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Troubling the water

Hydro-imaginaries in Nordic television drama

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Abstract

“Troubling the Water: Hydro-imaginaries in Nordic Television Drama” discusses a selection of Nordic television series to consider how they employ Anthropocenic imagery to challenge the Nordic governments’ long-established attitude as sustainable and environment-friendly. Despite their different genres and aesthetic qualities these series share their concerns about the availability of clean water usually perceived as everlasting given the Nordic countries’ physical geographical features. The close reading of relevant fragments from various series allows to interrogate such uncritical understanding of water as a “passive” commodity to serve modern societies anthropogenic wants, rather than eco-social needs. The article particularly focuses on the last season of the Danish family drama *The Legacy* which explicitly engages with water as being central to issues of social justice as much as issues of environmental concern.

Keywords: Nordic TV drama, hydrohumanities, eco-activism, Arvingerne, *The Legacy*

Water narratives in Nordic drama series

The credit sequence of the Danish series *The Rain* starts with a low angle shot of the darkening grey bluish skies. We see a raindrop slowly falling towards the screen from the milkily opaque clouds, hitting a tree leaf and exploding in a myriad of sparkling water beads. This mini-event is followed by a succession of standard post-apocalyptic images of abandoned streets, dilapidated buildings, a human skeleton on a bed covered by spiderweb, a dry and dusty flower, a revolving DNA molecule, an electronic map and a human figure in a yellow protective suit ascending the steps of a bunker, – all presented through a lens covered with water. Then the shot of the tempestuous skies returns to serve as a background for the series' title. In the story, the heavy precipitation carries a virus, that kills people quickly and horribly. And although shortly after, the narrative shifts towards the issues of bioterrorism, I wish to retain the shot of an exploding raindrop, and use it as an iconic image that prompts us to ponder how water's constitutive, for human life and subjectivity, qualities are brought into focus, or obfuscated, in this and other Nordic television series concerned with climate change and Anthropocene.

In recent years, Nordic serial drama has produced an array of texts challenging and critiquing the regional governments' self-congratulatory attitude as exceptionally sustainable and environment-friendly.¹ Underlining the value of this trend, Reinhard Henning, Anna-Karin Jonasson, and Peter Degerman contend that "various forms of cultural production can contribute to a better understanding of historical developments that contributed to the construction of the Nordic countries' contemporary green image" and thus open the way for the critical reappraisal of their "environmental exceptionalism" (Henning, Jonasson, and Degerman 2018, 5). To that extent, Pietari Kääpä asserts that "critical interdisciplinary exploration of the diversity of Nordic ecocinema can not only make a significant contribution to the study of Nordic cultures, but also to bring back political participation to a field which has lost some of its explicit engagement with political issues" (Kääpä 2014, 25-26). And while ecocinema scholars increasingly argue that "it is important, in an era of expanding media universes, that critics look at mainstream as well as alternative uses of visual media" (Ivakhiv 2008, 24; see also Rust and Monani 2013), Julia Leyda expands generic

boundaries further to suggest that popular quality television series often bear textual and visual traces of what she calls the “climate unconscious,” fostering baseline awareness of the anthropogenic footprint even when their narratives do not explicitly revolve around environmental issues (Leyda 2016, 16-17). Although, as David Ingram notes, (eco)critical cultural meanings may not be easily acknowledged by viewers depending on their prior predispositions and training (Ingram 2013), various modes of these texts’ circulation together with the heterogeneity of their audiences always encourage multiple interpretations, and it is within this dynamic cultural field that dominant ideologies can be both reasserted and contested (cf. Hall 1980).² Leyda rightly points out that “engrossing audiences in ... fictional narrative means allowing them to process emotionally the implications of what they may well already know via facts and figures” (Leyda 2016, 14). In line with this special issue’s focus on contemporary representations of Anthropocene, I would like to argue that the growing global appreciation of drama serials makes them especially well-suited for retraining viewers’ perception of ecological awareness.

This article’s particular interest in aqueous manifestations of Anthropocene motivates my attention to the series that weave water-related themes in their story lines. The most prominent ones in this sense are Norwegian petro-thriller *Occupied* (2015-2019), Danish economic thriller *Follow the Money* (2016-2019), Icelandic police procedural *Trapped* (2017-2021), Finnish crime drama *Deadwind* (2018-2021) and Swedish geopolitical thriller *Thin Ice* (2020). While *Occupied* and *Thin Ice* can be described as speculative fiction, other narratives integrate elements of apocalyptic horror of which *The Rain* serves as a good example; others again, introduce motives of Nordic folklore and eco-gothic imagery. This happens, for instance, in the Swedish series *Jordskott* (2015-2017), and in the Norwegian production *Ragnarok* (2020-2022). *The Rain* is not the only tv drama in which water prominently features in the opening sequence. This is significant in light of credit sequences’ ability to create an effect of a mise-en-abyme, to convey each series’ ideological and thematic concerns (cf. Bruhn 2018).

Thus, *Follow the Money*, which tells a story about fraud in a research company producing new “green” windmill technologies, starts with showing the protagonists in their habitual milieus (work-

place, car workshop, manager's office) filmed as if they are submerged in clear water. Suggestive of flooding, water bubbles, papers, and children's hair move upward creating a drowning effect. The images of this threatening, rising presence of water can be read as a metaphor of sinking deeper and deeper under lies and deception, but also, as literally offering a perspective on the consequences of future climate change—the flooding.³ Yet, this theme is not taken further than the opening shots as the plot soon evolves in the one of an economic thriller. Another series, *Occupied*, features a Green Party government taking a decision to cut off all fossil fuel production and is subsequently occupied by Russians who collude with the EU. The series opens with the up-tempo rock soundtrack depicting a dramatic, documentary-like footage of typical effects of climate change. The sequence displays the images of ice melting, heavy storms, floods, and human rescue actions. In the pilot episode, which also contains references to both the influential Norwegian oil industry and Norwegian nationalism, viewers are informed that a catastrophic hurricane, obviously understood as a sign of climate change, was the main reason behind the political popularity of the Green Party.⁴ After that, however, the action moves towards the geopolitical intrigue and the ocean's tempestuous waters disappear from view. The opening sequence of season three again, in a more subtle way, shows maelstroms of oceanic water with whirling weeds and other debris as a background for characters' portraits and credit titles.

Trapped, *Thin Ice*, *Ragnarok* and *Jordskott*, in turn, equally include water imagery in their openings but engage more directly with the notion of nature's devastation brought about by mankind. Different in terms of their stylistic and aesthetic qualities each series unveils the damage inflicted upon the environment as a result of governmental corruption and corporate consumption, often exacerbated by individual human greed or negligence. The narrative climax here is often reached with the dramatic collapse of basic infrastructures involving power and telecommunication crashes, but also cutting of water supply chain for reasons of contamination. Social unrest follows forcing the authorities to resort to radical measures which propels the conflict towards its final resolution. Compared to electricity and communication that are relatively new human-made conveniences, the availability of clean water seems something "nat-

ural” and everlasting (especially considering Nordic countries’ physical geographical features). The absence of clean water is perceived, in these narratives, as an exceptional calamity bringing to the surface fundamental water qualities that influence people’s daily lives as water-based beings. Yet, despite the co-constitutive nature of human bodies and water, water-related crisis usually happens at the diegetic periphery and remains underexposed. My aim here is to unsettle the easy understanding of water as a “passive” commodity to serve modern societies anthropogenic wants, rather than eco-social needs.

Gaston Bachelard seminally wrote that water provides a “type of intimacy” that is very different from the kind suggested by the “depths” of rock (Bachelard 1983, 6). A being dedicated to water, he notes in *Water and Dreams*, is a being in a flux, she or “he dies every minute; something of his substance is constantly falling away” (Bachelard 1983, 6). Water, far from being an inert substance, let alone a mere resource or utility, is a dynamic entity that infuses ways of thinking and being. And, as elemental ecocriticism scholars Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert insist, human knowing of the world is matter mediated. This mediation happens through the “intimacy of substance, force, flesh, trope, plot, and weather” (Cohen and Duckert 2015, 11). Why Cohen and Duckert move towards the elements, and water in particular, is because they sense how natural “matter’s ‘expressive’ dimension” (Opperman, 2014, 30) is increasingly being turned into an objectified resource reservoir that serves commodity capitalism, while leading to environmental degradation. When water’s lively flows are captured, when they are managed well, or when threats of rising and toxic waters sediment into stillness, water is often forgotten, as if not part of our terrestrial existence. Even when the rising sea levels, plastic and acid oceans, polluted rivers, melting ice caps, worsening weather events and contagious precipitation remind us of the enormous role water, in all its abundance, lack or composition, plays in the Anthropocene drama.

The series as *Thin Ice* and *Ragnarok* additionally testify how water-related concerns are mostly coming to us via news broadcasts or scientific data in which water figures as an abstract substance detached from phenomenological experience. However relevant for raising public awareness, the scientific modeling and mediated stories come at a price. The abstraction brings the risk of relating to

ecologic phenomena as externalized facts such as temperature, acidity or plasticity. Through this abstracting operation water again becomes effectively compelled to an existence in the background of human activity. And in the times of Anthropocene, while mankind are promoted to the level of a geological force, the aqueous reality tends to lose even more ground. The orientation towards the ground that Melody Jue and Rafico Ruiz call a “terrestrial bias” (Jue and Ruiz 2021, 12) produces environmental imagination that is situated terrestrially. Although water is an intense site and agent in shaping current and future planetary conditions, the prevailing geologic Anthropocene narrative tends to obscure these hydrological forces. This is why in their collection *Thinking with Water* Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod and Astrida Neimanis, bring water to the forefront in the engagement with eco-political questions. They suggest that sensing the presence of water in all aspects of our life is a way to find more “inclusive politics and invigorated practice of cultural theory” (Chen, MacLeod and Neimanis, 2013, 5). Informed by these critical insights I now turn to one series in which water plays a prominent role, bringing to the surface the relationality between its material flowing and the social and cultural forms that emerge from and with it.

Water, art activism and public awareness in the Danish family drama *The Legacy*

Loosely labeled as a “family noir” (Hochscherf and Philipsen, 2017, 169) Danish television drama *The Legacy / Arvingerne* (2014-2017) portrays the life of four adult children of a famous artist Veronica Grønnegaard, who come together after Veronika’s sudden passing. All damaged, in various ways and to different degrees, they don’t always get on with one another, but beneath the squabbling there always remains a strong familial bond. While the family tribulations drive the narrative throughout, its last, third part contains a plot line which explicitly focuses on water as being central to issues of social justice, as much as issues of environmental concern.

This subplot revolves around the daughter of the eldest brother Frederick, Hanna, – a leader of a young artist collective who work to activate and to embody a sensibility for human-water interdependency in the context of ecological crisis. The story starts with the vernissage of the collective’s first multi-media installation at the

prestigious Copenhagen Art Hall. We see a large industrially looking space illuminated by soft sea blue light and on the walls – video displays of schools of small fish frozen in ice, ice lumps floating in a glass water tank, formations of crushed ice driven by streaming water, and a human face submerged in clear water exhaling air bubbles. One of the artists, Inuit poet Malik, steps, barefoot, in a pool of water on a low stage with the images of melting ice in the background. He starts reciting: “The house I don’t have, kills me ... when I cross the ice virtually...”

Quiet music plays, on the opposite stage a girl in a white kimono gracefully moves and sings, spellbound, against the backdrop of streaming water. Hanna circulates the space recording the audience’s reactions. The viewing is suddenly interrupted when a group of Inuit people appear with barking husky dogs on a leash. Frederick hurries to evict the uninvited guests, gets into a scuffle with Malik’s inebriated uncle and hits Malik who tries to intercede. Lights are switched on, the security steps in to remove the intruders from the building. When the performance resumes we watch rain falling on the dancing girl whose kimono gradually dissolves revealing her naked body. She slowly crouches down and behind her, the scandalized audience sees the detailed recording of their participation in the violent incident that just happened.

What I am interested in here is the emphasis the exhibition puts on water’s expressivity, its saturating and gathering qualities, and in how it brings into focus the watery worlds human beings are dwelling. Astrida Neimanis notes, “Just like bodies of water, stories are rarely autochthonous; they usually begin in many places at once, with many unspoken debts” (Neimanis 2017, 8). Here we witness the intertwining of stories and debts Neimanis writes about, – disconnecting the characters (and viewers) from a stable ground of terrestrial weight, the matter flow of water invokes the imaginaries of damaged landscapes, drawing attention to individual and collective bodies’ entanglement with, and responsibility for climate change but also metaphorizing the unmooring and incessant flux of Greenlandic people (and animals) brought about by the Danish post-colonial regimes. In other words, by staging embodied encounters with water the artistic installation and performance unveil both the cultural and the biological, chemical, and ecological implications of what Neimanis calls the “watery embodiment” (Neima-

nis 2017, 3). The episode also shows that hydro-sensibility is not easily achieved as the selected party of invitees are only prepared to value aesthetic dimensions of the art work refusing to recognize themselves as subjects partially dissolved and continuous with their aqueous environment.

Denied the exhibition space as a consequence of the scandal, shortly after Hanna tragically dies in Greenland on a mission against a mining company who have falsified their permits to release extremely toxic materials into the ocean. Yet, the collective perseveres undertaking an attempt to intervene in the local borough's plans to sell their water supplies to a private company. To raise public awareness of the impacts of this decision the group infiltrate the water distribution facility and inject (harmless) red colorant into the network, while broadcasting a phone message about the local authorities' concealed intentions. The next morning farmers find "rusty" water flowing in the drinking troughs and spraying over crops through irrigation sprinklers, the local gym has to close the canteen, red water fills the commemorative bird bath in Grønnegaard's private garden, and the elder sister Gro wakes up to find her hair turned bright red after having taken a shower in a dark bathroom the previous night. When the police arrive to the Grønnegaard estate to arrest the resident artists the front yard is covered with clothes dyed in different shades of red.⁵ The dyed fabric can be read as symbolizing water's fluidity and its ability to saturate, impregnate and discolor, each shade expressing singular material interactions. But this deliberate articulation of water on non-aqueous tissue also urges us to think about what water actually means to the people in the neighborhood, apart from the practical inconveniences they momentarily experience.

Geographer Jamie Linton writes, in a somewhat provocative manner, "Water is what we make of it" (Linton 2010, 14). Rather than treating water as a cluster of molecules or a functional resource, Linton proffers an idea that water, at any point in history, must be understood in the relationality between the material flowing and the social and cultural forms that emerge from and with it. In other words, what water is cannot be disentangled from how we imaginatively produce it. The colored textiles suggest a kind of togetherness, a tentative community. While different shades of red stand for myriads of practical but also spiritual connections indi-

vidual people might have with water, this display also emphasizes human interrelatedness through the watery qualities of their bodies. Serving as a protective layer, close to the human skin the clothes laid out in the yard, invite for a new kind of imaginative construction, – shifting attention from external uses of water to internal ones, interlinking our watery bodies with other bodies of water around us. In this, the art piece is evocative of Neimanis’s contention that “in an ocular-centric culture ... membranes, like our human skin, give the illusion of impermeability. Still, we perspire, urinate, ingest, ejaculate, menstruate, lactate, breathe, cry. We take in the world, selectively, and send it flooding back out again” (Neimanis 2012, 106). Through water, our connectivity to the world comes into sharper focus. As Neimanis argues, and the series’ episode implies, the waters we drink are the same waters we pollute with the toxins of our industries; the waters we urinate are washed back to the seas along with the chemicals our bodies consumed. The waters outside us are the same as the waters inside. Our bodies are already implicated in the circulation of water and its contamination.

Although it would be too optimistic to assume that this becomes immediately clear to the different members of the community (or the viewers) the series ends with yet another watery assemblage, illuminating our and others’ bodies as part of the same stream and circulation in which we flow. The last episode of *The Legacy* concentrates on Gro Grønnegaard’s own art project set in and around the familial home. We see clear water flooding the floors of the house while the entire family, donning ocean blue shirts, sit in the middle of the space barefooted, each family member holding a huge frozen fish in their lap. They are surrounded by standing neighbors also clothed in blue. While this formation is being photographed, the audience outside the house watch a succession of water images projected on the façade and superimposed by the real water steadily streaming down the wall.

Once more, in this episode, the family and community are united through the ever present flow and flush of waters that sustain each individual body but also connect all bodies (and not necessarily human) thorough their shared, material and conceptual, wateriness.

The series ultimately demonstrates how engaging with water’s aesthetic dimensions and expressivity might help us find alternative modes of ecological engagement. The art projects offer a per-

spective of a radical collectivity, connecting human bodies of water to the watery planet through a fluid continuum. In its flows between and through matter, bodies and borders water allows for a way of thinking in which the differentiation between outside and inside loses its meaning, the boundaries between self and other dissolve and our seemingly individually protected selves, sealed off in our skins become continuous with our environment.

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Notes

- 1 The consistent pursuit of an ecologically conscious societal model is illustrated by the 2017 Nordic Council of Ministers' campaign Nordic Solutions to Global Challenges which ascribes a great significance to the long-term environmental cooperation between the partners (Nordic Council of Ministers 2017). Internationally, Norden's reputation as environmental forerunner is supported by the fact that already in 1972, Sweden took the initiative to host the first United Nations conference on environmental issues in Stockholm. However, the above discourse stands in opposition to the extensive exploitation of natural resources by the Nordic countries to maintain their welfare infrastructures. It is remarkable, for instance, that Sweden is ranked, by the World Wide Fund for Nature, at number ten in the list of the most resource demanding and polluting countries in the world (WWF 2014, 35). The long-standing reliance of Norwegian economy on the trade in fossil fuels, in turn, feeds into the public feelings of what Ellen Rees calls "petro-guilt that is a by-product of the collision between a social democratic ideology predicated on solidarity, equality and democracy, and the enormous wealth generated by the offshore oil and gas industry" (Rees 2016, 45).
- 2 For a discussion of the ways television drama can influence audiences' understanding of how the world works and what it will become, see Saunders 2017.

- 3 A similar idea is employed in the credit sequence of the political thriller *Borgen - Power and Glory* (Denmark/Netflix, 2021), where the aerial shots of the Arctic ocean are juxtaposed with an image of water literally rising above the protagonist Birgitta Nyborg's head. Interestingly, water reappears on the plot level in the concluding part of the series, when the risk of destabilizing the particular chemical composition of Arctic water and causing damage to its fragile ecosystem is used by the Danish government as a last-minute argument against a large-scale oil extraction project in Greenland.
- 4 For further discussions of the water imagery in *Follow the Money* see Bruhn 2018, 70; and in *Occupied* – Bruhn 2018, 70-71, and Mrozewicz, 2020, 86-87.
- 5 Apart from being culturally coded as alarming, the color red also connects this installation with the artists' earlier attempt to make visible the contamination of oceanic waters by the toxic waste. During that particular action, they dye a school of dead fish red and dump it into the water in front of the mining company's flagship.