis of six novels, this dissertation discusses how prose fiction in and around the 1960s in Norway, Sweden and Denmark responded and contributed to this circulation of ideas of agency. The study argues that a transition is played out in the novels, from an idea of agency as individualistic and possessive, which I designate as melodramatic, towards an idea of agency as distributed and ecodramatic, emerging in an active environment, where multiple agents, human and non-human, co-exist (these concepts are derived and developed from works by Timothy Melley and Mark Seltzer). This transition is claimed to be conveyed through vague feelings expressed by the characters, signalling problems with the representation of agency, which are discussed in the thesis through the concept of affects (as understood by Sianne Ngai, primarily). The study overall applies a media ecological perspective to the literary works, situating questions of both literary form and ideas of agency in the techno-cultural development of the 1960s, investigated through the lens of the cultural history of cybernetics and understood as part of a larger epistemological and ontological change – a process of ecologization (Erich Hörl). This process accelerated during the period and is characterized in this study by a focus on relations, networks and self-reflexivity. From this theoretic approach, ideas of agency must be understood as intrinsically entangled with changes in the environment (environment understood in a broad sense as a setting in the novels, including both technologically mediated environments and natural environments), and this is conceptualized through the newly coined term agotope, an adjusted version of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the

Keywords: Agency, Ecodrama, Melodrama, Ecologization, Cybernetics, Scandinavian, 1960s
Svensk sammanfattning


Nyckelord: agens, ekodrama, melodrama, ekologisering, cybernetik, Skandinavien, 1960-talet
The agency of human beings is a question we should answer, not a fact we should assume.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation could not have been written anywhere else than at the intellectually rich and generous environment at the research school of Language and Culture at Linköping University in Sweden. That is where I first met my supervisors, Jesper Olsson and Anna Albrektson, who gave me the confidence that I could actually pull this off, and who pushed the coherence and precision of my study beyond what could otherwise be achieved. Thank you for helping me navigate this project. An important part of the transdisciplinary milieu I had the good fortune to be part of in Linköping, are fascinating PhD colleagues, offering intellectual stimulating talks through the years, combined with great fun – Jakob Lien, Solveig Daugaard, Ellen Söderblom Saarela, Anna Lindström, Nazli Avdan, Johanna Vernqvist, Lene Asp, Agnes Löfgren, Hannah Pelikan, Carl-Wilhelm Siwers, and the rest of you. Thanks to the seniors and professors, among you, Elin Käck, Carin Franzén, Angelica Linke, Leelo Kevallik, Mathias Broth, Nigel Musk, Karin Mårdsjö Blume, Ann-Sofie Persson, Anna Watz, Emma Eldelin and Andreas Nyblom. If there is something of interest to scholars outside of literary studies in this book, it is because of you, who encouraged interdisciplinary curiosity through weekly research seminars and intriguing conversations at post-seminars. A special thanks to Agnese Griesle, who has helped me with so much in this process that I cannot even begin to list them. These years in Linköping would have been less fun without you.

Jesper Olsson’s research group, Literature, Media and Information Cultures (LMI), has affected this dissertation in fundamental ways. I was blessed with competent colleagues, Solveig Daugaard and Jakob Lien, working on the media ecology of the reception of Gertrude Stein, and
exploring representation of the digital in Swedish prose. This group organized conferences on media ecologies of the unknown and theoretical symposiums, as well as networks and blogs, including publications such as Sensorium Journal and Kartotek. The curiosity driven milieu sharpened my interest in and curiosity of the relation between agency, aesthetics, media and technologies, and infused the already collaborative environment in Linköping with yet another community approach to academic practice. To this milieu, I include generous and sharp colleagues from other institutions as well, Per Israelson, Johan Fredrikzon and Jenny Jarlsdotter Wikström. Our way of collaborating has changed my expectations of what it means to have a good academic working life. Thank you for that.

There are some additional people who have been important for this project. I am particularly grateful to Isak Winkel Holm, a supervisor of my master thesis, who was the opponent for my 60 % seminar, and helped to categorize my chaotic thoughts, pushing the research design forward. Beata Agrell, Sissel Furuseth and Jonas Ingvarsson gave substantial and important feedback for my 80 % seminar. Stefan Höltnen allowed me to take part in media archeological courses at the Fundus-lab in Berlin, and Espen Haavardsholm and Øyulv Stokkelien talked with me about Vigdis Stokkelien and the Norwegian 1960s literary culture over the phone. Erik Erlanson, Solveig Daugaard and Johan Fredrikzon read parts of the dissertation after the writing stopped progressing according to plan during the corona-years. Much thank is due Elin Käck, who made me believe in the project again after my second final seminar. Thanks to Elise Alexander for helping me with several practical details and language along the way. Also, a shout out to my editorial colleagues in the journal Vagant, to my previous office-buddies at the shared space in Copenhagen, Overdosseringen, and to my intellectual sisters, Ragnhild
Eskeland and Merete Enggard Jacobsen – you have played a part in this dissertation even though I have not always discussed this project directly with you. To my current employer, I am grateful for flexibility. And for the final proof readings, thank you to Solveig, Nazli and Jakob, and not least my brother Amund. For practical help at the end, Anna Lindström, you are a hero!

A big thanks to my extended family, reaching out over the south of Norway; Valdres, Gjøvik and Oslo, and to my two kids Astrid and Henrik. And at last, Martin. Without you, the thoughts that make up this book would never have been formulated in the first place. I don’t know if I can truthfully say that I couldn’t have finished this dissertation without you, because the opposite is probably true – without all the vomiting, diaper changes, corona-ish colds, and other sudden disruption of the work flow that a young family encounter, it would probably have completed sooner. But then again, thinking and writing does require breaks and time. And in my case, a lot of time, stability, and false finishes. Thank you for sticking around for it all.

A special thanks to my late father, whose encouragement and support I never doubted. I wish you could have read this book.

Copenhagen, July 2024
Comment on Translations

This dissertation analyzes six novels written in Swedish, Norwegian and Danish, only one of which has been translated into and published in English. I have translated the quotes from the untranslated novels myself and have included the original versions in the footnotes. The translations are quite verbatim and not made with any literary ambitions, rather provided in order to make it possible also for readers not familiar with the Scandinavian languages to follow the arguments and discussions. Throughout the study, certain poems as well as essays, newspaper articles and secondary literature are quoted and translated, with the same ambition. Longer poems are quoted in their original language in the text, with English translations provided in a footnote.
# Table of Contents

## Acknowledgements
 ix

## Introduction
 1
  - Aim and Research Question  5
  - Material and the Scope of the Study  9
  - Theory  12
    - *Agency, Ecologization and Affects*  12
    - *Agotope*  22
    - *Melodrama and Ecodrama*  25
  - Methods  32
  - Previous Research  36
  - Outline  42

## Matrix – Cybernetics and the Explosion of Agencies in the 1960s
 45
  - Cybernetics  47
    - *Cybernetic Approaches to Agency – Relations and Regulation*  50
    - *Anti-Essentialism and the Black Box of Human Agency*  57
  - Cybernetics and Ecologization in 1960s Scandinavian Prose  60
  - Summary – The Ecologization of Agency and Fiction in the 1960s  72

## Traffic – Ecodrama and Melodrama in Complex Infrastructures
 75
  - Freedom, Rush and Traffic Safety  78
  - Human plus Car: Nils Leijer’s Car Psychology  92
    - *An Agotope of Traffic – the Car-Friendly World of Motopia*  95
    - *Melodramatic Ambitions in a Parasitic Character*  102
    - *Sensing Ecodramatic Agency*  107
  - Situating Agency – Vigdis Stokkelien’s Melodramatic Captain  111
    - *The Agotope of Sea Traffic in the Eastern Trade*  113
    - *Captain Arne*  118
    - *One Melodramatic, One Ecodramatic Action*  125
### Summary of Traffic

Contamination – Ecodrama and Melodrama in Never-Endings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback Loops</th>
<th>133</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerable Bodies and Unpredictable Processes</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Melodramatic Dead-End – Sven Holm’s Privileged University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Termush is a Living Organism</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Withdrawn Melodramatic Agent</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria – An Ecodramatic Way Out?</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disruption – Vigdis Stokkelien and the Illusion of the Autonomous Body</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Manmade Landscape</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melodramatic Jon, Ecodramatic Karen</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen’s Situated Agency</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of Contamination | 184 |

### Media – Ecodrama and Melodrama in Simulated Environments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>187</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear and Hopes for Manipulation and Simulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determined by Media. Cecil Bødker’s Melodramatic Dismantling of Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Two-Dimensional Simulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Archeologist is Used to Dig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecodramatic Agency in a Simulated Environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Aggregated and Fragmented Agency in Nils Leijer’s World with No Outside | 219 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>222</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Research Laboratory Exploring Affective Technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ernst Hegius, the Artist and Stefan Hult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecodramatic Fragmentation of Agency?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of Media | 239 |

### Conclusion: Ecodramatic Agency in Prose Fiction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>243</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summarizing the Main Argument – Ecodramatic Agency on the Page in the 1960s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why Agency on the Page? The Potential of Exploring Agency in Relation to Cybernetics .......................................................... 249
Significance and Limitation of this Study........................................... 256

Bibliography .................................................................................. 259
Publications without Authors ............................................................. 279
Databases....................................................................................... 280
Chapter 1

Introduction

Set in contemporary Copenhagen, the novel *Min elskede – en skabelonroman* (My Beloved – a cliché novel, 1968) by Danish writer Sven Holm, is in many ways telling of its time; it plays self-reflexively with the novelistic form and, at the representational level, it explores *agency* – the topic of this study – by allowing different ideas of agency to collide as the plot evolves. The story plays with the question: Is agency primarily anchored in the individual, or does it emerge out of complex collective processes?

In the novel, two foreign agents are coming to Denmark to initiate a revolution – something they want to achieve by stealing vital documents from the minister of foreign affairs, Poul Hartling.¹ The two characters focus on these documents, and their own individualized role in the coming uprising in the Scandinavian country. Perhaps this is why they fail to notice that their role and tasks are completely insignificant – instead, a collective, environmental youth movement, called the “up-and-down movement,” is what drives societal change. This movement has no leader – it is an uncontrollable collective entity – and consists of people wearing black suits and bowler hats and meeting in parks in and around Copenhagen.

Throughout the novel, the lack of understanding of how this collective group operates frustrates the two agents, who desperately try to contact the people in charge, to steer and manipulate the revolution to their own

¹Here, the novel references the actual name of the foreign minister of Denmark when the novel was published, Poul Hartling.
In addition, chapters about their increasingly desperate efforts to influence the course of events are followed by chapters describing the non-human, distributed processes that also contribute to initiate change in Copenhagen – the swift air over the city, the sewerage infrastructure, the growth of grass in parks and streets. Multiple storylines signal to the reader that there is a “boundless cohesion” that connects everyone, in a complex mix of meteorological processes, consumer patterns, media use, and urban infrastructure such as plumbing and traffic. The novel ends sometime in the distant future with vegetative life taking over the city – in a Copenhagen filled with grass, populated by hybrid humans wearing malleable houses, moving around like snails.

For a long time in Western culture, agency has been intrinsically connected to modern political and philosophical concepts, such as intentionality, autonomy and individuality. Agency, in an everyday understanding of the term, is often thought of as a possessive phenomenon – something that people can have and therefore, also can lack or lose. However, in recent decades, quite different ideas of agency have become comme il faut in many humanities departments. Ideas of distributed agency have emerged – in parallel with a critical stance toward the idea of the liberal modern subject, – argued for in different strands in philosophy, ranging from new materialism and post-humanism within the humanities to

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2 A tailor asks one of the spies: “Have you no control over the movement after all?” Holm, Min elskede, (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1967), 43. Danish original: “Har I alligevel ikke hånd i hanke med bevægelsen (…) .”


Actor-Network Theory (ANT) in the social sciences. These streams are calling instead for a posthuman, vibrant, material or non-human-centred understanding of the phenomenon of agency. Notions of distributed agency are necessary, it is claimed, in order to understand the globalized and consumerist world we live in, as well as facing technological developments and organizational challenges. According to posthuman thinkers such as N. Katherine Hayles, this new use of the concept of agency is not a rejection of the phenomenon, but a farewell to a particular understanding of agency, as “a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice.”

These two different approaches to agency, as possessive or distributed, at first appear hard to combine, and the question arises – how has agency become such a confusing concept? Are we in fact talking about two separate concepts, with no connection to each other? Or are we part of a historical period in which the very question of agency is undergoing radical change? This dissertation tackles such questions, by studying how different ideas of agency flourished in fiction in Scandinavia in the 1960s – a decade quite close to our own contemporary period, and one in which scholars have identified an extensive cultural and societal

6 This argument is pursued by many, but among them Bennett, Vibrant matter. On these streams of thought, see also Latour, We have never been modern (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
7 Hayles, How We Became Posthuman, 286.
transformation at many different levels. The 1960s was characterized by a political and social mobilization on a grand scale, with the rise of empowerment movements, such as the emerging women’s movement, the civil rights movement, and many other movements for liberation as well as a transformation of values, giving new groups in society influence over the political scene. In addition, as in many parts of the world, technology accelerated, working life became more and more automated, and global mass media expanded. Moreover, phenomena such as overpopulation, chemical contamination, and the threat of nuclear catastrophe were very much present – phenomena which, each in their different way, destabilized some of the foundations upholding ideas of individual agency. No surprise then, perhaps, that scholars have suggested that the period paved the way for our own period’s “explosion of agencies.”

Technological breakthroughs and philosophical developments were breaking the spell of the “illusion, which has assigned a fantastic monopoly on human agency to human beings.”

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Aim and Research Question

The overall aim of this study is to contribute with knowledge about the relationship between the cultural history of agency and literary history. By doing so, this study also hopes to present a deeper knowledge about ideas of agency characterizing the mid to late 20th-century culture in Scandinavia.

In my investigation I consider how agency was represented in six Scandinavian novels from the 1960s and argue that the forms, plots and characters in the novels convey a transition from ideas of possessive agency to ideas of distributed agency. Moreover, I suggest that the question of agency in 1960s culture more broadly was challenged and discussed, not just in literature. I interpret this broad questioning as a response to what I, in the manner of German media philosopher Erich Hörl, describe as a process of “ecologization,” an epistemological and ontological turn toward relations in thinking and technology (I will discuss this notion further later on). This relational turn is observable in the universal science of cybernetics, which was in its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s, and an important background for the discussion of agency in this study.¹¹

Agency is defined in a minimalistic fashion in order to grasp the different ideas of agency at play in the literary works; it refers, put shortly, to the making of a difference, that is, a process resulting in change in one way or the other. This definition is further explored and developed in the theoretical section below. Furthermore, agency is studied in the literary

works through an analysis of the characters’ feelings of agency, the setting of the novels, and the use of different narrative techniques to represent ideas of agency. This is a spatial and affective approach towards agency which is analytically explored through the concept of the *agotope* in my readings – a concept that I have derived from Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope.\(^{12}\) Bakhtin developed his concept to shed light upon how space structures *time* in literary works, and this dissertation uses the newly coined concept to explore how space structures the representations of ideas of *agency* in a fictional universe. Based on this analytical approach, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- What is the relationship between space, character and ideas of agency in the prose novels?
- How do the characters’ feelings relate to agency in the works?
- Overall, what ideas of agency are constructed in the narratives at the level of both plot, characters and form?

Throughout the study, I will employ the concepts of *melodrama* and *ecodrama* to pursue the analysis of the different ideas of agency in the novels. My usage of the former concept deviates slightly from standard usage (as we will see), while the latter has been developed specifically for this study. Furthermore, to relate these concepts to each other in an illustrative and playful manner, a coordinate system with two axes is used in my

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readings, where each axis represents the ability or inability to make a difference within the range of the two ideas of agency suggested; one axis representing melodramatic ideas, ranging from possessing to losing agency; and another, horizontal axis covering an ecodramatic notion, with one pole representing a situated understanding of agency and the other a sense of not being able to exercise agency at all (fragmented agency). These concepts and the function of the diagram are discussed in the theoretical section of this introduction.

All the novels in this dissertation – however different – are placed within this diagram, through a phase plot visual graph that suggests a movement of the ideas of agency in each novel (not identical to the character’s experience of agency, but sometimes overlapping). The graphs should
not be understood as exact representations of ideas of agency within the narratives, but as visual representations of the readings that I perform in the chapters.

To illustrate my use of these diagrams, let me briefly comment on the plotted graph pertaining to Sven Holm’s novel *Min elskede* discussed at the beginning of this book. I argue that it makes sense to see the ideas of agency in the novel as moving from the melodramatic axis to the ecodramatic axis based on the fact that the two secret agents at first are feeling individual empowerment when they plan to initiate a revolution in Denmark, and thereafter despair when they fail to understand the constituents of the more complex collective and infrastructural movements depicted (by the so-called “up-and-down-movement, and by the many infrastructures in Copenhagen.)

The research contribution of this study consists of analyses and descriptions of the fluctuation of ideas of agency in the 1960s Scandinavian culture, and a proposal on how to see this transformation in prose fiction. By focusing on the 1960s, the study is part of a growing interest in scholarly work of this period, in media history, art, literature, technological and environmental history. But it adds something important to this research, I argue, by focusing on the question of agency and aesthetics. Furthermore, the study offers a Scandinavian perspective on the question of agency in the 1960s, in distinction to previous research engaging with the situation of agency in the United States. For instance, in *Empire*  

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of Conspiracy (2000), a work which is an important dialogue partner in this study, American scholar Timothy Melley claims that a kind of “agency panic” characterizes the post-war years in the US, and that a lot of cultural artefacts from the decade exhibit traits of a melodramatic mode – which Melley contrasts with streams of unmelodramatic fiction. He suggests that the 1960s witnessed the emergence of a society in which there was “a feeling that individuals cannot effect meaningful social action and, in extreme cases, may not be able to control their own behaviour.”

By approaching agency in a small fringe of the North-Western hemisphere bordering the Soviet Union, during a period in which the emerging welfare states are tying the individual closer and closer to the state, this study suggests that agency is explored somewhat differently in fiction in Scandinavia than in the US (or, for that matter, in central Europe or the Soviet Union). The choice to write this dissertation in English is related to the hypothesis that there are cultural variations regarding representations of ideas of agency and that it will be fruitful to look at fluctuations in how agency is represented in different times and places in history.

Material and the Scope of the Study

The six novels analysed in this dissertation were all published by large publishing houses in Norway, Denmark or Sweden in the 1960s, except for Sommeren på heden which came out in 1970, and Pap, that came out on the small publishing Danish house Arena. All of them are remarkably short, spanning approximately 100 pages each. They are written in a

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rather descriptive style, and they mostly concern types instead of traditional psychologically driven characters. Moreover, they are set in relatively contemporaneous environments of traffic, contaminated milieus and mass media, in which these types experience vague feelings related to their agency and possibility to act, such as anxiety, confusion or apathy. In this sense, the novels carry traits of what other scholars have called the emerging 1960s Scandinavian “new realist,” as well as “modernist” prose novels – the novels are both experimental, socially oriented, and self-reflexive in their approach to literary form.\textsuperscript{15} In addition to these six works of literature, a broader range of poems, newspaper articles, non-fiction books, novels and short stories from the 1960s are used to contextualize ideas about agency in the 1960s. These are featured in the introduction to each of the three chapters and are included to connect the novels to a wider cultural palette.\textsuperscript{16}

The historical period covered by the study is the 1960s in Scandinavia (here: Norway, Sweden, and Denmark).\textsuperscript{17} The choice of a decade – the 1960s – is connected on the one hand, as mentioned, to the fact that it was a period marked by cultural transformation, also in Scandinavia, and, on the other hand, because it has been considered in previous scholarship as a distinctive period in Scandinavian literature, often characterized by formal experimentation. The Danish literary scholar Tania Ørum

\textsuperscript{15} On prose fiction from this period, see for example Agrell, Forskningsresan som roman and Ørum, De eksperimenterende tressere, Mai, Galleri 66.

\textsuperscript{16} These other materials either touch upon questions of agency and vague feelings related to the environment and the agents, or they offer important perspectives on the agotopes studied in the dissertation. They include both essays, philosophical works and poetry, and the inclusion of these intends to underline how all of these types of textual thinking – not just prose fiction – are connected to the fluctuations of ideas of agency in the decade.

\textsuperscript{17} This limitation is based on the languages in which the author of this study is fluent. Thus, there is nothing in principle that would exclude Nordic countries such as the Faroe Islands, Iceland or Finland from being included.
has fittingly described the period as a time “where everything was in motion, and everything for a fleeting moment seemed possible.”

Scandinavia is seen as one cultural – although not homogenous – domain, which covers cultures that underwent similar changes in the 1960s, even though they did so in different tempi. The Scandinavian focus differentiates this study from most scholarly works on literature in the three countries, which are usually nationally oriented or focused on comparing different oeuvres or themes across national borders, albeit with certain exceptions.

In fact, this dissertation makes a point of studying Scandinavian prose fiction, instead of comparing Norwegian, Swedish and Danish fiction, because, when studying ideas of agency, the nation-state does not come across as a self-evident framework. Thus, none of the six novels are understood to represent “their” country in a nation-based literary-historical comparison.

Moreover, none of the novels are canonized in earlier scholarship; all except one can even be positioned at the peripheries of the official narratives of 1960s literature. Sven Holm is an acclaimed Danish author from the 1960s – he was a member of the Danish Academy and he received several prizes. The book I analyze in this study, _Termush_, was

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18 Ørum, _De eksperimentereende tressere_, 26. Danish original: “en periode, hvor alting er i bevægelse, og alt et øjeblik synes muligt.”

19 For example, in her introduction to the series _A Cultural History of the Avant Garde in the Nordic Countries_, Ørum describe Nordic avant-garde history as a transnational history, which should be best understood as a series of nodes in a rhizomatic network, each operating in its own way, with a loose, but still viable connection to each other. Ørum, “Introduction,” _A Cultural History of the Avant Garde in the Nordic Countries, vol 1_, edited by Hubert van den Berg et al (Leiden: Brill-Rodopi, 2016), 12. I see Scandinavia in a similar, heterogenous manner.

20 See the beforementioned Ørum and Olsson, _A Cultural History of the Avant Garde in the Nordic Countries_, as well as Margareta Petterson and Richard Schönström, _Nordens litteratur_ (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2017), that look more broadly at aesthetic and cultural change across the broader cultural domain of the Nordic countries and Scandinavia.
even translated to English in 1969 and republished in English and Danish in 2024.\textsuperscript{21} In Norway, the literary breakthrough of 1960s prose is almost without exception understood in relation to the milieu surrounding the important magazine \textit{Profil} – of which the Norwegian author in this study, Vigdis Stokkelien, was never a part. The Swedish author in question, Nils Leijer, was acquainted with the Swedish milieu at Fylkingen, which was one of the important nodes in the typical story of 1960s avant-garde aesthetics in Sweden, but he has almost vanished from literary history ever since.\textsuperscript{22} In Denmark, Cecil Bødker is to most Danes today she is primarily known as an author of children’s books.\textsuperscript{23}

**Theory**

**Agency, Ecologization and Affects**

At least since the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the relationship between aesthetics and agency has been contemplated in philosophy and aesthetics. Symptomatically, aesthetics has been central in the beforementioned problematization of agency in contemporary STS-scholarship, posthuman philosophy and critical theory.\textsuperscript{24} Aesthetics means, according to the Greek root

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\textsuperscript{22} The Swedish literary scholar Ingvarsson makes a short reading of one of his novels in his \textit{En besynnerlig gemenskap} – a book which has been important for this study. More on this book in the section “Previous research.”

\textsuperscript{23} The book on \textit{Bødker som en Arena-modernist} (Copenhagen: Forlaget Spring, 2018) by Hanne Godtfeldt, tries to make amends for the role to which she has been consigned in literary history.

\textsuperscript{24} See for example Hayles, \textit{My Mother Was a Computer. Digital Subjects and Literary Texts} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and \textit{How We Became Posthuman}, as well as Bennett’s \textit{Vibrant Matter}. Latour is using the metaphor of a theatre stage when he defines agency in his \textit{Reassembling the Social}, 46: “Play-acting puts us immediately into a thick imbroglio where the
of the concept “aesthesis,” “of or for perception by the senses;” hence literature is thought to have the capacity to represent, concretely and sensually, abstract concepts and complex phenomena.\textsuperscript{25} Already in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel argued in his magnum opus \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit} (1807) that not until the theatre of Ancient Greece did it become possible to talk about agency in the modern sense as related to individual intentionality.\textsuperscript{26} The point of departure for this study is this close relation between agency and aesthetics; on the stage, as well as on the page, agency is portrayed as a composition of several concrete features, making the social phenomenon of agency possible to discuss and reflect upon.

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\textsuperscript{26} Hegel argued that when an actor stepped out of the chorus in a Greek play and took on a role within the narrative, an aesthetic form able to contemplate what one could call a modern, intentional and individualized idea of agency was born (where agency was not solely attributed to external agents, such as oracles or gods). On this argument, see Allen Speight, \textit{Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency} (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 54, footnote 25, as well as Hegel, \textit{Phänomenologie des Geistes} (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), for example on pages 541f.
The novelistic narrative form stand in a particular relationship with ideas of agency, I argue. Through narratives, agents and events are organized in time and space, and agents are attributed agency, contextualized within historical circumstances. Narratives can therefore be seen to reveal the “contingency of action,” as the German literary scholar Joseph Vogl has suggested. Drawing inspiration from his book *Über das Zaudern* (2008), depicting how literary representations of “doubt” in the Western literary canon shed light upon processes and isolate them in events, prose fiction is in this study argued to disclose that things *could* be otherwise, and thereby highlighting the very idea of agency itself on a more abstract level. In a story, an event occurs, or does not occur, and someone is involved – and responds emotionally to this event. And through language – which in a literary work can be considered an actor on its own – agency is being constantly attributed one way or the other. Or demonstratively not attributed.

To theorize further this relation between aesthetics and agency, agency is in this study claimed to have an iterative, a projective and a practical-evaluative dimension, following the arguments of sociologists Ann Mische and Mustafa Emirbayer in their essay, “What is Agency” (1998). This definition ties the phenomenon of agency to a cultural and self-reflexive structure – a narrative that establishes a before, present and an after, as well as a responsiveness to the historical situation. In

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27 Claiming this, I do not mean that poetry and other artistic practices are not interlinked with the idea of agency. However, this study concentrates on prose fiction, which I argue contribute with a different kind of approach to agency, than for example poetry and theatre (even though I hold that a strict line between them is not fruitful to draw).


such an approach to agency, political, societal, technological and aesthetic expectations of, as well as conditions for human agency in a given time, becomes important to study. With support in such an idea of agency. In addition, an idea of agency is understood as an “interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations.”\(^{30}\) That means, that when one’s surroundings change, Emirbayer and Mische claim there is a need for alterations in “agentic orientation.”\(^{31}\) Thus, aesthetic representation, the historical situation and ideas of agency stand in a self-reflexive and responsive relation to each other, and it is this relation that I want to explore in this book.

The historical situation of the 1960s is understood as being characterized by what Erich Hörl calls a general process of *ecologization*, which he sees as accelerating in the decades after the Second World War. This change in thinking started even earlier, but “all the more so since 1945,” Hörl writes, and contributed to creating what he with support in Michel Foucault calls an “eco-governmentality.”\(^{32}\) Foucault described in a lecture in 1979 a world “in which action is brought to bear on the rules of the game rather than on the players.”\(^{33}\) To describe the key characteristic of this world view, it makes sense to turn to thinkers related to Actor-Network Theory, who see agency as an “emergent property,” and

\(^{30}\) Emirbayer and Mische, “What is Agency?” 970.
\(^{32}\) Foucault only very briefly described his concept of an environmental type of governmentality at the end of his 10th lecture on biopolitics in 1979, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, edited by Michel Sennelart (London: Palgrave MacMillen, 2008), 259-60.
\(^{33}\) Foucault ends the lecture mentioned above by describing a society, “in which there is an optimization of systems of difference, in which the field is left open to fluctuating processes, in which minority individuals and practices are tolerated, in which action is brought to bear on the rules of the game rather than on the players, and finally in which there is an environmental type of intervention instead of the internal subjugation of individuals.” Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 259-260.
While the concept of “eco-governmentality” refers to the particular ways political subjectivity is formed within this relational paradigm, I approach the more general idea of the process of ecologization identified by Hörl, in order to situate the questioning of agency in 1960s prose fiction. Hörl describes a relational way of thinking in the making, which are not just present in sociology and critical theory in the 1960s, but are sieving in and becoming dominant in behavioral sciences, military leadership theories, engineering and marketing, placing a premium on relations and leads to an essentially non-philosophical politics of relations.” Hörl claims that to identify and reflect on this change “is a challenge, perhaps the challenge, for thinking today.”

A symptom of this relational turn is an altered idea of the environment. Fredric Jameson has called the late 20th and early 21st century an “epoch of space,” making the argument that there is a “new spatiality” emerging. I align myself with Jameson in this regard, and follow Hörl

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34 John Law and Michel Callon in their Agency and the Hybrid Collectif, South Atlantic Quarterly; 94, 2 (1995): 481-507, 484. Quoting Latour, Hörl writes: “According to Latour, modernity means ‘to lose the experience of relations,’ to reduce the multitude of relations to a few essential relations that are moreover said to be secondary, whereas he urges, precisely in the name of ecology, a new ontological realism of relations.” Hörl, “Introduction,” 7.


37 Jameson, Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 418. See also Tally Jr, “Introduction – The re-assertion of space in literary studies,” The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space. (London: Routledge, 2017: 1-6), 2. This relational turn as described by Hörl also has similarities with what scholars have called the “spatial turn.” See for example Stephan Günzel: “Spatial Turn – Topographical Turn – Topological Turn,” Das Raumparadigma in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2009), and what Richard Ek has called an ontology based on movement in “Den rumlige vending som ontologisk vending,” Slagmark – Tidsskrift for idéhistorie, 57 (2018): 19–34.
when he argues that space needs to be approached speculatively in our time, not phenomenologically. More concretely, the understanding of space needs to be understood as **ontogenetic**. Ontogenetic, referring to the process of ontogenesis – the shaping and creation of an organism – points to an awareness of an active environment. Within an ecologicized worldview, the human being is no longer treated as an active being who can control his or her passive surroundings; the only way that humans can exercise influence is to interact and entangle themselves with the agencies already at work, whether it is in cooperation with microbiological processes, radiation, traffic or media technological infrastructures.

This relational paradigm is understood as emerging in parallel to the accelerated computer technologies in cybernetic and information cultures of the 20th century. The conditions for post-industrial science and thinking have fundamentally changed how humans relate to each other. There is, thus, a material base in Hörl’s philosophical position, building on thoughts by Michel Foucault, Gilbert Simondon, Jean-Luc Nancy, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. This cybernetic context is identified in one of his earlier books, written together with Michael Hagnar, where the concept of “imaginary viewpoints” (with reference to the German


39 The focus on materiality has affinities to the kind of media archaeology, embedding discourses in material networks, stemming from the German media philosopher Friedrich Kittler, see for example his *Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900* (München: Vilhelm Fink Verlag, 2003) and *Operation Valhalla* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022). The thinking of Deleuze and Guattari are also, as mentioned, crucial for his concept – one is almost tempted to quote Foucault in a review of Deleuze’s two first books: “perhaps one day, this century will be known as Deleuzian.” Foucault, “Theatrum philosophicum.” *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, volume 2: Aesthetics, Method, Epistemology*, edited by James D. Fabion, 343-368 (London: Penguin Books: 2000), 343.
philosopher Hans Blumenberg) is used to identify a “cybernetic viewpoint” in postwar Europe.40

To concretize the kind of material, ontogenetic approach to agency, which I see as important for understanding ideas of agency in the 1960s I find it useful to turn to the concept of “individuation” as developed by Gilbert Simondon.41 Simondon argues that space individuates humans, and can do so in different ways. For Simondon, individuality is not something given, it is produced and stabilized by the environment – to which technologies, at least during the last 200 years, have been significant contributors. The concept of “individuation” is thereby materializing and historicizing the idea of individuality. In such an understanding, environments do not leave the idea of the human untouched, so to speak.42

Take for example a pre-industrial tool like the plough. Simondon argues that both this simple tool, as well as the more industrial machines later on, are stabilizing humans as individual tool-users, and facilitating an experience of controlling and mastering of the surrounding.43 However, with the introduction of post-industrial, systematized technologies and more or less autonomous machines, the environment instead afford experiences of distributed agency. Simondon does not use such a term,

40 Hörl and Michael Hagnar, Die Transformation des Humanen (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), 7.
41 Simondon, Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).
42 Simondon attacks the common intellectuals of his time who exclude technology from the concept of culture, isolate it, and leave it to the engineers and connoisseurs to deal with: “Culture behaves towards the technical object as man toward a stranger, when he allows himself to be carried away by primitive xenophobia. Misoneism directed against machines is not so much a hatred of novelty as it is a rejection of a strange and foreign reality. However, this strange or foreign being is still human, and a complete culture is one which enables us to discover the foreign or strange as human.” Simondon On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects, 10. Italics in the English translation.
but says that instead of producing individual experiences, humans became conductors of an orchestra of non-human agents – and these technologies lead to a state in which “the governed reality comprises men and machines.”44 The cultural representation of this relation “relies on the experience of the man working with tools.”45 And this causes experiences of alienation, and discrepancies between the way reality is experienced and how it is portrayed.46 Simondon phrases it in this way: “Man thus has the function of being the permanent coordinator and inventor of the machines that surround him. He is among the machines that operate with him.”47

This focus on relations, including seeing individuation as a process, and space as an active environment, is fundamental to this study’s understanding of agency in the 1960s. First, understanding space in this ontogenetic matter, I do not refer to space as a natural environment, nature, climate or ecology in the traditional sense when I in this study focus on the settings of the novels. Instead, when talking about the “the environment,” I am referring to any given setting in the novels, comprising culture, technology, media and politics – not unlike the idea of an environment without nature, to rephrase Morton’s well-known proposal (“ecology without nature.”)48 Environment in this study means the nature-cultural surroundings of humans, regardless of this environment being artificially created or organic.

Second, the approach to agency in this study includes affective elements. Affects are seen to express the embodied experience of acting in a given milieu, and are influencing the ability to act. This understanding of agency and affects is understood through the lens of affect theory, which lead it back to Spinoza, who understood affects as something “by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or re-strained.”\(^49\) Affect theory does not understand feelings as the result of inner and psychological processes, but as a symptom of the relation individuals have to their surroundings. As one of the most important proponents of affect theory, Sara Ahmed, writes in her essay “Affective economy” feelings are “not simply ‘within’ or ‘without’, they create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds.”\(^50\) Affects are materially responsive to the historical situation, expressing an uncertainty about agency altogether and a new understanding of space.\(^51\) For my purpose in this study, I use the words feelings, affects and sensations as synonyms.

Vague feelings are of particular interest in this study. I draw on the work of Sianne Ngai, primarily, who in *Ugly Feelings* (2007) points out, turning to Spinoza, that traditionally, feelings like rage and fear have been seen as catalysts of agency, while a whole range of other feelings, such as irritation, confusion, disquiet, envy, irritation and anxiety are not


\(^{51}\) Emirbayer and Mische says something similar: “The ways in which people understand their own relationship to the past, future, and present make a difference to their actions; changing conceptions of agentic possibility in relation to structural contexts profoundly influence how actors in different periods and places see their worlds as more or less responsive to human imagination, purpose, and effort.” Emirbayer and Mische, “What is Agency?” 973.
consider relevant to the phenomenon. Countering such claims, she argues that these feelings point to “ambivalent situations of suspended agency” and must “be thought of as a mediation between the aesthetic and the political.”\(^{52}\) Leaning on the Italian philosopher Paolo Virno, Ngai contends that there is a “real social experience and a certain kind of historical truth” to be found in unresolved feelings. Simondon writes about something similar, when he argues that what he calls the “directive function” are becoming “false” when society changes – revealing a need for new representations of agency. If the environment in which humans operate alters without the cultural representations following suit, “an adequate code of relations between the governed reality and the beings who govern no longer exists.”\(^{53}\) In that sense, feelings are seen as “interpretations of predicaments”\(^{54}\) in Ngai’s study – in line with American philosopher Rei Terada – as “signs that [...] render visible different registers of problem [sic] (formal, ideological, sociohistorical).”\(^{55}\) That is, unresolved


\(^{53}\) Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, 20. Simondon does not talk about affects, but sensations. Sensations are “the differential play of the sense organs indicating a relation to the milieu;” and in order to operate in a world one needs to be able to relate to it both perceptually and affectively. Affects are therefore connected to perception in an entangled way in his thinking, I argue. “Sensation and perception are not two activities that follow one another, with the former providing matter to the latter; they are two twin and complementary activities, two versions of this amplifying individuation that the subject operates according to its relation to the world.” Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, 230. See also Ian M. Tucker’s “Simondon, emotion, and individuation: The tensions of psychological life in digital worlds,” *Theory & Psychology*, 32:1 (2022): 3-18.

\(^{54}\) Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 3, is quoting Rei Terada’s *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the “Death of the Subject”* (Harvard University press, 2001), 57.

feelings are “showing how sociohistorical and ideological dilemmas, in particular, produce formal or representational ones.”

Rather than “ugly,” I chose to refer to the feelings analyzed in this study as vague, to be able to include the positive feelings related to agency, and not just the negative ones. Also, in this study I understand affects as slightly more materially based than Ngai (who is concerned with political conditions), relating it to the historical situation of the 1960s. As Ngai, I see vague feelings in this study as pointing to both a transition of the understanding of agency, in the sense that it expresses a need for a reconceptualization of the relation between humans and his or her surroundings, as well as expressing a lack of adequateness of the representations of agency in established literary forms.

Agotope

Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope is a much-used concept in studies of spatiality in fiction – a field of study which has engendered an increased interest in recent decades according to Robert T. Tally Jr. Ever since the translation of Bakhtin’s essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” (originally written in 1937), the concept of the chronotope has been popular in literary criticism, film criticism, anthropology and other fields.

Nevertheless – I did not find the concept perfectly suited to my own aim in this study. The concept was developed to historicize and categorize literary works based on how they organize time and space, or space-time, as Bakhtin argues with reference to the physicist Albert Einstein.

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56 Ngai, Ugly Feelings, 12.
57 “[T]he last few decades have witnessed a profound reassertion of space in humanities, as matters of space, place and mapping have come to the forefront of critical discussions of literature and culture.” Tally, “Introduction – The reassertion of space in literary studies,” 1.
58 Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, 84.
In effect, the chronotope focuses on time much more than on agency. And it does not take into account the ecologization of space, which is crucial for my understanding of the cultural transformation in the 1960s. Bakhtin’s concept has mainly been used to analyse – in accordance with his own suggestions – the time-space of different chronotopes.\(^5^9\) Bakhtin writes that literature “thickens” the idea of time, and this is what becomes visible when looking at literature through the lens of the chronotope: “Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.”\(^6^0\)

At the same time, the chronotope is a very good starting point. As Bakhtin emphasizes, chronotopes do not just say something about how time and space are structured in novels, they also speak about the conditions for representing the agency of characters, as heroes and villains, etc.\(^6^1\) In his analysis of different chronotopes, in for example Greek romance and the idyll, the concept is used as a basis on which to say something about which individuals are portrayed, what kind of emotions and values that follow with these portraits, and the kind of actions that

\(^{59}\) Bakhtin writes in his essay that time is the “dominant principle in the chronotope.” Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 86. See also Pieter Borghart and Michel de Doppeleer, “Eulogizing Realism: Documentary Chronotopes of Nineteenth-Century Prose Fiction,” *Bakhtin’s Theory of the Literary Chronotope*, edited by Nele Bemong et al, 77-90. (Gent: Academia Press, 2010). This focus on time should not be read as a rejection of the fruitfulness of the use of the concept in the latter half of the 20\(^{th}\) and beginning of 21\(^{st}\) century. There are multiple example of its productivity, among them Frida Beckman, *The Paranoid Chronotope: Power, Truth, Identity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022).


\(^{61}\) See for example Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 92 (about how Greek romance portrayed individuals).
typically take place in the different chronotopes. Just as the chronotope “thickens” time, using Bakhtin’s vocabulary, the agotope *thicken* agency, thereby turning it into something that is possible to address, discuss, and compare.

To stress the focus on agency, and to take into account the ecologized approach to space in the 1960s, I have coined the term *agotope*. An agotope is an analytical derivation of Bakhtin’s concept, constructed by putting together “ago” (Greek root “agein” referring to “to lead”) and “topos,” (the Greek word for place.) It does not try to replace the chronotope, but is suggested as a sub-concept to Bakhtin’s term. It is created to underscores the extremity of the relation between space and agency, pushing space to the forefront of the understanding of agency – and the other way around.

The concept of the agotope can be argued to have similarities to terms such as “heterotopia,” as outlined by Michel Foucault in the well-known 1969-essay “On other spaces.” Both agotopes and heterotopias can be thought of as laboratories to explore alternative ideas of agency, but in contrast to the latter, the agotopes explored in this study are tightly connected to concrete post-industrial spaces of the kind that the chapter headings of this study refer to: “Traffic,” “Contamination” and the “Media.” The heterotopia can designate anything from castles, cities, ships and cyberspace, and Foucault stresses the heterotopia as another space,

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62 For example, Bakhtin argues that the adventure-time of the Greek romance is structured by chance, with passive, static individuals, while Rabelais’ folkloric chronotopes are characterized by growth and individuals who develop and evolve, see Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 91–105, and 207–216.

that is, strange or different.\textsuperscript{64} Agotopes in this study are indeed fictional, but, as said, closely related to contemporary environments in the 1960s, and are considered settings that one would traditionally in literary studies refer to as realist or naturalism, instead of speculative or strange.

Summarizing, looking at the agotope in this study does not introduce a radical \textit{new} way of exploring agency in novels, but represents an alternative way to focus on the interdependence on fictional settings and the historical situation regarding the representation of agency. This is an approach that involves paying particular attention to the settings of the novels, how it relates to the historical situation, which affects are produced by the environment as well as a focus on the interaction between the characters and their ideas of agency throughout the novels. Where is agency located in the novels? How do the settings structure the characters’ affects and their ideas of agencies? What ideas of agency are emerging in these kinds of spaces? And how is this agotope represented, that is, what literary strategies and styles dominate the portrayal of the fictional environments?

\textbf{Melodrama and Ecodrama}

In this last theoretical subsection, we are back at the concept of agency. As flagged in the beginning of this introduction, when I use the concept, I am referring very broadly to the making of a difference – regardless of who or what is making this difference. This resembles definitions of agency within Actor-Network Theory, and the exact wording is also reminiscent of Gregory Bateson’s definition of the smallest bit of information

\textsuperscript{64} Heterotopies have been argued to be related to “a crossing that enables exploration and experimentation.” Amanda Dennis, “Heterotopias,” \textit{The Routledge handbook of space and literature}, edited by Robert Tally Jr., 168-178 (London: Routledge, 2017), 171.
as a “difference that is making a difference.” From such a definition, it follows that an action is a change perceivable to others, big or small, and an agent is an initiator of change, human or nonhuman.

This definition is minimalist, because this is necessary to analyse fluctuations of ideas of agency. Keeping it basic, the definition manages to account for a more traditional understanding of agency as located in the individual, as well as an idea of agency as a phenomenon emerging in a collective or a distributed process. In the vocabulary of this dissertation, the definition of agency manages to span both ideas of melodramatic and ecodramatic agency.

Before defining these concepts and discuss the aesthetic traits and theoretical ideas of agency related to them, I want to give some background to the idea of bringing the melodrama and ecodrama into play in this study.

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65 Thanks to Ingvarsson for calling out the Bateson-reference in this definition, in a reading of an early draft of this study. “A ‘bit’ of information is definable as a difference which makes a difference.” Bateson, “The Cybernetics of ‘Self’: A Theory of Alcoholism,” Steps to an Ecology of the Mind (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 315. One of the often quoted approaches to agency from Science and Technology Studies defines an actor as “any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference.” Latour, Reassembling the Social, 71.

66 The words “action” and “agent” are not used often in this study, but when they are, they refer to this minimalistic definition of a change; that is, a person attributing agency to himself or herself, or being attributed agency by someone or something else. When I use the term “agential” I am referring to someone’s idea of attribution of agency on a more abstract level. I do not use the term “actant,” which is otherwise suggested by Latour, to cover both human and non-human agents. I stick to agents, since I mostly concern myself with human characters’ agency. Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory,” Philosopha, Vol. 25, no 3-4 (1994). Reprinted at bruno-latour.fr with new pagination, 2.

67 I have written about the melodrama in a similar way before, see Ragnild Lome, “Melodrama of Possessive Agency,” Nordic Journal of Aesthetics vol. 31, no. 63 (2022): 100-111.
It is not uncommon to relate agency in dramatic texts to such genres as tragedy and melodrama. In his seminal study *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), Peter Brooks claims that the melodrama is typical of modernity as such, and thereby it is also connected to modern conceptions of agency. The genre originated in music theatre during the 18th century, and became a literary form deeply connected to the demands and features of modern society and way of life – a secularized dramatization of everyday life, compared to the more prestigious tragedy. Characters and plots are not taken from myths or biblical stories, but from contemporary society, and related to the human.68 “Ecodrama,” on the other hand, is a concept created specifically for this study. It is not primarily referring to drama about environmental issues such as climate change or pollution in an ecocritical sense.69 The term is inspired by the concept of ecologization discussed above, built on and developed from by previous works of Mark Seltzer and Melley, the philosophy of Donna Haraway and posthuman thinking as manifested in the works by Hayles.70 Ecodrama is, thus, seen as pertaining to horizontal, self-reflexive, and relational ideas of agency.

In *Bodies and Machines* (1991), Seltzer develops the notion of a “melodrama of uncertain agencies” to describe the ideas of agency that dominated naturalistic American novels in the latter half of the 19th century, simultaneously (and paradoxically) both confirming the individual and

destabilizing agency. Seltzer relates the melodramatic and uncertain ideas of agency to the industrial work-environment of this period, a risky, but still tool-oriented kind of setting, where individuals both gain and lose agency by pushing buttons or steering instruments. Many American late 19th-century naturalist novels represent a world where humans could literally move mountains but were simultaneously subjected to great risk in dangerous environments with no individual opportunity or choice to save themselves (for example, in spaces such as mines). Seen from this perspective, what the literature of this period stages, Seltzer claims, is a way of holding on to an idea of individual agency in a world that is constantly challenging it. This stands in contrast to the prose fiction of the latter half of the 20th century, he writes in a footnote, calling much 20th-century prose since the Second World War undramatic.

The US scholar Melley observes something similar in his recent article, “The Melodramatic Mode of American Politics and Other Varieties of Narrative Suspicion,” (2022) focusing on American literature from a much later date, namely the 1950s and 1960s. He argues that in authors such as Joan Didion, Norman Mailer and Don DeLillo, one encounters what he terms an “unmelodramatic” aesthetics. It is characteristic of this literature, he observes, that it “studiously avoids demonological constructions and melodramatic conventions. It shuns the tropes of revelation and salvation so essential to melodrama. It is psychoanalytically

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72 Seltzer writes in the footnote: “The resistance to the mixed or immanent account of agency I am sketching here is thus a resistance to the sort of resolutely undramatic accounts of action or decisions set out in systems theory generally and an attempt to conserve what I’ve been calling the melodrama of uncertain agency.” Seltzer, Bodies and Machines, footnote, 198.
sophisticated and thus *suspicious of its own suspicion.*” This unmelodramatic aesthetics stands in sharp contrast to what Melley sees as the dominant mode of post-war American culture; a melodramatic mode arguing that this is a relevant framework for understanding the ideas of agency in the 1960s.

When this dissertation utilizes the concepts of melodrama and ecodrama, it is inspired by Seltzer and Melley’s dichotomy between melodrama and undramatic/unmelodramatic fiction. In line with both, a melodramatic idea of agency is regarded as conveying an all-or-nothing account of possessive agency, typically belonging to an idea of a relative stable, tool-oriented environment, which is affiliated with aesthetic traits such as psychologically driven characters, a chronological organization of events and a descriptive use of language. The environment in a melodrama is typically perceived to be passive and the characters active.

In contrast, an ecodramatic idea of agency builds on a displacement of agency from the individual to somewhere between the individual and the environment. The difference between the two is visualized in the diagram presented earlier. While the axis of the melodramatic idea of agency moves vertically between having or losing individual agency, the axis of the ecodrama moves horizontally between an experience of situated agency and an experience of fragmented agency. The ideas of ecodramatic agency in these novels moves towards being understood as “distributed rather than located solely in consciousness, emerging from

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74 Melley points out that conspiracy thinking and paranoia could be seen as “reasonable, even salutary, responses to the conditions of knowledge in contemporary democracy.” Melley, “The Melodramatic Mode of American Politics and Other Varieties of Narrative Suspicion,” 58.
75 See Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines,* 84.
and integrated into a chaotic world rather than occupying a position of mastery and control removed from it,” to borrow a phrase from Hayles.76

While the melodramatic movement in the diagram might be intuitive to most readers, the ecodramatic movement might be harder to decipher, moving from an experience of situated agency to an experience of fragmented agency. The construction of this axis is inspired by the philosophical approach to agency by philosophers such as Haraway, for example in the article “Situated Knowledges” (1988) and her book Staying with the Trouble (2016). This approach can be summed up in one of her many one-liners: “Nothing is connected to everything, everything is connected to something.”77 Haraway argues that we need to think of postmodern reflexivity and locally anchored knowledge together, since only in this way is it possible to critically engage oneself with the production

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76 Hayles, How We Became Posthuman, 291. In her book, Hayles is primarily tracing the development of posthuman thought as it is influenced by the cultural history of cybernetics during the latter half of the 20th century, defining posthuman subjectivity as “an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction.” Hayles, How We Became Posthuman, 3.

77 Haraway, Staying with the Trouble, 31. “Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something.” This quote stems from chapter 2, 31 in her book and is a paraphrase of a quote from Thom Van Dooren’s book Flight Ways – Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 60. Dooren makes this statement as part of a criticism of holistic eco-philosophical approaches. See also the following quote from Haraway. “So, I think my problem and ‘our’ problem, is how to have simultaneously an account of radial historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real world’, one that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earthwide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness.” “Situated Knowledges. The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” Feminist Studies, 14:3 (1988): 575–599, 579.
of knowledge and agency in a world of “active entities.””\textsuperscript{78} Thus, the left side of the horizontal axis on the diagram represents an embodied understanding of agency, where “meanings and bodies (...) can have a chance for life.”\textsuperscript{79} Agency can be understood as being embodied, or, then, as situated – which is a position that prohibits any overview of the network as a whole, but still makes it possible to exercise an influence on the part of the network one is connected to. In contrast, contemplating the opposite, the right side of the diagram represents what Haraway calls a relativism, of “being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally.”\textsuperscript{80} I call this fragmented agency, leading often to apathy, being aware of a connectedness to everything, but without being able to make a difference in the network. On this axis, one is never “losing” agency, or lacking it completely. Human agency is regarded as following “roots and routes,” to various degrees, and therefore, one makes differences always but risks being drowned in relations without being able to identify any agential paths at all.\textsuperscript{81}

In my readings in the three analytical chapters, I will elaborate on how ideas of ecodramatic agency look in the novels, and also discuss the oscillation between melodramatic and ecodramatic experiences of agency. To do this, I turn to scholars such as the beforementioned N. Katherine

\textsuperscript{78} Haraway uses this term of “active entities” in her article “Situated knowledges,” 593 and 584.
\textsuperscript{79} Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 580. In later works, Haraway uses a spider with the name of \textit{Pimoa cthulhu} to explain what she means by situated agency in a relational world. “Tentacularity is about life lived along lines – and such a wealth of lines – not at points, not in spheres.” Haraway, \textit{Staying with the Trouble}, 32. In other works, she uses figures such as the coyote and the trickster to make similar points. Haraway, \textit{Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature} (London: Routledge, 1991).
\textsuperscript{80} Haraway, “Situated knowledges,” 584.
Hayles and Donna Haraway, as well as Stacey Alaimo, Bruno Latour, Frédéric Neyrat, James Burton and Timothy Melley.

Why call it ecodrama, and not use the phrasings “undramatic” or “un-melodramatic,” as Melley and Seltzer suggest? The reason I talk about ecodramatic ideas of agency is related to my interest in the general process of ecologization (mentioned above). These novels, I argue, are not rejecting agency as such, instead they are embracing relationality as a key concept for understanding the phenomenon and are using literary techniques and an altered idea of space to represent it. Launching ecodramatic agency as an idea of agency in its own right, and not just calling it unmelodramatic, is therefore an acknowledgement of the fact that there is a new idea of agency in the making in these years, taking relationality as a fundamental condition.

Methods

Approaching novels with the aim to understand and reflect on agency, this study leans on the theoretical framework presented above. It also actualizes basic and established concepts from narratological theory by Gerard Genette to unpack the construction of the agotopes in the novels. Concretely, I am using a narratological framework to describe how time is represented (employing concepts such as analepsis and prolepsis), as well as style and focalization. Each reading begins with an analysis of the agotopes in the novels explored. Thereafter, I zoom in on the main characters in each novel: What feelings are expressed by the characters and how are these related to the question of agency, i.e. the characters’ ability to make a difference? Do the characters approach agency as

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82 See Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*, 61.
possessive or relational, and does this change throughout the novel? How does this movement and the transition of ideas of agency resonate in the form and the agotope in the novel? I will also look at side-characters, in order to explore the ideas of agency in the novels.

As already mentioned, each literary work will be represented by a playful graph, placing the novel in the diagram ranging from melodrama to ecodrama. As I have already said, I do not propose that these graphs are the only possible ones to construct when mapping fluctuations of ideas of agency in these novels, but they are one way. In certain diagrams, I use a stapled line to underscore how the movement is not expressed by the main character, but by a side-character in the novel.

More generally speaking, the choice of corpus and the development of the analytical framework for my study was the result of what I would call, with Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford, an “inventive” process.84 This process was from its infancy guided by material philosophical and media ecological approaches, in the sense that literature from the start was regarded as forming part of a larger material media technological network, making technologies, cultural debates, scientific discussions, and other artistic works relevant dialogue partners when trying to grasp what is explored on the literary page.85 This aspect of the study is particularly

84 Lury and Wakeford, Inventive Methods (London: Routledge, 2012), 15. They describe what they call inventive methods, which are nomadic, by which they mean “processual, iterative, emergent and changeable.” These inventive methods have “a multiple capacity for generalization that is precisely not monotheistic universalism.”

85 A media ecological approach to literature considers literature embedded into media history – being part of complex media ecologies – where literature is not determined by media or technological history, but is understood as interdependent upon them, and the other way around. Media ecological approaches to literature entails a focus on “concrete conditions,” see Fuller, Media Ecologies (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 2. It is for Fuller, “profoundly political or ethico-aesthetic at all scales,” Fuller, Media Ecologies, 5.
spelled out in the introduction to each chapter and the second chapter, where I outline the cultural history of cybernetics as it pertains to my discussion and readings.

With such a media ecological perspective on literature, the corpus and the theoretical framework – including the definitions of agency itself – was changing as I dug deeper into the historical and material situation of the 1960s in Scandinavia. Concretely, the inventive process has been influenced by the availability of digital access to primary literature and literary criticism in daily newspapers from the 1960s and 1970s. The large digital Norwegian literary database nb.no include novels, non-fiction and short stories published in the 1960s available in digital format, and this has been particularly useful in finding works that address agency and linking them to discussions in the broader culture. This digital access helped me keep a broad perspective of agency long into the research process and made it possible to test out hypotheses and ideas along the way.

To make a complete account of this process would be impossible, and the following is thus a reconstruction. The first searches I conducted were related to cybernetics and computer technology, and these seemed to confirm that only male authors were interested in how the technological acceleration of the 1960s altered ideas of agency. At this stage, my approach to cybernetics was rather narrow. I only searched for keywords specifically related to robots, machines and networks, for example “automatization,” “automatic,” “electr*.” As my understanding of the

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86 I was able to conduct keyword searches within (almost) all the newspapers published in the 1960s in Norway, Denmark and Sweden, finding everything from ads for novels, interviews and, not least, literary reviews of the novels. Danish “Mediastream” and the Swedish newspaper archive, respectively, in addition to the Norwegian nb.no. A note regarding Mediastream, explaining the “almost” above: Danish Mediastream does not include big newspapers such as Politiken, which instead is available through its own, rather ineffective and costly, archival service.
cultural history of cybernetics grew, and as I started to become more attuned to the concept of ecologization, this changed the way I searched. I became more attuned to relations and relationality as key issues in the decade, and I searched more broadly to access the ideas of agency flourishing in the 1960s, searching for plants acting as agents, for instance. In doing so, I began to find more female authors, and male authors of whom I had never heard. Moreover, parallel to my searches and readings, I started to observe how representations of vague feelings were featuring in many of these novels. This made me approach affect theory, and its analyses of vague feelings, and take an interest in feelings such as confusion, uncertainty, anxiety, fear, empowerment, rage, anger, nervousness, irritation and nausea, as signals pointing to an interest in agency in a novel.

By working and reading accumulatively in this way, the theoretical approach was spelled out – this ended up focusing on vague feelings, as well as an active relation to space, or environments, or, as I would later name them, agotopes, such as traffic, media and contamination. In the end, ten novels were regarded as potential primary material, partly because of its relational awareness, and also because they could be organized neatly into the three agotopes of traffic, contamination and media.

87 Most previous research on 1960s prose has been centred on male authors, and not only male authors, but male authors who became central in the late 20th century in those countries, such as Klaus Rifbjerg, Anders Bodelsen, Dag Solstad, Jan Erik Vold, P. O. Enquist, Torsten Ekbom, Øyvind Fahlström and Hans Jørgen Nielsen, to mention just a few. See for example Agrell, Forskningsresan som roman, Bredsdorff, Sære fortællere. Hovedtræk af den ny danske prosakunst i tiåret omkring 1960 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1967), Mai, Galleri 66, Jahn Thon, “Refleksjon – kritikk –protest. Forståelsesformer i unglitterære tidsskrifter,” (PhD diss., Universitet i Agder, 2013), Olsson, Alfabetets användning: Konkret poesi och poetisk artefaktion i svenskt 1960-tal and Läsning – apparat – algoritm, Ingvarsson, En besynnerlig gemenskap, Jakob Lien, Maskintankar.
Then, I cut this down to six (seven with Holm, which opens and closes the study), in order to make it a manageable number to write about.\textsuperscript{88} As a result of this, the analytical concepts used have been calibrated in relation to the novels I study, and my dissertation does not therefore claim to be an accurate representation of how agency was represented as a whole in fiction in the 1960s, other than in these six novels.

Previous Research

Agency is a fuzzy topic. Because of that, many previous studies of Scandinavian literature in the 1960s have touched upon this topic in different ways, even though they have not done so directly. However, there has been no Scandinavian studies to my knowledge that has been dedicated to the topic of agency explicitly – and no-one approaching it from an aesthetic and historically contingent perspective. Due to lack of comparable studies of Scandinavia, I therefore turn mostly to what I consider the most dominant previous works of ideas agency in fiction by American scholars Hayles and Melley. In distinction from their American focus, this dissertation offers, as we have seen, a Scandinavian perspective on agency in an historical context, and in addition, it works with a relational and spatial perspective of agency in fiction which slightly differs from their perspectives, focusing less directly on cybernetic subjectivity (Hayles) and cultural and political paranoia (Melley).

Even though there has not been much explicit interest in agency in earlier studies of Scandinavian 1960s literature, there has been a great

\textsuperscript{88} Apart from the novels read in this dissertation, these ten works included: Ebba Haslund’s \textit{Det trange hjerte} (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1965), Inger Christensen’s \textit{Evighedsmaskinen} (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1965), Øystein Lønn’s \textit{Kontinentene} (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1967) and Torsten Ekbom’s \textit{En galakväll på operan} (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1969).
interest in the literature from the 1960s. It is a decade that has attracted much scholarship, due to reasons mentioned earlier in the introduction – it was a period of societal and artistic experimentation in the Scandinavian countries, and a decade that, as elsewhere, generated cultural and political change. Regarding the literature, more specifically, several studies have contemplated the avant-garde and modernistic strands in the decade, including topics such as the loss of self and the dissolution of individual identity in favour of role playing, framed by concepts such as “attitude-relativism” and “trolöshet” (infidelity). This study is guided by works exploring such issues, but through my interest in agency, I move in slightly different registers than most studies of the decade, and try not to be consumed by the focus on the individualized subject (or its dissolution). As will be discussed in the chapters further on, a kind of dissolution of the individual subject seems to be necessary in order to rethink agency in the first place, but the ecodramatic fluctuations in the novels that I will discuss should not be equated with representation of an unstable subjectivity. Rather, to be able to act, these works seem to suggest, you also need to be grounded, in one way or another.

There have been quite a few studies focusing on material and technological questions regarding literature in Scandinavia in the 1960s.

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Particularly important for my own investigation has been Jonas Ingvarsson’s study *En besynnerlig gemenskap – Teknologiens gestalter i svensk prosa 1965–70* (A strange relation: Representation of technologies in Swedish prose 1965–70, 2003). Ingvarsson views the decade’s fiction through a cybernetic prism and analyses the posthuman relations between humans and technology in Swedish prose from the latter half of the 1960s, focusing on prosthetic bodies and automatization (reading authors such as Sven Delblanc, Torsten Ekbom and P. O. Enquist). His study also features one of the works to be discussed here, *Miniput* by Leijer – the only reading of this novel in earlier research. However, just as Ingvarsson’s study and some other related research of 1960s literature, this study is interested in identity and subjectivity (and the cybernetic deconstruction of those phenomena).

Other important works that explore a media technological perspective on literature should also be mentioned, such as Jesper Olsson’s work on concrete poetry and media, *Alfabetets användning: konkret poesi och poetisk artefaktion i svenskt 1960-tal* (2005), and the artistic explorations by artists Olle Essvik and Joel Nordqvist in the book *Virtuella utopier* (2015), which both have offered complex understandings of the material, utopian and dystopian views on technology and culture in the 1960s. The forthcoming dissertation on the digital in Swedish literature by Jakob Lien has in many ways been entangled with my own project, since we were both doctoral students at Linköping, working on similar projects, and on similar time periods. Moreover, Erik Erlanson and

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92 Lien, *Maskintankar*. 

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Peter Henning have argued for the fruitfulness of the perspective of ecologization in relation to the pragmatism of Swedish literature of the 20th century, which in part overlaps with my understanding here.93

From a more environmental aspect, there is also a growing number of studies within the context of ecocriticism in Scandinavian literature, that is relevant to bring up.94 In relation to this field, my study establishes a more general ecologicized perspective (Hörl), taking for granted that ecological thinking is entangled with computational thinking and technology, which make any study of ecology a study of technology and media history as well.

Broader informed studies of the 1960s have also been important to grasp what I in this dissertation consider to be an ecologization of both agency and literature. I align my study with views of literature that by other scholars have been designated as “social,” or “performative” in studies by Swedish scholar Beata Agrell and Danish scholar Tania Ørum.95 In her monumental study of Swedish 1960s prose fiction, Romans som forskningsresa, forskningsresan som roman (The novel as a research trip, the research trip as a novel, 1993), Agrell highlights two elements that are typical of her corpus: that these works are “open” in their literary form, and that they are “unclean,” that is, they use conventions and cliches, and take an interest in their own reception (through

94 For ecocritical perspective of Scandinavian literature, see for example Inge-mar Haar et al, Perspectives on Ecocriticism, Marie Öhman, Det mänskligas natur: posthumanistiska perspektiv hos Lars Jakobson, Peter Hoeg och Kerstin Erkman (Möklinta: Gidlunds förlag, 2015), Sofia Roberg, Besvärja världen (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2021).
95 Agrell, Forskningsresan som roman, romanen som forskningsresa, 11, Ørum and Ölsson (eds), A Cultural History of the Avant Garde in the Nordic Countries, 36.
Overall, Agrell argues that the literary work of the 1960s demonstrates a “social” turn, showing a pragmatic relation to society, culture and its own literary tradition. In the broad study of postwar Danish avantgarde aesthetics, Ørum approaches it in a comparable way, stressing that there is a “performative turn” in literary aesthetics of the 1960s. In addition, many books of literary criticism from the 1960s and 1970s itself consider the typical novel of the decade as characterized by a social, playful and public address: “From representing the subject to a large degree as a single individual, the novel tends to become a more objective representation of socialized individuals, average persons,” as an anthology characterizing 1960s prose fiction as a “public” form phrased it in 1977. This is an approach that rhymes with mine in this study.

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97 Ørum and Olsson (eds), A Cultural History of the Avant Garde in the Nordic Countries, 36.

98 Jørgen Bonde Jensen and Karen Nikolajsen, Romanen som offentlighetsform – studier i moderne dansk prosa [The novel as a public form of expression], edited by Jørgen Bonde Jensen and Karen Nikolajsen (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1977), 7. Danish original: “Fra at være en overvejende subjektiv fremstilling af det enestående individ tenderer romanen mod at blive en mere objektiv fremstilling af socialiserede individer, gennemsnitsmennesker.” Similar observation of the 1960s prose fiction can be found in Norwegian scholar Erik Bjerck Hagen’s use of the term “pragmatic” to talk about the prose of the decade, arguing that contact with the world is not a problem for the young author generation of the 1960s; they are “already at home in the world.” Hagen, “På sporet av norsk sektistalsmodernisme,” Vagant (2/2010): 38-46, 43. For more approaches making comparable arguments from the 1960s, see Karl Erik Lagerlöf’s Samtal med 60-talister (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1965), Moderne prosa: arbeidsbok fra et litteraturseminar (Oslo: Samlaget, 1968). See also Lasse Horn Kjældgaard, Meningen med velfærdsstateren (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2018), Mai, Galleri 66, Bendik Vold, Varmestafetten (Oslo:
Unlike some previous studies, my own understanding of 1960s fiction does not fundamentally differentiate the experimental decade from the more political 1970s, but is more open to connections between the two decade’s literature. For many Scandinavian scholars, the late 1960s have been seen as manifesting a transition from a more naïve and experimental literary practice toward a more political 1970s social realist literature emblematic of the 1970s. The media technologically oriented literary historical approach of this study observes continuity here, instead of breaks, and suggests that the social, official, performative traits of the literary works in the 1960s, continued into the 1970s (I will deal shortly with this question, specifically, in the last, concluding chapter.)

In addition to filling a research gap in studies of Scandinavian fiction regarding ideas of agency, this study also provides readings of six important novels which have seldom attracted attention from scholarship before (as already mentioned). Vigdis Stokkelien’s works have received a few scholarly readings and is mentioned briefly in literary historical overviews. Bødker’s Pap has been discussed in a monograph about the author by Hanne Godfeldt, but before 2018 the novel had gained no scholarly attention; this is also the case regarding her experimental

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period in the 1960s.¹⁰¹ The Danish critic Thomas Bredsdorff has written about both Bødker and Sven Holm in the 1960s, and even though Holm is a fairly established and acknowledged author in Denmark, his 1960s oeuvre has received very little attention the last decades (this might change, as I mentioned above, after Termush, the novel read in this study, was relaunched in English and Danish in 2024). Leijer is an almost forgotten Swedish author and has only been read by the above-mentioned Jonas Ingvarsson. My readings of their works will hopefully bring new scholarship and readers to their oeuvres, and also enrich the image of the experimental 1960s in the Scandinavian countries, by including more women and more authors from the periphery in the discussion of how literature in this decade responded to technological and political change.

Outline

This introduction has presented the aim, material and scope, as well as the theoretical and methodological perspectives underlying this study, including presentations of the analytical concepts of the agotope and the ideas of melodramatic and ecodramatic agency.

Chapter 2 contextualizes the 1960s as a decade of technological and cultural change – viewed in this dissertation as a decade affected by the process of ecologization, explored through a presentation of the cultural history of cybernetics, and a discussion of what are seen as typical ecologicized traits of 1960s fiction in Scandinavia.

After this contextualizing chapter, the three central parts of the study follow, organized around the three agotopes of “Traffic,” “Contamination” and “Media.” Each chapter starts with an introduction, discussing

¹⁰¹ Godtfeldt, Bødker som en Arena-modernist.
the specific environment of Scandinavian culture in general, before embarking upon two novels set in corresponding settings. In chapter 3, “Traffic,” *Bilburen* (1963) by Swedish writer Leijer and *Den siste prøven* (1967) by Norwegian writer Stokkelien are read as two novels exploring different sides of the ecodramatic axis in the coordination system. Chapter 4, “Contamination,” continues with a novel by the Danish writer Holm, *Termush, Atlanterhavskysten* (1967) and another by Stokkelien, *Sommeren på heden* (1970), both of which broaden the scope of agency in 1960s prose fiction, ranging from melodrama to ecodrama. The fifth chapter, “Media,” features a reading of *Pap* (1967) by Danish writer Bødker and *Miniput* (1969) by the previously mentioned Swedish author Leijer, both of which explore the kind of despair and confusion that is associated with ideas of ecodramatic agency.

The concluding chapter summarizes the findings and returns to the novel that opened this introduction, Holm’s *Min elskede* (1968), to discuss the political aspects of 1960s prose fiction’s interest in agency. In addition, reflections are provided regarding the significance of zooming in on the 1960s to explore the question of agency.
Matrix – Cybernetics and the Explosion of Agencies in the 1960s

In the short story “Hvalskipet” (The Whale Ship, 1967) by Vigdis Stokkelien (1934–2005), the submarine officer Kristian is moving around in an unfamiliar environment. He finds himself in a submarine controlled by a kind of computer system, constituted as a network – “like a heap of giant radio transmitters.”\(^{102}\) This is not at all what he expected. Normally, in horror movies, Kristian contemplates, “electronic brains are made in the image of man.”\(^ {103}\) But not this machine, which has tentacles all over the ship. Kristian feels nauseous.

To Kristian, the distributed constitution of the electronic brain on the submarine is a concrete representation of a systematized milieu, where agency cannot be anchored at any concrete place. This machine is not a tool, not an individual entity that humans can control (or lose control over). No, this is a distributed machine or, even more precisely, an environment within which Kristian moves. In other words, the computer is no Frankenstein’s monster as in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818). Rather, it resembles the computer HAL 9000, the computer on the spaceship in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968); an agent that has access to every part of the ship. It is precisely this environmental character of the technological device that seems to be the problem for Kristian in the short story. Machines made

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\(^{103}\) Stokkelien, “Hvalskipet,” 8. Norwegian original: “I skrekkfilmer var alltid elektronhjernen skapt i et menneskelig bilde.”
in the image of man are recognizable to him – after all, ever since the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century, there have been machines, that is, technical apparatuses harnessing forces that enhances the power of the individual human. But what is this?

As discussed in the introduction of this book, since the 1950s, many philosophers have offered ways to conceptualize experiences with networked apparatuses, and its consequences for ideas of individuality, political engagement, subjectivity and, not least, agency. In the 2017 anthology, General Ecology, Hörl fittingly identifies this a process of “cyberneticization,” which accelerates what he calls a process of ecologization within Western thinking and which entails an “environmental culture of control” that is both “radically distributed and distributive.”

Aligned with such a perspective, this chapter regards cybernetics a well-suited context for deepening the understanding of ideas of networked or distributed agency in 1960s culture, science and technology. Therefore, this chapter addresses the discussion on “ecologization” of agency during the post-war years, by diving into the cultural history of cybernetics and the idea of agency conveyed therein.

First, I introduce cybernetics, and go on to discuss ideas of agency flourishing in this line of thinking. I am ending this section with a presentation of two important traits to understand this approach to agency: anti-essentialism and the black box. Thereafter, some general observations of 1960s prose in Scandinavia are discussed, with the aim to show

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104 See for example Hayles, How We Became Posthuman on the history of this, and Gilbert Simondon, On the mode of Existence regarding arguments made in the 1960s.

how the process of ecologization can be viewed as a relevant prism through which to understand aesthetic experimentation in this period.\textsuperscript{106}

**Cybernetics**

Cybernetics can be characterized as a set of influential ideas, models and theories in academic thought in the US, Europe and the Soviet Union from the late 1940s to the 1970s. The streams of thought gathered under the umbrella term of cybernetics ran parallel to the development of digital technologies, and laid the foundations for the globalized information age in which we live today.\textsuperscript{107} And, as a recent study has argued, it is fundamentally intertwined with the way in which the university discipline of the humanities have evolved over the last seventy years.\textsuperscript{108} Cybernetics emerged as an effort to formulate a universal science – a common base upon which to understand humans, machines and animals as biological and social beings – and as a milieu within which technologies could evolve to control complex systems and processes. In the words of British artist Roy Ascott, who was greatly inspired by cybernetic thinking: “Cybernetics is not only changing our world, but also presenting us with qualities of experience and modes of perception which radically alter our conception of it.”\textsuperscript{109}

\textsuperscript{106} There are of course many ways to contextualize the history of cybernetics, and this presentation fills the purpose of presenting the vocabulary and approach of agency for the upcoming chapters. It is not supposed to cover all aspects of the cultural history of cybernetics.


Understood in this simultaneously discursive and material way, cybernetics is an intriguing matrix through which to explore cultural changes in ideas of agency during the 1960s. For example, together with mathematics and information theory, cybernetics pushed the emergence of technologies such as the first pacemaker surgically implanted inside a human body (1958) or CT scanning that is used to map the inside of the human body and brain (1971). But it also offered tools to visualize, understand and model complex environmental challenges. Hence, one could say that cybernetics delivered blueprints, propaganda posters and horror stories, but also vocabularies and sculptures (robots) pushing a distributed understandings of agency during the early information age.

When stressing the philosophical and cultural implications of cybernetics, it is important to keep in mind the military impact and origins of the science of cybernetics. From the first conferences in the US – the so-called Macy Conferences in 1946–53 – cybernetics was financially supported and attracted interest from the military. At these conferences, perspectives from military and medical professionals, sociologists, biologists, philosophers, engineers and mathematicians attracted a great sense of optimism and belief in a new and better future, for the military, the biologists, philosophers and anthropologists alike.


Nevertheless, neither back then nor today can cybernetics be reduced to a military or technological endeavour.\textsuperscript{113} The cultural revolution of cybernetics extended beyond being instrumental for big business and the “military-industrial complex.”\textsuperscript{114} As Céline Lafontaine writes in her article “The Cybernetic Matrix of French Theory,” (2008) cybernetics “carried a new paradigm combining the scientific and technical discoveries of the day.”\textsuperscript{115} The fact that cybernetics influenced so many different fields of thought – as well as culture in general – makes it a phenomenon that is difficult to delimitate or encircle. Precisely because of its “high level of conceptual flexibility,” cybernetics appeared useful and fruitful for so many fields.\textsuperscript{116}

Before embarking on more concrete traits of cybernetic approaches to agency, let me says something about the relation between US and Europe. Cybernetics in Europe emerged parallel to, and in close contact with, US cybernetics, but, some argues, with closer affinities to philosophy and art than in the US. In his book \textit{The Cybernetic Brain} (2008), the historian Andrew Pickering claims that this interest in aesthetics was the reason why the human – particularly the brain, but also the human body – and not the machine, played a larger role in British, French and

\textsuperscript{113} There have been many arguments along these lines; for example, Pias, “In the Age of Cybernetics,” and Hayles, \textit{How We Became Posthuman}.
\textsuperscript{114} As the former American president, Dwight D. Eisenhower called the military industry, in for example his “Farewell address,” accessed November 28, 2021, \url{https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Eisenhower%27s_farewell_address_(reading_copy)}
\textsuperscript{116} Lafontaine, “The Cybernetic Matrix of ‘French Theory,”’ 28. Full quote: “Paradoxically, it is this blurredness, combined with a high level of conceptual flexibility, that has given the informational paradigm the strength to diffuse so widely.”
German cybernetics than in their US equivalents.\textsuperscript{117} According to Pickering, central concepts in cybernetics, such as “control,” also had a more ambiguous meaning in Europe than in the US.\textsuperscript{118} What was so intriguing for the British cyberneticians, he writes, was the field’s ability to model manoeuvrings in uncertain territory and within extraordinarily complex systems, such as societies.\textsuperscript{119} The “entire task of cybernetics was to figure out how to get along in a world that was not enframable, that could not be subjugated to human designs – how to build machines and construct systems that could adapt performatively to whatever happened to come their way.”\textsuperscript{120}

**Cybernetic Approaches to Agency – Relations and Regulation**

“From its beginning, cybernetics was less a disciplinary science than a general methodology of action,” media historian Claus Pias argues in his foreword to the complete transcripts of the Macy Conferences.\textsuperscript{121} A lot themes were discussed at these initial gatherings, by biologists, mathematicians, anthropologists, engineers and philosophers, but already from the beginning, Pias argues, fundamental ideas of what was to become the universal science of cybernetics had been outlined; a special interest in the question of agency.

Homeostasis was an important concept in this regard. The process of homeostasis models how individual entities – such as human bodies –

\textsuperscript{117} Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain*, 24, footnote 28.

\textsuperscript{118} Pickering *The Cybernetic Brain* 32. “British cybernetics was not a scientized adjunct of Big Brother.”

\textsuperscript{119} On society and cybernetics, see Stafford Beer’s experiments with cybernetic democratization technologies in Chile, described in Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain*, 32.

\textsuperscript{120} Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain*, 32f.

\textsuperscript{121} Pias, “The Age of Cybernetics,” 23.
function, and how they relate to, adapt and process the outside world through action, perception, feedback and learning. Historians often talk of two waves of cybernetics, the first wave and the second (which is sometimes referred to as second-order cybernetics). Hayles also operates with a third phase, which relates to linguistics, concerned with “how the observer is constructed within social and linguistic environments.”

Homeostasis was dominant in the first wave of cybernetics (1945–1960), where the researchers were interested in observing and understanding the ability of natural and technological systems to stabilize and improve themselves, through reaching states of equilibrium. For example, the way in which animal bodies self-regulate levels of blood sugar and adjust their use of energy to match activity. In the second wave (1960–1980), recursion between systems and their surroundings become more important. Feedback was, of course, also important in the first wave, as a way of attaining homeostasis within a system, but in the second wave the observer becomes part of the equation, which gives the idea of homeostasis a reflexive spin.

Throughout these cybernetic phases, the autonomous subject becomes a big problem. In her study of US cybernetics, Hayles describes how the “idea of the feedback-loop implies that the boundaries of the autonomous subject are up for grabs, since feedback loops can flow not only within the subject but also between the subject and the environment.”

To maintain the concept of autonomy in such an interdependent world, the biologists Francisco J. Varela and Huberto R. Maturana introduced in the 1970s the concept of autopoiesis, that is, a theory of the

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123 Hayles, “Cybernetics,” 149.
124 Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 2, italics in original.
organization of “all living systems.”.” “Autopoietic machines are homeostatic machines,” they argued, “[a] closed network of productions that have a necessary material openness to the system.” This question of autopoiesis – that is, how individuality can be upheld within a systematized environment – is still being discussed today. For example, contemporary scholars have suggested that we understand biological processes as sympoietic instead of autopoietic, conceptualizing biological processes not as closed (auto-poetic, meaning self-produced), but as constantly co-produced with the surrounding.

This interest in open and closed, self-observing and autopoietic systems led sociologist Niklas Luhmann in the 1970s to develop a circular and universal theory of sociology in order to understand societal phenomena, which positions relations at the centre of the thinking, instead of objects. In Luhmann’s philosophical approach, as unpacked by Hörl, we find “the first condensation of a form of rationality that has turned or is becoming ecological,” which is “characterized by its radical revaluation of relationality.” According to Hörl, phenomena such as societies can be understood as overarching systems consisting of several closed systems in Luhmann’s thinking, which differentiate themselves according to their environment. From this perspective, each theoretical understanding of the system must necessarily be self-referential. In that sense, Luhmann’s theoretical approach carries with it an idea of agency and a rejection of absolute autonomy.

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126 Varela and Maturana, *Autopoiesis and Cognition*, 78.
127 Haraway has suggested a modification of the term autopoiesis, “sympoiesis,” as better suited to what actually goes on in nature. Haraway, “Sympoiesis: Symbiogenesis and the Lively Arts of Staying with the Trouble,” in *Staying with the Trouble*, 58f.
Along similar lines, but with different accentuations, the anthropologist Gregory Bateson developed an ecological theory of the mind in the 1960s and 1970s, which also had implications for ideas of autonomy. As Melley points to, Bateson imagined the human agent as a “system whose boundaries do not at all coincide with the boundaries either of the body or what is popularly called the ‘self’ or ‘consciousness.’”¹²⁹ The individual is not a closed system, but an open one, constantly exchanging information with the environment which he or she occupies.

This Batesonian idea of agency points to a rather complex view of materiality and communication in cybernetic thought. Technological discoveries in the 1960s modelled and took advantage of the communication occurring in material processes, and biologists discovered how the body itself communicated through genes and bacteria. These biologists included Jacques Monod, who in 1961 discovered a control mechanism in plants (the mRNA sequence) that controls growth.¹³⁰ Such discoveries paved the way for microbiology and, later, gene-editing tools such as CRISPR or the mRNA vaccines being developed today.¹³¹ As a forerunner to this, early technical experiments by the polymath and physicist Jagadish Chandra Bose back in the early 20th century used a self-built crescograph (a kind of ECG device for plants) to prove that plants

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communicated.\textsuperscript{132} Such developments further inspired cybernetics in the 1950s and ‘60s, and encouraged a stream of experiments, which were documented in the speculative book \textit{The Secret Life of Plants} (1973) by the journalist Peter Thompkins and Christopher Bird (later also made into a film with music by Stevie Wonder).\textsuperscript{133} Furthermore, the chemist and writer James Lovelock argued in his 1968 book that the earth itself is a complex cybernetic organism.\textsuperscript{134} The point of mentioning all these different examples, is that in the 1950s and 1960s, autonomous robots, thermostats and other automatized technologies made it clear that the human body was no longer the only producer of messages, nor the only recipient of communications. When Hörl talks about an “explosion of agencies” emerging with digital technology, culminating with sensors at the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, this explosion is already anticipated in cybernetics, albeit on a smaller scale.\textsuperscript{135}

Furthermore, these discussions about autopoiesis, systems and the problem of autonomy reveal that the question of autonomy became a \textit{problem} for cyberneticians.\textsuperscript{136} If humans, animals, machines and plants only differ from each other through the way in which information is

\textsuperscript{132} See for example Jagadish Chandra Bose, \textit{Researches on the Irritability of Plants} (London: Longman, Greens and Co, 1913)

\textsuperscript{133} For more about this, see Jenny Jarlsdotter Wikström, “Kåta växter,” \textit{Sensory Journal vol 1} (2016): 61-80.

\textsuperscript{134} I refer here to the Gaia-thesis, developed in many articles by Lovelock, among them “Planetary Atmospheres: Compositional and other changes associated with the presence of Life,” \textit{Advances in the Astronautical Sciences}, 25 (1969): 179-193.

\textsuperscript{135} Hörl, “Introduction,” 12.

\textsuperscript{136} As Hayles analyses in her book on US cybernetics, \textit{How We Became Posthuman}, this problem of autonomy runs deep in cybernetics, as well as in 20\textsuperscript{th} century thought. Thus, in many ways, cybernetics, with its theoretical models and innovative technologies, demonstrates the “Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity,” as one of her articles is called. Hayles, “Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity,” \textit{New Literary History}, vol 30, nr 3 (1999): 675-697.
organized, how do bodies maintain their organization of information – that is, their identity – through time? These theoretical speculations lead to questions about what a closed system really is, and if the human body is a closed or an open system. Framed in a different way, one might ask if it is possible to draw a strict line between the self and society, the individual and its environment? If not, how is it possible to know when you are acting of your own free will and when you are just doing what the society around you expects? And, if plants, machines and other entities are communicating constantly, what does this say about human communication and individuality?

Such questions, which might appear theoretical or abstract, were not just being asked by engineers, mathematicians and biologists with a philosophical flair. At the time, people outside strict scientific circles were also having everyday experiences that resonated quite well with cybernetic thinking. The 1960s was a decade of great infrastructural traffic projects, to name just one example. This can be exemplified by what the British art critic Jack Burnham wrote in 1968:

When we buy an automobile, we no longer buy an object in the old sense of the word, but instead we purchase a three- to five-year lease for participation in the state-recognized private transportation system, a highway system, a traffic safety system, an industrial parts replacement system, a costly insurance system, an outdoor advertising system, a state park recreation system, a drive-in eating and
Traffic was not the only feature imposing a relational perspective. So did the emerging environmental awareness in the decade, based on threats of ecological disaster (nuclear waste, radiation, DDT and other pesticides from industry, which were typical formulated fears of the decade), as well as the emergence of a globalized mass media society. The idea of individuation articulated by the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon, presented in the theoretical section in the introduction, is itself an example of this shift toward a relational thinking about the human being, focusing on the changes in the environment as a point of departure to understand fluctuation regarding human individuality and agency. You are shaped as an individual, if you are – as Hannah Arendt would say – a *homo faber*, building worlds.138 However, the introduction of self-augmented and autonomous machines attributes individualism to machines, instead of humans, and thus kicks humans off their unique role as tool-users.139

And, I would add, being exposed to contaminated environments and traffic affords similar experiences. Consequently, the human is forced to take on the role of a project organizer, or “conductor” of an orchestra, a

137 Jack Burnham, *Beyond modern sculpture. The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 11.
139 Up until the 18th century, humans had a relatively stable relationship to nature by being a tool-user. “[M]an centralized all technical individuality in himself, at a time when only tools existed (...), the machine thus takes the place of man because, as tool bearer, man used to do the job the machine now does. To this phase corresponds a dramatic and impassioned notion of progress, which turns into the rape of nature, the conquest of the world, and the exploitation of energies.” Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, 21.
“permanent coordinator and inventor of the machines that surround him,” that is, changing his or her idea of oneself as an individual, to quote Simondon.\textsuperscript{140}

**Anti-Essentialism and the Black Box of Human Agency**

The US polymath Nobert Wiener, often referred to as the father of cybernetics, saw and feared the huge consequences that cybernetics would have for the modern, Enlightenment idea of the human.\textsuperscript{141} He discussed the consequences of a cybernetic idea of the self, with a specific interest in morals and ethics in several books, addressing the gap between a humanism that values the rights of the individual subject, and the kind of anti-essentialist cybernetic philosophy that was being developed at the Macy Conferences.\textsuperscript{142} Wiener brings up an important aspect of the cybernetic approach to agency during the postwar years by asking: how is it possible to examine both the human and machines in terms of their functions (behaviour)? Other cyberneticians, such as Ross Ashby, would say it is impossible to figure out what is really going on, since the human is “not a thinking machine, it is an acting machine; it gets information and then it does something about it.”\textsuperscript{143} From such a perspective, it is not possible to ascribe beforehand a particular virtue or ethics to humans as a category.

The anti-essentialism of cybernetics is crucial for ideas of both agency and autonomy, and it can be understood by looking at the concept of the

\textsuperscript{140} Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, 17f.


\textsuperscript{142} According to Hayles, Wiener, “helped to initiate a journey that would prove to have consequences more far-reaching and subversive than even his formidable powers of imagination could conceive.” Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 291.

\textsuperscript{143} Ashby, quoted by Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain*, 6.
black box. The black box (or rather, the problem of the black box) was introduced alongside the accelerating developments in electronics during the 1950s, and serves as an illuminating way to describe cybernetic approaches to agency.\(^\text{144}\) In *An Introduction to Cybernetics* (1956), Ashby states that the problem of the black box evolves out of the simple fact that, from time to time, you have to deal with electronic apparatuses that you cannot open for fear of destroying them, or simply because they are too complex to take apart. In order to decide whether or not to send the apparatuses for costly repairs, you have to test them indirectly, by sending signals in and seeing what comes out. Therefore, Ashby sees the *black box* as fundamental to cybernetics. Cybernetics does not ask what a thing is, but what it does: “It is thus essentially functional and behaviouristic.”\(^\text{145}\) We do not need to know what something is in order to understand how it functions, as Ashby further contends: “In our daily lives we are confronted at every turn with systems whose internal mechanisms are not fully open to inspection, and which must be treated by the methods appropriate to the Black Box.”\(^\text{146}\) Thus, the black box represents a perceptual shift in how to address a problem or a thing. A black box is simply something that we do not need to understand fully to explore.\(^\text{147}\) To see something as a black box, means to look first and foremost at the doing, not the being. To address the relevance for this study’s focus on agency in a similar manner – it entails looking at agency, not the agent.

A canonized example that serves to illuminate the philosophical consequences of a black box perspective can be found in British mathematician Alan Turing’s article “Computing machinery and intelligence”

\(^\text{144}\) At least, according to Ross Ashby’s *An introduction to cybernetics* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1956), 86.
\(^\text{146}\) Ashby, *An introduction to cybernetics*, 86.
\(^\text{147}\) Ashby, *An introduction to cybernetics*, 110.
(1950). Here, he introduced the thought that was later to become the model for the Turing Test. In the article, he pays particular attention to the role of the observer, who, he says, becomes the key when deciding what something is. Thus, what something is, is decided by how it is being observed. In the article, he imagines a test modelled on a social game that people play at parties, where participants try to guess the gender of a person, based on typewritten information. Can you differentiate between a man and a woman if you cannot see their bodies in front of you when communicating with them? And what if you replace the woman with a machine? Turing moves his attention from the object to the observer and conducts a thought-experiment in which the individual is forced to activate what could be described as an anti-essentialist view of an object. He concludes by writing that it is the observer (who only has the output to examine) who plays the important role in the experiment, not what exists inside the black box. What something is, is less important than what it does. (And what it does, must be self-reflexively analysed, one might add, by looking at the relation between the observer and the output.)


149 “In order that tones of voice may not help the interrogator the answers should be written, or better still, typewritten. The ideal arrangement is to have a teletypewriter communicating between the two rooms.” Turing, “Computing machinery and intelligence,” 434.

150 As Hayles states in *How We Became Posthuman*, xiii: “What the Turing test ‘proves’ is that the overlay between the enacted and the represented bodies is no longer a natural inevitability but a contingent production, mediated by a technology that has become so entwined with the production of identity that it can no longer meaningfully be separated from the human subject.” That is, the individual is a cyborg, because it is “produced through the verbal and semiotic markers constituting it in an electronic environment.” Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, xiii.
When employing such an anti-essentialist approach, the productive and generative potential of cybernetics becomes visible. Cybernetics is fundamentally anti-essentialist, and focuses on the “doing,” instead of presupposing essential characteristics of agency. In this and many other ways, cybernetics contributed to destabilizing ideas of the individual, autonomous agent, and pushes a focus on the question of agency.

Cybernetics and Ecologization in 1960s Scandinavian Prose

Art and culture in Europe absorbed cybernetic ideas; for example, at large exhibitions during the 1960s, such as Cybernetic Serendipity (1968) in London and Konst och teknologi (Art and Technology) at Lund’s Konsthall (1966). Cybernetic Serendipity in 1968 was the first grand exhibition of computers and art. Max Bense was a key figure in European cybernetics in this regard; the milieu around Bense in Stuttgart – the so-called Stuttgart School – was a particularly rich aesthetic environment. Here, the first computer-generated poem was composed by Theo Lutz in 1959. In the late 1950s in Scandinavia,

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151 The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age (1968) at MOMA in New York opened a month after the exhibition in London.

152 In her opening address to the exhibition Cybernetic Serendipity in London in 1967, curator Jasia Reichardt thanks Bense for giving her the idea for the exhibition, thus explicitly connecting one of the important nodes in the ecology of cybernetics in Europe: British cybernetics (represented by scientists and engineers such as Stafford Beer, Ross Ashby and Walter Grey) and the Stuttgart School (represented by philosophers, poets and artists such as Bense, Theo Lutz and Frieder Nake). “Introduction.” Cybernetic Serendipity – the computer and the arts. A Studio International Special Issue, edited by Jasia Reichardt, 5-8. (London: Studio International, 1968), 5.

153 The first automatically generated poem, “Stochastische Texte,” was written in 1959 by Theo Lutz, an engineer associated with the Stuttgart school. It was programmed on a mainframe ZUSE Z 22 at the T.H. Stuttgart. Lutz coded, and the machine randomly rephrased sentences from the novel Das Schloss by Franz Kafka. The poem is available at stuttgarter-schule.de. See also
Öyvind Fahlström took an interest in German and Brazilian concrete poetry and cybernetics, and he also dubbed Bense “the most important theoretician of new poetry in Germany.” According to Swedish scholar Jonas Ingvarsson, there was very fertile ground for North American cybernetic thought in the aesthetic culture of 1960s Sweden; he views cybernetics as a “binding factor” between the wide range of different theoretical and methodological approaches contained in 1960s aesthetics.

There was also a broader cultural interest in cybernetics in Scandinavia in the 1960s. Books by Norbert Wiener were translated, and introductory books on cybernetics were written in Norway, Denmark and Sweden. In a 1968 publication, Danish author Hans Jørgen Nielsen called cybernetics a “symptom among many that there is a change in the understanding of the self and the world.” In many ways, 1960s aesthetics were attuned to both the aesthetic and existential consequences of the

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Öyvind Fahlström, “Bris,” Rondo 3 (1961): 24-32, 25f. Swedish original: “den nya poesins viktigaste teoretiker i Tyskland.” Fahlström wrote introductions to concrete poetry in magazines such as Rondo, an aesthetic approach that was in many ways related to cybernetics, as described in Jesper Olsson, Öyvind Fahlström: Ade-Ledic-Nander (Moderna Museet & Koenig Books, 2017), 13.

Ingvarsson, En besynnerlig gemenskap, 95. Swedish original: “sammenbinndande faktorn” and “marken är förberedd för denna typ av frågeställningar.”

Translations of his works into Scandinavian languages include, for example, the Swedish Materia, maskiner, människor, Cybernetiken och samhället (Stockholm: Forum, 1952), Danish “Menneske og automat – Kybernetikken og samfundet” (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1963), Danish A/S Gud og Golem (Copenhagen: Steen Hasselbalchs forlag, 1965), the Norwegian God og Golem A/S: betraktninger og visse punkter hvor kybernetikken støter sammen med religionen” (Oslo: Cappelen, 1964, with foreword by Piet Hein).

Nielsen, ’Nielsen’ og den hvide verden, 10. Danish original: “symptom blandt mange andre på en forandret selv- og omverdensforståelse.”
new information technologies, inspired by both American and European cyberneticians.

However, apart from the above-mentioned stream of interest in cybernetic ideas, for many authors and artists in Scandinavia, I argue that interest in technology were not primarily the way literature expressed a responsiveness to the relational turn cybernetics represented. Instead, I argue that much prose of the 1960s in Scandinavia, and in particular the novels read in the present study, show an interest in relations between individuals and the environment in manifold ways. This interest is manifested in an exploration of what Hörl terms an “explosion of agencies,” through a curiosity in natural processes, plants and dust (as well as, occasionally, in machines). This was so pervasive that I would talk about a “non-human turn” in 1960s prose. There was a certain kind of awareness of objects, as well as a focus on the environment as something more than just consisting of dead objects. Such an interest – it seems – resonate with cybernetic ideas of self-reflexivity and feedback, as well as

158 In addition to the novels read in this study, as well as the works mentioned in the introduction to the three main chapters, see for example works by Ann-Margret Dahlqvist-Lundberg, Strålen (Stokholm: PAN/Norstedts, 1958), Astrid Hjærtnes Andersen, Dr. Gnomen (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1965) Øyvind Boldstad. Dødens tango. Roman over en sjernert ung manns dagbok (Oslo: Forlaget Ny Dag, 1967), Olav Angell, Den elektriske blomsten (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1968), Mona Lyngar, Hull (Oslo: Cappelens forlag, 1970) and Sven Åge Madsen, Liget og lysten (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968). Danish author Erik Thygesen speaks of his own novels as “environmental,” a type of novel which is “on its way,” and that, unlike the traditional novel which moves in time and space, moves in space and “surfaces.” Erik Thygesen, “Med et patronhylster, et smykkeskrin og en pebgerbøsse som fortæller,” Moderne prosa: arbeidsbok fra et seminar, 37. Danish original: “er på vej” and “flader.”

159 For the concept of the nonhuman turn, see for example the anthology The Nonhuman Turn (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2015) edited by Richard Grusin.
descriptive stylistic choices that allowed the authors to approach agency as something akin to a black box.¹⁶⁰

Let me give a brief example of the kind of spatial and anti-essentialist approach found in the 1960s prose discussed in this dissertation. When I started to occupy myself systematically with the prose and poetry of the 1960s, I discovered a sense of materiality that disrupted the idea of passive objects and landscapes. Weird and paradoxical representations of materiality were found in a wide range of aesthetic expressions during the decade, many of which seemed to reduce humans to their physical circumstances, while also amplifying the physical conditions of seemingly dead objects, processes and environments.

For example, Norwegian poet Paal Helge Haugen acknowledged this new interest in materiality and the invisible life at other scales beyond the human in his poem “Læredikt om støvet” (Didactic Poem about the Dust, 1966). The last stanza of the poem begins like this:

Men det usynlige støvet er annleis og ukjent,
fullt av underleg liv, mikroskopiske dyr og planter.
Det frammande nære livet.
Vi ser det leve i solstrålande i mørke rom,
men vi kjenner det ikkje.
Opp av jordbotnen strøymer det ustanseleg,
ut or kleda våre, stig dampande opp frå hud og slimhinner.

Omkring oss og inne i oss.

¹⁶⁰ Examples of such descriptive approaches to agency and subjectivity can for example be found in literary movements such as the nouveau roman movement, see for example Sarraute, Age of Suspicion (New York: George Braziller, 1990), which had a great influence in Scandinavia in the 1960s.
The last line of the poem, “You know this,” implies that this is age-old wisdom, which humans have discovered anew in the aftermath of the Second World War. Our forefathers knew it, the poem declares, but in the modern age, we seem to have forgotten it, and now we are rediscovering that life is, in fact, everywhere. Humans cannot trust their senses regarding whether or not the dust around us is alive, because they cannot feel it. It is alien and intimate at the same time. It is “around us and inside us,” as the poem’s penultimate line claims. There is an almost hopeful, but simultaneously anxious, tone to the poem, pointing to life where no life is supposed to be found.\footnote{The poem is also referencing the dust from the pipes of Auschwitz, which increases its anxious tone.} It is almost as if, as US philosopher Karen Barad has argued in \textit{Meeting the Universe Halfway} (2007), “matter is agentive, not a fixed essence or property of things.”\footnote{Barad, \textit{Meeting the Universe Halfway}, 137.}

This material awareness and displacement of the perspective from human individuals to relations, was propelled, as observed in the first part of this chapter, by scientific breakthroughs and results within biology and the natural sciences during the 1960s. As we have seen, even plants were thought to be “read” and approached as active agents, and cybernetic technologies contributed to opening people’s eyes to see agency as
being something that might – in a very basic way – be extended to entities other than humans.\textsuperscript{164}

The Norwegian priest, Tor Aukrust, touched upon some of these consequences of the discoveries and theory of cybernetics in his book \textit{Mennesket i kulturen} (The Human Being in Culture, 1958). Technologies of the postwar years, he argues, have radically accelerated “the area of quantitative cognition beyond what is ‘natural’ for the human.”\textsuperscript{165} Through technological apparatuses and instruments, humans can gain access to “completely unknown and very complicated areas of reality. Macrocossms and microcosms.”\textsuperscript{166} And this have led to the idea that our “intermediate world,” as he calls it, is “just an insignificant province. Science and man’s ‘natural’ idea of the world are thus very different.”\textsuperscript{167} The contemporary era, he suggests, therefore risks increasingly alienating humans, as the scientific worlds are considered more real than the one humans experience with their senses.

Other ecological perspectives can be found in Scandinavian prose fiction in this decade, for example across the oeuvre of Danish author Inger Christensen – one of the most acclaimed Danish poets of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The eco-poetic traits of her work have been studied by, among others, Sofia Roberg, with a focus on the long poem \textit{Alfabet} (Alphabet, 1981), and the structuralist influences on her work have been discussed

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\textsuperscript{164} As described earlier in this chapter, for example, Thompkins and Bird, \textit{The Secret Life of Plants}.
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\textsuperscript{165} Aukrust, \textit{Mennesket i kulturen} (Oslo: Forlaget Land og Kirke, 1958), 57. Norwegian original: “den kvantitative erkjennelses område i forhold til det som er ‘naturlig’ for mennesket.”
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\textsuperscript{166} Aukrust, \textit{Mennesket i kulturen}, 57. Norwegian original: “helt ukjente og meget kompliserte virkelighetsområder. Makrokosmos og mikrokosmos.”
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\textsuperscript{167} Aukrust, \textit{Mennesket i kulturen}, 57. Norwegian original: “mellomverden,” and “våre egne senser, bare en ubetydelig provins. Vitenskapens og menneskets ‘naturlige’ verdensbilde blir således meget forskjelligartet.”
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by Jonas Ross Kjærgaard. However, symptoms of what I call the process of ecologization can be discerned as early as the 1960s, in her debut novel Evighedsmaskinen (The perpetual motion machine), published in 1964. In this book, Christensen rewrites the story of Christ in a series of stylistic and narrative different tableaux in the book, composing the plot to emerge as a kind of self-generating, ecologically unfolding structure. The Heideggerian idea of being “thrown” into the world is an intellectual reference, but above all the novel conveys a radical shift of perspective from focusing on individuals to focusing on relationships. In an unpublished essay on radio plays from 1969, referring to French literary scholar Lucien Goldmann, Christensen phrases it in this way: The “literary poetics in the future need to circle around the laws of the transindividual subject (…)”. 


169 The novel is organized into eleven chapters, the first narrating the gospel of Christ, named 1, and thereafter complications of this story in chapters named 1¹, 1², 1³, etc. The last chapter is called the square root of 1, and this offers a historically distanced perspective on the whole story, that overall is a story of a society that is moving from a totalitarian regime to a more democratic society. This organization of the narrative underlines how the story, like the totalitarian society in the plot, proliferates from a starting point, instead of progressing in chronological order, showing influence from, I would argue, cybernetic ideas that there is no position outside a cybernetic system, from where to operate or observe the system objectively, and figure out what is really going on. For digital aesthetics in one of Christensen’s other novels, see my article Lome, “Digital poesi hos Christensen og Max Bense,” Tidsskrift för litteraturvetenskap, 3-4 (2017): 27-39.

170 On the idea of being thrown, see Martin Heidegger’s Being and Time (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).

171 Christensen, “Hørespilllets problematik” from Verden ønsker at se sig selv, edited by Marie Silkeberg and Peter Borum, 800-803 (Copenhagen:
In a similar vein, and at around the same time, the Norwegian critic and author Espen Haavardsholm stated in 1968: “Maybe it’s time to define oneself forward and outward – towards the others – instead of introspectively and retrospectively?” The Norwegian author and critic Dag Solstad argued, in a related manner, in an essay about the introduction of modernism in Norway the 1960s, that modernist literary works operated with a dynamic environment, representing a dissolution of the difference between characters and milieu. The Danish author and feminist Charlotte Strandgaard, on the other hand, writes about environments in *Afstande* (Distances, 1966): “The surrounding world/is clinging/it does not give up//it/does not withhold itself.” Space is not

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Gyldendal, 2018), 803, Full, Danish original: “Jeg tror at den litterære problematik i lang tid endnu også i hørespillet må kredse om lovene for det transindividuelle subjekt sådan som og selv om de kun kan eksistere i de individuelle bevidstheder.” The text is dated December 1969 and was never published during Christensen’s lifetime. According to the editors of the volume, Marie Silkeberg and Peter Borum, it was probably written to the German translation of *Et uhørt spil*.


passive, it is active, one can almost read in her work, and it is no longer possible to see it as merely an ontological condition, but instead as a force or process, something actively shaping the individual agent.

To see invisible agents in the most insignificant objects, and to regard the environment as active, requires a new narrative and perceptual framework, the Danish author Sven Holm points to in a poem from 1969. But how to find this new aesthetic form? And how to conceptualize this new world? Holm repeats in the poem that he “knows” there is a new world all around him, and that it is inside and around him at the same time:

Jeg ved
at vi står over for en helt ny verden
og at denne verden allerede findes i os
og omkring os
endnu ikke synlig
men i mellemrummene

et sted på fotografiet en sætning
sagt mellem to utoydelige ansigter
en sætning
som en gang vil træde frem og blive hørt
med en anden teknik
ligesom magnetiske felter får jernfilspåner til at udtrykke sig.175

175 Holm, “Jeg ved at vi står over for en helt ny verden,” Vindrosen (1969): 48–50, 48f. English translation: “I know/that we are facing a completely new world/and that this world already exists in us/around us/still not visible/but in the in-betweens//somewhere in the photography a sentence/spoken
Here, Holm expresses curiosity, and openness to something new, to a world where non-humans such as “iron filings” can talk, if approached with the right equipment. The poem talks about sentences that may emerge from a photograph at some time in the future, and thus expresses an awareness of something extending beyond reality as it is experienced, legacies of a micro-world, which can only be mediated through scientific experiments, using advanced technologies. Hence, this 1960s poem expresses an unreliable relation to what is experienced as real, posing challenges to the aesthetic form, as well as to established ideas of individual agency.

A relational approach can be argued to be expressed on the page of the literary work itself in this decade. Overall, the 1960s has been understood as a period in European literary history during which both the author and the work’s autonomy are destabilized; manifested, for instance, in prominent and widely influential essays by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. More precisely, regarding Scandinavian prose, 1960s fiction has been characterized as being “social,” focusing on the relationship between non-literary texts and literature’s relations to society. According to the beforementioned Swedish scholar Beata Agrell, “a new type of exterior and probing reflection with particular aesthetic and literary consequences” emerged in these years. This “probing” entails a

between two indistinct faces/a sentence/that at some point will emerge and be heard/with another technique/just as magnetic fields make iron filings/express themselves.”


177 Agrell, *Forskningsresan som roman*, 154, italics in original. Swedish original: “en ny typ av utåtvänd och prövande reflexion med bestämda estetiska och litterära konsekvenser.”
destabilization of the author, by including feedback loops with the reader and society in the work itself, but also, I would argue, aligning it with cybernetics, an interest in what literature is doing, rather than what it is saying. This expression sums up what I would call an expression of a relational idea of literature, where the key focus becomes the relationship between literature and the world, instead of an exploration of the literary object or representation itself.\textsuperscript{178} This could also be called a “pragmatist,” or a “functionalist” approach to literature.\textsuperscript{179}

This relational idea of literature is visible in a multitude of ways in 1960s prose and leads to an openness of types of literary techniques available for authors. Multiple styles are mixed and experimented with, such as the renewal of the third-person narrator as well as the incorporation of science-fiction elements, experiments inspired by the nouveau-roman movement, concrete poetry, nature writing and mysticism. As Danish author Vagn Lundby said in 1969, on the subject of 1960s prose: “The technique of narration is simply ‘reality.’”\textsuperscript{180} I take this to mean that reality was regarded to be on the page, as well as outside of it, just like that, unproblematic and pragmatically understood. The problem of representation is not central, and it differentiates itself from the traditional modernist poetics in that sense, since the literary work was understood as a self-evident part of the reality which it describes, bound to it through self-reflexive feedback-loops.

\textsuperscript{178} For this perspective on 1960s aesthetics, see for example Erik Erlanson and Peter Henning, “Estetisk ingenjörskonst och konstens ekologisering: Richard Bergh, Människan och utiden och Öyvind Fahlström.”

\textsuperscript{179} I am here referring to a scholar of the 1960s, and an author of the 1960s, respectively. Hagen, På sporet av norsk sektistallsmodernisme,” 43 and Leijer, “Att inventera verkligheten,” Tryckpunkter (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1965), 120f.

\textsuperscript{180} Vagn Lundby (ed.), Texter fra slutningen af 60erne (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1969), 12. Danish original: “Fortælleteknikken i prosaen er simpelthen ‘virkelig.’”
Some works use non-literary language in a direct way to break down the literary work as an autonomous entity, such as advertising language. The collage novel *Bröderna Casey* (1964), written by Swedish authors Torsten Ekbom, Leif Nylén and P. O. Enqvist under the collective pseudonym Peter Husberg, is full of commercial language as well as language drawn from other cultural products, not unlike the poetry collection *Pris* (1966) by Sonja Åkesson, which consists entirely of ready-made advertising slogans. In Swedish author Ingrid Sjöstrand’s novel *kända nästet* (1969), the ways in which advertisers’ language infiltrates the daily pondering and murmuring are explored, and the perspective of the story moves back and forth between cardboard posters and the inner monologues of the three women portrayed. The literary object is nothing particular, in itself, in such novels – instead, the 1960s prose is interested in how humans relate to their environment, in both form and motifs. And the literary work is itself considered as entangled, it is actively creating worlds or, at least, takes part in doing so.

This background, I would argue, contextualize the rather strong presence of different types of self-reflexive traits in 1960s prose. Literary works occupying themselves with their own forms might be mistaken for a disregard for the outside world, but is in fact quite the opposite. Reflexivity, or never-ending feedback loops, seem to be the starting point for much postwar writing, precisely because language and art are considered to be embedded in the very production of reality. This idea of postwar fiction is in line with the argument made by Seltzer in *The Official World* (2016), in which he uses the apparatus of the gyroscope to shed light upon a constant self-awareness in fiction from the early information age.181 In the same vein, from the ecologicized perspective adopted in the

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present study (Hörl), art is understood not as a reflection of society, but as a generative part of it. Generative, meaning self-producing, makes literature an agent to take into account when describing reality. Literary scholar James Burton therefore suggests that metafiction must be seen as intertwined with the process of ecologization in the culture post-1945. The individual literary work is part of a larger ecology, to which it at the same time contributes and is shaped by.

Summary – The Ecologization of Agency and Fiction in the 1960s

Cybernetics, I argue in this chapter, is a fruitful point of departure to understand the shifts and changes concerning ideas of agency in 1960s prose fiction. Cybernetics provides this study with a material and scientific background to the aesthetic exploration of agency in the 1960s as well as offers a necessary vocabulary for the discussions and reflections upon agency in the 1960s that follow in the next three chapters; this sharpens the analytical awareness in the readings of relationships, feedback loops, challenges of upholding autonomy, second-order self-observing systems and a view of apparatuses, machines, plants and the environment as active agents, alongside the one human.

Moreover, in this study, the cultural history of cybernetics functions not just as a stepping-stone for understanding how and why ideas about different ideas of agency exploded in the 1960s, but also point to a utopian context for what the future was thought to bring in the 1960s, and what technology could help with in this regard. This is a utopianism that

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resonates in much fiction from the decade, and it can contribute to explaining the decade’s open approach to agency. As Hayles writes in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), cybernetics, and what she terms the posthuman project, “evokes the exhilarating prospect of getting out of some of the old boxes and opening up new ways of thinking about what being human means.”\(^\text{183}\)

Chapter 3

Traffic – Ecodrama and Melodrama in Complex Infrastructures

Car traffic appears in numerous books and films throughout the postwar period in Western countries. Cyberneticians in particular were intrigued by traffic – for example the philosopher and poet Max Bense, whom we met in the last chapter.184 Whereas the most canonized novel on car culture from the postwar period, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), used the setting of traffic to represent liberating aspects of the young postwar generation, European film auteurs found inspiration in the vast infrastructure of traffic as something that challenged concepts such as autonomy and freedom, magnificently portrayed in Jean Luc Godard’s *Week-End* (1967) and Jacques Tati’s *Traffic* (1971). As the philosopher Gilles Deleuze wrote in an essay in 1998, what characterizes the highway is the feeling that you can “drive infinitely and ‘freely’ without being at all confined yet while still being perfectly controlled.”185 The entanglement of traffic and humans was further explored in British writer J.G. Ballard’s *Crash* (1971, adapted into a film by David Cronenberg in 1996), in which the emotional lives of humans were represented as accelerating with the speed of the car and extended through the grade-separated junctions all around central London.186

Why this interest in traffic in the decade? From being a tool for leisure activities in the late 1950s, the car slowly transformed into the dominant means of transportation, enabling changes in both urban and rural landscapes. This chapter sees traffic as a multifaceted and ambiguous background against which it made sense to project the challenges of agency in post-industrial society. Traffic constituted a regulated environment, within which certain kinds of actions were allowed and others prohibited. You have to stop at a red light, and you cannot drive off the road. If it is rush-hour, you have to go slowly; if it is icy, you need to be cautious. Therefore, traffic never stabilizes the individual in one role, but facilitates different kinds of relations at different times between humans and their surroundings – humans can be active, tool-using individuals when driving, passive passengers when sitting in the passenger seat, occasionally deprived of agency when stuck in traffic, and actively navigating when driving at rush-hour. In addition, when you are driving in traffic, you are always aware that you are driving in something, as well as being on the road, with hundreds of other drivers.

Quite fittingly, the British art historian Jack Burnham – also mentioned in the previous chapter – argued in 1968 that, to an increasing degree, humans were living their lives in a “systematized environment,” where both the agency and subjectivity of the human being were constantly regulated. Thus, in the vocabulary of this dissertation, traffic pushes a focus on relations, and not on entities.187 The car, Burnham writes, is not only an advanced chart or vehicle – or a tool an individual can use to improve their life (such as a gun, camera, or glasses) – but rather a portal that connects humans to a greater system.188 On this background, it makes sense that the science historian Andrew Pickering refer

187 See the introduction to this study, as well as Hörl, “Introduction.”
188 Burnham, Beyond modern sculpture, 11.
to the car as a technology of the distributed, non-autonomous, and non-modern self. 189

Traffic is understood quite broadly in this chapter. It covers not just car traffic (although, car traffic is the template), but also postwar transportation systems in general, for instance sea traffic, where humans and vessels are connected in complex, but still controlled and regulated environments. 190 Norway, Sweden and Denmark are all seafaring nations, and an experience of the sea is not uncommon among authors in Scandinavia or the general public. 191 Moreover, navigating in car traffic and navigating in ship traffic recalls the very term from which cybernetics stems, etymologically: “Kubernetes”, the Greek word for captain or steersman. 192

This chapter contains readings of two novels that employ the environment of traffic as an ecologicized agotope, in which ideas about agency are explored. That is, as spaces that structure agency in abrupt shifts in pace, on the one side enhancing ideas of individual agency, while

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189 Referencing a concept developed by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, Pickering argues that “technologies of the self” in the latter half of the 20th century, such as the car, dissolves the modern subject. See for example Pickering, The Cybernetic Brain, 385.

190 I could also have included train infrastructure here, because of the many similarities, but hesitate, because it is a transport technology belonging to the industrial age of the 19th century, which is related, but less concerned with the particular globalized culture in the 1960s. The same can be said about sea traffic, however, this was a domain that transformed quite radical in the 1960s, with the acceleration of global shipping infrastructure and modernization of the fleet. In addition, as Hayles has argued, sea traffic might be quite attuned to understanding agency as distributed from the beginning. Hayles, How We Became Posthuman, 289. More in this later in the chapter.

191 Authors describing life at sea include, for example, the Norwegian-Danish author Aksel Sandemose, and Norwegians Nordahl Grieg and Gunnar Bull Andersen, to mention just a few. See for example the anthology Nordsjøen i norsk litteratur, edited by Jørgen Sejerstedt et al. (Oslo: Fagbokforlaget, 2015).

simultaneously enforcing a dependence upon other drivers and the car itself. *Bilburen* (Carborne, 1963), by Swedish writer Nils Leijer, tells the story of a scooter rider who becomes a car driver, and he cannot get enough of the adrenalin-rush when driving. Vigdis Stokkelien’s *Den siste prøven* (The Last Test, 1968) dives into the contemplations of the captain of an oil tanker, struggling with what to do when he unexpectedly has to spend days just waiting with his vessel in a river delta close to a war zone.

Before I go on to analyse the novels, I want to offer an outline of the discussions and representations of traffic in Scandinavian culture and literature more generally in the period. How was traffic used in the fiction of this decade? And, what ideas of agency were traffic inclined to be accompanied with in media coverage, non-fiction and public debates? I address such events as the transition from driving on the left to driving on the right in Sweden in 1967, debates around safety, and the increasing number of traffic deaths during the 1960s.

**Freedom, Rush and Traffic Safety**

Traffic is a multifaceted phenomenon – it is road infrastructure, petrol stations, urban politics, traffic lights, the sociology of driving, logistics and much more. What is meant when talking about traffic in the 1960s, is not just one phenomenon, but a group of complex cultural and societal phenomena that were each approached differently across Scandinavia. Common to many of them, however, I argue in this chapter, was that agency was reconfigured and pushed toward a relational understanding. The car was not just an object or an instrument, but a key to unlocking new ways to relate to fellow human beings, technology and society in general, which people feared and/or celebrated. In short, traffic
introduced a milieu that actively structured the individuals moving around in it.

That there was something new in the making, was obvious to many. In 1966, an art exhibition entitled “The Car in the Arts” was staged in Stockholm. In his review, Swedish art critic Bengt Olvång observes this change, and holds that the older generation tends to consider the car a *thing*, that is, an instrument, which individuals can use, like a commodity or a piece of consumer goods.⁵ In contrast, younger authors today seem to approach the car as a way “to orient [themselves] in life.” Without “a car I am not part of the present,” Swedish author Leijer writes – whose novel *Bilburen* is analysed later in this chapter⁶. What is experienced as the *present* is highly dependent upon the environment in which you move and the technologies with which you surround yourself.

However, exactly what is new, is not easy to put a finger on. The environment of traffic, both enforces and questions individualistic ideas of agency. When driving, one often experiences an enhancement of individualism – a feeling also enforced by societal changes, mass culture, globalization, prosperity and emerging youth movements during these years. Accordingly, intense experiences of individualism feature in many works of Scandinavian prose fiction of the 1960s. However, the same works also use traffic as a background against which to represent the identity of

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⁵ Olvång, Bengt, “Tillvaron är en förälskelse,” *Aftonbladet*, October 25, 1966, 5. The original Swedish title of the exhibition was “Bilen i konsten,” held at Galerie Doktor Glas. Among those who Olvång considers the older generation at the exhibition are Swedish authors Ivar Lo-Johansson and Artur Lundkvist.


⁷ Leijer quoted in the catalogue to the exhibition by Bengt Olvång, “Tillvaron är en förälskelse,” 5. Swedish original: “Utan bil lever jag vid sidan av samtiden.” According to Olvång, the quote is from the exhibition’s catalogue, which I have not been able to retrieve.
individuals as less autonomous, less self-sufficient and more in flux within the environment; for example, in Danish writer Anders Bodelsen’s short story “Success” from the collection Rama Sama (1967), and Norwegian Finn Bjørnseth’s novel –og det halve riket (and the half kingdom, 1963). Both these works use the car to describe a cultural formation influencing the main characters’ ideas of themselves, enhancing individual agency on the one hand, and distributing their sense of individual agency on the other. Similarly, Tilstanden Harley (The Condition Harley, 1965) by Danish writer Cecil Bødker, names state of mind after the motorcycle brand Harley Davidson, depicting a new traffic-induced identity as fluid and transgressive, corresponding to qualities attached to the vehicle in question. Illustrating, in that sense, that traffic is responsive, as the sociologist Harvey Sacks would phrase it – the car or motorcycle shows that you are dependent upon traffic, it allows you to drive, but can also leave you stuck in traffic.

This responsivity of traffic is explored in Norwegian writer Ebba Haslund’s novel Det trange hjertet (The Narrow Heart, 1965). Here, traffic enhances individuality and autonomy, while at the same time pulling the rug from underneath the experience of individual control. Boje, the female protagonist in the novel, has experienced discrimination during her childhood and youth but, as an adult, she marries money, owns her own clothing shop and drives a fast car. Of course, she drives everywhere she needs to go. Life has taught her, she says, that there are two kinds of people: those who drive and those who follow the traffic. She unequivocally

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197 Bødker, Tilstanden Harley (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1965).
199 Haslund, Det trange hjertet (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1965).
sees her adult self as part of the first group and attributes to her younger self – and to most other women – membership in the other. She is someone who has taken control of her life, and car culture allows her to bolster that illusion.

However, as her family’s financial security crumbles, her dependency on others is revealed to her. In the beginning of the novel she is represented as a magnificent driver racing through the streets of Oslo, but at the end of the novel she is following traffic anxiously. This change is caused by the economic collapse in her family, but also by a conflict with her alcoholised brother, a meeting with an unknown niece and an increasing sense of alienation from her teenage sons. All this makes her realize that the illusion of individual agency was exactly that, an illusion. However, instead of giving up this illusion altogether, she attributes her personal experience to her gender – in the vocabulary of this study. Thus, she melodramatically loses all faith in female agency whatsoever and considers herself a slave to circumstances. Traffic now evokes the opposite experience from that at the beginning of the novel. When she drives, she does not feel like an individual; instead, she is determined by forces larger than herself. She feels like a little girl, she is riven with vague and uncertain feelings regarding her own agency, expressed in feelings of anxiety, disempowerment and fear.

In the short story “Katastrofe” (Catastrophe, 1967) by the Norwegian author Dag Solstad, agency is also represented as oscillating melodramatically between enhancement and loss. An elderly man named Agnar Berger experiences the liberating freedom of driving, making him forget the threatening emasculation that accompanies old age. The car enables him to gain a sense of control over his body. When Agnar Berger unlocks the door and enters the car it is like “crawling into a part of himself,” as
Solstad describes it.\textsuperscript{200} Driving makes him feel as though his “body would grow and fill all rooms.”\textsuperscript{201} The heat of the motor “spreads to his body.” And when “the speed increases, his pulse increases. As the motor revs, he sees galloping horses in his inner eye, and he laughs.”\textsuperscript{202}

In passages like these, the short story reveals how traffic creates both an increased sense of individual agency, but also hints at an idea of distributed agency, taking as its point of departure the intertwined relationship between the driver and the environment in which he or she drives. However, instead of exploring the latter, the short story ends in melodramatic desperation by representing the devastating aspects of traffic deaths. “Outside on the road, a broken body lies waiting. Constantly, a broken body lies waiting somewhere.”\textsuperscript{203} A kind of rapid shift seems to occur in the consciousness of the main character in a way that is typical of representations of roaming the road – at first a sense of freedom and agency emerges that is later dissolved when encountering the risk of crashing and burning.

This fear of death, I argue, pushes an idea of melodramatic agency in traffic, offering either an increased sense of individual agency, or none at all. As already described, this oscillation between the two extremes was expressed quite often in 1960s prose fiction in Scandinavia. Death and destruction are for example explored in literary works such as Ernst Poulson’s short story “Ingenting,” Per Kirkeby’s “Bilen 1, 2, 3, 4” and


\textsuperscript{201} Solstad, “Katastrofe,” 70: Norwegian original: “Hvem har ikke drømt om at kroppen vokser og vokser og fyller alle rom?”


\textsuperscript{203} Solstad, “Katastrofe,” 71. Norwegian original: “Utenfor veien ligger det en knust kropp og venter. Hele tiden ligger en knust kropp og venter et sted.”
Anders Bodelsen’s *Hændigt uheld*, to mention just a few Danish examples. In a prologue to the Swedish novel *SOS eller Sanningen om Säkerheten* (SOS or the Truth about Safety, 1968) by Tore Zetterholm, written as a prose version of a play of the same name, automobilism is called the biggest “mass murder” in history, and the author encourages his readers to fight capitalism in order to make traffic safer.

The fear of traffic was justified. In all Scandinavian countries, the 1960s was the decade with the highest death rates in traffic accidents during the 20th and 21st centuries (so far). According to the Danish Council for Traffic Safety, the total number of annual deaths in Denmark rose from 735 in 1960 until it peaked at 1,213 in 1971 – by 1974, the number was already back down to 766. In Sweden, the death rate started falling in 1970, three years after the transition from driving on the left to driving on the right. The numbers peaked in Norway in 1970, ten years after private ownership of cars was deregulated in 1960, with a total of 560.

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207 Transport scholars Ulf Brüde and Rune Elvik sees 1970 as a turning point in terms of traffic deaths, and this should be viewed as a result of policy implementation. Brüde and Elvik, “The turning point in the number of traffic fatalities: Two hypotheses about changes in underlying trends,” *Accident Analysis and Prevention, Vol. 74* (2015): 60-68.

208 In comparison, the number of deaths in 1946 was 141, and today (2020) it is 93. Source: “Ulykkesutviklingen i Norge,” accessed November 24, 2021 [Statistics of Accidents in Norway], https://www.tryggtrafikk.no/statistikk/ulykkesutviklingen-i-norge/. A short comment on the deregulation of the private ownership of cars in Norway in 1960: In Norway, the government restricted the import and sale of private cars after the war. Officially, the reason was economic, but historians such as Per Østby have argued that the
With such numbers, it was obvious to everyone that the individual freedom of driving came at a great cost. As Norwegian sociologist William Aubert wrote in one of the many books published on traffic safety in the 1960s: “Regardless of whether you are a car driver or a pedestrian, you enter a faith community with strangers every time you drive or go out on one of the big roads.”

Faced with the experience of such a faith community, it makes sense that several debates on traffic safety in the 1960s problematized the very notion of individual responsibility. Questions were raised about how individuals could be held accountable when accidents occur. Who is really to blame after an incident, it was asked. Inspiration was found in books such as Unsafe at any Speed (1965, translated into Danish and Swedish in 1967) and Safety Last, an Indictment of the Auto Industry, both written by the US lawyer Ralph Nader. Authors Hansmagnus Ystgaard and background must be understood in a more complex way. “In Norway, however, the politically elite social democrats were opposed to, and during the 1950s even tried to restrict, the import and sale of private cars.” Østby claims that “in reality, this car policy owed more to political resistance than to worries about the national economy. For many politicians, the car stood out as an immoral and even threatening technology. The Norwegian car, they held, should be the bus or the train.” Østby, “Educating the Norwegian Nation. Traffic Engineering and Technological Diffusion,” Comparative Technology Transfer and Society, volume 2, number 3 (2004): 247-272, 248. See also Østby, Flukten fra Detroit—Bilens integrering i det norske samfunnet (Trondheim: Historical studies, 1996).


210 Ralph Nader’s book had wide implications for the car industry in America, as well as in Scandinavia – the book is explicitly mentioned in Bodelsen’s Hændigt uheld and Sanningen om Säkerheten by Zetterholm, as well as in literary criticism, such as Hans Hertel’s review of Bodelsen’s novel, for example. For Danish and Swedish translations of Nader, see Usikker ved enhver hastighed (Copenhagen: Fremad, 1967) and Den livsfarliga bilen (Stockholm: Rabén och Sjögren, 1967).
Jan Carlsen argued in a book from 1970, *Trafikk-krigen* (The Traffic War), that traffic requires new ways of looking at both individuality and responsibility.²¹¹ Traffic causes “biochemical changes with chronic consequences for the organism and state of mind,” the authors writes, an idea resonating with cybernetic theories of the human organism.²¹² It does not make sense, they wrote, to individualize the driver in traffic by talking about the “human factor” when trying to explain why accidents happen.²¹³ To do so is a “privatization of the causal relationship.”²¹⁴ The chain of responsibility is not so much a chain as a network of agents, consisting of both human (individual drivers, engineers, designers) and non-human actors (instrument panels, seats, road infrastructure), that

²¹¹ Jan Carlsen and Hansmagnus Ystgaard are referring here to a study conducted by A. Hoffman in *World Health Magazine* (February 1969) on 60 healthy drivers. They describe both stress and noise as causes of biochemical changes in the human body. *Trafikk-krigen* (Oslo: Pax, 1970), 91.


²¹³ Carlsen and Ystgaard, *Trafikk-krigen*, 84. “The causes cannot be attributed to the single individual, but to the increasingly cluttered traffic environment, where the individual has little opportunity to control the circumstances at all times, which one demands, if we are going to be safe in traffic.” Norwegian original: “Årsakene ligger ikke hos den enkelte trafikanten, men i det stadig tettere trafikkmiljøet, der den enkelte har små muligheter for å kunne mestre forholda til enhver tid, slik en må kreve dersom vi noen gang skal kunne oppnå trygg trafikk.”

²¹⁴ Carlsen and Ystgaard *Trafikk-krigen*, 158. Norwegian original: “privatiseringa av årsaksforholdet.” Ystgaard and Karlsen also write that the “goal for traffic awareness is traffic unawareness. The task is to channel the dissatisfaction and despair, to create a ritual frame around the protest against death and suffering, so that it does not get in the way of the mainstream development” Carlsen and Ystgaard, *Trafikk-krigen*, 158. Norwegian original: “Målet for trafikkbevissthet er trafikk-ubevissthet. Oppgaven blir å kanalisere misnøyen og fortvilelsen, å danne ei rituell ramme omkring protesten mot død og lidelser slik at den ikke får sjanse til å skade hovedløpet i utviklinga.”
collaborate to prevent, or cause, accidents, to paraphrase one of the American books on the subject.\footnote{The American book Safety Last – An Indictment of the Auto Industry (New York: Random House, 1966) is perhaps the most extreme in its elaboration of the agents responsible in traffic. The “seat” is mentioned as involved in the process, along with the “unpadded instrument panel,” designed and created by engineers, stylists, and businessmen in the automobile industry. Safety Last – An Indictment of the Auto Industry, 4.} 215

The safety debates introduced a need for a closer focus on the vast and invasive infrastructure of traffic. Infrastructure is a peculiar thing. Information sociologist Susan Leigh Star defines in 1999 infrastructure as everything that is normally not studied in sociology or history, but which is necessary for everything else to function.\footnote{Susan Leigh Star, “The Ethnography of Infrastructure,” American Behavioral Scientist, 43 (1999): 377-391, 379.} And, I might add, it is essential to understand in a systematized world. You cannot understand a city without understanding the sewers, you cannot understand the flow of information and communication in a society without studying standards, cables, and settings. And you cannot – which becomes clear when reading 1960s public debates and literary works – understand traffic in the 1960s without including the common signalling infrastructure (signs, lanes, lights) as well as the emerging system of roads. Similarly, you cannot understand ship traffic without considering trade routes, harbours, navigational technologies and the ships themselves. Put the other way around, you cannot grasp ideas of agency in such a highly regulated environment as traffic, if you do not pay attention to how agency is enabled through material infrastructures.

No wonder that infrastructure also became a subject in artistic practices. For instance, in 1969 the Norwegian avant-garde magazine Profil dedicated a whole issue to an infrastructural plan of Norwegian roads,
“Norsk Vegplan” – a ten-year plan for road infrastructure in Norway. Symbolically, it featured a dead child on the front page. The issue focused on road infrastructure and connected the conditions of a given environment to ideas of power and resistance in Norway during the late 1960s. This issue is an example of how art and literature drew the public’s attention to the radically altered and conditioned experience of acting within active infrastructures – that is, ecologicized spaces – during the 1960s.

The Norwegian science fiction author Jon Bing was one of the authors who connected this infrastructural awareness to ideas of agency. In a short text from 1969, “Operasjon Detroit” (Operation Detroit), he describes how US car manufacturers had incorporated “uranium and plutonium into all American cars that are exported.” This made cars on the road into a distributed weapon. Whenever the US wants, they can detonate atom bombs, so to speak, on every parking lot or intersection across the world. As Bing writes: “Awaiting a radio signal from the main control WEST, the lead-displays on the cars are blown away and the nuclear charges are detonated. Parking lots, streets with heavy traffic, car dealerships, garages, military warehouses etc. will go up in smoke.”

Such a scenario is not dangerous when considering a single car, because then, the “volume of radioactive metal in each car is below a critical

217 Rykkja and Ystgaard (eds), Profil no. 3–4 (1969).
218 Bing and Tor Åge Bringsværd, “Operasjon Detroit.” Sesam 71 (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1971) [unpaginated, and this specific text originally published in 1969]. Norwegian original: “Dette gjøres ved at uran og plutonium inkorporeres i alle amerikanske biler som går til eksport.”
219 Bing, “Operasjon Detroit,” [unpaginated]. The reference to ”WEST” is not explained in the short story, but is probably meant to be an American control center (as US is situated west of Norway). Norwegian original: “På radiosignal fra hovedkontroll VEST blåses blyskjermene bort og de kjernefysiske ladningene detoneres. Parkeringsplasser, tett trafikkerte gater, bilforretninger, garasjer, militære lager m.m. vil bryte ut i røksopper.”
mass.” But as it becomes part of traffic, things become more problematic: “when three cars or more are within a radius of a maximum of ten metres, the critical mass is exceeded.” Accordingly, the short story imagine the agency of the Americans as being able to create a distributed ballistic network, which they can activate at any time, embedded, as it were, in the everyday activities of people all over the world. Big, powerful states, as Bing seems to say, can exercise a scary and devastating infrastructural agency across an interconnected and systematized world, which is invisible, impossible to detect before it acts, and impossible to guard oneself against.

Many ideas of a distributed and collective agency are tainted with such fears of conspiracy, insisting that super-agents can possess, or put into motion, an infrastructural agency in a controlled way. As Melley writes:

(...) the idea of conspiracy offers an odd sort of comfort in an uncertain age: it makes sense of the inexplicable, accounting for complex events in a clear, if frightening, way. To put it another way, by offering a highly adaptable vision of causality, conspiracy theory acts as a “master narrative,” a grand scheme capable of explaining numerous complex events.

Bing’s short story exemplifies what Melley talks about when he describes a “melodramatic mode” of US politics and culture in the postwar years as related to an anxious desire to hold onto an individualist and

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221 Bing, “Operasjon Detroit,” [unpaginated]. Norwegian original: “Bare ved en ansamling av minst tre biler innen radium på maksimum ti meter, overskrides det kritiske punkt.”

222 Melley, Empire of Conspiracy, 8.
autonomous idea of agency, which constantly is challenged by societal changes, mass media and technological development. 223 A paranoid approach that is not irrational, Melley argues. In fact, to a large degree, it is a necessary response to the alteration of the environment and technological acceleration in the period as well as a logical response to the distribution of both agency and responsibility that came along with it. Paranoia can therefore be considered a “reasonable response to state and corporate power,” because it directs the attention towards how the state, or corporations can infiltrate the very fabric that makes up our reality and identity. 224 Conspiracies make clear that “the real threat is not so much a specific agent or group as a system of communications, an organized array of ideas, discourses, and techniques.” 225

However, distributed agency can also be more practically understood. When looking at footage of the transition from driving on the left to driving on the right in Sweden, on 3 September 1967, one finds a rather mundane representation of infrastructural agency. It is difficult to think of a better way to teach the public about infrastructure, the importance of roads, signs, pedestrian behaviour and the awareness of drivers than the event in 1967. On 10 May 1963, the Swedish parliament set the date, and in the years up to September 1967 information campaigns on a grand scale were put into motion, modelled after consumer advertising campaigns on how to reach people in the most effective ways in order to teach them to behave differently in traffic. Up until the H-day – H for driving on the right-hand side (Högra sidan) – citizens volunteered to rehearse crossing the road while looking left instead of right in an attempt to

225 Melley, Empire of Conspiracy, 2.

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change their automatic responses in traffic. An H-bible of the road – was sent out to every resident in Sweden. Roads were being marked, and signs put up, to increase traffic safety.\textsuperscript{226}

The day of the transition is almost a piece of live art about agency in traffic. At 04.50 in the morning, every car on the road in Sweden stopped. Every driver was told to turn on the radio, drive slowly over to the other side, stop again, and wait until the clock turned five. For a few minutes, every vehicle on every road in Sweden, from Ystad in the South to Kiruna in the North, were standing still, waiting for the command from a voice on the radio. When the clock turned 05.00, Olof Palme, at that point Minister of Communication (later Prime Minister of Sweden), gave a short speech on how this infrastructural leap would reduce the mortality rates in traffic.\textsuperscript{227} And, as simple as that, Palme put Sweden into motion again, by the force of his voice on the car-radio.

In this and many other senses, both fiction and non-fiction, as well as societal events in the 1960s expressed ideas of what this dissertation calls melodramatic and ecodramatic ideas of agency, flourishing in traffic and oscillating between driving and being stuck in traffic (that is, putting your faith in some kind of individual agency or lack thereof). Sometimes leaning toward the melodrama (as was the case in Haslund’s novel) and sometimes moving between the two (as Bing’s short story demonstrates). As a contrast to these melodramatic approaches, what Bing and Carlsten/Ystgaard underlines, is that when you drive on a road you are not moving within a passive environment, you are moving within a highly regulated space, one that you enter and exit at certain places and not


\textsuperscript{227} This speech can be listened to in Göran Undén’s film “3\textsuperscript{rd} of September” (1967–68).
others – the latter being a point made by media theorist Friedrich Kittler in his essay on the German autobahns, “Free Ways.” As we shall see in the following two readings, traffic is an intriguing agotope for exploring agency in prose fiction, for the very reasons just mentioned, featuring both an adrenalin rush and boredom, freedom and determination, as well as human beings positioned in a conundrum of intertwined processes, where, at each moment, the individual changes roles, and are constantly being shaped by relations to the surrounding environment, be it in land-based traffic, consisting of cars, roads, crash barriers lining the road, steering wheels, other drivers and cars, or in ship traffic consisting of the waters, the vessel, fellow crewmembers, land and other ships.

228 This essay is printed in Kittler, *Operation Valhalla – Writing on War, Weapons and Media*. 
The unique conditions characterizing post-industrial life fascinated the Swedish author and journalist Leijer. The plots of his novels are set in typical 1960s environments, such as the advertising industry in Köpsugen (Shopaholic, 1965), simulated laboratories in Miniput (Miniput, 1968) and, the subject of this chapter, traffic in Bilburen (Carborne, 1963). Traffic was a perfect setting to explore what the author named “car psychology” – a concept he coins in interviews after the publication of this book.\textsuperscript{229} Something happens to the human individual on wheels,

\textsuperscript{229} Brita Håkonsson, “F D fartdåre skrev bok om bilsamhället,” Expressen, October 15, 1963, 17.
Leijer claimed, which makes any study of the individual psyche alone insufficient. What is needed are ways to understand the complex relationship between humans and cars.

The novel is a form that proved to be suited to exploring such complex relations between the individual and their changing environment. In a poetic manifesto, “Att inventera verkligheten” (To Register Reality, 1965), Leijer called upon his fellow authors to pursue a functionalist idea of literature, an approach to fiction that is simultaneously instrumental and experimental.230 The novel is a laboratory, he claimed, in which phenomena from human life can be dissected and investigated. This is a view of literature that corresponds well with the artistic and experimental avant-garde milieu of Stockholm at the time, centred around the organization Fylkingen, to which Leijer is likely to have had connections through his friend, concrete poet and composer Bengt-Emil Johnson.231

The dual aspect of traffic in the agotope is clearly captured in the title of the novel, Bilburen. On the one hand, the title refers to the car as a cage – that is, the car as a constrained space, associated with an idea of the car as a technology that entraps the human like an animal.232 On the other hand, the title also refers to the fact that cars “carry” humans.233 This means, that, in addition to positioning the car as an object, the title is also suggesting that traffic represents a whole new way of thinking

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232 “Bil” means car, and “bur” means cage in Swedish, “buren” is its definite form.
233 “Buren” is the past participle of the verb “bära,” meaning “being carried” in Swedish, similar to how one can say that something is “luftburen”, that is, airborne.
about humans and society. When you are driving, you move around in the world, no longer as just a human, but as a human carried by a car. The human body – understood as the basis for experiences – has been extended and altered, and now incorporates parts manufactured in factories on the other side of the world, to paraphrase a line in the novel.\textsuperscript{234} Neither the individual object, nor the individual human is at the centre of traffic; instead, the relationship between the two is key. In this way, the novel shows traits of the process of ecologization – a relational thinking that has become “something like the cipher of a new thinking of togetherness and of a great cooperation of entities and forces [...]”, as Hörl argues.\textsuperscript{235}

My discussion of the novel is divided into three sections. In the first of these, I present the agotope of traffic in the novel. Thereafter, I discuss the feelings of agency by the nameless protagonist (the first-person narrator). Towards the end, I ask more generally what ideas of ecodramatic agency are conveyed by both form, characters and the plot in the novel. To theorize ideas of ecodramatic agency in the book, I discuss observations made by Frédéric Neyrat and, more concretely, his descriptions of the flipside of the process of ecologization, leading to a kind of “indistinct jumble.”\textsuperscript{236} I chose Bilburen as the first novel to analyse in this study because it encapsulates both an acknowledgement of the melodramatic idea of agency typical of postwar conspiracy culture, according to the

\textsuperscript{234} Leijer, Bilburen (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1963), 5f. “Humanity,” as the prologue states, is expressed through “identical reserve parts transported over continents and oceans in line with the rhythm of production.” Swedish original: “Medmänskligheten tar sig uttryck i identiska reservdelar förda över kontinenter och hav i takt med produktionens rytm.”

\textsuperscript{235} Hörl, “Introduction,” 3.

beforementioned Melley, and at the same time it aesthetically explores ecdramatic ideas in an interesting way.

**An Agotope of Traffic – the Car-Friendly World of Motopia**

Like all novels discussed in this dissertation, *Bilburen* is quite short, spanning barely one hundred pages. The story begins with a brief prologue setting the scene in a utopian future town called Motopia. An actual car exhibition somewhere in Sweden is then depicted as the starting point of the plot, where a nameless first-person narrator – almost identity-less – is hanging out with his friend Kurt and his cousin Linda. The three of them are responsible for a car crash test, featuring a doll they have named Victor, and together they discuss the benefits and dangers of the car culture.

The narrator himself is originally a scooter rider, not a car driver. However, soon after he and Linda become a couple, he substitutes his scooter for a car. In doing so, he experiences a strange emotive alteration. While the scooter gave him a feeling of masculinity and autonomy, the car enables new kinds of feelings, more comprehensive ones – more intense, but also slightly confusing. In fact, driving the car puts him into a new state, allowing him to relate differently to the world and other people. It does not take long before his first crash, however, and he experiences the violence of traffic on his own body. The consequence of this crash is that he is losing his car due to lack of insurance, and he becomes obsessed with speed, addicted to driving and the life the car makes possible. He starts borrowing cars, and almost melts his identity into the different characteristics of the vehicles. On a trip to the coast with Linda and Kurt, the narrator ends up raping a young girl in a sports car, after which he is beaten up by her friends, chased by the police, crashes, and
is hospitalized. The final pages of the novel return to the mythical style of the prologue, and are told from the perspective of the narrator, at this point lying on his deathbed. In stark contrast to the start of the novel, the utopian car city has now become dystopian. The whole world is just a car repair shop, where a mechanic lies “dead on the floor,” and “the tools have fallen out of his hands.”237 Thus, human beings are no longer a tool-user, the novel seems to hold. They have become something else.

The agotope of the novel is traffic, which first is presented in the world Motopia, in a short prologue to the novel. Motopia can best be described as a science-fictional utopia for car lovers, designed by an architect by the name of G. A. Jellicoe. The name Jellicoe must be drawn from the actual landscape architect and town planner of the 1960s, Geoffrey Allan Jellicoe, who has written a book with that name, Motopia: A Study in the Evolution of Urban Landscape (1961), where he is analysing how traffic influences city planning.238 This reference to Jellicoe reminds the reader of similar architectural projects from the postwar years, such as those of Le Corbusier or the British group Archigram, which, based on an understanding of the human as a cybernetic being, tried to optimize the individual by optimizing its surroundings.239 The only slight adjustment in Leijer’s novel is that the environment is optimized for car drivers, not for human bodies, thus destabilizing the human as a natural point of departure for societal development. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” the fictional

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237 Leijer, Bilburen, 95. Swedish original: “verkmästaren ligger död på golvet och verktygen har fallit ur hans grepp.”
Jellicoe says in the novel: “my city is a necessity.” Because, in our time, “the car triumphs. Sublimated, appreciated, justified.”

After the prologue, the novel’s plot begins at a car exhibition, realistically portrayed as of the late 1950s or early 1960s in Sweden. Here, the narrator shifts, from an omnipresent third person to an observational and situated first person. The reader meets a nameless male character, focalized throughout the rest of the novel, who is both detached and attached to the actions he performs (something to which I will return shortly). This car exhibition seems to adhere to similar laws as Motopia. Everyone is “bound to the speed of their means of transportation,” as the narrator states in the middle of the novel. Quotes like this underline how the human being is not autonomous, but entangled with the vehicles he or she moves around in.

One therefore might call this agotope a cybernetic world, in which the body is “the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate,” as Hayles writes in *How We Became Posthuman*, tracing posthuman ideas of the individual back to the cybernetic heyday of the latter half of the 20th century. In line with such a cybernetic view, the narrator says at one point that he wishes he could connect himself directly to the vehicle he drives: “In certain moments, (...) I wanted a car that I could steer directly with my nerves, a car as muscles and bones, as a continuation of my body.” That is, traffic is hooked into the physical fabric conditioning the individual, linking the agency of the human being to the infrastructure.

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around it at a fundamental level. And as already said, cars also influences him emotionally. “When we talked about the cars, it made it easier for me to open up and share,” the narrator says when he is first out driving, implying that he is not just driving when interacting with his car, but also nurturing his self-understanding and emotional stability.  

Abstracting a bit from the novel, it becomes obvious here, that traffic is an active milieu that is individuating its inhabitants; and this will have consequences for the possibilities to represent agency. For the “car-borne,” the narrator says, “a certain action in a certain situation is demanded.” In traffic, information needs to be processed by the driver in a split second. “The signals came to me as lost birds: black hawks hitting me on the shoulders and making me wobble (...),” as the narrator says. To underscore this further, the novel is narrated in a way that leaves the reader unsure about individual attributions of agency. Referred to by critics as “French art prose,” the narrative style orients the reader towards how things look instead of what they mean, and consequently describes what is taking place on the surface, without interpreting it further. This gives an impression of a narrator who is observing himself

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244 Leijer, Bilburen, 18. Swedish original: “När vi pratade om bilarna gick det lättare för mig att öppna mig och ge av mig själv.” There are numerous other quotes supporting such an interpretation.

245 For individuation, see the introduction to this dissertation, and Simondon, On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects, and Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information.

246 Leijer, Bilburen, 66. Swedish original: “av de bilburna fordras en bestämd handling i en bestämd situation.”


248 With the expression “French art prose”, critics claimed that there was an influence from the French nouveau-roman movement. As the critic Urban Torhamn states in his review of the novel in the Swedish newspaper Expressen: “In a stylized prose that can sometimes bring to mind French art
acting, as though he is simultaneously the driver and the passenger of a car, both controlling his car and being moved by it. In that sense, by this stylistic choice, the novel destabilize any conception of the unity of the narrator. He is not anchored in an individual body, situated in time and space, but a fragmented body, oscillating between viewing the world from the outside with descriptive clarity and experiencing it from inside a car.

An entanglement of humans, feelings and cars is particularly obvious in the first scene in the novel, which portrays a car crash test. Featuring the narrator, Linda and Kurt, as well as the crash doll named “Victor”, this scene demonstrates how a technology like the crash test structure feelings in humans. First, melodramatically understood, by accentuating the scope of individual agency that is represented in a risky world; the test is deadly, if you do not take safety measures – that is, wear a seatbelt. But the test also demonstrates an intertwined relationship between the individual and car culture. And thus, it opens up for the idea that there is something off about a melodramatic representation of agency, and that agency in traffic is something there is a need to think about in a novel way.

In this particular scene, the narrator is positioned as an observer, who describes the reactions to the crash test among the audience at the car

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249 At the beginning of the novel, the doll Victor also oscillates between being treated as a person and a doll, both by the audience, and Linda and Kurt. After the crash test is over, Linda, Kurt and the narrator sit around the doll and talk, in a way including him in their social interaction.
exhibition. For most of the audience present, the narrator says, the test has a soothing effect, convincing them that driving a car is less dangerous than it feels. Thus, it functions as a demonstration of the possibility of individual agency, and a confirmation of the existence of an autonomous person – even in a society dominated by the massive violence of cars. “I had noticed it in show after show,” the narrator claims. In the first round, the doll Victor is put in a car without a seat belt and is thrown out of the vehicle as it reaches the stop bench. This causes feelings of torment in the audience. Soon afterwards, however, the audience is “relieved,” the narrator explains, when the test is repeated with the seatbelt fastened around the doll.

However, as mentioned above, the same car crash test also demonstrates the insufficiency of this kind of melodramatic representation of agency. The narrator observes that there are always some members of the audience who remain standing apathetically beside the doll afterwards, looking at the lifeless Victor, who has just been thrown violently forward in the crash. The description of people simply standing there and looking, I read as an expression of vague feelings being produced in the audience by the car crash test. One can imagine that they ask themselves fairly reasonable questions when watching the violence caused by the speed of the car. What kind of agency can be attributed to Victor the doll? Who is acting, is it Victor or the car? Or both at the same time? Does it really matter when confronted with the massive violence of a crash? Even though these vague feelings are not explained by the narrator, the

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252 Swedish original: “av vilka några blev stående kvar och tittade på dockan.”
restlessness of the audience, I would argue, expresses such an uncertainty about agency. As Sianne Ngai points out, the feeling of not knowing what to feel is a feeling in itself, a feeling of “indeterminacy” which is related to a “loss of control.”

Soon after, the scene with the car crash test is repeated in the novel, but with one crucial adjustment, namely that Kurt, a real person, is positioned where the doll Victor used to be seated. Kurt places himself in the test car one afternoon after he and the narrator have quarrelled about how deeply car traffic affects human life. Kurt claims that cars are safe and that car culture does not jeopardize or change human culture in any radical sense. To demonstrate his stance, he insists on performing the test himself.

The three of them, Linda, the narrator and Kurt, sneak into the car exhibition after closing hours to do their experiment. With a real person in the seat, the uncertain feelings related to car culture increase in the audience, which now consist of the narrator and Linda. And speaking of uncertainties about agency; the narrator initiates the test, but describes it as Kurt is moving his hand. When the seat reaches the stop bench, Kurt’s body is thrown forward with massive force, held back only by the seatbelt. Kurt is here literally described as a doll, hanging in the belt, and Linda and the narrator cannot help but stare at him, exactly as audience stared at the doll Victor earlier. After a while, Kurt regains consciousness, but he no longer resembles the self-assured man he was before. Linda and the narrator try to make eye contact with him as Kurt starts walking towards them, helped by two guards, who have discovered them. “He

walked strangely and moved cautiously without smiling. When we met him, he avoided our gaze,” the narrator says.255 Thus, the self-assured and confident Kurt is no longer expressing any strong feelings of certainty and individual agency. His avoidance of the gaze of others is an expression of the opposite – a loss of his sense of agency, and a bodily experience of being subjected to forces too huge for an individual human being to handle.

**Melodramatic Ambitions in a Parasitic Character**

Within the environment just described, Leijer places a hybrid protagonist, a man with no name – signalling that he has no fixed identity. In the course of the novel this character turns into an assemblage of human and car; in the words of French philosopher and sociologist Latour, a human *with a car*.256 An assemblage is an apt description, since the narrator seems to change his behaviour in response to every new vehicle with which he interacts. When he drives a racing car, he is magnified by the speed. When he drives in the crowded summer traffic, he is attentive to others. When he drives at night, he races. And when he rides his scooter, he sees himself as masculine, young and free – his scooter representing “my explosive manhood and power.”257 I therefore see the main character as a cybernetic character, a stimulus-based entity, stabilized by the environment, in whom not just the human body, but also the mind, is

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fundamentally regulated by inputs. He is not unlike the robotic turtles that the British cybernetician William Grey Walter engineered and developed in the 1950s, programmed to move in a certain way responding to external stimuli.

The majority of Swedish critics in 1963 were sceptical to this vague literary figure, emptied of an inner drive and identity, and condemned the character from a moral standpoint, demanding more psychological depth in a literary persona. Critics called the protagonist a “parasite lacking initiative” who “behind the wheel in different cars explores and cultivates sides of himself that correspond with the type of car,” as critic Urban Torhamn wrote in Expressen. “Car mania,” critic and poet Olof Lagercrantz wrote in Dagens Nyheter “has gone so far that no representation of humanity is left.” A car is not God, another critic, Mario Grut, declared, and added that any “novel which is so explicitly said to be about ‘man and the car’ has after all lost part of its balance when it allows man and machine to become equal factors in the dramatic plot.”

Men and machines are indeed important elements of the novel, but they are not equal factors in its plot, I would argue. Traffic is the fundamental factor of the plot, conditioning both men and machines,

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258 See for example Bateson, Steps to an ecology of the mind, 315.
260 For example, Caj Lundgren, ”En rivstart,” Svenska Dagbladet, September 13, 1963, 5.
261 Torhamn, “Debuter i avhästningens tid,” 4. Swedish originals: “initiativlös parasit” and “vid ratten i olika bilar utforskar och renodlar han de sidor som kan korrespondera med just den aktuella bilens sort.”
facilitating either freedom or entrapment. Even the “roaring sea of traffic” around the individual driver represents a force that the drivers “themselves master,” as the narrator says at one point.\textsuperscript{264} Traffic is making the narrator believe he has individual agency when he drives cars at night, roaming empty streets. And, as mentioned, traffic is emotionally substituting the narrator. Throughout the novel, the narrator requires more and more speed in order to feel free. “High speed and dangerous passings became narcotics for me. I had to get it in bigger doses to feel liberated.”\textsuperscript{265}

Even though traffic is the driver of the plot (pun intended), the narrator’s conviction of individual agency is strong. He tries to leave Linda in the middle of the novel, and this scene ends up representing the inadequacy of his idea of individual agency. Because, in the end, he is sent back to Linda’s house, as though nothing had happened.

The scene starts in Linda’s house. He has been preparing his farewell for a while. “To get away from the feeling of confinement, I more often drove around on my own in the car,” insinuating that traffic does not just entrap people, but also offers a sense of freedom.\textsuperscript{266} Finally, he decides that it is time. As he tries to start the engine, he is shocked by the sound of the motor – to such an extent that he drops the keys on the floor. Reaching full speed, he feels calm again, his pulse is described at this point as running parallel to the revolutions per minute of the motor –

\textsuperscript{264} Leijer, \textit{Bilburen}, 66. Swedish originals: “brusande trafikhavet” and “själva bestämmer över.”


\textsuperscript{266} Leijer, \textit{Bilburen}, 37. Swedish original: “För att komma ifrån känslen av bundenhet gav jag mig allt oftare ensam ut på turer i bilen.”
“the speed is a condition for my calmness.” However, he becomes so obsessed with keeping a steady pace that he does not react fast enough when the car skids and ends up upside down on an icy lake. The weight of the car crushes the ice and both the narrator and his car start sinking into the lake. In the lake, the narrator feels helpless and a victim of circumstances to such an extent that when he tries to get out of the car, he fails repeatedly, because he “pushes in the wrong direction on the wrong door.” At last, he finally does get out, and an ambulance is waiting for him to take him to the nearest petrol station, where he is picked up by Kurt and driven back to Linda. He says nothing to either of them when he gets back.

This failed attempt to leave is a turning point in the novel. After this, the narrator stops identifying himself with a driver in traffic, that is, with an autonomous agent. Instead, what characterizes the narrator in the second half of the book is an inability to separate between himself and his surroundings. He is experiencing something that Neyrat has claimed in 2017 to be deeply related to the process of ecologization; namely, a kind of “indistinct jumble.” Neyrat contends that disorientation is a kind of default position in our time, because separation is so difficult, however necessary it may be to sustain relationships. The character of

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267 Leijer, Bilburen, 47. Swedish original: “Hastighetsmätaren är bestämd, dess fasthet blir ett villkor för mitt lugn, (...).”

268 Leijer, Bilburen, 48. Swedish original: “trycker åt fel håll på fel dörr.”


270 “The imagination does not help us to contest this world: it does not offer us an alternative image, a counter-model to what we are; nor does it constitute the romantic reserve of lost voices of modernity, but participates in the production of the global network in which the living and the machinic, humans and nonhumans blend together. We are thoroughly interlinked, and we dream of being even more so.” Neyrat “Elements of an Ecology of Separation: Beyond Ecological Constructivism,” 102.
Linda worries about the direction the development of the protagonist is taking, because he is identifying himself with technical apparatuses. “To drive is not a goal in itself, and the car is not a home. There must be some fixed points of reference outside of it,” Linda says.271 She insists that the narrator must seek out a “psychotechnical consultation.”272 This is something that he eventually does, albeit too late, it seems. There are no points of reference outside. As Neyrat writes:

In a universe of pure continuity, with no faults, no outside, automated reactions replace decisions, and each new technology that appears in the saturated market of anthropogenic environments presents itself as an ineluctable destiny. For we no longer know how to tell apart faire la part, we no longer know how to maintain a distance, how to separate ourselves.273

This inability to separate resonates with the form of this novel. The peculiar narrative style, in which the narrator is simultaneously both acting, and observing himself acting, becomes a symptom of precisely what Neyrat is writing about – that the narrator lacks the ability to separate what he himself is doing from what others are doing. The narrator is both observing everything from a distance, and identifying himself completely with the vehicles he drives. And thus, he cannot differentiate between

272 Leijer, Bilburen, 40. Swedish original: “psykotekniska rådgivningsbyrån.” This concept is insinuating that this fictional (technologically advanced) society has their own psychologists for human’s relationship to technology, which is a quite neat thought.
moments when he is doing something from when things are just happening.

**Sensing Ecodramatic Agency**

In such an agotope as traffic, are there really any possibilities to make a distinct difference, other than an arbitrary one? In one sense, for the main character, agency seems to be a lost cause if he holds on to an idea of melodramatic agency. The end of the novel can at least be read in this way, as demonstrating the fatalism of clinging onto ideas of individual agency in an environment that constantly undermines such ideas. If the ideas of agency do not resonate with the environment in which one acts, one experiences what I in the introduction of this study referred to, following Simondon as “directive functions” becoming false.²⁷⁴

As mentioned above, the novel ends with two symbolic scenes. At the summer residence the narrator ends up sexually violating a young woman in a borrowed sportscar, after which he is chased by the police, and ends up in hospital. And thereafter, the narrator lies on his deathbed at the hospital and dreams that he has lost the grip of his tools. Several topics in the novel are reiterated in these scenes. First of all, the sexual violation in the rape scene becomes a desperate attempt to confirm what this dissertation calls a melodramatic idea of agency, reassuring the narrator that he can master *something* – if not his surroundings, or himself, then at least he can master this young woman. There is a need for control being expressed here, which is underlined by the vocabulary employed, applying the metaphor of an angler trying to land a fish:

> She was a beautiful fish. After a while I got her on my hook and she resisted wildly. (...) In its curve, the wafer of

innocence was tightened, and I got my fish, it shook in my hands and the shocks went through its body. But the sea calmed and after a while the fish lay weak and lifeless with me.\textsuperscript{275}

The words used in the scene is interesting. The key here is of course a will to master, that are not possible within an ecologicized agotope. I am following Hayles here, who observes that when considering agency in posthuman environments, agency cannot be related to control in any common-sense meaning of the term:

In the posthuman view, by contrast, conscious agency has never been “in control.” In fact, the very illusion of control bespeaks a fundamental ignorance about the nature of the emergent processes through which consciousness, the organism, and the environment are constituted.\textsuperscript{276}

The quote from the novel also underlines how mastering requires patience – the narrator waits for the sea to “calm.” He is waiting for his victim to give up. Only then, when he is able to enforce other person’s (or environment’s) passivity, is he able to feel that he is acting.

As if to underscore how the environment resists such melodramatic representations of agency, this scene takes place on the coast, a borderline zone and a windy place that shapes the appearances of its

\textsuperscript{275} Leijer, \textit{Bilburen}, 82f. Swedish original: “Hon var en vacker fisk. Efter en stund fick jag henne på min krok och hon gjorde vilt motstånd. (...) I sin båge spändes oskuldens oblat och jag fick min fisk, den skälvdde i mina händer och stöten gick genom hela dess kropp. Men havet lugnade sig och efter en stund låg fisken slak och livlös hos mig.”

\textsuperscript{276} Hayles, \textit{How We Became Posthuman}, 288.
inhabitants. The people who live there all year round are described as having “wrinkled faces from the wind and narrow eye slits.”\textsuperscript{277} This is not a place where individuals master their surrounding, instead they are marked by it.

What happens after the rape seems to illustrate exactly such an embeddedness of humans in the environment – natural or technological. When the girl's friends find them, they beat him up, and force him literally to enter a kind of symbiotic relationship with the car. One of the girl's friends presses an open box of engine oil against the narrator's penis, and thereafter empties it onto his face. Afterwards, another boy holds the narrator’s nose close to the exhaust pipe of the car and starts the engine – thus, as it were, inverting the previous rape scene – penetrating his nostrils with the rear of the car. “When I could not hold my breath anymore, I breathed in the gas and coughed fiercely,” the narrator describes.\textsuperscript{278} After they are done with him, the girl's friends leave him, naked and covered with oil. This beating is described just like every other scene in the novel – as though the protagonist were not part of what is going on but positioned at a distance from the event. He comments that he hoped “they would finish with me as soon as possible.”\textsuperscript{279}

The very last scene of the novel underlines that an idea of melodramatic agency is rejected in this world. A repairman lies dead on the floor, having lost his tools. This seems to be a death bed fantasy by the narrator at the hospital. In order to manoeuvre and navigate in an agotope of this kind, the scene seems to suggest, new representations of agency and

\textsuperscript{277} Leijer, \textit{Bilburen}, 69. Swedish original: “vindrynkade ansikten och smala ögonspringor.”

\textsuperscript{278} Leijer, \textit{Bilburen}, 85. Swedish original: “När jag inte kunde hålla andan längre, drog jag in av gasen och hostade våldsamt.”

\textsuperscript{279} Leijer, \textit{Bilburen}, 84. Swedish original: “de skulle göra processen med mig så kort som möjligt.”
agents need to be fostered, ideas of agency that do not understand the car as a tool, which the repairman has lost, but as something more than that.

On the first page of this reading, there is a stapled line in the diagram, insinuating that there are some people in the book who have cracked the code of exercising agency in an ecologicized environment. These are a group of French guests at the inn, who are only mentioned briefly by the narrator towards the end of the novel. They seem to be able to maintain a sort of balance in their relationship with their car, in a way the narrator cannot. The artists do not merge with their car completely. Instead, they keep their distance from it. Symptomatically, when they arrive at the inn, the narrator observes that the Frenchmen order “food that is not on the menu.” After they have eaten, they go out to their vehicle, but instead of driving it, they transform it into a kind of mobile atelier. Their “car seems to be able to include everything,” the narrator says to his surprise, and he continues by describing their car as “part of their bubbling world, containing possibilities outside the usual.” Thus, the guests represent something other than the narrator by being able to operate their car while acknowledging some sort of separation, to talk with Neyrat. They have found a way to remain both connected to and independent of their vehicle, and of the car culture they are part of, which makes it possible for them to gain a sense of agentic orientation, not characterized by apathy (or exaggerated ideas of individual control.) They manage this, not because they are guided by a point outside of traffic – such a position does not exist in an ecologicized perspective. Instead, they have found a

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280 Leijer, Bilburen, 79. Swedish original: “beställde mat som inte fanns på mat-sedeln.”
281 Leijer, Bilburen, 80. Swedish original: “Bilen tycktes rymma allt, den var en del av deras sprudlande värld, rymmande möjligheter långt utanför det vanliga.”
way to situate themselves within car culture and establishing stable relations, thus hinting at the conditions for exercising agency in traffic; being capable of letting go of one’s melodramatic agential ambitions related to control and being open to agency as distributed.

Situating Agency – Vigdis Stokkelien’s Melodramatic Captain

Ever since her debut collection of short stories, *Dragsug* (Suction, 1967), the Norwegian author Stokkelien has proven herself to be a keen observer of post-industrial societies, regarding how both information technologies and globalization condition life, which she had some experience
of from having sailed on the ocean as a radio telegrapher. In 1968, Stokkelien published her first novel Den siste prøven (The Final Test), which is set in a globalized, interconnected world. In this environment, the book explores two parallel ideas of agency, one with melodramatic traits and one with ecodramatic traits, thereby investigating the opportunities to act when being embedded in and entangled with a complex infrastructure. The kind of ecodramatic agency that is explored in the novel is not characterized by disorientation and apathy, as in Leijer’s work, but is understood in a positive way as both situated and site-specific, allowing some relations to persist and become more important than others.

The novel can be described as a cybernetic closet play set in the agotope of sea traffic, which explores – just as Sommeren på heden published two years later, to be discussed in the next chapter – the need to rethink agency within an active and self-reflexive environment. In a “good straightforward” way, as critics wrote about the novel when it came out, Stokkelien addresses multifaceted issues. Although the critics all agreed that the book was a bit too short, the story was praised for being “strong enough to burn the consciences of those of us who earn our living by transporting goods for the oppressors,” which would include most of the Norwegian audience, as the critic Willy Dahl wrote in his review in 1968.

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282 See for example her short story collection Dragsug, and her novels Granaten (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1969) and the trilogy consisting of Lille Gibralter (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1972), Båten under solseilet (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1982) and Stjerneleden (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1984).


284 Willy Dahl, “I fraktfart for mordere,” Arbeiderbladet, October 25, 1968, 9. Dahl also thinks the novel is too pregnant, and that it wants too much at once.
In the following, I begin by addressing the agotope of sea traffic in the novel, and the emotions it produces in the main character moving around in it. Thereafter, I portray the main character, the captain Arne, as a melodramatic agent, and demonstrate how he eventually transforms into an ecodramatic agent. Two different actions, performed at the end, are important to my reading. I suggest that the first of these, in which Arne ends up confirming himself as a cog in the machine orchestrated by the global superpower of the US, is a melodramatic action. The second action, exercised shortly thereafter, grows out of his embracement of the complex infrastructure of ship traffic. These two actions, together with the analysis of the agotope, form the basis upon which I discuss the representation of agency in the novel. Throughout the readings, I focus on unresolved feelings to discuss the captain’s ability to act, contextualizing the pitiful and vague feelings that resonate throughout the novel. By attending to these feelings, I argue that the captain manages to stay with the trouble, to speak with Haraway; that is, to realize the situatedness of his actions as the captain of a ship in international traffic, waiting restlessly off the shores of Vietnam.

The Agotope of Sea Traffic in the Eastern Trade

\textit{Den siste prøven} is set on the Filipino ship “Eastern Trader,” sailing under a neutral flag, which is waiting to unload oil on neutral ground for the Americans during the Vietnam war. For fifteen days – the same as

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It has “tried to squeeze material for a couple of novels” into one, he says, \textit{Arbeiderbladet}, October 25, 1968, 9. Norwegian original: “prøvd å presse sammen stoff til et par-tre romaner.” Norwegian original regarding the “strong enough to burn” quote: “Men stoffet i boka er sterkt nok til å svi hett i samvittigheten hos oss som lever av å frakte for undertrykkerne.”

\textsuperscript{285} On my understanding of vague feelings, see the Ngai, \textit{Ugly Feelings}, and the introduction to this dissertation.

\textsuperscript{286} Haraway, \textit{Staying with the Trouble}, 5.
the number of days spanned by the novel – the ship waits with its radio turned off, so as not to reveal its location to the enemy. In a mixture of dialogue, monologue and flashbacks (analepses), the story focalizes the Norwegian captain, Arne, and tells the story of this captain and supposed master of an oil tanker, who becomes more and more paranoid every day, fearing both the Americans’ intentions and the intentions of his own crew.\textsuperscript{287} The bombs come closer, and the confusion and uncertainty escalate more and more every day. At one point, an American plane almost hits them by accident, and shots are suddenly fired from the jungle on day thirteen, killing the chef on the ship. On day fifteen, the captain finally decides to move the ship to safety – even though this means contradicting the initial orders from the Americans. Expecting repercussions, he instead receives praise for having saved the cargo, when the ship finally turns on its radio. This confuses Arne, and he feels restless – something still needs to be done. The novel ends with him taking action, and give orders to sail out to sea and discard the oil.

The whole novel is played out on this ship, a location once described by Michel Foucault in his well-known essay “Of Other Spaces” (1969) as the heterotopia par excellence. The ship is, as Foucault writes, a great “reserve of the imagination,” “a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea” – a description that illuminates the vessel in Stokkelien’s novel.\textsuperscript{288} However, first and foremost, the ship in

\textsuperscript{287} For the sake of clarity: The terms focalization and analepses stem from the narratological framework of Genette, as mentioned in the introduction, underlining how the narrative present in the novel is not a fixed and given entity, but a fragmented and elastic phenomenon, within which it is possible to be in the past, present and future all at the same time.

\textsuperscript{288} Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 27.
the novel is a place where relations are central. As Hayles has argued, in a sense, sailors became posthuman long before anyone else in post-industrial society. On a ship, cognition and “decision-making [are] distributed between human and nonhuman agents.”

The particular ship in the novel is a mobile vessel rendered temporarily immobile, anchored with its radio off at a maritime traffic intersection in a river mouth, close to the Vietnamese war zone – a dangerous place, considering the fact that the ship is carrying oil. With the radio off and in the vicinity of this war zone, the ship resides in an epistemological limbo. “If we just knew what was happening!” the captain screams towards the end of the book. When the chef at one point comes up to him, already drunk at 1 pm, the captain cannot give him an answer. “Don’t ask me when we’ll get orders. I don’t know,” the captain answers. The lack of knowledge or certainty is underlined in the novel through constant

289 As an apropos, recent approaches within the humanities, such as hydro-criticism, have explored the entanglement of rising sea levels and aesthetics, see for example Laura Winkiel’s (ed.) special issue of English Language Notes on Hydro-Criticism, volume 57, no. 1 (2019).

290 Hayles, How We Became Posthuman, 289. Hayles references Edwin Hutchins’ Cognition in the Wild (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), who has studied how sailors orient themselves and make decisions at sea, and takes a particular interest in what happens when the automated systems fail, and sailors need to navigate without them. Hayles writes: “Hutchins was studying the charts and pocket calculators that the navigators were then forced to use to calculate their position. He convincingly shows that these adaptations to changed circumstances were evolutionary and embodied rather than abstract and consciously designed. (...) Seen in this perspective, the prospect of humans working in partnership with intelligent machines is not so much a usurpation of human right and responsibility as it is a further development in the construction of distributed cognition environments, a construction that has been ongoing for thousands of years.” Hayles, How We Became Posthuman, 289f.

291 Stokkelien, Den siste prøven (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1968), 82. Norwegian original: “Hvis vi bare visste hva som skjedde!”


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narrative movements between past and present – a series of analepses and alcohol-induced dreams, which contribute to making the sequence of events fragmented and dream-like, blurring the ideas of who or what has agency.

The radio being shut off does not mean that the ship cannot communicate; in fact, the opposite seems to be the case. The ship in the novel is described as something that one can listen to, and tune into. No longer by using radio communication, but by listening to the ship itself – that is, acknowledging the ship as a kind of cybernetic organism, which is constantly exchanging information with its environment: “The Chinese did not talk on deck. It was as if they were listening. And outside, the jungle held its breath.”293 At first, the captain does not think of the ship in this way and attributes this idea of a ship talking to primitive philosophies circulating among the Chinese crew: “The Chinese talked about how the birds and the fish ‘knew’ when something was about to happen, that they would leave.”294 Attributing the ability to listen to the ship to the Chinese is not simply a matter of mystifying the colonized in the novel (even though, it is also that). As Goh, one of the crew members, tries to explain to the captain: there is nothing magical about this. They just listen to the ship. “The Chinese said: – Ship talk. And what said the ship? – Anxious, said Goh.”295 For the Chinese, and eventually also for Arne, the ship is producing feelings, which demonstrates how it is entangled with its crew

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293 Stokkelien, Den siste prøven, 71. Norwegian original: “Kineserne snakket ikke på dekk. Det var som om de lyttet. Og ute holdt jungelen liksom pusten.”
294 Stokkelien, Den siste prøven, 8. Norwegian original: “Kineserne hadde snakket om at fuglene og fiskene ‘visste’ når noe skulle skje, at de dro sin vei.”
and captain. This is underlining, in that sense, the social origin of feelings in the novel.296

Furthermore, listening to the ship means noticing the environment how it functions. As described in the introduction to my study, Simondon sees this kind of attention as a precondition of attuning to the historical situation.297 Concretely, in this novel, it entails being aware that the sweet smell emanating from the ventilation system comes from the use of Napalm further upstream, or that there is going to be a fight in the near future.298 “How do you know?” the captain asks the Chinese. “Know, says the Chinese, – everyone knows.”299 Listening to the ship also entails paying attention to the infrastructure; this peculiar situation of the novel – the ship is an immobile vessel, stuck waiting with its radio off – makes the infrastructure of sea traffic visible. As Susan Leigh Star observes in the aforementione essay “The Ethnography of Infrastructure,” infrastructure only becomes visible when the normal modus operandi breaks down.300 In the case of this novel, the colonial logic of sea traffic in the 1960s comes into focus. The sea, economic zones, the hierarchy on the ships, borderlines and harbours which existed all over the world during the 20th century constitute a global, and in the 1960s a colonial, environment, where one is used to always navigating and working alongside and in conflict with different agents, such as the weather, sea, depth, cargo,

296 See the introduction of this study and Ahmed, ”Affective Economy,” 117.
297 See the introduction and Simondon, Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information, 230.
298 Stokkelien, Den siste prøven, 14.
300 Star, “The Ethnography of Infrastructure,” 379.
international law and animal life, as well as colonialism itself.\footnote{For the relationship between colonialism and cybernetics, see Geoghegan’s \textit{Code}.} With the radio off, this is what Arne learns to tune into.

The agotope of this novel can therefore be considered an ecologicized agotope, which, as we saw earlier, according to Hörl, implies a reorientation from subject-object dichotomies to a focus on relationships.\footnote{There is a need for a “new ontological realism of relations,” Hörl, “Introduction,” 7.} On the ship, this means the relations between the captain and the ship, between him and the crew, between the ship and other vessels, between the ship and the US/NATO, the ship and the water, the ship and the ongoing war in Vietnam. In addition, the setting of the novel force the individual to navigate simultaneously both on a local and a global level. The oil tanker is a mini global community, deeply imprinted with the logics of colonialism, but also a community on its own. Said in a different way, the environment is not passive, but is an active environment, constantly in motion, forcing everyone acting within it to co-ordinate and navigate. Acting in sea traffic, as in car traffic, requires a “distributed cognition,” as the anthropologist Edwin Hutchins argues in his studies of how sailors navigate at sea.\footnote{See Hutchins: \textit{Cognition in the Wild}, and Hayles, \textit{How We Became Posthuman}, 291.} The ship is in that sense a heterotopia, suggesting a new way to relate to the world for the captain, in the sense of Foucault, as one among many “laboratories of the possible.”\footnote{Amanda Dennis quoting Bertrand Westphal, “Heterotopias – The possible and the real in Foucault, Beckett, and Calvino,” 171.}

**Captain Arne**

The protagonist in Stokkelien’s novel is the captain of the ship, Arne, a Joseph Conrad-inspired alcoholic in his forties, who has worked for a
long time in the East; too long, according to him, fearing that it might have destroyed him completely.\textsuperscript{305} This is a man who happily thinks of himself as a cog in the US-driven global war-machine. The captain is comfortable being such a cog, actively distancing himself from any responsibility: “Napalm. What did he know about that? Short words from a newscast. Napalm. Nuclear bomb. What did it have to do with him?”\textsuperscript{306} It is not his war, the captain says, “he just brought the oil. Like he brought the oil to the rest of the world, including to Normandy at one point. It did not matter to him who fought or what they were fighting for.”\textsuperscript{307} He repeats this over and over again, as though he needs to convince himself of his lack of responsibility. This is not his war. What does this have to do with him?\textsuperscript{308} Occasionally, Arne admits that there are agents in the world, capable of changing things, for example the Americans and God. He finds comfort in something that his ex-wife, Britt, once said, as they almost died one night: “God controls everything.”\textsuperscript{309} But, most of the time, it is the Americans who are the agents.

\textsuperscript{305} Stokkelien, \textit{Den siste prøven}, 8. On the very first page, the captain says: “Why didn’t we win over the yellow bastards, why didn’t we wipe out every last one of them in the jungle and delta?” \textit{Den siste prøven}, 7. Norwegian original: “Hvorfor vant de ikke over de gule jævlene, hvorfor ryddet de ikke bort hver eneste en av dem i jungelen og deltalandet?” Also, it is described how Goh “carefully dusted the porn and records on the bookshelf.” Norwegian original: “tørket omhyggelig støv av pornoen og skipsregnskapene i bokhyllen.” \textit{Den siste prøven}, 14.


\textsuperscript{308} “It’s not my war, he says loudly – I can’t help that they fight. There’s always war somewhere.” Stokkelien, \textit{Den siste prøven}, 40. Norwegian original: “Det er ikke min krig, sier han hoyt, – jeg kan ikke noe for at de kriger. Det er alltid krig et eller annet sted.”

\textsuperscript{309} Stokkelien, \textit{Den siste prøven}, 88.
I read the person who is type-cast in this agotope as a person who has grown up within a colonial and hierarchical sea traffic command structure, covered by the idea of melodramatic agency in this study. Arne is a man who gives and follows orders. He is the captain of his ship as part of the Eastern trade, and the Americans are the real agents in his worldview. I regard his idea of agency as melodramatic because the captain sees himself, and everyone else, as either agents or cogs in the machine. Either they possess agency, or they do not exercise agency at all. His world consists of agents who either follow or gives orders.

This melodramatic idea of agency lead him onto a paranoid path. As we have seen, Melley discusses in his book on postwar US culture, that if a person cannot sense his or her own individual agency, he or she tries to locate it somewhere else. Because someone must exercise agency. As Melley writes in *Empire of Conspiracy*:

To understand one’s relation to the social order through conspiracy theory, in other words, is to see oneself in opposition to “society.” It is to endorse an all-or-nothing conception of agency, a view in which agency is a property, parcelling out either to individuals like oneself or to “the system” – a vague structure often construed to be massive, powerful, and malevolent. This way of thinking is rooted in long-standing Western conceptions of selfhood – particularly those that emphasize the corrupting power of social relations on human uniqueness.\(^{310}\)

Arne’s paranoia is particularly evident in his treatment of the Chinese crew. The narrator switches between picturing the Chinese as servers

\(^{310}\) Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*, 10.
and as super-intelligent spies who are going to kill him in his sleep and can read his mind. This resonates with the approach to conspiracy theories in Melley’s writing.311 Are the Chinese really there to take control of the ship? That is, are they individuals with the power to fool everyone? Arne remembers what a Yugoslavian doctor once told him in a bar in Singapore, namely that these Chinese are spies for the communists: “these Chinese are well educated, organized by Mao, ready to take over the ship and everything else as well.”312 To uphold his authority in this situation, where he feels that it is being challenged, the captain consequently talks “pidgin” English to the crew, a kind of simplified English developed in the 19th century by the British colonizers to give orders to the inhabitants of the colonies.313

This melodramatic default position in his thinking about agency is very clear in something the narrator says in the first half of the novel. During a moment of chaos on the ship, when the captain feels insecure about his own agency, he wishes for a moment that the Americans would “use nuclear weapons rather than lose” the war.314 That is, he rather would want them to nuke something and destroy everything in the vicinity, instead of admitting defeat. Why? Is it because such an acknowledgement would include giving up the worldview that Arne holds, in which there is an autonomous super-agent? Meaning, as Melley points out in the quote above, that he does not have to give up his idea of selfhood. The

312 Stokkelien, Den siste prøven, 14. Norwegian original: “disse kineserne er velutdannet, organisert av Mao, klar til å ta over skip og til hva som helst annet.”
314 Stokkelien, Den siste prøven, 33. Norwegian original: “At de heller måtte bruke atombomber enn å tape.”
The captain would prefer to die in a universe where autonomous agency is something attainable and achievable than to live in a world where it is not.

However, something is about to change. And this change is conveyed through vague feelings. The captain had felt uncomfortable with his authority in the East, even before they became stuck there in the delta at the beginning of the novel. “My head hurt, the sun burnt my eyes, my uniform was sticky,” as he says in the middle of the book. The title, “The final test,” also relates to this feeling of having had enough – that this shipment to the Americans might be his last job abroad. “He was done. He had to get away from the East. When they came to Singapore, he had to go ashore,” as is claimed on the very first pages of the novel. Thus, the whole situation on the ship increases his discomfort.

At first, Arne tries to distance himself by sedation with alcohol (and later opium). Maybe for this reason, he is confusing the discomfort of not knowing with reactions to the high intake of alcohol, a reaction to the heat or just sea sickness: “the anxiety festered on his skin, tingling in his blood, made the hair curl on his forehead.” But more and more, Arne notices that there has been a weird silence in the air, “as if something was expected.”

What I interpret Arne doing here is giving up his melodramatic idea of agency. Arne starts to ask questions because he suspects that there is

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315 Stokkelien, Den siste prøven, 64f. “Det gjorde vondt i hodet, solen sved i øynene, uniformen klebet.”
316 Stokkelien, Den siste prøven, 10. Norwegian original: “Han var gåen. Han måtte bort fra Østen. Når de kom til Singapore, måtte han gå i land.”
317 Stokkelien, Den siste prøven, 7. Norwegian original: “Og plutselig var han redd, angsten satt i huden, kriblet i blodet, fikk håret til å krolle seg vått om pannen.”
318 Stokkelien, Den siste prøven, 8. Norwegian originals: “en underlig stillhet” and “liksom noe ventende i luften.”
something wrong. There is something about the war, which the Americans are not telling him. There is something about the ship, which the Chinese are not telling him. There is something about this whole situation that is off, in the sense that he does not have the vocabulary to name it, or the perceptual tools to figure out what it is. This is evident as he smells a sweet smell. Is that really napalm? he wonders. Would the Americans use that? He continues asking questions. The American planes fly over them, into the war zone, so low that the captain can see the pilots. Why do the Americans use such old makes of planes, the captain wonders, where the pilot is not protected? He also begins to ask Goh questions about his family. This makes him realizes that, like him, the Chinese are “just afraid. After twelve days on the river, anyone would be afraid.” He feels more solidarity to the crew now, as well as steps down from his high horse. “What did I know about what was happening in the world? (...) Bottom line, he knew nothing.”

This turn toward the unknown of his own agency is intertwined with a shift in his view of himself as a captain. By taking seriously the feelings of disempowerment as well as the vague feelings of apathy, which the environment is producing in him, he is not diminishing his experience of agency, but actually, increasing it, he notices, since these feelings tell him to think about his relation to the world in another way. As his previous conceptions of the world slowly disappears in this process, he starts accepting the boat itself as a communicative agent, capable of telling him how to understand the world. “If he listened, it was as though the ship

319 Stokkelien, Den siste prøven, 7.
320 Stokkelien, Den siste prøven, 50.
322 Stokkelien, Den siste prøven, 64. “Hva visste vel han om hva som skjedde i verden? (...) I grunnen visste han ingen ting.”
was talking, it was full of turmoil – new sounds, and he did not know where they came from. The waves against the side of the ship sounded different, there was a crash when they turned on the river."323 “The ship creaks, ‘Eastern Trader’ sighs.”324 And “‘Eastern Trader’ trembles like a living being,” he says at one point.325 When the danger is high, he observes: “Even the ship is quiet now.”326 That is, in parallel with this inclusion of the boat as a communicative agent, and himself as part of it, the captain is becoming aware of himself as an agent; that is, as someone who can do something about the ship’s situation.

As if to underline this further, the captain describes how he mishears gunshots as applause on a theatre stage.327 He hears it, “faintly, as if someone is clapping, then it rises to storming applause.”328 Hearing the applause, the captain is offered a concrete perspective from the outside, giving him a feeling of being on a stage, where his actions are being observed, and also evaluated.329 In this situation, from which he cannot

325 Stokkelien Den siste prøven, 82. Norwegian original: “‘Eastern Trader’ skjelver som et levende vesen.”
326 Stokkelien, Den siste prøven, 87. Norwegian original: “Selv skipet tier nå.”
327 Stokkelien, Den siste prøven, 59. Norwegian original: “Som applaus i et teater, tenker skipperen.”
328 Stokkelien Den siste prøven, 59. Norwegian original: “svakt, som om noen klapper, så stiger det til stormende applaus.”
329 The use of the metaphor of a theatre is rather common in war vocabulary—the battlefield is often referred to as a theatre of war. But the metaphor is interesting particularly when discussing agency. As mentioned in the introduction to this study, the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel pursues the argument that it was first in Greek theatre that it became possible to talk about a modern understanding of individual agency, because such a projection requires an aesthetic representation, which requires a theatrical reflection. See Speight, Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency, 54.
abstract himself, he ends up being attentive to the here and now – and act according to what is happening on the stage, so to say.

**One Melodramatic, One Ecodramatic Action**

Adjusting one’s agentic orientation, and actually acting according to it, is easier said than done. The captain needs two trials, I argue. In the first, he feels like an agent, but makes no difference. In the second, he feels uncertain and unsure, but makes a big difference. I will argue that the second time, the novel identifies a strategy for an alternative, ecodramatic idea of agency.

In the first melodramatic act, the feeling of being “a captain” is key. Toward the end of the novel, the captain experiences a familiar feeling of having agency. The captain thinks at the end of the novel: “How could he ever have doubted that he knew when to act?”330 “Everything will be as before,” that is, he is again a captain.331 Feeling like a captain, he moves the ship further down the river, against the initial orders from the Americans. The captain is indeed nervous about what the Americans will say – he expects them to be angry. But it *does* make him feel like an agent. However, as it turns out, he has only done what is expected of him. To his surprise, he receives praise from the Americans, when he finally turns on the radio to let them know that the ship is out of the danger zone: “Well done, captain, well done! Praise for saving ship and cargo.”332 The Americans assure them that everything is fine and tell them that a navigator will come to guide them to the dock at 6 o’clock.

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This sets his whole situation in a rather unsatisfying relief for Arne. He indeed acted as a captain, but then turned out to be performing the role of a cog in the machine. All in all, the whole thing seems to have confirmed his initial idea of melodramatic agency. He feels confused. He is not satisfied with this action, because it does not entail making a difference.

What happens next demonstrates this. Now, in contrast to the first action, he does not feel like an agent. He has understood that he is not just a cog in the wheel, but a node in a network, which is evident in the way the whole scene plays out. Oil is essential here – because it is what keeps the infrastructure of the American war machine running. If he is to make a difference, he needs to act infrastructurally. The long intermission while the ship waited has made him realize what kind of network he is part of and has revealed to him how the ship is situated within a complex geopolitical infrastructure, where he as a captain is responsible not only to the Americans, but even more so to his crew, and to the fighting in the jungle. In other words, in this second action, he is listening to the ship in order to make a difference and is first and foremost attentive to his surroundings. Soon after this first action, Arne decides to give contrary orders to his crew; instead of waiting for the Americans further downstream, they are to leave the river altogether and let out the oil instead. “He will not ship more oil. Never more oil.”

Calmly, the captain declares, “let the oil out.” “An order is an order.”

“He will not ship more oil. Never more oil.”

Calmly, the captain declares, “let the oil out.” “An order is an order.” “Never oil again.”

Prior to this action, the captain is uncertain as to what he is going to do, he only knows that there “is something that he needs to clarify.” Thus, before he acts, he does not know what it is, but he knows what it is about. “Something about the oil.” Thus, in contrast to the first action described above, this action is filled with confusion and uncertainty, instead of feelings of empowerment. He does not feel like a captain.

Letting out the oil is of course a rather grand gesture, which could be understood within the context of a melodramatic idea of agency, as well as an ecodramatic. Not at least, letting out the oil is a catastrophe for the local environment in the ocean; the oil does not disappear by letting it out – in fact, nothing disappears in an ecologicized world. This brings our attention to the biological environment (which will be explored in the next chapter), and how the 1960s also nourished an understanding of that as active and individuating in its own right. However, within the novelistic universe of Den siste prøven, sailing off to open sea and letting out the oil, constitutes a kind of disruption of the war system, which Eastern Trader is a part of, which I would see as an expression of an idea of ecodramatic agency.

My own reading is attuned to the major role feelings play regarding the ability to act. Previous scholarly work on the novel, as well as newspaper reviews when the novel came out, disagree. First of all, critics in the Norwegian newspapers asked whether a captain would really dare to discard oil intended for American bomber planes in Vietnam. As one critic argued, the representation of how the captain overcomes his pity and actually acts is not very persuasive. In one of the few scholarly


readings of Stokkelien’s text, Rakel Christina Granaas suggested that the novel as a whole stages a conflict between reason and feeling, between contemplating and acting, seeing contemplation and action as opposites.\textsuperscript{339} Disagreeing with these readings, I argue that the novel explores the interdependence of the two – feelings and agency. And that vague feelings are key to a perceptual shift in the novel. It is the pitifulness and the fifteen days of contemplation that make the captain capable of acting. Only when he accepts the existence of multiple agents around himself, that is, accepts his environment as ecologicized, self-reflexive and active, is the captain able to make a difference. His last action can therefore be read as a culmination of the movement which has been going on throughout the novel. If the captain is to act, he needs to take seriously the idea that he is part of a networked organism, and that he is situated within it. And within a network, there are no cogs in the machine, only nodes, constantly relating to something else.\textsuperscript{340}

If we recall, once again, space as ecologicized, as presented in the introduction, this means that the captain is able to act precisely because he is taking seriously the fact that the environment is ontogenetic, that is, is co-creating his agency. Arne is no cog in the machine, rather, like the narrator of \textit{Bilburen}, he is entangled with his function as a \textit{driver of a vehicle}. He is Arne-with-a-ship, as Latour would say. Referring to

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{340} Such a reading is aligned with thoughts expressed in Donovan Schaefer’s \textit{Wild Thing} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022) about how rationality is entangled in affects from the beginning.
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\end{footnotesize}
Haraway, this spatial anchoring can be described as “staying with the trouble,” that is, understanding oneself as “situated, someplace and not noplace, entangled and worldly.” Abstracting from this trouble, means falling into the hands of melodramatic ideas of agency. To stay situated and rooted seems to be a prerequisite for understanding agency in an ecologicized agotope of sea traffic.

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341 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 4. “Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all. That kind of material semiotics is always situated, someplace and not noplace, entangled and worldly.”
Summary of Traffic

Through the two readings in this chapter, the coordinate system presented in the introduction has been provided with graphs that represent the transformation of agency – thus, the diagram has, hopefully, been given more flesh. Leijer’s novel was read as exploring the rise and fall of melodramatic agency, and ending up at the left side of the coordinate system, the narrator struggling with his sense of loss of agency – and ending up in an “indistinct jumble,” to borrow a phrase from Neyrat, feelings something in-between a loss of agency and a fragmented sense of ecodramatic agency. Throughout the novel, the narrator of Bilburen becomes more and more intertwined with the vehicles he drives but,
simultaneously, sees himself as detached from every action he takes, as though he is the passenger, only observing what is going on. In that sense, he is unable to sustain or prioritize between any relations. He is incapable of differentiating between what he himself is doing, and the processes around him. He is forced to navigate endlessly and does not know where he is in the network, or to whom or what he is connected to particularly – he is connected to everything, all the time.

The second reading, of Den siste prøven, is also moving along the melodramatic axis in the beginning, but ends up exploring how this interconnectedness and embeddedness of the human in vessels can facilitate new kinds of agency, as long as one is willing to accept oneself as a hybrid agent, and accept the consequences of the uncertainty about who or what has agency. Thus, Stokkelien’s novel explores the left-hand side of the coordinate system, because it situates the individual actor within a network. And maybe it is in fact easier to situate oneself on a ship than in a car. The composition of the novel also helps the characters to destabilize the present. Instead of sticking to a strict chronological narrative, visions, memories and dreams make the narrative presence porous and fragmented, enabling – perhaps – causal relations beyond those considered rational.

Interestingly, the central character in Stokkelien’s novel – the captain Arne – considers himself positioned as stuck in a kind of web, as a small cog in a big machine from the beginning of the novel. Maybe a newfound agency on ecodramatic terms is easier for such a character to accept, in contrast to a character who starts out by feeling masculine, riding on a stallion, as the narrator of Bilburen underlines when he describes his scooter.\footnote{Leijer, Bilburen, 22. Swedish original: “Jag hade min röda hingst, min sprängstyva mandom och kraft.”} Arne has already surrendered his agency to powers greater
than himself. The cybernetician Gregory Bateson makes a point about exactly that – surrendering – in his essay: “The Cybernetics of Self: A Theory of Alcoholism.” He is describing the first steps of Anonymous Alcoholics – admitting that you are powerless over alcohol. This is, he argues, a more “correct” epistemology regarding human agency. It is not a surrender, “it is simply a change in epistemology, a change in how to know about the personality-in-the-world. And notably, the change is from an incorrect to a more correct epistemology,” Bateson argues. And Arne would probably agree.

Nevertheless, what is obvious in these novels is that both sea traffic and car traffic are represented as active environments, which influences the ideas of agency that are possible to pursue in them. In such an active environment, it is never quite clear whose or what goal your actions serve, or where your actions may have an effect, locally and globally. The novels seem to advocate for an acceptance of some sense of uncertainty of agency in a vast and distributed system of traffic, as a first step to understand ecodramatic agency.

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Chapter 4

Contamination – Ecodrama and Melodrama in Never-Endings Feedback Loops

One week during the summer of 1969, 40 million dead fish suddenly appeared floating in the River Rhine. This mass death – the cause of which was identified after a few days of intensive investigation as stemming from insecticides – was covered in newspapers across Europe, creating both existential and political turmoil, as well as diplomatic tensions between the Netherlands and West Germany, the alleged source of the contamination.344 Who was responsible for such a mass death? How could such an event even occur? And if all these fish had been killed, what might have afflicted all the humans living and working along the river who, one must assume, had also been exposed?

The fish deaths seemed to confirm an eerie feeling of fragility and entanglement in a globalized world, which was rather common during the 1960s. The period of the Great Acceleration, as some scholars have termed the period since the Second World War, was a wake-up-call for many of a natural environment that was not static and local, but active

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344 The International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine was established as early as 1963, and it was already known then that the river was contaminated – however, the scope and range of the 1969 event was nevertheless extraordinary. For a glimpse of how the event was described in Scandinavia, see for example the following article from a Norwegian newspaper, “Rhinen – en dødskloakk – Nederland tyr til nødvann,” Glåmdalen, June 25, 1969, 1 and 6. Regarding the political turmoil, see for example New Yor Times, “Source of fish poisoning in Rhine identified as Insecticide,” June 26, 1969.
and global. As historian David Larsson Heidenblad has argued in a recent book, *Den gröna vändningen* (The Environmental Turn, 2022), the year 1967 marks “a societal knowledge breakthrough” in Sweden regarding environmental issues. Part of this awareness can be traced back to ideas formulated by Rachel Carson in her book *Silent Spring* (1962, translated into Danish as *Det tavse forår*, into Norwegian as *Den tause våren*, and into Swedish as *Tyst vår*, all in 1963). In her book, Carson introduced a series of new agents which were important to take into account in order to understand the ongoing pollution. In that regard, the fish deaths in the Rhine did not represent something unique; this incident was *yet another* example of an increasing global interconnectedness through systemic processes.

This environmental awareness ran parallel to the development of new theories and technologies to measure and model the interplay between the ongoing contamination and the complex processes in natural ecosystems. “The butterfly effect,” proposed by US mathematician and

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348 Carson, *Silent Spring*, 35. “For the most part this pollution is unseen and invisible, making its presence known when hundreds or thousands of fish die, but more often never detected at all.”
meteorologist Edward Lorenz was one such statistical and mathematical explanation that made sense of the complex, global world of the 1960s. In 1961, he used computer simulations to “prove” that even a small alteration within a system changes the outcome completely, thus suggesting a model connecting local to global agency, and tiny changes to massive ecological forces.\textsuperscript{350}

The two novels in this chapter are both set in contaminated milieus, where microscopic, invisible agents are sneaking into the human body, reminding humans of their entanglement with their surroundings, and thereby continuously disrupting their feeling of bodily autonomy. In \textit{Termush, Atlanterhavskysten} (1967) by Danish writer Sven Holm, a university professor is living in a post-apocalyptic nuclear shelter in Denmark, just after a nuclear catastrophe has hit the vicinity of Denmark. The second novel, \textit{Sommeren på heden} (1970) by Norwegian writer Vigdis Stokkelien, features a pregnant woman, who is accidentally exposed to toxic substances, risking harm to her unborn child. Realizing their interconnectedness with the surroundings, the main characters in the two novels realize that they need to renegotiate how they understand both themselves and their ability to make a difference in such an interconnected world.

Before I take a close look at the two novels, I will briefly discuss the topic of contamination in Scandinavian fiction and non-fiction of the 1960s, with a focus on how the general, cultural reconsideration of the natural environment during this period is represented. As in the previous chapter, I use examples from other literary works and public debates in Scandinavia to highlight typical traits of the setting of a contaminated environment.

\textsuperscript{350} See Edward Lorenz, “Deterministic Non-period Flow.”
Vulnerable Bodies and Unpredictable Processes

During the 1960s, an environmental consciousness was growing among the general public in Scandinavia – even though contamination was not yet directly politicized in the way it came to be during the 1970s, when it became the subject of political environmental movements. Contamination was discussed in popular scientific works by the abovementioned Carson, but also by such figures as Swedish biologist Georg Borgström, Hans Palmstierna, and Rolf Edberg, all of whom in different ways introduced cybernetic models to understand both human population growth and the natural world around us. In addition, a stream of vitalist philosophy in Norway through such figures as Peter Wessel Zapffe, explored how the milieu individuated the human being, inspiring deep ecological thinking by for example the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss. The

351 See for example, the beforementioned Heidenblad, *Den gröna vändningen*, regarding Sweden. For Denmark, see for example the history of the organization NOAH, founded in 1969, see “Om NOAH: Historie,” accessed April 14, 2024, [https://www.noah.dk/om-noah/historie](https://www.noah.dk/om-noah/historie). In Norway, the environmental movement can be argued to begin with the Mardøla-protests, where youth gathered to stop the regulation of a local waterfall in 1970, see Bredo Berntsen, *Grønne linjer – natur og miljøvernets historie i Norge* (Oslo: Unipub forlag, 2. Edition, 2011).


353 Historian of ideas, Robbie McClintock, has claimed that there is a strong parallel between vitalist philosophy and the emerging environmental movements in “Machines and vitalists reflections on ideology of cybernetics,” *The American Scholar* vol. 35, no. 2 (1966): 249–257. McClintock has not written
perception of the environment, that I would argue these streams of thoughts tried to conceptualize and reflect upon in their different ways, take nature to be an active environment.

One of the contamination debates in the 1960s focused on the ongoing mercury leak in Stockholm. Observations were made already in the 1950s of birds dying, seemingly out of the blue. Eventually, leaking pipes under Stockholm were identified as the cause. Inspired by Carson’s book, Swedish psychiatrist Nils-Erik Landell described this leak in his *Fågeldöd fiskhot kvicksilver* (Bird’s Death, Fish Threat, Mercury, 1968), a debate book that brought pesticides and the ongoing pollution in Sweden to the public’s attention. Landell claims that, in order to cope with the problem, a paradigm shift in our view of nature is needed, from what the author considers an industrial idea of the environment as passive (and, thus, something to be mastered), to an idea of the landscape as something that kicks back and is radically altered by human action.354

“Gone is the idyllic time,” Landell writes, “when human limits seemed to be defined by her own ability, by the use of machines or hands, to turn forest into cultivated land.” Gone is the time, he claims, with reference to the Viking era, when humans tried to master the elements. It is no longer possible to imagine “a planet with unlimited resources that could be exploited like the pig Sæhrímnir, that is slaughtered every morning by the

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Norse Gods and then returns every night, without any blemishes.”355 In this world, we are forced to realize “the worrisome fact” that “humans always interact with nature.”356

This infiltration makes the world eerie. In order to represent such a world with an environment enabling and shaping its inhabitants, new stories and ways of thinking about representation are needed, and this is maybe the reason why the 1960s literature are interested in mysticism, dreams and cyclical narratives.357 In addition, fictional environments are often represented as producing vague feelings of disquiet and concern in the humans moving around in them, forcing them to rethink what surroundings really mean, what difference they make, and what the existence of active environments mean for human agency. As such, mythical environments are echoing the discourse on contamination during the 1960s, such as radiation, mercury leaks or the use of pesticides and cleaning products.358

355 Landell, Fågeldöd fiskhot kvicksilver, 7. The pig Sæhrímnir is a pig that is slaughtered and eaten by the gods every night in Norse mythology. Swedish original: “Borta är den idylliska tid, då människans gränser föreföll sättas bara av hennes egen förmåga att med maskiner eller händers hjälp vända urskog till odlingsmark. Borta är bilden av ett jordklot med öändliga resurser som kunde exploateras likt Särimners gris, som varje morgon slaktades av de nordiska gudarna och varje kväll fanns får på nytt utan skavank.”

356 Landell Fågeldöd fiskhot kvicksilver, 8. Swedish original: “Man begrundade ängsligt det faktum att människan alltid är med i naturens samspel.”

357 I am thinking here about, for example, Inger Christensen’s Evighedsmaskinen, Ann-Margret Dahlqvist-Lundberg’s Strålen, Astrid Hjærtenes Andersen’s Dr. Gnomen, and Ebbe Kløvedahl Reich’s Svampenes tid (Copenhagen: Rhodos, 1969). Also, Beata Agrell has argued for a return of a pre-modern aesthetics in 1960s Swedish prose fiction, in the sense that a modern split between the individual and the world is no longer at the centre of the literary work. Agrell, Forskningsresan som roman, 11.

358 Robert L. Rudd’s book Pesticides and the Living Landscape (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1964) was translated into Swedish in 1968 as Biocider och den levande nature by Sven Mathiasson (Wahlström & Widstrand, 1968). Regarding radiation, Scandinavian states did not house – or had –
One of the most active Norwegian poets regarding contamination in the 1960s and 1970s, Sideel Mørck, contemplated this simultaneous physical and mental experience enforced by contamination in her book *Dager kan vokse* (Days can grow, 1969).\(^{359}\) The lyrical I in one poem, “Giftene” (The Poison), experiences vague bodily sensations, an “irritable itch / on the verge of reason,” a kind of intuitive idea about what is going on, but which cannot be rationally understood by the mind.\(^{360}\) This itch is both a symptom of the contamination and a hint at the perceptual change that needs to come. In Mørck’s poetry, the environment sneaks in.

Production of some kind of vague feelings, I have argued, is to be typical of all the agotopes in this study. But in contaminated environments specifically, vague feelings have a dual reference; they have both mental and material origins. Mentally, the ongoing contamination introduced a new understanding of nature and the role of humans in it, throwing traditional concepts such as autonomy and agency up in the air while nuclear weapons. However, there were extensive debates on the use of nuclear energy in Scandinavia during these decades, due to scientific breakthroughs within nuclear energy. Only Sweden went on to build nuclear facilities during the postwar years – six of which are still in use today. Two of the reactors were built, one of them very close to the Danish shores, Barsebäck (in use 1975–1999 and 1977–2005). The construction began in 1968 and this was so close to the Danish capital of Copenhagen that the Danes could see the reactor towers from the capital.

\(^{359}\) In addition to writing poetry, Mørck was active in the efforts to uncover the contamination caused by the cellulose factory owned by Norsk Hydro in Porsgrunn in Norway. See for example Sissel Furuseth, “Varslere og stumtjenere i oljelandet.” *Forfatternes klimaaksjon*, 2021, accessed November 22, 2023, https://forfatternesklimaaksjon.no/2021/09/25-varslere-og-stumtjenere-i-oljelandet-sissel-furuseth/.

causing cultural anxiety and unease.\textsuperscript{361} But more important, materially, contamination could affect the physical body of the individual by causing prickling sensations and dizziness. As Carson wrote in her book, DDT affects humans by causing diffuse symptoms such as shaking: “Abnormal sensations as of prickling, burning, or itching, as well as tremors or even convulsions may follow exposure to appreciable amounts (...).”\textsuperscript{362} Quite literally, as affect theoreticians would argue, vague feelings emerge within a contaminated environment where the individual and its surroundings intersect.\textsuperscript{363} In line with Simondon and Ngai, I argue that these vague feelings express a “bewilderment” – both regarding a loss of control and a gap between the representation and the experience of the world.\textsuperscript{364} Am I an individual, autonomous body, if my bodily boundaries are continuously trespassed by micro-agents stemming from my surroundings? In a contaminated space, there seems to be a need for new concepts and representations to understand how the roles of humans, nature, machines and animals are entangled and inter-acted with each other.

One could almost say that the idea of the human body is becoming “trans-corporeal.” This concept stems from Stacy Alaimo, according to whom a trans-corporeal being is someone that inhabits “the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from ‘nature’ or ‘environment.’”\textsuperscript{365} This is related to an idea that humans

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Carson, \textit{Silent Spring}, 157.
\item Ahmed, “Affective economy,” 117.
\item Ngai, \textit{Ugly Feelings}, 14.
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\end{footnotesize}
can never “entirely protect ourselves from the elements that also move through our bodies,” as Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loweven Walter Walker argues, with reference to Alaimo.\textsuperscript{366} Moreover, actions can no longer be considered on a purely local scale, but have the ability to set in motion changes outside individual control to an extent that was unprecedented in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century; in that sense, attributing to the individual a far greater, and simultaneously, lesser sense of individual agency. A Danish anthology on pollution published in relation to the radio programme “Orientering” in 1970, stated that contamination required the connection of domains that until then had been regarded as separate: “Who would dream of the fact that birds on a distant island in the Atlantic would lay barren eggs and face their doom, just because farmers thousands of miles away had used too many chemical pesticides?”\textsuperscript{367}

A “trans-corporal being” is a rather fitting description, of the disturbing example Danish professor, Knud O. Møller, writes about in a foreword to Carson’s book in 1964.\textsuperscript{368} A baby boy in Denmark was playing on the lawn in front of his house one day, when he suddenly fell lifeless to

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\textsuperscript{368} In the Danish newspaper \textit{Dagbladet Information}, there is a short note on \textit{Silent Spring} before it was translated into Danish, called “Insektmidler øger cancer-risikoen,” \textit{Dagbladet Information}, September 3, 1962, 1 and 8. Before publication, the book started a debate in the Danish parliament, initiated by the left-wing party SF, see for example Leif Blædel, “Giftnævnets formand i krig med Rachel Carsons Det tavse foraar,” \textit{Dagbladet Information}, January 15, 1964, 6. In Norway, Carson’s significance is attested by the creation of the Rachel Carson Prize, which has been awarded in Stavanger since 1991, on the initiative of the Norwegian sociologist Berit Ås.
the ground. His mother had seen him sticking a finger into the soil fifteen minutes prior to putting it in his mouth. And now he was dead. In his throat and belly the pathologists later found traces of parathion (bladan), a substance that had apparently been used to spray the crops on a neighbouring field a few days earlier. Just like that, a few drops of the wrong substance a hundred metres away had contaminated the local environment to such a degree that a child was killed. Modern farming had turned free and wild nature, in which children were supposed to play and explore the world, into dangerous land.

A remarkable Norwegian novel of 1967 set in a contaminated environment accentuates the radical consequences for agency in this kind of global and active environment. **Kontinentene** (The Continents, 1967) by Øystein Lønn takes place in a society undergoing a kind of reverse totalitarian process 2,000 years after a nuclear catastrophe has hit the planet. As the novel begins, a previous era of total control over society is about to loosen up, after the population has lived in highly controlled and regulated communities in mountain caves for thousands of years. Now, ecological change, after the apocalypse, has enabled people to go outside on their own, talk to each other, smell the fresh rain. And this new situation has created uncertainty, both in the population at large and in the government. How can they control their inhabitants open-air?

In the novel, the reader is given access to the government’s experimentation with new forms of surveillance strategies through the narrator – named Tenderly – a bureaucrat working for the government, whose technique for information gathering is eclectic and chaotic. Through him

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the novel zooms in and out on people murmuring on the metro or in bars, and then shifts rapidly to his own thoughts, memories and stories from the pre-apocalypse period of the 20th century, which he has read about in books. Tenderly, a man with a questionable moral standpoint, is the key person in this new kind of environment. He represents the future, because an open-air era requires humans and other agents to become more attuned to instincts and vague feelings in order to discover changes in the mentality of the population. Only by tapping into this kind of relational and affective resource, can the government regulate the behaviour of the population.

Another typical approach to agency in the 1960s, is a fear of nature’s ability to act on its own. The Norwegian short story “Eld i turrsogen myr” (Fire in dry swamp) from the debut short story collection Vind (Wind, 1966) by the Norwegian author Tor Obrestad demonstrates how such a fear might look. Mysticism is here taken up in relation to the violent agency of nature itself, of fears about Gaia taking revenge, as if nature was a kind of monstrous agent, unleashing terror in what otherwise is regarded as balanced ecosystems – an interest in natural elements that recent studies in elemental ecocriticism has paid attention to.370 The story revolves around a group of men trying to fight a fire on a riverbank, constantly challenged by the wind. Suddenly, the wind dies away, and the men are able to put out the flames. Believing they have won the fight over the fire, they go to the nearby town to celebrate. However, while the humans are celebrating, the narrator zooms back to the heath, where

“the heart of the firebird is growing” underneath the surface.\textsuperscript{371} When the wind freshens again during the night, the flames rise once more.\textsuperscript{372} Nature, it seems, is lurking silently and invisibly, before it suddenly takes back control. Humans, this story illustrates, melodramatically don’t stand a chance.

Summarizing, in different ways, the themes discussed above of active-passive behaviour, observation and interconnectedness as well as global-local perspectives, a contaminated environment brings forth both melodramatic and ecodramatic approaches to agency – though mostly the latter. In the two novels addressed in this chapter – Termush by Holm and Sommeren på heden by Stokkelien – the capacity to act arises not from the ability to perceive and understand oneself as an autonomous individual but from the ability to see oneself as connected to something big and complex, outside of individual control.\textsuperscript{373}


\textsuperscript{372} “It is night when the wind rises in the valley. (...) This happens while you are asleep” Obrestad, “Eld i turrsogen myr,” 8. Norwegian original: “Det er ei vanlig natt når vinden reiser seg i dalen. (...) Dette hender mens du sov.”

\textsuperscript{373} As in the previous chapter and the introduction, this situatedness is understood in line with Haraway, \textit{Staying with the Trouble}, 31.
The novel *Termush, Atlantershavskysten* (1967, translated into English in 1969, and republished in 2024) by Danish writer Sven Holm explores agency within an active and mediated environment, filled with microscopic, toxic agents infiltrating the membranes of the human body, making them sick, confused and dizzy. In line with cybernetic systems theory, the contaminated setting of the novel affords no external position from which the sequence of events can be observed – and this is what the narrator struggles with. To be able to observe something, you need to be part of the system, the cybernetic thinkers and biologists Humberto
Maturana and Francisco Varela once argued, in their studies of the question of autonomy in cybernetics, mentioned in the “Matrix” chapter.\(^{374}\) So, how to figure out what is really going on, when you cannot retract and see it from a distance? And how to know whether or not you are making a difference at all? Observing something, the novel concludes, is never neutral or without implications, but always influences the turn of events in one way or another.

The concrete backdrop of Holm’s novel is that a nuclear catastrophe in the area around the Danish Atlantic Coast has altered the conditions for life on the planet. A group of privileged citizens has gained access to a shelter called Termush to survive the initial blast – an access given through a high monthly insurance rate in the years prior to the catastrophe. It is in this shelter and its vicinity that the novel takes place. Termush is a kind of terminal, processing information from the past and the present, as well as from the inside and the outside, standing on the verge between two different worlds: the industrial, colonial world and the new post-apocalyptic world. The plot-twist is this: The privileged guests discover that they are not the only survivors from the catastrophe. People from the outside start coming to the shelter for protection. Termush is \textit{not} an isolated colony, serving as a worthy haven to die in for the rich, instead, it is a laboratory of a new kind of environmental understanding of life on planet Earth.\(^{375}\)


\(^{375}\) The Danish critic Ole Hyltoft Petersen writes in his review that the title must be a play on the English words “Terminal” and “Mushroom,” characterizing in a precise way the kind of world in which Termush is set: A world where the threat of ecological collapse has become permanent. Petersen, “Dødsens alvorlig Sven Holm,” Printed in more newspapers, such as \textit{Sønderjyden} 19 October 1967, 14 and \textit{Demokraten, Århus}, 16 November 1967, 4.
My reading focuses on the consequences for ideas of agency in this world and describes how the novel stages a melodrama of uncertain agency, which in the end, is doomed to fail – as the diagram on the previous page indicates. I begin by outlining the ecologicized agotope, and thereafter focus on the main character (who is also the narrator of the story), in order to discuss how his feelings signal an inadequate understanding of agency, not corresponding with the world he is experiencing. To explore the idea of agency in the novel, I turn to Varela and Maturana, to their concept of “autopoiesis” and their theorizing of observation in recursive systems, as well as to Melley’s work on conspiracy culture in the 1960s. Finally, I ask: Is there a way out of this dead-end melodrama?

**Termush is a Living Organism**

*Termush* consists of 31 entries, corresponding to the 31 days the guests spend at Termush, before the guests leave the hotel with all their food supplies, fleeing from the intruding survivors. The diary entries are all written chronologically by a nameless, privileged university professor, who observes and reflects upon what is going on in this first month after the catastrophe.

During the 31 days, the professor and narrator befriends Maria, another guest, and a nameless doctor, who works at the hotel. Apart from these two, the rest of the characters remain more or less anonymous. These include the other guests, the hotel management, the guards, and the many survivors outside of Termush. A few days after the catastrophe outside, survivors show up on the doorstep of the hotel – some dying, some still very much alive. The first outsiders are granted protection at Termush, but as more and more of them arrive, the guests begin to demand action from the hotel manager – unlike themselves, the outsiders have not paid a high insurance premium to stay at Termush. One day,
the weather is stable, and the guests are able to spend some time outside on a trip in a motorboat belonging to the hotel, only later to realize that this was just a trick from the management to take in more refugees during their absence. The hotel and the guests thereafter make a compromise to close the doors of the hotel. The novel ends soon afterwards, when the survivors have broken the fence, and all the guests escape in fear in the motorboat. The last entry in the diary – which is also the last chapter of the book – is written at sea, with no wind. Maria and the narrator are lying on the floor of the boat: “No one moves more than is necessary. Outside the ocean is still, there is no darkness and no light.”

I read this ending as a demonstration of the guests’ incapability of coping with the conditions in this new and altered world. Relations, participating observation, and a lack of control and possibility to foresee what is going on, are key to this world. As briefly mentioned, the narrator believed the biggest problem with a nuclear blast would be life in isolation. But the challenge consists, in fact, to alter one’s perception and idea of the world. In a moment of clarity, the narrator says that the

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377 Holm has explored the theme of isolation previously in his writing. For example, in his debut collection of short stories, Den store fiende ([The Great Enemy] Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1961), a short story about the features of war – mentioned by many reviewers in their reading of Termush – Holm delves into “the common fear of something no one can see,” which eventually means that the army “dissolves and fights itself,” instead of fighting the enemy, as one critic wrote in the newspaper, esp, “Verden efter B-bomben,” Dagbladet Folketidende, November 10, 1967, 4. Danish original: “den fælles frygt, for noget, som ingen kan se. I novellen går en hær i oplosning og kæmper mod sig selv.”
anxiety he feels is not a “fear of death, but of change and mutilation.” Such a quote underlines that it is transformation he fears, both regarding a change in his ability to operate in the world, and, perhaps most of all, a transformation of his own idea of agency.

It is hard to change perception of the world at Termush for many reasons, one of the most obvious is how normal everything looks – after the privileged guests in the first chapter come up to Termush from the underground shelter they hid in during the blast. The composition of things, the molecules and structures of the world, has changed, but not the surface. The “world looks as it did in the moment when the disaster struck,” the narrator writes in his diary. Even their immediate surroundings look the same as before; the hotel environment that secures privacy and autonomy for its inhabitants, upheld by servants, a board of directors, doctors who service them and the standardized yet personalized rooms, each featuring modern art from such painters as Paul Klee and Monet. “We expected to find a world completely annihilated. This was what we insured ourselves against when we enrolled at Termush,” the narrator writes.

This invisible change makes reality hidden and only accessible and possible to regulate through cybernetic technologies. The guests are like astronauts who are dependent upon their spacecraft and spacesuit, intertwining the individuals who are kept secure there into the very fabric

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378 Holm, Termush, 93. Danish original: “Vor angst er ikke længere angsten for døden, men for forvandlingen og forkrøblingen,” Termush, Atlanterhavskysten, 96.
380 Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavskysten, 19.
of the hotel itself. For example, to keep the guests safe, the surroundings of the hotel are constantly scanned with different kinds of “dosimeters” and “intensimeters,” as the novel calls the measuring instruments that monitor the radiation levels. This mediated reality makes it hard to trust the changes, and to keep calm, and it also offers great conditions for those inhabitants that are inclined to conspiracy theories. At one point, the guests need to go down into the caves again, due to heavy rain, and the narrator observes, quite correctly: “We are not staying down in the shelters because the world is a blazing hell, but because it is raining and the rain makes certain instruments set off the alarm system.”

As the beforementioned Norwegian intellectual Tor Aukrust wrote in the late 1950s, what is “natural” for the human is no longer a given. “Science and man’s ‘natural’ idea of the world are thus very different.” Melley underlines how experiences of such a mediated reality can lead to conspiracy narratives, and a wish to secure ideas of individual autonomy and control. As he writes:

[T]he recent surge of conspiracy narratives stems not from a specific historical development – such as Watergate, the Kennedy assassination, or even the Cold War – but from the larger sense that, to quote one cultural critic, ‘our specialness. Our humanness – has been taking it on the chin a lot lately.’

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382 Holm, Termush, 24. Danish original: “Vi opholder os ikke i hulerne fordi jorden er et helvede af ild, men fordi det regner og regnen får nogle instrumenter til at sætte alarmsystemet i gang,” Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavskysten, 28.

383 Aukrust, Mennesket i kulturen, 57. Norwegian original: “den kvantitative er-kjennelses område i forhold til det som er ‘naturlig’ for mennesket.”

384 Aukrust, Mennesket i kulturen, 57. Norwegian original: “Vitenskapens og menneskets ‘naturlige’ verdensbilde blir således meget forskjelligartet.”

385 Melley, Empire of Conspiracy, 11, quoting Charles Sibert in a commentary in Harper’s Magazine.
The main character in Termush has indeed endured a lot, having survived a nuclear apocalypse. But even though he is at times paranoid in the course of the novel, most of all, he is confused and apathetic. Vague feelings in the novel signpost an uneasiness about agency altogether. “I have been walking about preoccupied with vague premonitions and conjectures,” the narrator writes.\textsuperscript{386} As in other already mentioned contamination scenarios, it is not clear in this narrative whether such vague concerns are caused by the toxic radiation or whether they stem from the epistemological unease at Termush. But the vague feelings are produced constantly. “Somewhere in ourselves,” the narrator says, “we feel the changes.”\textsuperscript{387} “The state of panic and anticipation is over and has been replaced by complete deafness, not just of the ears but of the whole body, a sense of exhaustion or deep-seated dizziness,” the narrator writes when describing how the guests feel at the hotel after coming up from the sheltered caves.\textsuperscript{388}

Taking the perspective of Sianne Ngai, I suggest that the narrator’s vague feelings first of all can be understood as feelings of “indeterminacy,” related to a “loss of control.”\textsuperscript{389} Already on day 2, the hotel director demands daily urine samples from all of the guests, in order to be able to control the radiation levels in their bodies. One guest – who is later revealed to be the narrator’s close friend Maria – reacts badly to this and asks if it is really necessary. Crying, she explains that she did not read

\textsuperscript{386} Holm, \textit{Termush}, 76. Danish original: “Jeg har gået omkring, koncentreret om vague anelser og formodninger,” Holm, \textit{Termush, Atlanterhavskysten}, 79.
\textsuperscript{389} Ngai, \textit{Ugly Feelings}, 14.
about this in the brochures.\textsuperscript{390} It is as if she is only now realizing how intrusive this stay at Termush will become, and how impossible it will be to retain privacy and autonomy. Later, the guests are also disturbed when they realize that there are loudspeakers in every private room, and that these cannot be shut off.\textsuperscript{391} At any moment, sounds and voices transmitted from a distance might enter the individualized and secluded space of the individual. I see this as an example of the guests understanding that they are not the only agents in a dead and passive world, and that the place they inhabit is in fact recursive – resonating with the ideas explored by Varela and Maturana some years later in their study in 1973 – events can only be understood from the inside. Every action taken within the system can generate both negative and positive feedback loops.\textsuperscript{392}

An example of this logic can be found in chapter 23, when a man hangs himself in the restroom. The narrator asks: “Had it happened because he was a guest at Termush or was it the result of some inner decision?”\textsuperscript{393} The director asks those who knew the deceased best what could explain it. But no one “could contribute with an explanation to the man’s death,” the narrator says.\textsuperscript{394} This recursive foundation of explanations, is too much for the narrator. He cannot understand how things happen in this

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{390} “One of the women suddenly collapsed across the table in front of her in a fit of hysteria.” Holm, \textit{Termush}, 9. Danish original: “En af kvinderne faldt i pludselig krampegråd ind over bordet der stod foran hende.” Holm, \textit{Termush, Atlanterhavskysten}, 13.
  \item \textsuperscript{391} At one point, the narrator is uncertain whether or not the voice informing the guests about what is happening is a tape recorder or an actual live voice, Holm, \textit{Termush, Atlanterhavskysten}, 46.
  \item \textsuperscript{392} See for example Varela and Maturana, \textit{Autopoiesis and Cognition}, 14. Recursivity refers to a self-referential process, a definition of the problem in terms of itself.
  \item \textsuperscript{393} Holm, \textit{Termush}, 88. Danish original: “Var det sket fordi han var gæst på Termush eller var det en beslutning der var kommet fra hans eget indre?” Holm, \textit{Termush, Atlanterhavskysten}, 91.
  \item \textsuperscript{394} Holm, \textit{Termush}, 88. Danish original: “Ingen kunne bidrage til at udlægge denne mands død.” Holm, \textit{Termush, Atlanterhavskysten}, 91.
\end{itemize}
way. The narrator cannot help but wonder whether it happened because the man wanted it to or because he was a guest at Termush? “Was it at all possible to differentiate between the two?”

Maybe because of this post-apocalyptic setting, many reviewers classified *Termush* as a renewal of the Second World War “emergency novel,” which teaches its readers not what people need materially in order to protect themselves against catastrophe, but rather how to live in “isolation,” as Danish critic Per Stig Møller wrote. “The people have survived,” he states, “but will they survive the isolation?” However, as underlined above, the problem in the book is not that they are isolated, but that they are *not*. Actually, being isolation would let them keep a kind of control. Instead, the hotel is described by the author as a living organism, constantly exchanging information with the outside world, “a single body, which acts according to different laws than those which apply to each individual guest,” as the narrator describes it at one point. Thus, the isolation is their smallest problem.

The Danish critic Thomas Bredsdorff sees this. He is one of Holm’s most engaged readers during the late 1960s and 1970s, and compares *Termush* with Holm’s earlier prose works and underlines how his stories often feature narrators that are observers, not agents. Holm has made a change in this novel: “The whole story is a game between the ability to observe and the incentive to take action,” Bredsdorff argues.399 Critic Ole Hyltoft Petersen argues for the same link between the role of observer and agent in his newspaper review. In this world, “a private guarantee of survival is impossible. In our time, we share a destiny. To stay out of this fact by calling yourself an observer or objective is impossible.”400

The composition of the novel is significant for this problem of isolation and lack of distance to what is going on. The narrator feels an unease because he cannot represent the world he inhabits adequately with his descriptive and chronological manner in his diary, trying to document what happens at Termush from an objective position. Written in the first person, and using descriptive language, the style of the novel reflects the limited but still seemingly distanced perspective that the main character claims to have. The more the narrator struggles to describe the kind of logic that rules at Termush, the more insecure he becomes about his own autonomy and individual perspective, and the more vague feelings he expresses, the more closely he becomes intertwined in the feedback loops of Termush. He finds it harder and harder to carve out a space in this infiltrated world, from which he can observe it quietly and undisturbed. He describes it as if he stops being able to foresee what will happen, and

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399 Bredsdorff, *Sære fortællere*, 223. Danish original: “Hele fortællingen er et spil mellem evnen til at iagttage og tilskynsdelen til at gribe ind.”

400 Petersen, “Dødens alvorlig Sven Holm.” Danish original: “Bogens tanke er, at en privat garanti for overlevelse er umulig. I vor tid har vi alle fælles skæbne. At holde sig uden for denne kendsgerning ved at kalde sig iagttager eller objektiv er umuligt.”
thus cannot account for the events in his diary. “I was not able to foresee these incidents; I cannot place them in context. My imagination is numb (…).” The narrator even claims that he has no language anymore. “Even when I try to express my perceptions, I use the same language and start from the same fixed premises.”

A Withdrawn Melodramatic Agent

In one of his diary entries, the narrator reveals that pre-apocalypse he had been comfortable in the role of an observer. He is a firm believer in what I with Haraway would call the relativist parallel to the god-trick, which rejects critical inquiry and responsibility: “being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally.” Acting makes things messy, he used to think: “Intervention could prevent free observation; it meant that one was no longer unprejudiced or open to all points of view.” In his life as a university professor, he always used to stress “a person’s right to observe and clarify his thoughts without being obliged to intervene.”

As he says, “I wanted above all to avoid over-simplifications, and individual action appeared to be a form of simplification.” Of course, he

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401 Holm, Termush, 76. Danish original: “Jeg har ikke haft mulighed for at forudse disse begivenheder, jeg kan ikke placere dem i forløbet, Min fantasi er lammet (…).” Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavskysten, 79.

402 Holm, Termush, 89. Danish original: “Selv om jeg forsøger at formulere mine indsigelser er det stadig i det samme sprog og på de samme u bevægelige præmisser.” Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavskysten, 92.

403 Holm, “Situated knowledges,” 584.

404 Holm, Termush, 52. Danish original: “Indgrebet kunne forhindre den frie iagttagelse, man stod ikke mere fordomsfrit, ikke alle synsvinkler var åbne.” Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavskysten, 55.

405 Holm, Termush, 52. Danish original: “Jeg har understreget retten til at iagt tage og gøre sig sine tanker uden at være forpligtet på at gribe ind.” Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavskysten, 55.

406 Holm, Termush, 52. Danish original: “Jeg ville fremfor alt holde mig fri af forenklinger og hver eneste handling tog sig ud som en forenkling.” Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavskysten, 55.
has always been interested in his environment, he claims, but “I have wanted to reach my conclusions about it in peace.”

Arriving at Termush, he expects that there is no opportunity to act. As he says in the beginning, this place is no longer something that humans can change: “The world looks as it did in the moment when the disaster struck; we, who remained behind, can move around the immense black crystal, but we are quite incapable of altering it.” This world is also egalitarian, in the sense that no one is spared the radiation of the nuclear catastrophe, not even the privileged guests. And this seems also to be related to a decreased sense of agency for the narrator in the beginning. As one of the critic argued, he nuclear situation redistributes power in a split second and demonstrates that there is an interdependence between all life on the planet: “In a nuclear war no one can buy their way out of the common destiny.” Thus, at first, this apocalyptic world disrupts all established concepts and ideas of the human, and produces apathy in the narrator. The narrator’s movements have no clear motivation or intention: “I allowed myself to wander round the hall and out into the park, along the paths that edge the walls of the building. (...) I did not clarify my purpose; as I walked I felt increasingly perplexed.”

He and the other guests “hold meetings just as we always have in political societies

407 Holm, Termush, 52, Danish original: “for min omverden, men jeg har ønsket at drage mine konklusioner i fred.” Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavskysten, 55.
408 Holm, Termush, 18. Danish original: “Verden ser ud som i det sekund katastrofen skete, vi, der er blevet tilbage, kan bevæge os rundt om den umådelige, sorte krystal, men vi formår ikke at ændre den.” Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavskysten, 22.
and discussion groups. We vote for and against and reach a conclusion.”\textsuperscript{411} The narrator takes part in these meetings, but thinks they are “like a rather crudely managed game,” as he writes in his diary.\textsuperscript{412} The only thing he can change is his own immediate surroundings. After the guests have been informed by the management about something that has gone wrong in their plan – the scouts who were sent out have lost radio contact with the hotel – the narrator decides to try to rearrange his surroundings in order to at least take some kind of control over what is going on: “change round the pictures, clean the wash-basin and examine the glossy surface of the furniture for dust – all to prove my ability to master my surroundings.”\textsuperscript{413}

However, after a while at Termush, the narrator senses that he can change something. He states how he has been feeling less and less like an individual lately, and this encourages him to connect with others: “I have scarcely been aware of myself as an individual. I have not stayed in my own room; I have had no desire to work out the lines of demarcation between the hotel and myself.”\textsuperscript{414} This makes him feels that “the basis of my conceptions have become changed. To my own surprise, I suddenly


\textsuperscript{413} Holm, \textit{Termush}, 76. Danish original: “flytte om på reproduktionerne, rense vaskekummen og undersøge møblernes blanke overflade for støv, alt sammen for at afprøve min evne til at bestyre mine omgivelser.” Holm, \textit{Termush, Atlanterhavskysten}, 79.

want to intervene, not to observe, but to try to alter the course of events.”

Instead of questioning or being sceptical about the technology mediating his role with the outside world, he now actively and voluntarily makes use of it. And what does he do? The narrator picks up a battery radio transmitter he has found. “While I lie on the bed, holding the small shiny box, I feel excited, almost rebellious,” he says, to underline that he feels as though he is finally doing something – tapping into the frequency of others. He describes how he is physically altered by this urge to act. “All my ideas about how to act affect my body like strong drink or a fall in the barometer.”

Unfortunately, the scene does not turn out the way he expects it to. There is no-one at the other end, just the “obscure whirring sound” of the radio. The narrator turns off the radio and goes instead to Maria’s room with a bottle of wine. And they become intimate. Thus, the effort to act ended up in some kind of contact after all. Even still, I understand this as a defeat – I interpret the bottle of wine he brings with him as indicating that he is giving up, sedating himself instead of trying to act again. This reading is supported by the fact that after this scene, he gives up trying to find ways to navigate at Termush. It is, as if he has

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415 Holm, Termush, 52. Danish original: “De sidste dage har jeg set udgangspunktet for mine forestillinger blive forandret. Til min egen overraskelse vil jeg pludselig gribe ind, ikke iagttage, men forsøge at ændre forløbet.” Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavskysten, 55.
416 Holm, Termush, 53. Danish original: “Mens jeg ligger på sengen og holder om den smalle, lyse kasse føler jeg mig opstemt, næsten oprørsk.” Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavskysten, 56.
417 Holm, Termush, 52. Danish original: “Alene mine forestillinger om at handle påvirker min krop som en kraftig træk eller et barometerfald.” Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavskysten, 55.
418 Holm, Termush, 54. Danish original: “den uhåndgribelige susen.” Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavskysten, 56.
acknowledged that he is part of a strange organism, and he cannot foresee what it will do. And instead of accepting the default agency he has in such a world – ecodramatically speaking, he is never outside of the system, – he desperately try to retreat to being as an observer. This has consequence for his ability to act. “The boundaries of Termush have become more restricted,” the narrator writes in his diary at the end of the novel.\textsuperscript{419} The way in which the privileged guests have behaved at Termush has meant that their exits “become cul-de-sacs,” he admits.\textsuperscript{420} “There is no through road; they lead only inwards. Nothing more can happen.”\textsuperscript{421} The hotel is out of options. The organism of Termush, as the narrator sees it, “rests, and is tolerant and then kicks out like a damaged muscle,” exercising no agency, but simply performing an aggressive, semi-autonomous act.\textsuperscript{422} The last scene in the novel underlines this lack of agency, which I read as self-fulfilled – since the privileged guests have actively ignored the kind of agency possible at Termush, and have instead chosen to grief the kind of melodramatic agency which belongs to the privileged world they come from. On the sea in the motorboat, there is no wind – no light nor darkness.\textsuperscript{423}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Holm, \textit{Termush}, 82. Danish original: “Grænserne omkring Termush er blevet snævrere.” Holm, \textit{Termush, Atlanterhavskysten}, 85.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Maria – An Ecodramatic Way Out?

Could things have ended otherwise, if the narrator had only adapted his agentic orientation, as Emirbayer and Mische would call it? Despite the hopelessness of the novel, there are a few hints about how a different idea of agency is possible to imagine if it is related to another kind of representation than the diary form.

A dream by Maria toward the end of the novel is capable of representing this new recursive world. Her dream enables both the narrator and herself to realize the scope of the perceptual change that is needed to survive in this ecologicized setting. They discuss her dream in a scene toward the end of the novel, describing it as containing an “insight that could only be captured in a slow, shocked picture.” Concretely, through an ekphrasis, that is turning toward spatial aspects, instead of the temporal diary form. This is how narrator writes down the dream in his diary:

> Whichever way she turned, she saw the picture; the weak, grey light which streamed down from the sky, out of the walls and up from the earth and the floor. A faint radiance lay over the landscape, the outlines of the trees, the contours of the mountains, the beach, the stone statues; all this was, as it were, veiled in a watery sheen that seemed to repeat and exaggerate the original shapes. And she saw the hotel residents wandering about in the landscape as if they were part of an old-fashioned painting.

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424 See the introduction of this study and Emirbayer and Mische, “What is Agency?” 964.
425 Holm, Termush, 70. Danish original: “et langsomt, oprevet billede.” Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavskysten, 73.
The distance between the figures was great; they were all a long way away and had their backs turned towards the observer. They were dressed in bizarre clothes as if to emphasize the traffic in their existence. The trees and mountains had enclosed these beings like polyps, but at the same time they themselves had become organic creatures, covered in fur and skin. That light streamed out of every object; it shone through robes and skin and the flesh on the bones, the leaves on the trees and the moss on the mountains; it seemed suddenly to reveal the innermost, vulnerable marrow of people and plants, the sensitive growth tissue, the chalk, the iron, the blood.\textsuperscript{426}

In this dream, Maria is able to see a kind of substance that is connecting everything in this new world. Her vision is of “a universal contamination,” in her own words.\textsuperscript{427} She interprets the dream underlining how “the hotel guests were exposed to this invisible radiation, while the

\textsuperscript{426} Holm, Termush, 68f. Danish original: “Hvor hun end vendte sig, så hun bil- ledet: det svage, grå lys der strømmede ned fra himlen, ud fra væggene og op fra jorden og gulvene. Den spinkle glorie, der lå over landskabet, trærernes konturer, fjeldknudurere, sandstranden, stenfigurerne, alt dette som var omkranset af det væskeagtige skær, der ligesom gentog alle omrids et stykke over de oprindelige. Og hun så hotellets beboere vandre omkring i landska- bet som på et forældet maleri./Afstanden er stor mellem skikkelserne, de er alle langt borte fra betragteren, alle med ryggen vendt mod ham og klædt i overdrevene gevandter, som om det skal understrege det tragiske i deres ek- sistens. Trær og bjerge har som polypper lukket disse personer inde imellem sig, men samtidig er de selv blevet organiske, beklædt med hud eller skind. Ud fra alle genstande strømmer dette lys, som gennemstråler gevandterne og huden og kødet på knoglerne, bladene på trærerne og bjergenes mos og som pludselig aftegner den inderste, såbare marv i mennesker og planter, de omfindtlige vækstlag, kalken, jernet og blodet.” Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavssten, 71f.

\textsuperscript{427} Holm, Termush, 69. Danish original: “altings forgiftning.” Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavssten, 72.
management neglected to call them down to the shelters for fear of spreading panic.”428 The hidden entices a fear of catastrophe – echoing the images provoked by Carson in *Silent Spring*, who writes that pollution is invisible until one suddenly sees catastrophic results when the contamination spreads higher up in the ecosystem.429 Maria is seeing everything clearly in her dream, an interconnectedness that the narrator seems to have had trouble writing down in his descriptive and chronological prose.

As already mentioned, the form of this part of the narrative is different from the descriptive prose that the narrator uses elsewhere in the novel. Changing aesthetic style, seems to have allowed the narrator to capture a different kind of causal logic that better corresponds with the world they live in. The novel thereby suggests that the agotope of contamination requires an aesthetics that is quite different from the diary form and the kind of subjective observation of the world which it prescribes. It needs an aesthetics that can capture simultaneity, active environments and a self-reflection that affects both observation and agency. Hence, in a quite literal way, the novel suggests a simultaneous shift in perspective and aesthetics, which corresponds to the kind of environmental approach suggested by Hörl with his concept of ecologization. Concretly, in this study, from a temporal understanding of events in the diary, the novel turns to a spatial understanding of events, which I understand as an expression of, as Emirbayer and Mische underline, that

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429 Other references in the novel which make the reader think of Carson could include the constant flow of dead birds in the hotel garden. *Termush, Atlanterhavskysten*, 66. Or a dream by the narrator of swimming in the sea, discovering new species of fish that have big open wounds on their bellies. *Termush, Atlanterhavskysten*, 89.
representation matters, because it can “influence how actors in different periods and places see their worlds as more or less responsive to human imagination, purpose, and effort.”

Why does Maria experience this epiphany and not the narrator? Maria is a character who represents a quite different relation to the world than the narrator, even though she ends up joining him and the other guests in leaving Termush at the end of the novel. She is described as “restless” and that “a slight anxiety and insecurity are fundamental to her nature,” as the narrator says the first time he sees her. This, he reflects, is precisely why “she is able to face the world outside without the sleep-walker’s confidence that characterizes the rest of us, which, although it enables us to take action, at the same time prevents us from questioning our behaviour and its motives.” Moreover, the main character thinks that Maria reacts more “naturally” to the changes in their surroundings than the disciplined way in which the rest of the guests are behaving, just accepting what is going on – “neither her imagination nor her sensibility is gagged and bound, as ours are.” Thus, Maria is described as a person

431 As mentioned, the narrator also has a dream, of fish moving around like a muscle – but this dream ends with him realizing that all the fish have open wounds. This is not a dream opening up a different way to understand agency, but instead a nightmare about the death and destruction related to a change in ideas of agency. Holm, Termush, 86–87 and Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavskysten, 89–90.
433 Holm, Termush, 12. Danish original: “kan hun møde omverdenen uden den søvngængeragtige sikkerhed, der præger os andre og som nok sætter os i stand til at handle, men samtidig forhinder os i at være usikre på vore handlinger og deres præmisser.” Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavskysten, 16.
434 Holm, Termush, 10. Danish original: “Hendes udbrud forekommer mig at være naturligere end vor beherskelse, hverken hendes fantasi eller
who has certain qualities, which seem to be useful in this ecologicized world, namely as the narrator says, being unsure of her actions. She exhibits in a clearer way a kind of “trans-corporeality,” as Alaimo would say, which, as Neimanis and Walker writes, is a feature that “denies the myth that human bodies are discrete in time and space, somehow outside of the natural milieu that sustains them and indeed transits through them.”

This brings us closer to what ecodramatic agency might mean in the novel – and it also, potentially, points out that such an ecodramatic idea of agency is partially coded as feminine, while the melodramatic approach is coded as male. If you are to act, you must be sure of your actions, the narrator seems to be claiming, but the problem with people who are sure of their actions is that they cannot be unsure of the premises of their actions. Maria is attuned to ecodramatic ideas of agency because she is more open to embracing vague feelings of disquiet in a way that the narrator is not. She is restless, but still able to doubt. And most importantly, in her dream, she is thinking spatially, and not in a temporal ordering of events. This might be clues to a literary aesthetics, which, according to the novels in this study, correspond better with the experiences of an ecologicized world.

følsomhed kan ligge bastet og bundet som de gør hos os andre.” Holm, Termush, Atlanterhavskysten, 13.

435 Neimanis and Walker, “Weathering: Climate change and the “Thick Time” of Trans-corporeality,” 560. See also Alaimo’s “Trans-corporeal feminism and the ethical space of nature.”
Disruption – Vigdis Stokkelien and the Illusion of the Autonomous Body

_Sommeren på heden_ (Summer on the Heath, 1970) by Stokkelien demonstrates how a temporary lapse of memory, almost bordering on amnesia, can help bring forward a newfound sense of agency in a world where the autonomy of the individual is not a given. Especially if you are a woman. The text on the back of the book cover suggests that there are gendered elements conditioning how humans experience post-industrial life. Women in the 1960s were faced with new kinds of challenges, regarding both the changes in the environment and the right to terminate
pregnancies (after a liberalization of the abortion laws had passed in Norway in 1959 and was enacted in legislation in 1964).436

This book is first and foremost a story of humans’ – and in particular women’s – reactions to the dark realities of our time: Contamination of air and water, as well as new, scary weapons. For the first time in history, women today have the opportunity to decide for themselves whether or not they want to bring children into this world.437

These new, post-industrial societies offer women more control over their bodies through legislation and birth control, while simultaneously exposing the female body to contaminated environments that undermine the very experience of individual control and autonomy.

In Sommeren på heden, the experience of being pregnant changes the female protagonist’s perception of her surroundings. The main character becomes more aware of the fact that matter flows in and out of the body, making her co-dependent upon the environment in a radical way. As the cybernetician Gregory Bateson would say, rather than experiencing herself as an individual, the pregnant body demonstrates that humans are intrinsically embedded within a greater ecology. The body is part of Lake Erie, to speak with Bateson, who used this image of a poisonous American lake to describe the entanglement of subject and environment in his

436 This law only allowed abortion for medical reasons. In in 1978 women were given the right to terminate pregnancies for social reasons in Norway.
437 Norwegian original: “Denne boken er først og fremst en skildring av menneskets – og da især kvinnens reaksjon på vår tids dystre realiteter: Forurensninger av luft og vann og nye, skremmende våpen. I dag har kvinnen, for første gang i historien, muligheter til selv å bestemme hvorvidt hun vil ha barn eller ikke.”
essay “Pathologies of Epistemologies” (1972): this lake is part of “your wider mental eco-system – and if Lake Erie is driven insane, its insanity is incorporated in the larger system of your thoughts and experience.”

*Sommeren på heden* was Stokkelien’s third novel, published two years after *Den siste prøven*, which is discussed in the chapter “Traffic.” *Sommeren på heden* was also her first book with a female protagonist – in the late 1970s, she would receive criticism from fellow female critics because she had featured men in her first two novels. “In Vigdis Stokkelien you will not find any (...) strategy for the next step on the way to revolt,” the literary critic Janneken Øverland declared in the late 1970s. Maybe the kind of intertwined relation between women and nature, which is explored in *Sommeren på heden*, was not a recipe to gain feministic credentials in the 1970s. As Alaimo notes, because “‘woman’ has long been defined in Western thought as a being mired in ‘nature’ and thus outside the domain of human transcendence, rationality, subjectivity, and agency, most feminist theory has worked to disentangle ‘woman’ from ‘nature.’” A novel entangling the relationship between the female body and the environment in the beginning of the 1970s, was probably not regarded as politically radical in any meaningful way for the young generation of feminists.

The following reading concentrates on the agotope of the novel and the characters forced to act within it. What is typical of the environment

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439 Using a concept from the Danish literary scholar Pihl Dahlerup, Øverland was arguing that the novel reproduced a patriarchal narrative structure. Øverland, Janneken, "Kvinneroller – tilpasning eller opprør. Om Vigdis Stokkeliens og Bjørg Viks forfatterskap,” 249 and 259. Norwegian original: “Hos Vigdis Stokkelien vil man lete forfjeves etter noen organisert ‘ny’ kvinneligenth enn si strategi for neste steg på opprørets vei.”

440 Alaimo, "Trans-corporeal feminism and the ethical space of nature,” 239.
in which humans act? Who are the characters? What kinds of agency are at play in the novel, and in what ways are these ideas of agency gendered? Feminist perspectives on exposure and the female body presented by Alaimo are in this reading used to describe the main character Karen’s experience of agency.441 Her material female body is exposed, and altered, in a world where multiple substances are transgressing her skin and membranes, demonstrating to her, in a concrete way, that autonomy is an illusion that only certain bodies can uphold. Insinuating, I would argue, that reconfiguring ideas of agency might be easier for women than men in the 1960s and 1970s.

A Manmade Landscape

Stokkelien’s novel is set some time after the Second World War, on a heath in Denmark – possibly somewhere on the east coast of Jutland. The novel consists of two parts. In the first part, the main character, the journalist Karen, spends her holiday in a summer house area in Denmark together with her boyfriend, a photographer named Jon. They are trying to start a family, but failing, due to Jon’s impotence. At their summer residence, Karen has numerous flashbacks to the kind of global travelling lifestyle the couple used to pursue, as well as flashbacks to the termination of a pregnancy five years ago – an abortion that Karen underwent after being exposed to toxic gases. Towards the end of this first part, Karen gets pregnant with a local farm boy. The second part is set on a contaminated island in Norway, to which Jon and the pregnant Karen travel so that Jon can take photographs. Coming back from this island, Karen has a dream, after which she decides to terminate her second pregnancy and become politically active. She will not, she says, reproduce before it is safe to have children.

441 On this perspective, see Alaimo, Exposed.
The story is told in the third person, focalizing Karen. For the most part, the novel is characterized by dialogue and descriptions of what Karen sees, mixed with analepses, inserted without any warning to the reader, which fragments the narratological presence. This use of analepsis fits well with the vague and probing understanding that Karen has regarding her own agency. In glimpses into the past, events leading up to the terminated pregnancy five years ago break into the narrative present and build up to a kind of fragmented crescendo, ending with Karen’s termination of her second pregnancy. In this manner, the novel has clear resemblances to the novel *Den siste prøven* (read in the chapter “Traffic”) where in a similar fashion a temporal limbo helped to reorient the captain, shifting his perspective, and changing his understanding of agency.

The first part of the novel is set on a heath. Heaths are quite a common landscape in Denmark – and quite an interesting choice of setting. A heath is a sandy biotope poor on nutrition, in which the human is unprotected against every external danger. Some heaths are natural, but many – typically those that dominate in continental Europe, such as Poland, Germany, and Denmark – are so-called “anthropogenic,” a product of hundreds of years of human cultivation using fire, in order to harvest turf and animal nutrition. Thus, the novel is set in an open and man-made landscape. In the novel, this heath appears slightly dystopian. Not compared to the nuclear scenario presented by Holm, but still, it is a landscape where words such as “Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Bikini” resonate, as the narrator claims.\(^{442}\) This is a world where it is not uncommon to fear “toxic gas from the Third Reich,” “radioactive rain” and factories “that

\[^{442}\text{Stokkelien, Sommeren på heden, 61.}\]
spewed poison into the air and poison into the rivers.\textsuperscript{443} Poison that came with the wind across every border, fish that floated with their bellies burst, and sheep that lost their teeth because the grass was dangerous.”\textsuperscript{444} In short, this is a contaminated environment, resonating with the milieu described by Carson in her book \textit{Silent Spring} – a place where many tiny agents operate, constantly infiltrating the human body.\textsuperscript{445} As Karen says at one point: “She would never again think years into the future and feel safe.”\textsuperscript{446}

This environment enforces an experience of, what I in the introduction to this chapter with Alaimo called, trans-corporeality, where the body “is in constant interchange with its environment.”\textsuperscript{447} In the novel – in line with cybernetic ideas – the body is not a protective shield against the toxic environment, but instead an organism that is constantly exchanging information and matter with its surroundings.\textsuperscript{448} As Neimanis and Walker writes: “The ebb and flow of meteorological life transits through us, just as the actions, matters and meanings of our bodies return to the climate in myriad ways.”\textsuperscript{449} Her trans-corporeality is something Karen started sensing five years ago, during the first pregnancy. Just as the toxic substances infiltrates her and makes her sick, so is the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{443} Stokkelien, \textit{Sommeren på heden}, 61. Norwegian original: “som rev seg løs fra dypet, giftgass fra Det tredje rike i dag, radioaktivt nedfall i morgen. (...) Fabrikker som spydde gift i luften og gift i elvene.
\item \textsuperscript{444} Stokkelien, \textit{Sommeren på heden}, 61. Norwegian original: “Gift som kom med vinden over alle grenser, fisk som fløt med sprengt buk, og sauer som mistet tennene fordi gresset var farlig.”
\item \textsuperscript{445} On this perspective, see the introduction to this chapter and Carson, \textit{Silent Spring}.
\item \textsuperscript{446} Stokkelien, \textit{Sommeren på heden}, 62. In Norwegian: “Hun ville aldri kunne tenke år inn i fremtiden og være trygg.”
\item \textsuperscript{447} Alaimo, “Trans-corporeal feminism and the ethical space of nature,” 255.
\item \textsuperscript{448} See for example Bateson, \textit{Steps to an ecology of the mind}, 315.
\item \textsuperscript{449} Neimanis and Walker, “Weathering: Climate change and the “Thick Time” of Trans-corporeality,” 560.
\end{itemize}
embryo infiltrated. Karen is not sure how strongly affected it is, but she reads things in the newspapers – she has heard rumours that chickens which are fed poisoned grain lay eggs containing poison.\textsuperscript{450} “Did the woman excrete substances into her embryo? She did not know.”\textsuperscript{451} She “had to guard everything she ate.”\textsuperscript{452} Karen “would never again take an apple from a branch and eat it. For there was poison on the skin. She would never again go to a creek and drink because the water looked clean.”\textsuperscript{453} Particularly not after she became pregnant, making her not just a victim of this toxic ecology, but also a perpetrator, since she is actively poisoning the child in her womb, through the choices of environments in which she moves, and the food she eats.

Throughout the novel, the relationship between Karen, the embryo and the environment are vague and confusing to her. One of the key scenes in the novel in this regard is a trip five years earlier, prior to the termination of her first pregnancy. This was the first time that Karen had a feeling of the kind of rootedness in the environment (about which Alaimo writes).\textsuperscript{454} At this moment, Karen is four months pregnant and she and Jon are out on a boat with some fishermen, to write an article. Every now and then, by mistake, fishing boats catch Second World War German bombs in their nets. In order to collect the insurance money for the damage to their fishing equipment, they have to bring the bombs on board. This, however, puts the crew at high risk of exposure to the toxic

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\textsuperscript{450} Stokkelien, \textit{Sommeren på heden}, 65. Norwegian original: “Hun hadde lest at høns som fikk giftpreparert korn, skilte det ut i egget.”
\textsuperscript{454} Alaimo, \textit{Exposed}, 2.
\end{flushright}
gases inside the bombs. And this is what Karen and Jon are writing about. This is also exactly what happens on the trip. At sea, the crew of the boat gets a bomb in their net and, upon bringing it aboard, a small hole is discovered, which is allowing gas to leak out. It is not much—everyone seems fine after an initial bout of nausea and dizziness. But still, Karen is haunted by unease about her pregnancy. Shortly after the exposure, she contacts a doctor, who examines her and says that she should not be worried. Just be “responsible,” he encourages her. He tries to brush it away, offering her advice that reminds her most of a brand slogan: “All this talk has created an excessive fear. Take it easy. – Eat healthily. – Show responsibility.” For Karen, all these words have lost their meaning. How can one be responsible in a world that positions you as victim and agent at the same time? Where you cannot establish a firm boundary between yourself and your surroundings?

This advice from the doctor about being responsible has the opposite effect. Her unease is further accelerated, because she cannot figure out what being “responsible” means in such a situation. What does it mean to be responsible when you cannot even protect your own body or your baby’s body in your womb? When you are exposed to the environment and have no opportunity to control what substances flow into your body? Responsibility and choice cannot be understood as individualistic endeavours, she thinks, but she finds it difficult to formulate the issue into words. When she tries to talk to Jon about it, he is not interested, incapable of understanding the problem. Her thoughts become abrupt and

455 Stokkelien, Sommeren på heden, 14. Norwegian original: “Hun kan være noenlunde trygg for barnet.”
456 Stokkelien, Sommeren på heden, 37. Norwegian original: “vis ansvar.”
457 Stokkelien, Sommeren på heden, 66. Norwegian original: “Alle disse skriveriene har skapt en overdreven frykt. Ta det rolig –. Spis sunt –. – Vis ansvar.”
staccato. “She saw that Jon smiled. Responsibility. Freedom.”\textsuperscript{458} Thus, the only way this comes to expression is through vague feelings of unease. “She feels a vague anxiety, a type of nausea reminiscent of sea sickness,” the novel states after the scene aboard the boat.\textsuperscript{459}

Karen’s sense of interdependence of her body and the environment stems from an interview with a Copenhagen professor, to whom she talked when gathering information for a newspaper article about contamination five years prior to the novel’s present – a time which the novel often gives flashbacks to. These flashbacks prompt a more naïve period, when contamination was not a subject on the agenda, and when her boyfriend Jon, in contrast to the present, believed in something reminiscent of melodramatic ideas of agency (more on that soon). This was a period when Karen and Jon were travelling around the world as war journalists with an activist desire to expose political and social misery. The professor told her about the ongoing pollution, not just in specific parts of the globe, where there were weapons from the Second World War. He spoke about the contamination all around them, in their everyday lives. After this interview, Karen started to think about “sneaking poison.”\textsuperscript{460} The professor contends that, even though they cannot smell or taste it, every bite they eat contains “small volumes of poison in the food – from emissions in the air and water, from tests of new weapons. We do not know what consequences this will have – in the long run.”\textsuperscript{461}

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These two environments – the past, where melodramatic ideas of agency are possible, and the present, where the human body’s autonomy is challenged – are mixed and blended into each other in the novel, through flashbacks by the main character, Karen. This occurs to such a degree that the reader is often left wondering on what level the present begins and the past ends. Again drawing on the idea of trans-corporeality, the novel could be argued to portray what Neimanis and Walker calls a “thick time,” that is, “a transcorporeal stretching between present, future and past that foregrounds a nonchronological durationality.”\(^{462}\) It is almost as though the novel rocks back and forth between past and present, positioning Karen in a state in which she is experiencing both the idealism and activism that the old Jon encouraged her to nourish, and the kind of weird sensation of ecodramatic agency that later becomes her only way of acting in a contaminated world.\(^{463}\) It is a representation of time that allows, past future and present be entangled, mirroring the material boundness of the body and the toxic environment.

**Melodramatic Jon, Ecodramatic Karen**

Karen and Jon are both in a state of transition regarding their agency and are making diametrically opposite movements within this ecologicized agotope. Jon reads as a typical melodramatic character, going from thinking that he possesses individual agency, having the capacity to change the world, to ending up thinking that his only contribution is to

\(^{462}\) Neimanis and Walker, “Weathering: Climate change and the “Thick Time” of Trans-corporeality,” 561.

\(^{463}\) An example of this is when various levels of past and present are piled on top of each other, for example on page 15. Norwegian original: “Hun driver av sted, av og til er hun langt ut på havet, og sjøsprøyet kjøler huden. Andre ganger er bestefaren der, ansiktet er like ved hennes, så ser hun at det er Jon som står boyd over sengen. Han legger et vått håndkle på pannen hennes. Og så er bestefaren der igjen. Hun forsøker å forklare, men kan bare noen få ord: – Måtte jo, måtte jeg ikke, sier hun om og om igjen.”
be a spectator, a neutral observer of an interconnected space. Karen, on the other hand, experiences a transition from thinking of herself as a passive observer, and as a sidekick to the real agent of the story (Jon), to considering herself one among many small agents within a network of things and people, within which agency can emerge.

Jon has in the novel’s past decided that he cannot change anything – he is a man of disempowerment and apathy. Not long ago he was an idealistic war journalist, trying to change the world by taking photographs – looking on himself as an activist. But today, he thinks of himself as a documentarist, only registering reality, a “spectator.” “Five wasted years, Karen. – Five idiotic years. As if anything is useful. Thank God I’ve become a spectator.” In particular, it was one episode involving an 11-year-old prostitute from India, whom he could not help, that made him conclude that nothing can really improve things. If he could not help her, he cannot help anyone, he thinks. Ever since this episode, he has retreated from all ambitions to act. In that sense, Jon’s apathetic response to the globalized world resonates quite well with the attitude of the protagonist in Termush, who also preferred to be an observer in a world that had complicated the conditions for exercising individual agency.

Being a spectator includes stop taking photos of people and conflicts, and instead focus his attention on nature. In addition, it entails no longer instructing Karen, who used to write the captions to his photos, to stress the contrasts in the images. Instead, he wants her to stress what he considers a kind of natural innocence. If there is anything artificial in the images, such as metal, it is not to be accentuated, he says; instead, it

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should be removed. He only wants to photograph pure nature, because this is the only thing in the world that is meaningful. “He could sit for hours to catch an ant. Hours of photographing a flower bud. Sometimes he enlarged an image so that she could see the dewdrops on the petals. At one point, he made a whole film about grass and flowers.”

Karen, on the other hand, is in a transition that flows the other way (a transition that the narrator of Termush was not able to take) – from an observer to an observing agent. Before she even met Jon, she used to write poetry about nature, “short lines about the ocean and grain and love.” However, when she met Jon, she stopped composing poetry because he was critical of the futility of such an endeavour. Instead, he urged her to do something that would make a difference; that is, she should write about more politically important subjects, in a way that accentuated the contrasts in the world – between the poor and the rich, for example – and thereby create the dramatic expression necessary for people to act. Seduced by his melodramatic belief in his own (and her!) individual agency, she joined him on his trips, travelling around the globe for more than five years, writing a few articles, but most of the time composing captions for his photos.

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465 Stokkelien, Sommeren på heden, 19. Norwegian original: “Men pass deg for å få med noe av unaturen. Han lo hardt. – Om mauren klatrer på en giftbeholder, så raderer vi beholderen bort. Eller løfter mauren over på et strå.”


468 Stokkelien, Sommeren på heden, 24. Norwegian original: “små linjer om hav og korn og kjærlighet.”
However, as the events in the novel’s present evolve, Karen is about to be forced to take an active role. She cannot follow her partner into the role of an observer, because she cannot remain passive after she becomes pregnant for the second time, knowing what she knows from her first pregnancy. She is not a container protecting this unborn life. Instead, she has a membrane that actively exchanges matter with the environment. As a pregnant woman in a polluted place, she is a cyborg not unlike the inhabitants at Termush in the last reading – a being that is not individualized but is dependent and intertwined at a fundamental level with the feedback loops of her environment. Consequently, Karen needs to pay close attention to what she eats, and what she breathes, in this world filled with toxic substances, which could at any moment infiltrate her body, and turn her into a toxic milieu for her embryo. Her body is not an autonomous entity. Karen is “rooted in the ordinary practices of everyday life,” as Alaimo would put it. This means that Karen’s body is connected to other bodies, first and foremost to her unborn child, but also to the undetonated Second World War German bombs, fertilizers and toxic gases sprayed out on her surroundings.

The fact that Karen can become pregnant, and thus is appearing more rooted than Jon, differentiates the couple from each other, but only on the surface. Jon is not unaffected by contamination – he is like Karen also a trans-corporeal being, constantly infiltrated by the ongoing environment. Or, we can say, he is a cyborg as well. In line with second-order cybernetic theories, the observer is never outside the system, but always embedded in it. This insight into the interconnectedness of everything is represented in both Karen and Jon through vague feelings of disquiet

470 See for example Varela and Maturana, Autopoiesis and Cognition, 14.
and diffuse physical symptoms – stress, dizziness and impotence – vague symptoms and feelings that highlight uncertainty about both the representation of agency and what agency is. Karen and Jon are both exhausted, without knowing the reason why. “Jon had this fatigue as well. He called it stress.” He is described as having a temper, which is somehow connected to the environment – or, as Karen is suggesting, might have something to do with the fact that the house had been sprayed with insecticide just before they arrived. This disorientation, as described in the introduction to this chapter, can be a symptom of exposure to toxic gases, as well as a form of psychological discomfort. It is both at the same time and in addition, vague feelings of discomfort express an uncertainty about representation, such as words presupposing individual agency – which to Karen seem inadequate.

However, in contrast to Karen, Jon does not have to heed the consequences of this infiltration; at least, it is not acutely important to him, in the same way as it is for the pregnant Karen. Instead, he can keep up the illusion of autonomy and observational objectivity, blaming his experiences of interconnectedness on stress or the alcohol he keeps consuming. Karen does not have that choice, and perhaps this is why she is more open towards accepting the need for a change in agentic orientation. Perhaps it also has to do with other things, for example, her urge to

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474 See for example the Norwegian poet Mørck, mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, and Simondon and Ngai in the introduction of this dissertation.
475 Karen knows it is more than just being drunk. This is not the first time he has resorted to alcohol in his life. “He used to drink before as well. She knew it was not just the drink.” Stokkelien, *Sommeren på heden*, 29. Norwegian original: “Han hadde drukket før også. Hun visste at det ikke bare var drinkene.”
write nature poetry when she was young. In addition, from the beginning of the novel, she demonstrates that she is accustomed to vague sensations, such as those evoked by a disturbing combination of sight and smell when she is on the beach and senses the stench of a dead dog. Karen seems, in a way, to sense that there is something wrong before knowing it – suggested by the first sentence of the novel: “There was a pungent odour at the beach.”

**Karen’s Situated Agency**

The novel ends with a dream and a call for political action. The dream reminds us of the dream of Maria in *Termush*, which – I suggested – pointed to the fact that alternative representations of reality have the ability to represent agency in a new way, more open to alternative causal relations, and not bound by the chronological logic of time. In *Sommeren på heden* one could say that the alternative logic of dreamwork makes her capable of understanding herself as an agent in this world. Because, after dreaming, Karen takes action, and becomes politically active in the women’s movement. It makes her decide to terminate her second pregnancy.

However, something happens before that. Prior to her dream, Karen identifies the historical example of leprosy. This historical example helps her understand the systematized aspects of contamination. It is not just the dream, then, but also a historical framework, that enable an understanding – and, not least, helps her to represent – this kind of systematic interconnectedness, which contamination brings with it. Thus, crucial is not just taking seriously one’s vague feelings of unease, but also finding adequate ways of understanding the systematic contamination that is

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occurring – finding a way to represent an interconnectedness that is not false, to refer back to the quote by Simondon presented in the introduction.477 Or, as Neimanis and Walker argues, with support in the work of Elisabeth Grosz: concepts can provoke us to “thinking otherwise”, and “cultivate a sensibility,” as well as “gestate” a “new imaginary.”478

In her dream, Karen is marching in a political demonstration, urging women to stop bringing children into the world. She sees thousands of “women coming towards the factory, threatening the planes, the brown river, the woods, towards the skyscrapers. On the walls, there are painted words: Show responsibility, remember the population explosion. Hunger or welfare? (...) One of the women screams something: – What the women’s movement did not achieve, the pill will.”479 She describes it as though she has attained a “weird sense of power.”480 After waking up, she puts on her makeup and decides to terminate the second pregnancy as well, not out of fear, like the first time, but as a political protest. In the lucidity one can have after a dream, her thought is formed: “The poster stands clear to her now, with new illustrations. Not preventing population explosion, but preventing new experiments, new forms of

480 Stokkelien, Sommeren på heden, 68. Norwegian original: “underlig følelse av makt.”
contamination of the earth.”481 She sees herself going around with a sign saying: “Show responsibility, do not have children before the earth is safe.”482

The day before this dream, Jon and Karen are on an island in Norway, deserted due to contamination. Here, Karen realizes the fitting mental image to explain what contamination means – leprosy. Before this, Jon points out the naïve illusion that lies behind the rationale of moving away from an island. Contamination does not just affect one island, he says. “It’s just as dangerous on the mainland. It’s just as dangerous everywhere (...) But it’s smart, putting these white ‘dots’ of danger on the map. It makes people feel safe on the mainland.”483 Thus, Jon shares with Karen an ecodramatic understanding of agency, even though he insists on making his observations through his camera lens as neutral as possible. And it is Jon’s way of phrasing this interconnectivity, that makes Karen realize what contamination reminds her of: “Leprosy of our time.” She is almost exhilarated; it is described as though she has just “woken up from sleep.”484 She is trying to stay awake and think through the consequences of this epiphany. “She no longer saw visions of fear, instead she was

481 Stokkelien, Sommeren på heden, 69. Norwegian original: “Plakaten står med ett for henne, men med nye illustrasjoner. Ikke for å forhindre befolkningseksplosjon, men for å hindre nye eksperimenter, nye former for forgiftning av jorden.”
482 Stokkelien, Sommeren på heden, 70. Norwegian original: “Vis ansvar, få ikke barn før jorden er trygget.”
484 Stokkelien, Sommeren på heden, 63. Norwegian original: “Det var som om hun var våknet av en søvn, (...).”
already shaping the reportage in her mind. ‘Leprosy of our time. The fear hits the island.”

Leprosy is an interesting example. The disease itself was familiar for a long time before its cause became known in 1873, when the Norwegian doctor Gerhard Armauer Hansen identified the microorganism behind the symptoms. And when he did, suddenly this moralized and shameful disease became something tangible and rationally explainable. Something that, until this point in history, had seemed to be ungraspable, became comprehensible and something possible to do something about. Thus, in a neat way, the discovery of the conditions for the leprosy epidemic forms an analogy with the discovery of the growing and systemic contamination depicted in the novel. What makes Karen eventually capable of acting is that she is able to represent the structural conditions that are causing this contamination. Contamination is not just a given condition, it is man-made, and will be continuously produced until someone stops it.

As an apropos, one might question why a termination of her pregnancy is necessary. Why not just become politically engaged, and keep the baby at the same time? In line with this dissertation’s perspective on agency, I understand the termination as a provocative way to underline the kind of networked understanding of agency, which is represented in the novel, when the absence of action is also an action. Thus, keeping the baby would be just as much an action as terminating the pregnancy. But by letting the main character terminate it, the ecodramatic agency becomes more visible in the plot. Whatever she does, she is acting. She does not have the luxury of retreating into the role of a spectator, as Jon can

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485 Stokkelien, Sommeren på heden, 63. Norwegian original: “Hun så ikke lenger skremselfjernings, hun jobbet, utformet allerede reportasjen i tankene. ‘Vår egen tids lepra. Frykten slår ned på øya.’”
(or believes he can), but is forced to act in one way or another. By not reproducing, Karen is taking seriously Gregory Bateson’s thought-provoking claim in his lecture about the polluted Lake Erie – the environment is part of her ecosystem, and she is part of it; or, as James A. Lovelock talked about in the late 1960s, when suggesting that the Earth itself could be viewed as a cybernetic system in his so-called Gaia hypothesis.\textsuperscript{486} To act in a contaminated world means acting on behalf of something bigger than yourself, because everything is connected.

\textsuperscript{486} See Lovelock, “Gaia as seen through the atmosphere,” and Bateson, “Pathologies of Epistemologies, 484.
Hopefully, by now, the different quadrants of the coordinate system of agency in the 1960s have become even richer. Sven Holm’s Termush outlines the breakdown of the melodramatic understanding that there is a dichotomy between agency and observation. Observing is always acting in an ecologicized world. The privileged male character in the novel demonstrates how the fear of accepting this, leads to a melodramatic stand-still. The environment changes, but the ideas of agency do not, leaving the privileged guests alone out on the open sea, both affectively speaking, literally speaking, and epistemologically speaking.
Sommeren på heden also ends with death, but this happens after a perceptual shift has taken place, and the interconnectedness of politics, bodies and the environment has become clear to the main character. The novel situates a pregnant woman within a contaminated world, and gives her the right to terminate her pregnancy, creating thereby a petri dish in which ideas of agency can be rearranged and grow into new forms. The experiment consists of combining two agotopes in the novel, the old world, represented by Jon and the past, and the new world, constructed out of a man-made, contaminated environment (not unlike in Termush, where there is also an old and a new world). This new environment is structured in a way that exposes the vulnerability of the human body, predominantly the female. Working out what agency means in such a setting includes finding ways to represent interconnectivity, to make the directive functions less false, between the experience of living in the world, and the representations of it. Instead of ending up in apathy, confusion and disempowerment, the main character finds herself in a state of feeling a weird sensation of power. And maybe Karen, as a woman, is more attuned to this kind of ecodramatic agency in the fictional universe, similar to Maria in Termush? When you have a body with blurred boundaries, you are constantly reminded that you are rooted, Alaimo might say.⁴⁸⁷

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⁴⁸⁷ Alaimo, Exposed, 2.
Chapter 5

Media – Ecodrama and Melodrama
in Simulated Environments

“Our landscapes cannot be delimited,” Norwegian journalist and critic Amund Myhre wrote in 1968. In his book on mass media culture, *Kulturstrategi* (Cultural Strategy), Myhre accentuates how media technologies are changing the environments in which humans act, infiltrating bodies and extending their reach around the globe. Revealing a deep inspiration from the thinking of Canadian media philosopher Marshall McLuhan, Myhre writes, “[e]verything streams through us, and we stream through everything.” McLuhan himself, intrigued by how the media alters and structures the common space that humans share, claimed in his *Understanding Media* (1964), that the “message’ of any medium or technology is not what is says, but the change of scale, pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.” Much later – in 1986

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– and in a different philosophical tradition, German media philosopher Friedrich Kittler expressed a similar idea of media – when he declared that media “determine our situation.” ⁴⁹¹ In Mark Hansen and W. J. T. Mitchell’s words, this means that media “broker the giving of space and time within which concrete experience becomes possible.” ⁴⁹²

This change of a scale and pattern that media introduced seems to have opened for an uncertainty toward the very idea of what is real and invoked a fear of manipulation of both humans, animals and plants. A crucial source of such an image of manipulation is mass media, and the advertisement industry is an especially striking example. The new mass media societies are full of “hidden persuaders,” the American sociologist Vance Packard wrote in the late 1950s, reflecting on the emerging consumer society in which advertisement and PR plays an integral role. ⁴⁹³ Packard inspired Norwegian journalist Torolf Elster to claim, in 1961, that advertisers were “social engineers” trying “to rebuild the human soul” by revealing and manipulating the patterns of the human brain. ⁴⁹⁴ Lurking behind such fears and hopes of manipulation are cybernetic ideas of the human. Like plants, animals and machines, the human body is a specific conglomeration of organized matter and information that can be processed in different ways. Thus, it can be controlled and regulated. Accordingly, manipulation is here to stay, as German writer Hans

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⁴⁹¹ Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), xxxix.
⁴⁹³ The concept was coined in the title of Vance Packard’s The Hidden Persuaders (New York: David McKay, 1957).
Magnus Enzensberger, contended in his essay “Constituents of a theory of media” (1970), in which he called for a new understanding of “democratic manipulation.” Enzensberger argued against a preconception that he found to be typical of the left during the 1950s and 1960s where all manipulation is conceived as evil.\textsuperscript{495} Today, all media are manipulated, Enzensberger states, and hence, manipulation must rather be regarded a starting point for any democratic conversation.

In this chapter, what I mean when referring to media as an environment are mediated settings, characterized by an inherent uncertainty of what is real. This should be understood both in reference to milieus dominated by mass media, such as television, newspapers or radio, and to particular technologies for studying the world such as microscopes and computer programs for modelling and regulating biological processes or the weather. The media environment cannot be traced back to any particular technology, but to the view of reality, which is unravelled by a conglomerate of them all when informed by the predominantly cybernetic technologies and theories of the post-war years. Thus, it represents not just a perceptual shift, but also an embodied experience. Consequently, Mitchell and Hansen describes the idea of the body in McLuhan’s thinking: “The body, in sum, is a capacity for relationality that literally requires mediation and that, in a sense, cannot be conceptualized without it.”\textsuperscript{496} This conception of the human body and mind open up for an idea of media not as “neutral or transparent” but rather as something exhibiting a “social and cultural agency.”\textsuperscript{497} Representations in such an


\textsuperscript{496}Mitchell and Hansen, “Introduction,” xiii.

\textsuperscript{497}Mitchell and Hansen, “Introduction,” xxi.
environment does not just *represent* reality but engages with it, in a manner both “operative and productive,” to quote Hörl.\(^{498}\)

Therefore, in the way it is used in this study, the agotope of media is an ecologicized agotope, making it impossible for the characters (and sometimes also for the reader) to recognize who is controlling whom or what is really happening.\(^{499}\) Such a setting enforces a constant focus on mediation processes and aesthetic representations in order to understand what is going on. This leads to an uncertainty of agency, as mentioned above, as well to an experience of agency as being distributed between several different agents, media representations and technologies included. Symptomatically, in this regard, the cybernetician Gordon Pask defines media as something that brings people together. Media can be considered as “pervasive,” they not only connect individual brains but makes it possible to think of them as “minds in motion.”\(^{500}\) And this makes sense in an ecologicized agotope. Neither the human body nor the mind are definitively circumscribed or given phenomena, but scalable and malleable objects for experimentation, which constantly exchange information with the world around them.

The two novels read in this chapter are both set in epistemologically uncertain and active environments. The first is a cardboard simulation, depicted in *Pap* (1967) by Danish author Cecil Bødker. Here, a man called Benjamin is trying to figure out how to live in a two-dimensional cardboard simulation that is used as a device to alter humans’ sense of

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\(^{499}\) Examples of the fact that this uncertainty can be found in many novels are given in this chapter, but they could also include Øystein Lønn’s *Kontinentene*, Torsten Ekbom’s *En galakväll på operan*, as well as Solveig Christoph’s “Mediet,” *Jegeren og villet* (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1962).

\(^{500}\) Gordon Pask quoted by Andrew Pickering in his *The Cybernetic Brain*, 333.
reality. The second is an either simulated or real research laboratory (this question is never resolved) in Miniput (1968) by Swedish author Nils Leijer, whose work we were already acquainted with in the chapter “Traffic.” In his book, three different characters in a lab are undergoing affective experiments of love and despair, while simultaneously being manipulated by technologies that affect their mind and sense of reality. Both novels battle with the topical problems and dilemmas of overpopulation, a charged political issue by the end of the 1960s, and their fictional worlds are packed with technologies that destabilize the distinction between nature and culture. Both novels could be said to end on the right-hand side of the axis of ecodramatic agency in the coordinate system we have encountered throughout the study, exploring feelings of confusion and a fragmented sense of the idea of ecodramatic agency.

Before embarking upon a discussion of these novels, I will present media awareness in the 1960s more generally – through a selection of literary works, public debates, and other relevant sources, with a specific focus on advertisement, the fear of media manipulation, as well as manipulative solutions to the problem of overpopulation. The aim of this short introduction is to outline the underlying idea of the media agotope in this chapter, coining it as a self-reflexive and epistemologically uncertain environment in which language, media technologies and literary representations are treated as making a difference, along with the humans moving around in it.

Fear and Hopes for Manipulation and Simulation

The fear of manipulation was widespread during the 1960s. One of the central intellectuals of the post-war period in Norway, Tor Aukrust, argued in 1968 that “manipulation is present as a problem wherever people
move in modern society,” citing consumer society and media technology as threats to the integrity of individual human beings and their ability to make choices.501 The fear of manipulation was believed to stem from many sources – advertising and the consumer society are some examples, but also new scientific strands of thought, including cybernetics, played a role. Already in 1957, Swedish critic and writer Sven Lindqvist claimed that the advertising industry was “life threatening” to the human being,502 because it “penetrated its soft parts” or what we might be tempted to call, its software.503 Moreover, cybernetic ideas resonated everywhere in the cultural discourse, from fears of the advertising industry programming consumers, to curious explorations of parapsychology, trying to execute control on a distance. When reading newspapers and popular science books in Norway, Sweden and Denmark in the 1960s, one could find, for instance, book ads and small articles describing the possibility of bypassing human consciousness and reading the brain directly, as if the body could communicate on its own, without needing to be mediated through language or other symbolic systems.504 In debate books and newspapers in Scandinavia one could read how these

503 Lindqvist, Reklamen är livsfarlig, 9. Swedish original: “mjukdelar, de har hullingar och kan inte dras ut.”
504 For example, in Norway, the Soviet publication Mystiske fenomen i menneskesinnet (Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 1966) by L.L. Vasiljev, offering the Norwegian public ideas about how the human brain can be seen as “some kind of brain radio,” and whether or not an iron hand could be made functional if it was connected to the nerve system of the human body. Norwegian original: “eit slag hjerneradio.”

An example of the fear of manipulation stemming from this context can be found in the science fiction novel *Miraklet på Blindern* (Miracle at Blindern, 1966) by Norwegian author Sigurd Evensmo. It explores a world in which the brain and the body are media to be read by others, and where, in principle, everything is readable, if you just have the right tools at hand. In the novel, a serum has been developed at the University of Oslo (in common usage called “Blindern”) that can be injected into humans, enabling them to read the thoughts and feelings of everyone in their vicinity. When the serum is injected into someone, this person becomes a “radarman,” a kind of chemically altered being. The serum does not change a person’s appearance, so you never know who these

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505 For example, Jacques Bergier’s book *Le Matin de Magiciens. Introduction au Realism fantastique* (Paris: Galimard, 1960), which focuses on over-sensitivity and the possibility of expansion of the human consciousness as we know it and was sold out when it appeared in Danish in May 1970, according to an article in *Vejle Amts Folkeblad*, May 28, 1970. In Denmark, the book had the title *Den fantastiske virkelighed*, translated by Karen Nyrop Christensen (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1970).


507 For more on tapes and Scandinavian poetry, see Jesper Olsson’s *Läsning – apparat – algoritm*. 

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radarmen are; as the novel stresses, he or she can appear everywhere, “on the tram, in the subway, in the elevator.”\textsuperscript{508} In a frightened and anxious manner the novel asks: How can I keep my thoughts to myself if someone is capable of reading them at a distance? This makes the private sphere a temporary and relational phenomenon, only possible to experience in a non-manipulative and passive environment.

Characteristic of many fears of manipulation in the 1960s is the recurring concern about the realm of autonomy and independence in a world that is constantly and actively trying to infiltrate the minds and behaviours of people.\textsuperscript{509} And as Melley points out in \textit{Empire of Conspiracy}, the fear of manipulation reveals a rather fragile idea of human autonomy in the first place.

For mass control to be exercised in this manner, persons must be significantly less autonomous than popular American notions of individualism might suggest. The postwar model of conspiracy, in other words, is dependent upon a notion of diminished human agency.\textsuperscript{510}

\textsuperscript{508} Evensmo, \textit{Miraklet på Blindern} (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1966), 152. Norwegian original: “på trikken, i Undergrunnen og i heisen.”

\textsuperscript{509} Radio television had been allowed in the early days of radio, but in the late 1950s, there was a debate in all Scandinavian countries, on whether or not one should allow advertisement on TV. See for example Per Torsvik, “XII Radio og fjernsyn,” \textit{Norske meninger: 3: Velfredssamfunnet}, edited by Bjørn Alstad, 129-140 (Oslo: Pax forlag, 1969). Sweden first introduced commercial tv-channels in 1987 (cable TV was introduced in 1983). Norway opened up for commercial channels (TV2) in 1992, and in Denmark, advertisement was allowed on local tv stations from March 1989 (local tv stations started sending in 1982).

\textsuperscript{510} Melley, \textit{Empire of Conspiracy}, 3.
Simultaneously as fears were widespread, the awareness of performative qualities of language and media also brought with it a sense of optimism. Parallel to this increased anxiety of media manipulation, a newfound sense of importance of the arts emerged.\footnote{In particular, the exponents of a younger generation identified a liberating potential in states of “inauthenticity.” Every citizen is a player, the abovementioned Hans-Jørgen Nielsen claimed; deprived of a static identity, they get the freedom to shift between different “attitudes.” Hans Jørgen Nielsen conceptualized this as “attituderelativism” in Nielsen, ‘Nielsen’ og den hvide verden. Norwegian author Dag Solstad wrote an essay, deeply inspired by the Polish author Witold Gombrowicz, entitled “Nødvendigheten av å leve inautentisk. Om Witold Gombrowicz” ([The importance of living inauthentically. On Witold Gombrowicz], Vinduet, (3/1968): 190–195). The Danish poet and author Inger Christensen was inspired by the same Polish writer, and structured her novel Azorno (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1967) around one of his central self-reflexive thoughts; that the human is the “creator of the form,” “created by the form” itself and, in addition, the one “who implements it.” Christensen, Azorno, Gombrowics quoted on the first page, unpaginated. Original Danish version of the quote: “Mennesket,/Sådan/som jeg ser det er/1. skabt af formen,/2. skaber af formen,/dens utrættelige iværksætter.”} The multifaceted self-reflexive ramifications for agency in such an inauthentic and manipulative environment is explored in Danish writer Sven Holm’s short story “Min opera-verden” (My Opera World, 1963), a narrative set in a theatre.\footnote{The short story is from the collection Nedstyrtning (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1963), 16–27.} The main character of the story – the director of the theatre – feels that the world outside is getting more and more slippery and out of his grasp. On stage, things are different. He can direct the movements of the actors, the wind machines and the scenery. Therefore, “in order to cope with it,” he decides to bring reality onto the stage, creating his very own opera \textit{world}, as the title reads.\footnote{Holm, “Min opera-verden,” \textit{Den store fiende} (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1961), 16. Danish original: “for overskuelighedens skyld.”}

The idea seems perfect to begin with, but as the experiment progresses, things start to get out of control. The organic world brings with it a complex ecological logic, which the director cannot manage. And the
theatre (that is, the world of representations) and the real world starts to intermingle. Very soon, the distinction collapses, and the theatre props become real objects. In consequence, every representation turns into an event (and the other way around), transforming the theatre into a post-modern dystopia, where confusion rules. Consequently, it is not long before the director starts playing the role of a prince in the play he did not expect to play, and performs actions not meant for him, but for other actors. Reacting in a melodramatic way to loss of control, he runs amok through the theatre, trying to exercise his own agency, killing everyone except himself. All the while, he is wondering – was it me or the theatre that demanded that I perform such cruel actions? He cannot determine what is real and what is not and cannot separate his own intentions from the scripted directions in the playbook.

Controlling an ecologicized environment of this kind is impossible, the short story seems to say. And the result of his desire is chaos and a sense of disempowerment. And more significantly, a paranoid feeling of being governed by the very thing you believed to control in the first place. Thus, this short story exemplifies Melley’s point about how agency panic expresses a fear of being scripted. In an attempt to hold on to an idea of intentionality, the opera-director attributes this ability to control the agency of others to systems or corporate agents. As Melley contends, “[a]gency panic, in other words, may be understood as a moment in which characters suspect that they are, in fact, characters, being constructed and observed by agents beyond their control.”

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514 “In moments of agency panic, individuals tend to attribute to these systems the qualities of motive, agency, and individuality they suspect have been depleted from themselves or others around them.” Melley, Empire of Conspiracy, 13.

Furthermore, the story neatly describes the self-reflexivity that haunts manipulative milieus; the rage the director feels has already been orchestrated by himself while it is simultaneously the emotion of a prince in the play, an agent constructed by literary history, the playwright and the tradition of Western theatre. The short story, thus, can be argued to describe the awareness of a world, which can be called immanent, inhabiting no space from which it is possible to transcend or observe it from the outside. Thus, pointing to that, in the agotope of media, representations of reality do not refer to an external reality, but must be approached as simulations, as copies without an original. Which was exactly what the French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard suggested in the 1980s, to describe the conditions of experiencing reality in the information age of the postwar period.516 Or, to paraphrase Danish author Hans Jørgen Nielsen (1968): reality is just an endless series of examples of reality.517

A concrete fear in the 1960s was that technologies would exercise agency on their own. An aesthetic exploration of this can be found in Swedish writer Torsten Ekbom’s ready-made novel En galakväll på operan (A Night at the Opera, 1969), which asks whether there are media technologies that are acting in the text (and in reality) or not? And how would one know to tell the difference? The novel is structured as a travelogue visiting a series of optimistic technologies developed to optimize society from the late 19th century and onwards, and the novel is made up mostly of found texts. As one critic suggested after the novel was published, Ekbom could be considered a “Jules Verne who mistrusts

516 See for example Baudrillard, Simulacra et Simulation (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1980) and Simulations (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1983).
517 Nielsen, ’Nielsen’ og den hvide verden, 162. Danish critic and poet Hans Jørgen Nielsen argued that the literary work does not represent reality, but offers examples of it.
technology.” The plot begins in a World Exhibition Hall in London in 1884, and moves forward in time chronologically, ending in 1967. In 1968, at the end of the novel, agency has shifted from being considered as something human beings possess, to something engendered in conjunction with different kinds of media technologies – to the extent that human agency is detached from any direct contact with the world. As Ekbom himself states in a comment at the end of the book, representational technologies and the modelling of reality give humans “a feeling of absolute freedom from responsibility.”

All in all, the fear of media manipulation in the 1960s is related to control and regulation of people, experience, senses of reality, as well as an ambition to manipulate the organic world (Holm’s short story is an example of that). Illuminating in that case, is the fierce rhetoric of overpopulation in the 1960s. The threat of a population crisis and food shortage appeared to legitimize explorations of rather grand manipulations of the society. At least, it seems so, looking at the fiction in the decade, as overpopulation was a popular background for authors who wanted to discuss manipulation. For example, it is used in Danish writer Anders Bodelsen’s Frysepunktet (The Freezing Point, 1969), where


519 Ekbom writes this with reference to the cybernetician and peace scholar Anatol Rapoport and his book Strategy and Conscience (1964), see Ekbom, En galakväll på operan, 246. Swedish original: “en känsla av absolut ansvarsfrihet”.

520 First formulated in the wake of European industrialism in the late 18th century, the fear of overpopulation led the 1960s to look into a future in which the population continued to increase, without a similarly efficient development in food production. During the 1970s, the Green revolution in India changed the conditions for such dystopian scenarios, largely due to M.S. Swaminathan, in collaboration with Norman Bolaug, see Louise O. Fresco: “The New Green Revolution: Bridging the gap between science and society,” Current Science, Vol. 109, No. 3 (2015): 430-438.
society constantly repair and reconstruct minds and bodies. Norwegian cell biologist Anton Brøgger’s short story, “Dagbok fra Homo Futurus” (Diary from Homo Futurus), deals with new, grown organs, imagining how piece by piece, technologies can replace each part of the human. In both works, systemic threats facing the 1960s seem to be used as a kind of background, on which to project radical media experiments not just on an individual level, but on a societal and systemic level, tweaking behaviours and reproduction in whole populations, and destabilizing the border between culture and nature.

To go from manipulation of reality to manipulation of population growth is not too far-fetched, when digging into the discourse on overpopulation in the decade. American biologist Paul Ehrlich declared in Population Bomb (1968) that “a minimum of ten million people, most of them children, will starve to death during each year of the 1970s.”

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523 Sir Julian Huxley, trained biologist and first Director of UNESCO, declared in 1963 that overpopulation was the most serious problem facing mankind today. “The world population problem is to my mind the most important and the most serious of all the most important and the most serious problems now besetting the human species.” Julian Huxley: The Human Crisis (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963), 43. The year before, population growth had been discussed at the UN, at the request of Sweden, and 69 countries voted yes to doing something about the problem, according to Richard N. Gardner in the article “International Family Planning,” originally published in an English anthology edited by Larry K.G. Ng and Stuart Mudd’s The Population Crisis, translated into Norwegian by Jarle Simonsen as “Internasjonal familieplanlegging” in Ståplass på jorda? (Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 1967).

Norwegian anthology called *Fem på tolv* physiologist Harald T. Andersen describes the problems challenging the future in an alarming tone, and warns against a horrible future in a world that will house 7.15 billion people by the year 2000. “Certain regions will be permanent hunger regions, whether the crops fail or not.” The rhetoric seen in these quotes is typical of the 1960s – of the planet having reached a state of saturation. It “is now too late to take action to save many of those people,” as Ehrlich symptomatically says in his book. It is too late, because the whole planet is a system, in which every little choice in each individual life could tip the balance into a planetary collapse, and where every little detail feeds back into the rest.

However, it is not too late only if you systematically tamper with the whole material world, for instance through manipulation of human reproduction or with the crops grown. Thus, a world threatened by over-population is a world that requires human manipulation on a global scale to function sustainably. The setting of overpopulation thereby open up for a fundamental manipulation of nature and culture, neatly underlining how the world is no longer considered as *natural* in a traditional sense, but rather an object and process to be regulated on a general

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525 Andersen, “Den store, sultne flokk,” *Fem på tolv*, edited by Finn Carling, 54-91 (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1968), 57. Norwegian original: “Visse regioner vil være permanente hungerområder, uår eller ikke.” For comparison: In 1960, the world population was topping 3 billion; in 2000, the world population was 6.14 billion; and in 2020 it was 7.8 billion. See Max Roser, Hannah Ritchie and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina “World Population Growth.” Published online at OurWorldInData.org, 2013, [https://ourworldindata.org/world-population-growth](https://ourworldindata.org/world-population-growth).

level.\textsuperscript{527} In this vein, and in alignment with media historian John Durham Peters’ *The Marvelous Clouds*, Mitchell and Hansen writes that the “most obvious medium in which the human species dwells is the earth’s atmosphere.”\textsuperscript{528} Obviously, they are making this claim in in light of the Anthropocene, and the fact that today, “[h]uman beings now have a greater impact on the environment than rain.”\textsuperscript{529}

Manipulation, self-reflexivity and the blurry boundary between nature and culture is central in both the novels analysed in this chapter, Bødker’s *Pap* and Leijer’s *Miniput*. In the two novels the material world can no longer be described as a transparent, naïve, given or passive. Instead, reality is from the outset manipulated. The consequence of this is an epistemological uncertainty, leading to a radical self-reflexivity concerning everything that goes on in the world, and producing affects such as alienation and detachment in the characters. They all have a hard time delimiting what is real and what is fake. Thus, in the media agotope – similar to the other two agotopes explored in this study – agency is understood as relational and self-reflexive.


\textsuperscript{528} Mitchell and Hansen, “Introduction,” xiv.

\textsuperscript{529} Mitchell and Hansen, “Introduction,” xiv.
Determined by Media. Cecil Bødker’s Melodramatic Dismantling of Agency

Overpopulation is the tragic background for the establishment of the simulation in the novel *Pap* (Cardboard, 1967) by Cecil Bødker. The novel explores what happens when a man, who understands himself as a real man of the Enlightenment gets trapped in a simulation, which manipulates the experience of reality at a fundamental level, and thus takes away his ability to physically explore his surroundings. In a very precise way, the novel investigates what happens when the “directive functions are false,” as I have already referred to many times that according to Simondon happen in the information age. That is, when the tools handed
to you to grasp the world contradict your experience of reality.\textsuperscript{530} In that way, the novel is highlighting a need for a new kind of representation of agency.

Cecil Bødker is a peculiar author in Danish literary history. Relatively unknown as a writer of books for adults, she is famous to most Danes as a children’s author, known for her popular series about the boy Silas, which is also what existing scholarship has concentrated upon.\textsuperscript{531} However, as Hanne Godtfeldt reminds us in a recent book, during the 1960s Bødker was part of the new young and experimental generation of authors, centred around the publishing house Arena.\textsuperscript{532} Generally, in almost every one of her literary works, whether they are for children or adults, Bødker writes in an experimental, slightly ironic and playful manner. Not infrequently, her novels give the reader an impression of epistemological uncertainty. Being perhaps the most obvious example, Pap, which was originally written for radio, situates its protagonist within a two-dimensional simulation. Bødker seems to excel at depicting situations where things are not what they seem, and where a perceptual shift is needed in order to understand what is going on. This is clearly expressed in a short story from the collection Øjet (The Eye, 1961) called “Trapperne” (The

\textsuperscript{530} Simondon, On the Mode of Existence of Technological Objects, 20.
\textsuperscript{531} The first, Silas og den sorte hoppen (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1967) was published the same year as Pap. This series runs for more that 10 books, describing the life of the homeless little orphan, Silas, and his many adventures.
\textsuperscript{532} Godtfeldt argues that Bødker should be taken more seriously as a significant contributor to the modernistic streams of 1960s Danish fiction, Pap being an excellent demonstration of what Anders Juhl Rasmussen has called “Arena modernism,” a branch of Danish modernism of the 1960s, centred around the publishing house Arena. Rasmussen, Arena-modernisme (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2012). Samuel Beckett was an important figure for the Arena modernists, and Godtfeldt therefore spends much of her book pointing out similarities between the two authors. As part of that argument, Godtfeldt reads the novel as a palimpsest of a Beckett-inspired monodrama of human consciousness in isolation, applying a psychological perspective to the novel.
Stairs), in which a disinfected landscape consisting of stairs suddenly starts to feature the growth of uncontrolled plant life.\textsuperscript{533}

In my reading of \textit{Pap}, I will follow the pattern of my previous readings and initially analyse the agotope, as a completely mediated and manipulated environment. Thereafter, I present the main character, the rationally minded Benjamin, as an inherently melodramatic agent, experiencing agency panic when becoming trapped in this simulation. He will exhibit a rather troubling relationship to his own agency, which causes rage and confusion in him, oscillating between exhilarated rage and disempowerment. Finally, I discuss how the novel represents an alternative understanding of agency, manifested through the supporting female character of Dida. I use Melley’s work as a key to understand the kind of “agency panic” the protagonist experiences in the novel, and I turn to Seltzer and his idea of officiality to discuss certain characteristics of agency in a manipulative information age.\textsuperscript{534}

\textbf{A Two-Dimensional Simulation}

The reader is introduced to the strange world of \textit{Pap} through the main character, Benjamin Karsemark, as he by accident stumbles into a simulation called “Valsemøllen” (Rolling Mill).\textsuperscript{535} The simulation was created to battle the problem of overpopulation in a world where even the planetary weather system is controlled and regulated. Thus, this is a world where, as said in the introduction to this chapter, “nature”, in the traditional sense of being opposed to “culture,” does not exist. Valsemøllen is best described as a naturecultural, in line with how Haraway uses the concept of natureculture in her “Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs,

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\textsuperscript{534} Seltzer, \textit{The Official World}, and Melley, \textit{Empire of Conspiracy}.
\textsuperscript{535} Bødker, \textit{Pap} (Fredensborg: Arena, 1967), 7. Danish original: “Og så ryger man altså alligevel uden varsel på hodet i maskinen.”
\end{flushright}
People and Significant Otherness” (2003), as an entanglement of nature and culture that makes it impossible to differentiate between the two.\(^{536}\)

In addition, this world presents a rather macabre system, as one of the critics called it in a newspaper review; both “captivating and macabre” Hanne Marie Svendsen writes in *Dagbladet Information*.\(^{537}\) Thus, the simulation comes forth as a kind of totalitarian naturecultural “system.”

The very first thing that strook many critics and reviewers when the book was published in 1967, was that the “simulation” made obvious references to the welfare state being cemented and developed in Denmark during the 1960s, and which was widely discussed in the arts, politics and literature.\(^{538}\) The publisher also suggested this link on the back cover of the first edition; calling the book a dystopian novel about an “oppositional man” forced to live within “the system.”\(^{539}\) A system that is individuating its population in a particular way, in fact is annihilating individualism altogether. From the beginning, the novel inscribes the plot in a paranoid agential discourse. As Melley says, such a paranoid discourse,  

\(^{536}\) Haraway, “Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness,” 8. See also Nicholas Malone, Nicholas and Kathryn Ovenden, “Natureculture.”


\(^{538}\) See for example Kjældgaard, *Meningen med velfærdsstaten*.

\(^{539}\) The back cover of the first edition from Arena. Danish originals: “systemet”, and “Cecil Bødker har atter taget det oppositionelle menneske op til behandling.” The critics noted that the criticism of the welfare system – if the novel should be read as such – was not very elegant or complex, calling the fictional world a somewhat banal and cheap gimmick. In the local Danish newspaper *Skive Folkeblad*, the critic Nils Olav Olsen writes: “If ‘Cardboard’ is a political allegory of the welfare society, it is so shattering banal, that it is not worth the paper it is printed on. There have been at least twenty science fiction-novels which far more precisely describe the dangers of a big brother, who takes care of us.” Olsen, “Tilstanden karton,” *Skive Folkeblad*, October 18, 1967, 2 Danish original: “Hvis ‘Pap’ er en politisk allegori over velfærdsfondet, er den saa kaglende banal, at den ikke er sit papir værd. Der er skrevet mindst 20 science fiction-romaner, der langt mere rammende skildrer farerne ved en big brother, der tager sig af os.”
tends to promote “forms of hyperindividualism – extraordinary desires to keep free of social controls by seeing the self as only its truest self when standing in stark opposition to a hostile social order.”540 This is indeed true for Benjamin, which we soon shall see.

But first, what happens inside such a manipulative system? Benjamin is educated as an archaeologist, and from the moment he arrives, he is haunted by a mistrust of the authenticity, all the while finding it difficult to pinpoint exactly what is real and what is fake. This mistrust drives the novel’s plot. The reader first meets Benjamin in the middle of a chemical process, as his brain is being prepared for entrance in the simulation. Here, he is communicating with an anonymous operator, whom he does not see (she disappears soon after). When he arrives to the simulation, he is in an empty apartment and must choose from a catalogue presented to him what his surroundings should look like: his furniture, his vehicles and even his girlfriend. His choice falls on a girl called Dida, who is the only other character in the novel. After a period of time, Benjamin discovers something interesting. He can alter the way the furniture looks by picturing things differently with his mind. Thus, he has the ability to rearrange reality around himself simply by thinking differently, transforming the world through his individualized will. He decides to test this will by making the water rise in the harbour. This leads, however, to the water getting out of control, flooding the whole cardboard world and destroying everything in it, including Benjamin and Dida (who are also made of cardboard). The novel ends with the two characters lying under the surface of the water, incapable of moving.

What makes the environment of this novel intriguing, is that it is a physical and chemical simulation, set up in a concrete place, made from

540 Melley, Empire of Conspiracy, 25.
cardboard, that is, simultaneously both virtual and material, fake and real, flat and three dimensional. In sum, an ontologically uncertain place. It is a simulation, but in a very strange way showing signs of certain physical properties.

However, for the most part the cardboard world consists only of surfaces, where depth and three-dimensional sensation is manipulated by the chemical substances in people’s brains, and hence the perception of the world is impossible to detract from reality itself. Like I said, chemical processes have altered the brains of everyone in the simulation to entangle them with the media environment at a fundamental level, leading to a world that is both material and mediated, and from which there is no opportunity to go outside and observe, or – to use a more contemporary phrase – to be logged out. It would be accurate to call it an immanent space. Transcendence is impossible here; there is no ability to exit the simulation.

Quite elegantly, not even the reader holding the book in his or her hands is allowed to transcend this environment. Like in a second-order cybernetic system in which every observer is also an agent, the reader is a part of the play. Like the cardboard world, the book page is flat. At the end of the novel, Dida and Benjamin are lying just underneath the surface of the water, wet and made from cardboard, just waiting to lose consciousness, like the flat pages of a paperback book, soon to be closed by the reader. “Never before was it possible to become one flesh” it says on the last page.541 It seems that the characters are not actually dead, they

541 Italics added. Bødker, Pap, 103. Danish original: “Aldrig før har man i den grad kunnet blive ét kød.”
are just lying there, collapsed into pieces of cardboard – until a reader decides to open the book again and reboots the story.\textsuperscript{542}

The style of the novel is vernacular with short and descriptive sentences. Maybe this is related to the fact that the main character is deprived of the important sense of touch. The novel opens with Benjamin only using his sense of hearing – a feature that leads self-reflexively back to the origins of the novel which, as mentioned before, was first written as an assignment for radio.\textsuperscript{543} It is “[d]ark and silent. Carbon black and no sound.”\textsuperscript{544} Metaphorically, and literally, the protagonist has no possibilities to get behind the scenes or under the surface, other than literally being thrown into deep waters. 

One way of designating agency in this condition, is by turning to what Seltzer in his book \textit{The Official World} (2016), has described as “official.” It refers to an idea that representations do not represent, but rather actively operate in the world.\textsuperscript{545} Along with the development of information technology after the Second World War, an idea began to spread through art and literature that actions are caused and initiated in a self-confirming circle.\textsuperscript{546} This default self-reflexivity means that many fictional worlds

\textsuperscript{542} Quite fittingly, the first edition came out as a paperback version. The Swedish scholar Beata Agrell points out that it is typical of 1960s Swedish prose to be pragmatic regarding the novel, turning the attention to the narrative, but also to the material circumstances of the aesthetic product. Swedish quote: “60-talets romanestetiska interesse riktades alltså mer på det litterära tilltalet och dess egenart, än på textens explicita budskap eller mening. (...) texten framträdde inte längre som autonomt artefakt, vare sig i förhållande till andra texter eller sin egen avläsning.” Agrell, \textit{Förskningsresan som roman}, 201, italics in original.

\textsuperscript{543} According to Godtfeldt, \textit{Bødker som en Arena-modernist}.


\textsuperscript{546} Seltzer, \textit{The Official World}, 73.
of this period render the depiction of time in a spiral form, simultaneously extending into the past and future – an idea often associated with postmodern thought, of language and words having their own agency. Seltzer gives the example of the fall of the Berlin Wall, arguing that it was the rumours of the fall of the Wall that led to the eventual fall itself.\textsuperscript{547} And today, a tweet one day can turn into reality the next. Or it can be lost in the information flow of the internet. And the individual actor might ask him- or herself: Did anything really happen? Did I change anything at all? And for whom does it matter? Something similar seems to be going on in \textit{Pap}, where the distance from thought to actual event is short, and where the feelings of an individual are intertwined with the agency of the system itself, and where thoughts, words and feelings are able to make a difference on their own. In “the same moment I start to doubt the durability of the boat, the moisture begins to seep in,” Benjamin notes, underlining the eerie feeling of direct contact between his feelings and what is going on outside of him.\textsuperscript{548}

As in many of the novels read in this study, a past is suggested, pointing the reader’s attention to a different, easier world. A better world, at least in the mind of Benjamin, in the sense of it being more immediate and transparent. In \textit{Pap}, the narrator expresses a grief of not having access to the bicycle he owns in the real world. Looking at the novel as a story exploring agency, this detail makes perfect sense. The bicycle is a technology that enhances individual agency. It belongs to a transparent universe that is possible to observe and examine objectively, and where

\textsuperscript{547} Seltzer, \textit{The Official World}, 131.
\textsuperscript{548} Bødker, \textit{Pap}, 102. “Ikke på noget tidspunkt har det været min mening at vi selv skulle gå under, tværtimod har jeg hele tiden set hen til en bedre måde at fortsætte livet på. Men nu hvor Dida så raskt udslynger sin påstand vækker hun tvivlen i mig. Og i samme øjeblik jeg begynder at nære tvivl til bådens holdbarhed, begynder fugten at sive ind.”
the causal logic is easy to spot. In the words of transport scholar Steven Kern, the bicycle is “not two different things like man and horse,” or “man and a machine.” The bicycle simply makes man “a faster man.”549 Thus, even though the bicycle is a tool which alters human agency, it does so in better harmony with an already established idea of individual and melodramatic agency. And this becomes obvious in the novel; Benjamin’s bicycle becomes the symbol of a conception of agency, which the world denies him. And an idea of agency which seems impossible to attain in the simulation Valsemøllen.

**An Archeologist is Used to Dig**

Benjamin is an archaeologist, trained to be critical in the Enlightenment sense. He is a man who wants to empirically investigate everything he sees, double check what he hears and get to the bottom of things. In short, a man who is used to deconstruct different layers of the material world. Therefore, I read him as a melodramatic figure – an “oppositional man,” as the publishing house describes him on the cover of the book. With Melley’s definition in hand, he sees agency as a property, “a property, parcell out to individuals like oneself or to ‘the system.’”550

This is an idea of agency that is deeply related to Western understandings of selfhood, “particularly those that emphasize the corrupting power of social relations on human uniqueness.”551

When he first arrives in the simulation, Benjamin is confused. First of all, due to the fact that reality behaves differently than he is used to. He is in doubt, as Melley would say, about “how knowledge is produced and

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about the authority of those who produce it.”

But his uneasiness is also related to what he sees as a newfound experience of agency; to Benjamin’s own surprise, he can completely shape the furniture around him and cause events in the simulation simply by using his imagination. He feels, as one critic phrased it, “liberated.”

He thinks he has found a kind of hack, which has made him capable of mastering the world. But something is off and he cannot confirm that the transformations are in fact caused by himself. One could say that he follows the path of the dialectics of the Enlightenment. That is, if he cannot master his surroundings, he can always destroy them.

As he begins to feel more and more out of control and uncertain about whether he or the simulation are causing things to happen, he turns into an angry Old Testament God: “I have an angry desire to break holes in the cardboard, it is unbearable to be constantly surrounded by a deception that you cannot reveal, and the more I think about it, the worse it gets. But now I want to know if I am right or not.”

He begins to think of revenge – situating himself in opposition to the system. “The thought of revenge begins to stir. If I am to disappear, everything shall disappear. I have lost interest in dying in silence, and I feel cheated. It makes me immediately want to destroy.”

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552 Melley, Empire of Conspiracy, 13
555 Bødker, Pap, 74. Danish original: “Jeg har fået en rasende lyst til at få hul på alt det pap, det er uudholdeligt hele tiden at være omgivet af et bedrag man ikke kan afsløre, og jo mere man tænker over det, des mere ulideligt blir det. Men nu vil jeg altså vide om jeg har ret eller ej.”
556 Bødker, Pap, 66f. Danish original: “Tanken om hævn, begynder så småt at røre på sig. Skal jeg forgå, skal alting forgå. Jeg har tabt interessen for at dø ubemærket, og jeg synes i grunden jeg føler mig snydt. Det afsetter uden videre lysten til ødelæggelse.” The first time that Benjamin experiences agency, he is lying in a wooden bed and is irritated by how it looks. He
melodramatic idea of agency to the bitter end, instead of altering his con-
ception of agency, he discovers too late that this kind of intuitive agency
was only granted to him by the simulation.

To me, this reads as if a melodramatic conception of agency is keeping
him from being able to navigate in the simulation. Benjamin only sees
himself playing two mutually exclusive roles – roles that he has picked
up from books he has read: Either he is Columbus, a great discoverer, or
Don Quixote, a man living in a fantasy world. These two figures, Colum-
bus and Quixote, explicitly evoked by Benjamin in the novel, can both be
understood as representing melodramatic ideas of agency; either you are
discovering a new kind of world, or, you are under the spell of an illusion
that makes you hunt windmills. Either he is at the top of the world, hav-
ing agency, or he is completely in the hands of something else, having no
power to affect reality.557

From the very beginning of his life in the simulation Benjamin is look-
ing for glitches. As he often repeats to himself in the novel: “underneath
it all there is this endless nagging suspicion.”558 An ironic comment, since
there is nothing underneath the surface in a two-dimensional world. This

bears more and more irritated about the appearance of the bed until he is
so angry that he wants to “destroy” the bed posts, “cut them with knives, hack
them with axes and planer,” picturing how the four posts of his bed have
turned into angry totem poles. Bødker, Pap, 58. Danish original. “Jeg får lyst
til at ødelægge, til at skære i dem med knive, hugg i dem med økse og hul-
jern. Begynde oppe foroven og skamfere deres pæne velstandsudseende, lave
dem om til vrængende tungrækende totempæle.”

557 The reference to Don Quixote is also a reference to the kind of collapsed rep-
resentational levels in the simulation, between what is real and what is rep-
resented (the novel by Cervantes is full of metalepses, that collapses the dif-
ferent levels in the novel). On Quixote, see for example Konstantin Mierau,
“Hope Unravelled in Don Quixote: Self-Reflexivity and the Problem of Meta-
lepsis in Cervantes, Unamuno, and Bloch,” Self Reflection in Literature, ed-

558 Bødker, Pap, 72. “Men nedenunder sidder denne evigt børende mistænksom-
hed. Det var meget nemmere hvis jeg kunne blive den kvit.”
seems quite in line with Melley’s argument in *Empire of Conspiracy* that mediated worlds produce conspiracies and paranoia. In a world infested with technologies and societal changes, complexities and systematization become unforeseeable. “The result,” Melley says, “is panic about the difficulty of locating control at any level of existence – the difficulty, in other words, of deciding what a person is.”

Agency panic is, as we have previously seen, the concept Melley uses for describing this kind of situation, and Benjamin exhibits a rather clear case of the diagnosis. The key symptom is paranoia. There must be something *beyond* the simulation – something that he can reveal, Benjamin thinks.

After spending his first night together with his designated girlfriend, Dida, Benjamin wakes up, happy, but confused. Suddenly, he sees a glitch in the simulated reality: “from the rear it looks as though she does not have a neck. As though her head is bigger and placed directly on her shoulders.” In another scene, he looks at Dida, but sees only a photograph: “Beside me [in bed], lies an exact photographic reproduction of the sleeping Dida – quite simply an image of her. Full size. I stare long and hard at her, filled with a good old-fashioned fear of ghosts.” Shortly afterwards, he becomes unsure of what he saw. Was it really a photograph? He even questions his own suspicion. “Why is it so hard to believe something I can both see and feel?”

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562 Bødker, *Pap*, 60. Danish original: “Hvorfor har jeg så svært ved at tro på noget jeg både kan se og føle? Jeg må være den fødte tvivler, ethvert normalt
However, compared to the other literary characters analyzed in this study, Benjamin’s agency panic is striking. He does not express the kind of doubt that a character such as the melodramatic narrator of Termush conveys about his own perceptual tools to understand the world. One could say: Benjamin’s anxious relation is short circuited – his fear of not getting past the surface to reach a state of certainty about the manipulative world he is in does not make him doubt his own idea of agency.

Nevertheless, in the beginning of the novel, he does indeed sense that there is something off about his perception of the world he is in. When he first discovers that he is able to exercise agency in the simulation, he is confused. He lies in bed, and without him moving a finger, the pillars on his wooden bed start to be carved in the way he wants them to be. He is baffled. “That was funny,” he comments. “Exactly the way I wanted it to be.” Soon after, more vague feelings of discomfort come over him. He feels empowered, but in a confusing way. “It was a confusing discovery – where did this strange power over things come from?” His feelings fluctuate from anger to calmness, and then to irritation, most of all related to situations where he experiences a need to assert himself, or where the world he lives in and the experiences he has of it, differ from each other.

However, he does not explore these vague feelings, instead he hides them in rage. As described above, after his initial confusion, he becomes obsessed with proving that he is the one changing the simulation, 

menneske vil optage det som ren og skær idioti at sidde og bide i træspåner for at være sikker på at det ikke er papattrapper.”

Bødker, Pap, 58. Danish original: “Jeg ved nøjagtig hvordan jeg vil have dem, jeg føler det som om jeg kan se det frem i træet, mere og mere tydelig træder det frem. Det var skægt. Akkurat som jeg ville have det.”

Bødker, Pap, 76. Danish original: “Det var en forvirrende opdagelse, for hvor kom den mærkelige magt over tingene fra?”

Melley, Empire of Conspiracy, 25.
not the system itself trying to fool him, relating it to a feeling of loss of control. While the simulated landscape is flooding, Benjamin keeps repeating to himself and to Dida, desperately, that this is not something that is just happening.\textsuperscript{566} “I had no doubt that it was me who had made the ocean rise.”\textsuperscript{567}

However, the novel’s ending underlines how this insistence leads to disempowerment. When he is lying just beneath the surface of the water, waiting to lose consciousness due to the flood (which he still believes he himself caused), he does not even move, he just makes “involuntary swimming movements but it has nothing to do with reason, it is a pure reflex that starts when I come into contact with water.”\textsuperscript{568} Lying there, feelings of tiredness and fatigue come over him. “I feel weirdly tired inside. All my feeling of power and all my hubris has disappeared,” he says.\textsuperscript{569}

\textsuperscript{566} Zooming in on another literary work by Bødker from these years, a similar scene of flooding comes to mind; in Bødker’s collection \textit{I vædderens tegn} (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968), a poem entitled “Oversvømmelse” (Flood) describes water that keeps rising without anyone being able to stop it. The poem gives the reader the feeling that things are out of control. Humans stand looking at what is happening, and try to give the situation names or meaning, which suggests that everything is \textit{under control}, “every day has new conditions/names which insinuate/that things are under control.” Bødker, \textit{I vædderens tegn}, 63. Danish original: “hver dag får nye tilstande/navne der antyder/at man har tingene under kontrol.”

\textsuperscript{567} Bødker, \textit{Pap}, 76. Danish original: “Jeg var ikke i tvivl om at det var mig der fik det til at stige.”

\textsuperscript{568} Bødker, \textit{Pap}, 104. Danish original: “Uvilkårlig gør jeg svømmebevægelser, men det har ikke noget med fornuft at gøre, det er ren og skær refleks der træder i kraft når jeg kommer i vand.”

Ecodramatic Agency in a Simulated Environment

Although Benjamin is a lost cause regarding agency – a representative of a melodramatic and unfruitful idea of agency in the fictional universe, – there is another character in the novel who does seem to be able to exercise agency: Dida, representing an alternative, ecodramatic path. She is introduced as the woman Benjamin chooses as his girlfriend from the large catalogue of women he is presented with when he enters the simulation, and she accompanies Benjamin pretty much throughout the story.⁵⁷⁰

The fact that Dida seems to exercise some kind of agency must be viewed in the light of her being a woman, and also having a quite different trajectory from Benjamin. Dida differs from Benjamin in many ways. She has no desire for truth or any expectation of being able to control things or habit of being attributed agency by others. She seems to know that there is nothing behind the façade and she knows that she herself is a construct. Also, Dida is no archaeologist, she has received no formal education, and, in contrast to Benjamin, she has never believed herself having access to the inner nature of things. In addition, if we are to believe what she says herself, she is an old lady, about 80 years old, and she experiences the reality of the simulation as liberating instead of imprisoning. “If you believe there is any enjoyment in having a body so big and heavy that you have to sit in a chair all the time, because your legs cannot carry it anymore, you must think again,” she says to Benjamin at one

⁵⁷⁰ Typical of Bødker’s literary universes, Dida is both a character in her own right and a physical manifestation of Benjamin’s fantasy. If one chooses to read the novel psychoanalytically, she can be argued to be a representation of his repressed desires, as argued by Godtfeldt, Bødker som Arena-modernist, 106.
point. That is, in contrast to Benjamin, Dida feels liberated in this world. She also exercises some kind of agency in it. She suddenly disappears at the beginning of the novel after Benjamin has insulted her many times, trying to figure out who she really is. At the very end, when they are both lying in the water, she is not tired, like Benjamin; rather, she seems to be distant, as though she has already left this simulation of Benjamin’s and is entertaining herself into another world.

Dida’s potential for ecodramatic agency in the simulated world is just a minor part of the novel, but can be related to something that Emirbayer and Mische accentuate in their essay, “What is Agency?” “Actors who feel blocked in encountering problematic situations can actually be pioneers in exploring and reconstructing contexts of action.” Just as feminist, civil rights or gay and lesbian rights movements are groups that have experienced an impasse regarding their agency, Dida is more open to shifting her agentic orientation and discovering new kinds of agency in the simulation. And thus, she can transition her ideas of agency as the

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571 Bødker, Pap. 36. Danish original: “Hvis du tror der er nogen fornøjelse ved en krop der er så stor og tung at den hele tiden må sidde i en stol fordi benene ikke kan bære den mere, så tror du fejl.”

572 Bødker, Pap. 36. Danish original: “Og hvis du tror det er skægt at sidde og være fanget midt inde i sådan et læs kød og ingenting kunne er det fordi du aldrig har prøvet det. Jeg savner aldeles ikke en krop af den art vil jeg bare fortælle dig.”

573 Bødker, Pap. 37. Danish original: “Men hun gir seg ikke. Hun tar mig på ordet og forsvinder lige for øjnene af mig som var der trykket på en kontakt. Som når man slukker en lampe. Hun er væk.” This can, of course, be interpreted as if Dida is Benjamin’s fantasy, but this kind of Freudian reading does not really add up, when we look at the novel in its totality. For this perspective, see Godfeldt, Bødker som Arena-modernist.

574 Emirbayer and Mische, “What is Agency?” 1009.
historical situation changes.\textsuperscript{575} Dida can thereby be argued to point to a kind of ecodramatic agency – she is not resisting or seeing herself in opposition to the simulation, but rather stresses how her agency is enabled by it. Her ability to act is entangled in the very fabric of this macabre nature-cultural world.

\textsuperscript{575} Emirbayer and Mische, “What is Agency?” 1009. “(...) such pioneers make inroads into previously segmented fields, they may also find new and creative ways of fusing, extending, and transforming these received schemas, as they experiment with practical strategies to confront the emergent challenges of historically changing circumstances.”
Miniput (Miniput, 1969) was the last novel written by Swedish author Nils Leijer. After this book, he continued working as an editor and journalist, but never published fiction again. But what an exit he made in literary history! The book is fascinating, not due to its success – in fact, it had none. The critics were confused and disoriented. In the words of Kjell Sundberg in Aftonbladet, “no matter how I turn this book, I cannot find any meaningful way to read it. (...) I see no intention, get no
contact.” But regarding the topic of agency in post-industrial environments, the novel is of high interest. In particular, this depends on its neat structure; it materializes as a second-order observation system, which from the beginning traps its characters into never-ending feedback loops, resisting any attempt to step outside of it to observe what is really going on. Tying together features from the author’s two previous novels, *Bilburen* (1963) and *Köpsugen* (1965), set in traffic and the advertising industry respectively, *Miniput* mixes different kinds of ecologicized environments by creating a networked simulated milieu within which human agency can be explored.

Just as in my reading of Bødker, the media environment is here understood as a disempowered and confusing agotope, similar but also slightly different from traffic and contamination. In both of these previous agotopes there were opportunities to stay “rooted” (with Alaimo in “Contamination”) or “situated” (with Haraway in “Traffic”). But in this chapter on media, there does not seem to be, in either Bødker’s or Leijer’s novel, anywhere to anchor oneself as an agent. As one of the characters says in Leijer’s book: “Everything could be regulated and cause new sensations and interpretations.” So, how does agency manifest itself in a media agotope?

Integral to Leijer’s novel is that the difficulty in positioning one’s agency applies not only to the characters, but also to the reader. The reader is forced to deal with an “arbitrarily” structured work, as literature and media scholar Ingvarsson has argued in a reading of this novel in his

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study *En besynnerlig gemenskap*. Ingvarsson observes how *Miniput* is exceptionally confusing to the reader as well as for its characters, not at least because it is equipped with multiple endings. This is indeed not a crime novel, with a solution to satisfy the reader at the end. In her review, the Swedish critic Britt Tunander observes in 1968 that it is quite impressive how all the endings *could* be right, in the sense that they all fit with what the reader has experienced in the book until then. Even though she thinks the novel fails on several points, she cannot help “admire Leijer’s ability to get them to correspond exactly with the main text – or, if one wants, with its elasticity.” This makes it difficult for the reader to lock down any distinct interpretation of the book as a whole; instead, the readers are forced to turn their attention towards the trajectories of certain characters – which is what Ingvarsson’s does, focusing on the prosthetic relationship between the character Ernst Hegius and his miniput. Or to read ecodramatically, I would suggest, keeping the question of agency open.

In the reading below, I first identify the self-reflexive, mediated agotope within which the novel is set and thereafter sketch out the feelings of agency in the characters acting within such a world; Ernst Hegius, Stefan Hult and an anonymous artist. Thereafter, I discuss more generally what kind of agency this manipulated environment conveys. Ideas and observations from Melley, once again, help to shape my reading as

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578 Ingvarsson, *En besynnerlig gemenskap*, 231.
well as discussion of the kind of self-reflexive idea of agency, which has been elaborated upon earlier in this chapter. 581

A Research Laboratory Exploring Affective Technologies

The novel is set in a futurist research facility somewhere in the Swedish woods. At this facility several laboratories have been built to find a solution to the problem of overpopulation. Artistic and scientific elites have gathered here, and together with new technologies they make out a collective, giant brain – with the key objective of rethinking everything that “had previously been thought and said about modern humanity and her environment,” because it has all become “obsolete.” 582 Thus, this is a world where high-tech advances and global threats, predominantly overpopulation, have made scientific experiments with human minds and bodies not just possible, but necessary. It is also a place that opens up for utopian affinities regarding new explorations in philosophy, aesthetics and, not least, technologies, leaning on futurist ideas, which were not uncommon in the 1960s. 583 That is, this is a fictional world in which every part of the human body and mind can (and should!) be manipulated, and where ideas of individuality and originality are long gone.

Furthermore, it is a non-anthropocentric environment. The novel’s prologue – a one pager at the beginning of the novel – describes a kind of deep time, a geological perspective, looking at human evolution on

581 Melley, Empire of Conspiracy, and “The Melodramatic Mode of American Politics and Other Varieties of Narrative Suspicion.” See also Seltzer, Official World.

582 Leijer, Miniput, 15. Swedish original: “Allt som tidigare tänkts och sagts om nutidsmänniskan och hennes miljö verkade passerat.”

Earth, and anticipating its end.\(^{584}\) For too long, humans have adapted environments to themselves, the novel later suggests. Now, it is time to adapt humans to the “external conditions” – to give the human body “a new, more useful form,” “better suited to the demands of the future.”\(^{585}\) Technologies, new ideas and aesthetics are all new ways to organize people into forming an “organic unity,”\(^{586}\) the artist tells the reader, and the goal was to create a “giant brain in which the processes slowly move from one cell to another and from one department to another in long chains of association.”\(^{587}\) This contributes to shaping an agotope in which relationships and not individuals are at the centre. As the collective narrator says in one of the chapters: “The creative ones began losing (...) the individual ways of thinking.”\(^{588}\)

Apart from the one-page prologue, comparable to the one in *Bilburen* (read in the chapter “Traffic,”) the novel consists of 29 chapters,

\(^{584}\) Leijer, *Miniput*, 5. In this prologue, the human is referred to as the “thought-animal,” to underline our place within the animal kingdom on the planet. Swedish original: “tankedjuret”


presenting three main characters: an anonymous artist who writes a diary and creates a kind of simulation called the “Allmedium,” Ernst Hegius who gives birth to a mini-clone of himself, and Stefan Hult who works with developing an affective technology called the “multibox.” In addition, several chapters feature no individualized characters and are told by a third-person, collective narrator, who observes different kinds of discussions at the research facility and offers more general information about the experiments going on. At the end, as mentioned above, the novel provides four different endings, all leading, in one way or another, to a mass suicide for the humans involved. One of the endings tells the reader that the research laboratory is a giant simulator, created to make the lives of patients in a mental hospital more meaningful: “Some would call this whole facility a simulator, the work conducted here is nothing else than a way of creating a kind of meaningfulness, an arranged, simulated functionalism.” In another ending, the research facility is presented as a military operation, “developed outside of the conventional, wire-tapped, supervised and censored media.” In a third ending, the people at the research laboratory have all been influenced by some kind of love potion, which makes them all commit collective suicide to save the planet, wearing white gowns and walking to their collective death at midsummer. In a final ending, it is just hubris and stupidity, or simple greed and human evolution that destroy mankind. All in all, the reader is deprived of any kind of complete picture into which to place the individual puzzle pieces of the novel.

589 Leijer, Miniput, 90. Swedish original: “En del vill kalla hela anläggningen för simulator, verksamheten som bedrivs här är ingenting annat än ett sätt att skapa en betydelsesfulhet, en tillrättalagd, simulerat nyttighet.”
590 Leijer, Miniput, 97. Swedish original: “utvecklades utanför konventionella, avlyssnade, bevakade och censurerade media.”
The clearest example of the cybernetic relationality characterizing this agotope is the experiments with plants and miniaturized human beings performed in the woods. Plants are not passive entities, but something possible to manipulate, just like humans. A new kind of plant seeds that look like miniaturized humans have been developed that can be eaten, or talked to, they offer company, and never demand anything. You can take a seed with you when you are on a long trip, and grow it to provide company. This is a kind of idea that resonates with the experimentation with plants and regulations in cybernetics, documented in such works as The Secret Life of Plants, mentioned in the chapter “Matrix.” In addition, the miniaturizing of human beings expresses a similar idea and connects the novel to a greater stream of thought about the new posthuman human, to which a lot of 20th century modernist fiction can be argued to contribute.591 Other experiments at the facility also underline the involvement with cybernetic ideas. An “Allmedium” try to mine feelings and is described as “a medium that operated directly all the way into the organism and the bodily fluids.”592 Furthermore, the book outlines the creation of a Miniput town (shortened “MPT” in the novel), which is a kind of media simulation for humans, combining screens and projections of light in a classroom. Such experiments situate the novel’s agotope within a cybernetic worldview, in the sense that there seems to be a fundamental belief that everything can be manipulated and regulated.

The style of narration varies. Most of the chapters – and increasingly towards the end – are narrated by a third-person collective narrator, who seemingly uses metaphors and symbols to depict what is going on, while

591 See for example, Rosendahl Thomsen, The New Human in Literature – Posthuman Visions of Changes in Body, Mind and Society after 1900.
592 Leijer, Miniput, 88. Swedish original: “samlade alla de möjligheter som krädes för utlevelserna – ett medium som verkade direkt ända in i organismen och kroppsvätskorna.”
often referring to actual experiments taking place in the lab.\textsuperscript{593} The artist, about whom we hear more below, writes in his or her diary in the first person using descriptive, paraphrastic language, referring to other members of the research facility, as well as the project itself with vague description, which seems necessary for him or her, in to convey the transgressive experiments she is part of.\textsuperscript{594} The artist also makes several references to the other characters – for example, Hegius is mentioned briefly, as an engineer who is acting strangely, hiding something – a gun? – in his pocket – making the reader unsure if there really is a miniput, or if Hegius is just a madman.\textsuperscript{595} A third mode of narration focalizes two people who are both involved in these projects, Ernst Hegius and Stefan Hult, and these chapters portray chronologically their trajectories in the simulation. The novel overall shuffles between these narrative techniques throughout, and the collective narrator takes over towards the end, replacing the individual narrators with an omniscient narrator and concluding the novel with the four different endings, as described above.

These unusual stylistic features, along with the cybernetic motifs in the novel, help to create a rather self-reflexive, relational and confusing setting, where the individual human being is not at the centre, and where the world is conditioned and constructed by the many feedback loops between humans, environment and media, with no position made available from which to observe the setting from the outside. The research facility

\textsuperscript{593} For example, it is described how the creative people “cultivate their fantasies,” which turns out to mean social plants, which they have invented to help people feel less lonely. Leijer, \textit{Miniput}, 61. Swedish original: “De kreativa odlar sina fantasier kring växtvarelserne i lönndom, fylkas kring dem som kring ett hemligt gift, berusar sig av dem.”

\textsuperscript{594} For example, Leijer, \textit{Miniput}, 13. Swedish original. “Vi är på väg att bilda ett av de mest unika arbetslag historien sett, har det sagts oss – ett slags kollektivt universalgeni.”

\textsuperscript{595} Leijer, \textit{Miniput}, 22.
can therefore be described as a reflexive place, which makes it difficult for anyone – including the reader – to enter a privileged, interpretative position from which to decide what is real and what is not.

**Ernst Hegius, the Artist and Stefan Hult**

Placed within this agotope are three people who are seeking something beyond themselves and beyond what post-industrial society has to offer them: The anonymous artist, Ernst Hegius and Stefan Hult. What they all have in common is that they have come to the research facility voluntarily, and feeling lonely, searching for something new to happen. They want something *more* from life. While the engineer Ernst Hegius is very isolated and likes to be on his own, the artist seems open to input, trying to put into words what is going on around him or her. Hult, on the other hand, is a biochemist, a man of experimentation, that dives into even the most extreme laboratory tests in order to model and map the world around him – including experimenting on himself.

More importantly, each in their own way, the three characters can be argued to represent three strategies for agency within the ecologicized agotope of media. Hegius reads as an ecodramatic agent literally connected to another human being (his miniput, which has given the novel its title). Bursting with oxytocin, he is situated, connected to something – but not everything.\(^{596}\) The artist, on the other hand, starts to move along the melodramatic axis, but ends up expressing an idea of ecodramatic agency, trying to construct a sensible narrative, a before and after, and a chronology of the experience within the simulation – why were they at the research facility at all, and what was their assignment? Stefan Hult is

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\(^{596}\) Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 31. I am thinking, here, about the quote presented in the introduction to this study: “Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something.”
the representative of a similar strategy, starting to try to master the world on the melodramatic axis, but concludes at the right-hand end of the eco-
dramatic axis, confused and disempowered. He is a cybernetic scientist, trying to model and extract essential information out of the relationships in which he takes part. What motivates him is primarily curiosity, and thereafter, desperation and anxiety, as he himself becomes part of the scientific experiment, and is caught in the self-reflexive feedback loops produced by the agotope.

The first person whom the reader meets in Leijer’s novel is Ernst Hegius, an engineer at the laboratory. Ernst Hegius is literally experiencing his autonomy as dissolving. The reader meets him just as a creature starts growing out of his spine, a creature that eventually will take over his consciousness. The birth is both painful and surprising and is done with the help from two men at the research facility. After the birth, the being remains connected to his human spine, and when the men discover that the little thing is alive, the two helpers describe it as a “twin,” a term that is used throughout this reading. This twin, or “miniput,” is something that from now on Ernst Hegius will be dependent upon, and which will concurrently be dependent upon him. A symbiotic relationship, in other words. “Both of the organisms are totally dependent on each other,” the novel states fascinated way. Thus, the umbilical cord is not cut, and Ernst Hegius keeps the miniput in his pocket – and later in a revolver-holster – to keep him safe under his arm.

The little miniput literally changes Ernst Hegius’ perspective, displaces it from the individualized human body to somewhere between the two beings. One day, he opens his eyes, and apprehends something strange: “His consciousness is displaced, and very vaguely he feels

597 Leijer, Miniput, 10. Swedish original: “De båda organismerna är helt beroende av varandra.”
transferred, what he sees is now much bigger – fleetingly, it reminds him of looking at himself in the mirror.”

The two Hegiuses, the small and the large, are distinguished from each other by using the first name Ernst to refer to the carrier and Hegius to the miniput. At first, the big Ernst can manipulate and control the little fellow. But soon, the focalization changes, and the little fellow manipulates the large body. “After some time, he figures out how to share his consciousness between the two residents. And he left to the old body only as much as was necessary to move it and make it function as a carrier.”

This whole experience does not scare Ernst Hegius at any moment. He does not feel disgust or fear of the little being, instead he feels love and joy, and is very protective of it. It is described that he undergoes an emotional metamorphosis. His feeling of love is a “thundering happiness growing within him, his chest bursts and tears begin to stream down his cheeks.” “For the first time in his life, he no longer feels alone.”

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599 Leijer, Miniput, 31. Swedish original: “En ny dimension i det förhållande han hittills upplevt som lycka har öppnats för honom.”

600 Leijer, Miniput, 54f. Swedish original: “Efter en tid hade han nämligen kommit underfund med att han kunde dela sitt medvetna jag mellan de båda boeningarna. Och han lämnade till den stora kroppen endast över så mycket som behövdes för att röra den och få den till att fungera som bärare.”

601 For example, he tells the men who helped him deliver it that he has removed the embryo to make them stop asking questions. He is afraid that someone will cut the embryo off. Leijer, Miniput, 27.


603 Leijer, Miniput, 9. Swedish original: “För första gången i sitt liv känner han sig inte längre ensam.”
He is slightly alcoholic, but he stops drinking, because beer is not good for the little being, thus he starts adapting to the needs of this adjunct creature. For longer and longer periods, Hegius decides to stay in the little being instead of himself. And, eventually, he starts hating his former clumsy body.\(^{604}\) The last time the reader hears from Hegius, the miniput is giving Ernst gin in order to manipulate him to move.\(^{605}\)

What about the other characters? How do they exercise agency, and how do they feel about it? The artist is the second person the reader meets in the novel, and the only one narrated in the first person. He or she is – quite fittingly – anonymous and has no name, and is trying to work out what is really going on in the simulation. The artist is extremely curious at the start, and acknowledges that there is a need for a new kind of approach to human challenges and the environment on the planet – and to art. But the artist is becoming more and more confused and apathetic, feeling stupid, constantly wondering: is there something he or she has missed?

To some degree, this person mirrors the experience of the reader, who is also trying to figure out what is happening in the novel. In contrast to Hegius, the artist asks questions, and tries to dismantle his or her experience and the research laboratory in order to understand what is going on, constantly referring to what he or she has heard others say about this laboratory. She or he refers here to the project as “the Creative,” a name it has been given. “By the way, the whole of the Creative must have been made in order to legitimize something – but what, I do not know. There must be other interests behind this project, than simply performing


\(^{605}\) Leijer, *Miniput*, 78–79.
experiments and facilitating a free and creative collaboration.” Such an ambition I argue to be melodramatic, and it brings no joy, in contrast to Hegius’ experience, but instead confusion and anxiety – feelings which emphasize that there is something wrong with how this reality is represented. The artist has no way of describing what is going on. As an artist, he or she is highly aware of this, but is incapable of finding alternative ways to represent this cluster of complexity. Anxiety and paranoia sweep over them – resonating with what Melley suggests happens affectively in a society where the complexities are too many and it becomes impossible to re-create or understand the causal links. The artist ends up confused and with a fragmented sense of agency. In one of the last entries, he or she finally realizes that “everything is a here and now – the fictitious, the second-hand experience can no longer be differentiated from what is real.”

The last person the reader meets is Stefan Hult, who tries to quantify and regulate people’s feelings in a project he calls “Condensed Life,”

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607 Melley, Empire of Conspiracy, 22.

608 A sense of fragmentation was present from the start for the artist, and this cast a kind of critical light on the collective ambition of the research laboratory. They should act collectively, but most of the characters in the novel, the artist included, seem to be trapped in anxiety and uncertainty. At the beginning, she and the others cannot even remember what they are doing there – and apparently, they cannot contact anyone to get an answer. They try to remember “what was said during the many speeches that were held at the unofficial welcome, what had been written in the papers.” Leijer, Miniput, 21. Swedish original: “vad som sagts under de många tal som hållits för oss vid den inofficiella invigningen, vad det stått i våra förelägganden.”

shortened to “CL” in the novel. Through the employment of feelings, which work “almost biologically, directly on the receptors like a gas,” his research make the military capable of manipulating individuals. However, Stefan does not do this to earn money or increase population control. He is altruistic, he wants to give people meaningful lives. “By exposing the weak and fragile to a constant condition of love, he wants to make the sick healthy, give the elderly youth and the weak strength – give them back their lust for life.” Symptomatically, the whole project starts with his curiosity and urge to share his feeling, when he falls in love with a colleague, Eva Blom. Falling in love is described as becoming “aware of his own person in a new way.” “The awareness is sharpened, muscles tightening imperceptibly in him, the body straightens [...] and the eyes more alert.” Thus, the experience of love intrigues him. What if he could industrialize this feeling? Use it to make people happier? Rather than staying in this feeling, as Hegius does, Stefan as a scientist becomes intrigued by these emotions and tries to identify his feelings as objectively as possible.

As the abovementioned Ingvarsson writes, feelings become information for Stefan Hult. He first tries the cumulative approach; he

611 Leijer, Miniput, 97. Swedish original: “närmast biologiskt, direkt på receptorn som en gas.”
612 Leijer, Miniput, 41. Swedish original: “Genom att utsätta de livssvaga för ett konstant tillstånd av förälskelse ville han bota sjukdomar, ge de ålderstigna ungdomlighet, de svaga styrka – ge dem deras livsmod åter.”
613 Leijer, Miniput, 18. Swedish original: “medveten om sin person på ett nytt sätt.”
614 Leijer, Miniput, 18f. Swedish original: “Uppmärksamheten skärps, musklerna spänns omärkligt i honom, kroppen får resning, stegen svikt. Andningen är något hastigare nu, ögonen mer vaksamma.”
615 Ingvarsson, En besynnerlig gemenskap, 229f.
starts to gather a collection of emotions, “so that his call of love shall reach out.”616 He calls the collection a “multibox.” “And the multibox is called Love.”617 “[A]ll parts of the collection are original, but they can be multiplied and given the same content as the original if the material did not change, and they are therefore independent of the complexities of feeling they are to express.”618 More concretely, Stefan Hult’s collection consists of tape recordings. That is, he objectifies his feelings by constantly having a tape recorder switched on when he encounters his love, Eva. “A tape recorder was always on when the lovers met. Somewhere among all the words, Stefan hoped he could find the essence, that which in concentrated form could express what their conversations were encircling.”619 Unfortunately, the project CL leads to a kind of information overload, pointing to the emerging information age in the 1960s. Hult ends up seeing too many connections, and is not capable of differentiating between them or sorting out the many feelings. He cannot make any priority in the material he has gathered. “The scissors are in his hand without being used – everything feels essential, it is difficult to select.”620 Everything seems to be connected to everything else, and it seems possible to regulate everything, making uncertainty an absolute condition. Thus, he is moving towards an experience of a fragmented ecodramatic

616 Leijer, Miniput, 38. Swedish original: “för att hans kärleksrop ska nå ut.”
617 Leijer, Miniput, 38. Swedish original: “Och multiboxen heter Förälskelsen.”
618 Leijer, Miniput, 38. Swedish original: “Alla delar är original, men de kan mångfaldigas och ges samma innehåll som originalen eftersom materialet inte förändras och är som sådant oberoende av de känslökomplex de skall uttrycka.”
619 Leijer, Miniput, 38. Swedish original: “Någonstans bland alla orden hoppas Stefan kunna hitta de väsentliga, de som i koncentrat kan uttrycka det deras samtal kretsar kring.”
sense of agency. He ends in an inarticulate “jumble” to refer to *Bilburen* and the observations of Neyrat discussed in the chapter “Traffic.”

Important to note, however, is that Hult is indeed doing *something*, but he cannot trace his steps or situate himself anywhere. Thus, the character of Hult portrays how difficult it is to connect yourself to something – commit to an interpretation – when everything is mediated. Together with the melodramatic artist and the ecodramatic Hegius, the three characters are therefore all moving within the lower half of the coordinate system used in my investigation, implying a kind of collective, non-individual understanding of agency.

**Ecodramatic Fragmentation of Agency?**

When Leijer’s novel came out, critics raised the question of impact – not in relation to the characters or plot, but in relation to the book itself. Did the novel really make any difference? That is, they questioned the very existence of interesting aspects in *Miniput*, calling it a boring “intellectual game.”

Another critic, Magnus Hedlund, discerned more potential in the work, but argued that it still failed, considering it a “gesture leading nowhere:” “If *Miniput* had been less vague, it could have become part of a debate, and if it had been more worked through, it could have been a good adventure novel. Now, sadly, it becomes a general critical gesture leading nowhere.”

Even though these questions could be considered fair, I want to stress a different perspective. Maybe this boredom and this

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gesture-leading-nowhere are essential for understanding agency in the self-reflexive world depicted? The same question could be asked about the agency of the characters: Do any of these characters make a difference at all – that is, is there any opportunity for exercising agency – or are we stuck in a world where we can feel good, but not do good in?

A story about a computer simulation from the middle of the novel might help to shed light upon the way in which this fictional world radically makes agency indeterminate. The story is told by the artist, in an effort to grasp the kind of experiment of which she or he is part. Earlier – the artist has been told by the ones who came before her – two people had been locked into a simulator in the laboratory. This simulator consisted of a system that were supposed to do everything for human individuals, even go to the toilet, and the task of the humans were to oversee the system and check it. The two men in the simulator had different backgrounds: One is the man who built the simulator and who knows the system. The other is a layman, who knows nothing about computer technology. And the question asked in the experiment was: Do the people involved react any differently? As it turns out, the engineer became bored, because the work was so repetitive. The layman, however, abandoned his role as a controller very quickly. He became “psychically unbalanced,” reached high levels of stress, and the experiment had to be interrupted before the designated time, because the layman had fallen into a “state close to illness.”

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624 Leijer, Miniput, 45. Swedish original: “Den teknisk insatte hade klarat sina dygn i simulatorn bra med undantag av att han gett uttryck för en viss tristess när mönstren upprepats.”
625 Leijer, Miniput, 45. Swedish original: “Han hade total fallit ur sin roll som kontrollör av de olika funktionerna enbart efter ett par misslyckanden.”
626 Leijer, Miniput, 45. Swedish originals: “Den teknisk okunnige hade efter endast en mycket kort tid i simulatorn kommit i psykisk obalans och nått ett
It is tempting to picture both the artist in *Miniput*, as well as Benjamin in Bødker’s *Pap*, as that person in the simulator. Entering the simulator with the motivation to decipher it – that is, to maintain a kind of individual agency, even though the system is rigged to annihilate all individual agency – they both fail completely and become disempowered. The other extreme is the engineer, who is familiar with the logic of the technology and has an epistemological framework enabling him to understand what is going on in this world, so he knows that he has no agency in this environment, he is just someone overseeing what happens. Such a need for knowledge about technology during the early information age and at the beginning of automation was often expressed in the 1950s and 1960s. Without an understanding of how agency works technically, there is a risk of becoming apathetic and disempowered, philosophers such as Simondon have suggested. He argued that children need to be taught about technical culture, in order to give people “an awareness of the nature of machines, of their mutual relations and of their relations with man, and of the values implied in these relations.” Any “child ought to know what self-regulation is, or what a positive reaction is, in the same way a child knows mathematical theorems.” Without knowing this, as Melley would say, agency panic will flourish, because people cannot find any meaningful way to understand the world, and why things happen. This is not to say that agency panic is only caused by misinformation – on the contrary, as Melley points out, the complex, networked, globalized societies in which we live make agency panic and paranoia rational, perhaps

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even necessary, in order to reveal abuses of power, corruption and government control.\textsuperscript{629}

However, it is not enough to simply understand the world of the simulation example in \textit{Miniput} – if you do only that, you become bored, just as the critics were, when they read the book. You also need to find some kind of joy in this madness. What is so striking about the trajectories of the three characters is that the feelings they experience appear strong and real but, at the same time, they are self-reflexive enough to make the individual doubt whether what they are experiencing is real or not.

Implicitly, this becomes an imperative to the reader as well, challenging his or her urge to control and to interpret. Maybe he or she is experiencing feelings of inauthenticity and lack of control from the several internal references between the three characters, becoming unsure of which of the three characters’ perspectives to trust. The feeling that Stefan is trying to quantify is described very similarly to the feeling that Ernst Hegius experiences when he gives birth to his miniput. The reader starts to wonder: Did Ernst’s experience of the miniput really take place? Was the little being only a manipulated seed, from one of the other experiments? Were Hegius’ strong feelings of love produced by the multi-box made by Stefan Hult? Such questions resonate throughout the novel, and it can therefore be seen to demonstrate how the setting produces vague feelings of disquiet, even in the reader. As Melley is saying, in many aspects, it is hard to differentiate paranoia from a normal interpretive practice.\textsuperscript{630} “It is for precisely this reason that literary criticism is so


\textsuperscript{630} “Despite its numerous problems and dangers, however, reading for buried messages cannot be dismissed as a practice of only the lunatic fringe, or the intelligence community, or even its aficionados in the postwar literary
often understood to be a matter of unearthing ‘secret’ meanings and intentions in texts [...] the work of interpretation always seems to produce secret meanings to those who do not know how the meanings in questions are coded.” Melley, Empire of Conspiracy, 22. The fictional universe of Leijer’s novel actively work against such an unearthing of secrets – the text offers no guidelines for how to battle confusion and uncertainty. And as said above, this seems to be key when acting within a media environment – to accept to move horizontally on the surface, to speak with the imagery of Pap.

At the end of Miniput, the artist suggests something like this – namely that everything might be “simpler than you think, the solutions more obvious than one would have thought.” Exactly what is meant by this, and what this simplicity consists of, is not clear. But maybe it is a hint as to how to approach agency in a ecologicized agotope. The only character for whom this world is simple is Hegius, who does not investigate what really happens with his miniput. Ernst Hegius never cares about what happens, he is just happy. In that way, he resembles Dida. Both Hegius and Dida just enjoy the spectacle. If you take this as a starting point – that everything is in the here and now, as the artist says at some point – then exploring this fictional universe, the reading, also becomes more joyful. The only thing the reader can do, in the end, is to “start everything anew,” as the prologue suggests, i.e., read the book again. Not to figure out what has really happened, but to appreciate the relationships which the novel magnificently portrays – the relationships between the characters, their loved ones, the different chapters and, not least, the expectations of the reader, and his or her need for overview and puzzle-solving. Maybe the

631 Melley, Empire of Conspiracy, 22.
632 Lejer, Miniput, 84. Swedish original: “enklare än man föreställer sig, lösningar-arna mer självklara än man trott.”
novel, in that sense, is representing a posthuman and social constructivist world, and is training its readers in resilience toward paranoia, unravelling the intricacies of agency in a mediated and manipulative world.

Summary of Media

In this last chapter, melodramatic and ecodramatic ideas of agency have been explored through the readings of two novels, both set in what I have called media environments; in simulations that produce self-reflexivity, attribute agency to media technologies themselves, and produce vague feelings of disquiet regarding who or what is performing agency in the characters. Similar to the novels read in the two previous chapters, these
novels’ ideas of agency move towards the ecodrama. Cecil Bødker places a man of the Enlightenment into an ecologicized simulation in *Pap*, without really giving him any means to escape from the deep melodramatic waters into which he immerses himself. Nils Leijer demonstrates the complexity of agency in a world characterized by constant feedback loops and mediation in his *Miniput*, a novel set up in a way that allows him to dwell upon the shakiness of agency within a mediated environment.

The question of knowledge is interesting when comparing these novels to the other novels analysed in this study. Knowledge is difficult to attain in the novels discussed in all three chapters, but especially when entering the agotope of media, where excessive self-reflexivity makes it hard to be rooted or situated – or, at least, make certain whether you are or not. The lack of knowledge about technology, as well as the infrastructure of both agency and knowledge, which is so widespread in postwar societies, causes the opposite to happen – prohibits characters from understanding the epistemological message these vague feelings of disquiet carry with them, and hence makes it impossible for them to see themselves as situated within the networks in which they are embedded. Benjamin in *Pap* is in fact proud of his lack of interest in the new environment he is forced to stay in; he holds onto ideals from the old world – as a typical oppositional man, as the publishing house writes on the back cover of the book. This seems to indicate an imperative expressed in these novels of a need to learn about, accept, and explore the consequences of an interconnected, relational perspective. Only in this way, are we capable of acting in it – to see, with Emirbayer and Mische, the agential possibilities the new historical situation is opening up.633

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This focus on knowledge offers a perspective on ideas of agency in the novels in the other chapters as well. Those who are capable of acting eco-dramatically seem in this study to know more than others. Arne in *Den siste prøven* in the chapter “Traffic” is an experienced captain, who knows the East, and he knows the global, political infrastructure of which he is part. Karen in *Sommeren på heden* seeks knowledge about the ongoing contamination by talking to a university professor in Copenhagen, and her insight into the systemic features of contamination comes after being reminded of historical parallels (the leprosy epidemic). In contrast, the narrator of *Termush* is indeed an expert in English language and culture, but he is neither curious nor knows anything about the new science or technologies of the information age. He likes the old world as it is.
Chapter 6

Conclusion: Ecodramatic Agency in Prose Fiction

Two central arguments have been pursued in this study. Firstly, that it is both possible and productive to trace a transition from ideas of individualized agency to relational agency in six Scandinavian prose fiction works from the 1960s. Secondly, that this transition is part of a larger and all-encompassing material, aesthetic and perceptual change, referred to as the process of ecologization in Scandinavian (and Western) culture and society. Such a transition of the ideas of agency found in the literary works have in this study been analysed by exploring the agotopes of the novels, and focusing on the feelings of the characters regarding agency.

This concluding chapter will reiterate the general argument of the study and discuss the aesthetic traits that were identified throughout the three main chapters, with a focus on the use of descriptive language, self-reflexive features in both form and plot, and the use of a destabilized narratological present created using dreams and flashbacks. Thereafter, I discuss what makes cybernetics a relevant framework to help understand why agency was put on the page in these works of fiction, and will also come back to the overall argument of the study as a more general turn toward relations by returning shortly to the novel Min elskede – en skabelonroman (My Beloved – a cliché novel, 1968) by Sven Holm – the novel that opened this dissertation. In conclusion, I will reflect briefly upon the significance of my study.

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634 Ecologization understood after Hörl, described in his introduction to General Ecology. See the introduction of this study.
The above, somewhat cluttered, version of the diagram will be partly recognizable to readers of the previous chapters. It combines the graphs regarding all six novels read in this dissertation. Taken together, it visualizes the overall argument made in the study – that there is an exploration of agency in the novels studied, which can be mapped out across these two axes, and that traces a transition from melodramatic towards ecodramatic ideas of agency. Symptomatically, none of the graphs point

635 Which novels refer to which arrows is not important in this figure, but for the curious reader, the colours match the figures in the respective readings.
upwards towards an affirmation of an idea of melodramatic agency, but instead towards the horizontal, ecodramatic axes, or downward towards a loss of melodramatic agency. Thus, the diagram illustrates what the readings have aimed to demonstrate: there appears to be a rejection of a melodramatic, possessive idea of agency in the agotopes of these novels, and an awareness of a need for a move toward something else. This rejection of melodramatic ideas of agency could be understood in many ways – I would here stress that it can be seen as a useful stepping stone for the novels in this study, in order to make room for an exploration of this something else, which I have called ecodramatic ideas of agency.

On the vertical axis, an idea of agency reigns, oscillating between having and losing agency. Here, possession is key. Agency is melodramatically understood as something someone is considered to have, or lack/lose. On the horizontal axis, as defined in the introduction, ecodramatic agency emerges in feedback loops between the environment and the individual, ranging between being situated and being fragmented. The ecodramatic axis is outlined from a distinction borrowed from Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble*, presented in the introduction of this study, and referring to a difference between being connected to something, and being connected to everything.636 The melodramatic idea of agency as “having” or “losing” agency, makes no sense when agency is represented as distributed. There is no privileged position from where you can predict or control the action in an ecologicized world view – your actions are always embedded within someone or something else’s actions. Thus, agency is constantly in the making, as it were. Herein lies the clue to the novels’ exploration of ecodramatic agency, I would argue. Even though you can never enter a privileged position within this

636 See the introduction to this dissertation, as well as Haraway “Situated knowledges,” 584 and *Staying with the Trouble*, 31.
complex web of relations, you are never completely out of contact with anything, and therefore, you are never completely without the ability to act. This, however, does not equal a feeling of empowerment. This realization can just as well lead to a fragmented idea of agency.

Furthermore, agency in the novels in my study have been analysed with a spatial approach, paying close attention to how the novels use the fictional environment to destabilize traditional understandings of agency. Three agotopes, “Traffic,” “Contamination” and “Media,” organized the readings, with each representing different settings deeply connected to the technological situation in the 1960s and having the potential to represent active and self-reflexive fictional worlds, where agency is emerging, instead of being attributed to any individual human or institution. Vague feelings, I have argued, were used as a strategy for the authors to put the ambiguity of agency at the forefront and express an uncertainty about the very question of how to understand agency in the stories. Following one’s vague feelings of disquiet, building on them, instead of tucking them away, became in many of the novels a viable path for characters to gain a more thorough understanding of the interconnected and shared worlds they were a part of. These vague feelings were understood as social affects, responding to the techno-cultural changes occurring within society, as well as pointing to a problem with the representation of agency in established literary forms. 637

Throughout my readings, I have pointed to several aesthetic techniques applied in the novels to put agency on the page, in addition to the use of vague feelings and active settings: self-reflexivity, a descriptive use of language and a fragmented chronology, and I will briefly discuss all of them here.

637 For this approach to affect, see the introduction to this study and Ngai, Ugly Feelings, Simondon, On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects.
First, self-reflexivity features in all the books concerned. Cecil Bødker’s *Pap* plays with the reader of her book in a very concrete way, in addition to placing the characters of the story inside a radically self-reflexive simulation. *Miniput* by Leijer works elegantly with the expectations of the reader, insisting on ambiguity throughout the narrative. Stokkelien’s *Den siste prøven* and *Termush* by Holm both in their own ways challenge naïve ideas of objective observation, and relate observation and agency closely together. This interest in observation and self-reflexivity is not understood in this study as a sign of a literature turning towards itself, but rather of a literature trying to represent the kind of immanence that an ecologicized universe brings with it. Hence, as Burton writes, metafiction should “maybe be considered a general mode of contemporary cultural thought, expression, practice, and one that is at least in some sense integral to (the thinking of) general ecology.” According to this study, it is possible to observe a convergence between exploring self-reflexivity in novels and a broader cultural process of ecologization.

Second, almost all of the six novels that have been discussed utilize a form of non-psychological, descriptive language, or an extensive use of dialogue. This is key to being able to offer a kind of environmental perspective on both characters and the milieu, carrying with it an illusion of objectivity and neutrality; as Haraway would call it, the illusion of being able to play the god-trick — “seeing everything from nowhere.” As we have noticed in many of the novels, for example *Bilburen*, this external perspective tend to flip over to its opposite — an idea of pure relativism of “being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally,” to use Haraway’s words. Situating oneself while also observing, is challenging in

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all the novels. And this becomes even more complex in *Bilburen* when
the character is a descriptive observer embedded in a self-reflexive logic,
causing alienation and fragmentation when the character is observing
himself acting. On the other side, the narrators of *Pap* and *Termush* can
be argued to be trapped in a minimalist, objective and descriptive posi-
tion, where a descriptive use of language hinders the characters from see-
ing the radical interdependence of all life on the planet they are living.
Thus, the descriptive use of language is a double-edged sword – a con-
tradictory aspect that is demonstrated in Stokkelien’s *Sommeren på
heden*. Here, Jon and Karen are following two different agential paths –
Jon is using the descriptive language to zoom in on life in every detail
with his camera, trying to observe it as neutrally as possible, observing
all objects and events and their connection in this world. In his past life,
he used to play the god-trick as a journalist, but now he is stuck in near-
sighted relativism. Karen, on the other hand, is trying to find a language
that fits the experience she is having in this new world. Being pregnant,
she does not have the privilege of retreating to the god-trick.

Finally, the relation between agency and the composition of a narra-
tological present is central in all the novels. Even though the composi-
tions differ quite a lot, a pattern is still visible: the characters who remain
on the melodramatic axis are the ones who insist upon ordering events
in a chronological manner – for example, the narrator of *Termush* and
the narrator of *Pap*. The novels using analepses in *Sommeren på heden*,
multiple endings in *Miniput* and ekphrasis in *Termush*, to convey tem-
poral lapses, enable a more fragmented experience of the present. I relate
this representation of a porous presence to the ability of the characters
in these novels to experience a sense of agency, after all.
Why Agency on the Page? The Potential of Exploring Agency in Relation to Cybernetics

Both the literary works and ideas of agency have been contextualized through the prism of cybernetics in this dissertation. That is not to say that these aesthetic traits of using vague feelings, use of descriptive language, self-reflexivity and unstable narrative presence stem from cybernetics, or even that they emerged during the 1960s – that would be an ahistorical claim. Such traits can be found in prose from the last 300 years and could be argued to be characteristic of the modern novel as such.\(^{641}\) The reason for bringing cybernetics into the mix is to provide a specific and material context, which this kind of aesthetic experimentation responded to and encouraged the understanding of. Thus, my argument is that literary practice and cybernetic philosophical approaches embarked on a similar basic quest in the 1960s: to make sense of agency in a world in which the material structures and technological apparatuses necessary to uphold ideas of autonomy and individuality had begun to lose their legitimacy, simultaneously as new relational material structures were emerging.\(^{642}\)

The view of literature itself also changed in this period. I would argue that authors in a rather open way used the aesthetic and philosophical tools available to them. This resulted in a literature that could be described as “functionalistic,” borrowing the words of Leijer, quoted in the

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\(^{641}\) I mean this in a very general sense, to the extent that self-reflexivity can be found in novels from Miguel de Cervantes’ Don Quixote, descriptive use of language from realist works such as Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and the fragmented presence can be found in most modernist fiction from the 20th century.

\(^{642}\) For more on this, see the introduction of this study, as well as Hörl, “Introduction,” and Pias, “The Age of Cybernetics.”
chapter of “Traffic.” Understanding the view of literature itself as being in a transition, I align my own perspective with previous scholars arguing that literature in this decade could be described as “social,” “performative” and “pragmatic,” in the sense that literature applied a wide range of literary techniques, spanning from pre-modern mythical approaches, realist descriptive language, as well as modernist and avant-garde techniques. In addition, literary works test and experiment with traditional ideas of agency in post-industrial environments, making the literary work itself a kind of agent of change, an active tool to reshape conceptions and ideas flourishing in the culture.

More concretely, cybernetics offered a vocabulary to explore agency for this study. And in a somewhat surprising way, at least to myself, cybernetics also afforded a structure to the dissertation, not just by turning the attention to environments, but also to the three chosen agotopes. The chapters approximately mirror the three different phases of cybernetics. The first phase, focused on homoeostasis – as well as, according to Hayles, on the “flow of information” – can be said to be at the centre of the chapter “Traffic;” for the chapter “Contamination,” “interactions between the observer and the system” is put at the forefront; whereas the third chapter on “Media” brings more attention to “how the observer is constructed within social and linguistic environment.”

Moreover, I want to argue that cybernetics provides a context for the interest in non-human relations, instead of just human relations, in these novels. As new technologies were developed with accelerating speed

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643 Leijer, “Att inventera verkligheten,” 120f.
644 See Agrell, Forskningsresan som roman, 11, Ørum and Olsson (eds), A Cultural History of the Avant Garde in the Nordic Countries, 36, Hagen, “På sporet av norsk sektistallsmodernisme,” 43.
645 These three quotes are stemming from Hayles’ three characteristics of the three phases. Hayles, “Cybernetics,” 149.
during the post-war years, and as mass media society fetishized consumer objects, things and technologies took on an ambiguous meaning, becoming simultaneously both political and apolitical (more on this below). It was not important what the thing was, that is, if it was human or not. The point was the relationship humans entered into with it.

I relate this to an interesting observation. Looking at the novels, it is striking that the characters are not portrayed as part of collective groups, but as isolated individuals co-acting with non-human agents. Benjamin in Pap is lonely, Ernst Hegius and Stefan Hult in Miniput are trying to get in touch with others and end up fulfilling their social needs in engineered organisms and affective technologies. In Bilburen, it is not people, but the car, that becomes a kind of key to opening up the main character’s emotional life. In Den siste prøven, the captain in the story is listening to the ship – more than he is feeling a connection to the Chinese crew. If these people are so lonely, why are they turning to non-human entities, and not primarily to other human beings? I would argue that this makes sense in the context of the process of ecologization and cybernetics as a central symptom of that. By turning to ships, cardboard and cars, the focus in these novels is not on sociality, that is, on relations to other humans, but on relations as such, regardless of whether they are between humans or between humans and non-humans. The six novels therefore echo what Haraway wrote about the cyborg, that it revolutionizes “the social relations in the oikos, the household,” understood broadly – in the sense that the cyborg reorients the way we relate not just to each other, but to our surroundings in general.

To put this latter claim into perspective, I return to the novel that opened this dissertation, Sven Holm’s Min elskede – en skabelonroman.

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646 Hörl, “Introduction,” 7
Just like the six books read in the three main chapters, Holm’s novel puts agency on the page and experiments with narrative form in order to convey a transition from ideas of melodramatic to ecodramatic agency. But it is also a novel which questions agency in a political manner that is more familiar in a traditional sense, since it focuses on relations between people, not primarily relations between people and the non-human agents surrounding them. The up-and-down movement, which is central in the novel, is a complex and nonsensical movement in many ways, but it is a movement echoing political collective movements of the late 1960s, and the beginning of the 1970s.

However, the relational perspective is everywhere in the novel, and goes beyond just the human relationships of this movement. The setting of the novel is active and complex, made up of a post-industrial ecologized environment, full of non-human distributed agents; traffic infrastructure, piping and microscopic agents floating around in the air.\(^648\) In one chapter, the sewers underneath Copenhagen are described as having the capacity to “unite the separated citizens [...] in the sewers everyone is equal, and all borders are abolished.”\(^649\) In such a setting, there is no opportunity for melodramatic agency. Instead, an ecodramatic world is laid out. Consequently, a sustainable and environmental utopia has taken over the city at the end of the novel, and the urban space has turned into a jungle where humans no longer behave as individuals, but like snails, with houses on their backs, that occasionally melt together with other houses, and generally help people to live in symbiosis with nature.


\(^649\) Holm, *Min elskede*, 60. Danish original: “forene de splittede indbyggere,” and “i affaldsgaderne er alle lige og alle grænser er ophævede.”
Nature and culture have merged, and humans are likened to fish in the sea, locally anchored and embodied:

When fish rest in the water, side by side, they meet their surroundings without moving, only by contracting their muscles in the sides a little; completely immersed in the water that runs by, without blinking, because the experience spellbinds them – until a signal, a change in the light, rearranges them, splits them up and lets them concentrate on a stone, a piece of a plant on the bottom. They share the water, but each have their sensitivity, each their perspective.\textsuperscript{650}

This kind of fantasy echoes, once again, of Haraway when she claims that we are all connected, an idea particularly present in sentences such as, “They share the water, but each have their sensitivity, each their perspective.” However, these fish are not connected to everything – an overwhelming idea that leads to apathy and disempowerment. They are connected to each other, thus maintaining their own “perspective.” They are embodied, and their view of the world is situated. In the novel, relations are at the centre and there are these relations that lead to societal change.

Focused on issues of control and regulation in animals and machines, cybernetics was closely tied to the military and medical industries during

\textsuperscript{650} Holm, \textit{Min elskede}, 119. Danish original: “Når fisk hænger i vandet, side ved side, moder de deres omverden uden at røre sig, kun ved at holde musklerne i siderne i en ganske lille bevægelse: helt fordybet i det nye vand der strømmer forbi, uden at blinke fordi oplevelsen binder dem helt – indtil et signal, en lysændring kaster dem omkring, splitter dem og lader dem koncentrere sig om en sten, en plantestump på bunden. De er fælles om vandet, men har hver sin følsomhed, hvert sit syn.”
the 1960s, but it also contributed with liberating potential to many
groups in society, in the sense that it insisted on an anti-essentialism, as
well as reconfiguring the question of agency in a relational sense. This
was how Haraway understood and employed cybernetics in her recon-
sideration of the question of agency in relation to gender, among other
things, in the beforementioned “A Cyborg Manifesto” from 1985. The
“cyborg,” Haraway writes, “is resolutely committed to partiality, irony,
intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely
without innocence.”651 Seen from this perspective, experimenting with
representations of agency – whether it is on the page, in robotic turtles
or in mathematical models – could all be ways to question deep-seated
conceptions of agency, laying the foundations for inviting new kinds of
agents to the scene, among them sexual minorities, women or ethnic mi-
norities. Hayles is observing this central aspect of agency in the 1960s in
her study of the posthuman, as also briefly quote din the introduction to
this study. Cybernetics and the posthuman ideas it brings do not neces-
sarily entail a rejection of human agency, she argues.

It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a
conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of hu-
manity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize
themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through
individual agency and choice.652

I observe something similar in the novels in this study. They are full of
groups that not just lose or lack agency, but gain it. Dida in Pap, Maria
in Termush and Karen in Sommeren på heden all represent women who

652 Hayles, How We Became Posthuman, 286.
have scarcely been attributed agency in the past. But through the course of the novels, they experience agency. And this agency is situated.

I suggest, therefore, in the light of my readings in this study, that there can be found a positive approach to agency in Scandinavian prose fiction of the 1960s. Of course, there was plenty of criticism and panic about the societal systematization that took shape during the post-war decades, but still, what is striking is a fascination with a rethinking of agency in an interconnected and interdependent world. It is symptomatic that Leijer in *Bilburen* pictures the French artists as the only people in the novel who are capable of navigating in a relational world. Maybe one can here find a thought-provoking contrast between an American understanding of the transformation of agency, and a Scandinavian or European one? I find a willingness and eagerness to explore and think agency anew that seem to trump paranoia and agency panic in these novels. And in that sense, this might hint at something *culturally distinct*. (Albeit with only six examples, I can only insinuate a distinction between the Scandinavian works from American fiction of the same decade.)

I am not claiming this to put ecodramatic agency on a pedestal, as a more correct way to understand agency. Although this dissertation argues that a transition can be observed in the novels, from ideas of melodramatic to ecodramatic agency, and moreover proposes that the latter is represented in the novels as more appropriate for describing the everyday experiences of humans in the 1960s – ecodramatic agency is not necessarily a good or useful understanding of our own abilities to make a difference today (and, vice versa, melodramatic ideas of agency are not

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653 The contrast between the US and Scandinavia should not be overrated, of course. In many American novels from this time period, one could see similar tensions between melodramatic and ecodramatic ideas of agency, referring back to my presentation of Melley and Seltzer in the introduction to this study.
necessarily “bad”). What I do suggest is good, is for us as readers to turn to fiction to nuance our idea of agency and discuss adequate representations of agency in relation to aesthetic form. This was already accentuated by Simondon and his argument that has often been mentioned in this study, that the “directions” were false in the 1960s, between the experiences people had in their everyday lives and the cultural forms representing them – which created a need for what I with Emirbayer and Mische could call different kinds of “agentic orientation[s]”.

During the 1960s, Scandinavian prose fiction tried to experiment with literary form in order to describe eerie and incomprehensible experiences of agency in an interconnected world, I argue, and this makes the literary works from these decades a useful reservoir for thinking about what enables or disables feelings of agency, spanning aesthetical, political, historical and technological realms.

Significance and Limitation of this Study

Today, sixty years after the heyday of cybernetics, and after the novels read in this study were written, Western culture is still struggling to represent agency in a relational perspective. From Hörl’s ecological view, the world we live in today produces uncertainty about who or what initiates change and transformation, and this is filtered into the very fabric of post-industrial life – science, media, aesthetics and the economy. In several places in society, agency appears to be understood as emerging in some kind of nodes or clusters, or distributed across networks, in everything from capitalism to critical theory and military command.

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655 For the latter, see for example Anthony King, Command: The Twenty-First-Century General (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
how does this translate into ideas of political agency? How to avoid being paralyzed with disempowerment, or infuriated with conspiracy theories and paranoia?

By exploring distributed ideas of agency historically, along with the cultural representations of the process of ecologization, as it has been described in this study, I hope that the reader’s uncertainty and disempowerment regarding agency has become thicker, and more multifaceted. As Hörl notes, it is important to be aware of the extent of this “pervasive triumph of the cybernetic hypothesis of universal controllability and a corresponding ideal of regulation,” in order to criticize the way in which power operates today, and most important for this study, finding paths of resistance. This study therefore took as its starting point the idea that the key to fighting apathy and urging resistance is to pick apart experiences of disempowerment, that is, by understanding them historically, materially and aesthetically. My delving into ideas of agency in the 1960s was driven by a curiosity about the duration and historicity of this uncertainty about who or what can be considered an agent – as well as an interest in how agency can be understood as distributed in a historical contingent and critical manner.

As mentioned in the introduction, novels are obliging material to work with when interested in the cultural history of agency. What prose fiction does in this period is to put agency on the page, to test and experiment with diverging ideas of how differences are made, and also contribute to documenting historical changes in the ideas concerning the phenomenon. Novels is in this perspective seen as intricately structured “organisms,” to paraphrase Sven Holm’s Termush, capable of absorbing and exhibiting the complexities and paradoxes of the environment and

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656 Hörl, “Introduction,” 5.
societies in which they are written, as well as of literary history itself, and mixing all of that into a form that makes humans capable of discussing and reflecting upon the elusive phenomenon of agency.


Publications without Authors


Homepage for the Rachel Carson-prize, rachelcarsonprisen.no, http://www.rachelcarsonprisen.no/home.html


Databases

Mediastream in Denmark, https://www2.statsbiblioteket.dk/medie-stream/

A multitude of ideas about individual and distributed agency circulated in Scandinavian culture during the 1960s, a period often designated as the early information age. Through an analysis of six novels, this dissertation discusses how prose fiction in and around the 1960s in Norway, Sweden and Denmark responded and contributed to this circulation of ideas of agency. The study argues that a transition is played out in the novels, from an idea of agency as individualistic and possessive, which I designate as melodramatic, towards an idea of agency as distributed and ecodramatic, emerging in an active environment, where multiple agents, human and non-human, co-exist (these concepts are derived and developed from works by Timothy Melley and Mark Seltzer). This transition is claimed to be conveyed through vague feelings expressed by the characters, signalling problems with the representation of agency, which are discussed in the thesis through the concept of affects (as understood by Sianne Ngai, primarily). The study overall applies a media ecological perspective to the literary works, situating questions of both literary form and ideas of agency in the techno-cultural development of the 1960s, investigated through the lens of the cultural history of cybernetics and understood as part of a larger epistemological and ontological change – a process of ecologization (Erich Hörl). This process accelerated during the period and is characterized in this study by a focus on relations, networks and self-reflexivity. From this theoretic approach, ideas of agency must be understood as intrinsically entangled with changes in the environment (environment understood in a broad sense as a setting in the novels, including both technologically mediated environments and natural environments), and this is conceptualized through the newly coined term agotope, an adjusted version of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope. Three agotopes organize the readings in the study, each referring to key aspects of 1960s culture: “Traffic,” “Contamination” and “Media.” The six novels studied are Bilburen (Carborne, 1963) and Miniput (Miniput, 1969) by Swedish writer Nils Leijer, Den siste prøven (The Final Test, 1968) and Sommeren på heden (Summer on the Heath, 1970) by Norwegian writer Vigdis Stokkelien, Pap (Cardboard, 1967) by Danish writer Cecil Bodker, and Termush, Atlanterhavskysten (Termush, the Atlantic Coast, 1967) by Danish writer Sven Holm.