

Special Issue:
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Environmental Change in Nordic Fiction

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TONI LAHTINEN AND JUHA RAIPOLA (HELSINKI AND TAMPERE) ON:

Introduction to the Special Issue: Environmental Change in Nordic Fiction, pp. 36–39.

DANIEL CHARTIER (MONTRÉAL) ON:

The Traditional Sources of Lana Hansen's Greenlandic Environmental Commitment, pp. 40–59.

HENNING HOWLID WÆRP (TROMSØ) ON:

Knut Hamsun's *Segelfoss* Books. A Green Criticism of the Consumer Society?, pp. 60–71.

MARKKU LEHTIMÄKI (TURKU) ON:

Fictional Minds in Natural Environments: Changing Ecologies, Human Experiences, and Textual Designs in Ulla Lena Lundberg's *Ice*, pp. 72–88.

PER ESBEN MYREN-SVELSTAD (TRONDHEIM) ON:

Anthropocene Melancholy. Uncanny Familiarity in Contemporary Norwegian Long Poems, pp. 89–107.

THORUNN GULLAKSEN ENDRESON (OSLO):

Climate Change and the Carnavalesque in Erlend O. Nødtvedt's *Vestlandet*, pp. 108–128.

Thorunn Gullaksen Endreson (Oslo):

Climate Change and the Carnavalesque in Erlend O. Nødtvedt's *Vestlandet*

Abstract

Norwegian contemporary climate fiction often portrays humans as in denial of climate change.¹ In Erlend Nødtvedt's transgressive novel *Vestlandet* (2017), an alternative story is presented. In contrast to conventional climate change denial, the two protagonists turn the situation upside down and literally celebrate death and climate change and the exceptional Western Norwegian »sublime« landscape. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of laughter and the carnivalesque, I will investigate *Vestlandet* as a response to a world in climate crisis, and thereby transcending the ecocritical reluctance to engage with laughter. Environmental humor offers an alternative vision, a possibility to see ourselves from another perspective. *Vestlandet* contributes to the creation of new climate change narratives and communicates potential for change, but there is no guarantee that laughter will lead to increased awareness and action.

Zusammenfassung

In der zeitgenössischen norwegischen Klimaliteratur wird der Mensch oft als Leugner des Klimawandels dargestellt. In Erlend Nødtvedts transgressivem Roman *Vestlandet* (2017) wird eine alternative Geschichte präsentiert. Im Gegensatz zur herkömmlichen Leugnung des Klimawandels stellen die beiden Protagonisten die Situation auf den Kopf und feiern buchstäblich den Tod, den Klimawandel und die außergewöhnliche westnorwegische »erhabene« Landschaft. In Anlehnung an Mikhail Bakhtins Konzept des Lachens und des Karnevalesken werde ich *Vestlandet* als Antwort auf eine Welt in der Klimakrise untersuchen und dabei die ökokritische Zurückhaltung gegenüber dem Lachen überwinden. Umwelthumor bietet eine alternative Vision, eine Möglichkeit, uns selbst aus einer anderen Perspektive zu sehen. *Vestlandet* trägt zur Schaffung neuer Erzählungen über den Klimawandel bei und vermittelt das Potenzial für Veränderungen, gibt aber keine Garantie dafür, dass Lachen zu mehr Bewusstsein und Handeln führt.

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¹ For a detailed analysis, see Endreson, Bjørkdahl & Lykke 2017.

In the introductory chapter of *Rabelais and His World* (1984), Mikhail Bakhtin presents the world of the carnival in medieval Europe, a world where rules, restrictions, and inhibitions are abolished, and everything is turned upside down. The hierarchy of the society is suspended, the sacred is parodied, the high and the low interact, and everything is filled with a feeling of change and renewal. The medieval carnival tradition eventually disappeared, but the spirit of the carnival metamorphosed into literary form, into carnivalesque literature, which was »deeply penetrated by the carnival spirit«,² adopting its forms and symbols. The carnivalesque style of expression is dynamic, demanding »ever changing, playful, undefined forms, with the sense of gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities«.³ The logic of the »inside out«⁴, of the »turnabout«⁵ prevails, the world is shown upside down. An important aspect of the carnivalesque is the material-bodily level, where excess and grotesqueness preside. Eating and drinking is a joyful and triumphant act, where »[man] triumphs over the world without being devoured himself«.⁶

During the Renaissance, according to Bakhtin, laughter was regarded as universal and philosophical and had its rightful place in the higher genres:

Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint. Therefore, laughter is just as admissible in great literature, posing universal problems, as seriousness. Certain essential aspects of the world are assessable only to laughter.⁷

Bakhtin emphasizes the complexity of carnival laughter. First, it is not merely an individual laughter; it is not directed towards a specific comic episode. Moreover, it is universal, directed at everyone and towards the comic aspect of the entire world. Lastly, laughter is ambivalent: it is gay and triumphant, but also ridiculing.

However, at the dawn of the seventeenth century, the meaning of laughter changed; it was now seen as individual and inferior, downgraded to the low genres of literature: »the essential truth about the world and about man cannot be told in the language of laughter«.⁸ No longer could important issues be comical. Is it now, in our time of climate change, a time to reconsider the value of laughter?

Laughter, Ecocriticism, and Climate Change

Laughter is more or less absent within the field of ecocriticism. In »Ecocritical Approaches to Literary Form and Genre« (2014), Richard Kerridge presents a list of what a book can do, along with which genres are best suited to

² Bakhtin 1984, p. 11.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 281.

⁷ Ibid., p. 66.

⁸ Ibid., p. 67.

Climate Change and the Carnavalesque in Erlend O. Nødtvedt's *Vestlandet*

which purposes. He suggests that realistic novels and confessional lyric poetry seem to be the genres best equipped to explore people's current reactions and evasions in our time of climate change. Even utopian eco-fiction must, according to Kerridge, contain »a strong element of literary realism«. ⁹ There is certainly no space in his taxonomy for Nødtvedt's *Vestlandet* (2017), a (partly) unrealistic and poetic road novel, mixing laughter and apocalypse. Nor does this rather »unclean« novel fit his description of the apocalyptic road novel, which attempts to »shock and scare« ¹⁰ us deeply. His call for »stark realist representations« are countered by Timothy Clark, in »Nature, Post Nature« (2014), where he argues that »the main artistic implication of trying to represent the Anthropocene must be a deep suspicion of any traditionally realist aesthetic«. ¹¹ Even if representing the Anthropocene and representing climate change is not necessarily the same thing, neither Kerridge nor Clark speaks up for environmental humor, satire, or comedy.

There are a few exceptions. In »Are You Serious? A Modest Proposal for Environmental Humor« (2014), Michael P. Branch makes a case for environmental humour: »it offers a salutary opportunity to momentarily transcend the limits of our usual vision, to view ourselves in a new way – to see ourselves, perhaps, as others see us«. ¹² He argues that the »ecocritical hesitancy to laugh« ¹³ has affected which texts we study and made us neglect interesting texts. In a more recent article, Massih Zekavat concurs with Branch, claiming that environmental satire can »raise environmental awareness«. ¹⁴ However, as opposed to satire, which aims at laughing at others, the laughter of the medieval period, the people's laughter, was ambivalent and universal, expressing the viewpoint of the entire world: »he who is laughing also belongs to it«, as opposed to the modern satirist, who mocks and positions »himself above the object of his mockery.« ¹⁵

In a recent and noteworthy book-length study, *Bad Environmentalism* (2018), Nicole Seymour examines a number of »unserious« texts and other cultural forms in order to challenge and expand our presumably narrow understanding of environmentalism. In line with Branch, she argues that »it is not that environmentalist artworks that engage with and employ irony, absurdity, and so forth are necessarily so rare. But they may go unrecognized as environmentalist, due to environmentalism's prevailing reputation for seriousness, sentimentality, and the like.« ¹⁶ Although Seymour addresses popular cultural expressions and focuses on sentiments such as playfulness, absurdity, irreverence, frivolity, and laughter, she somewhat surprisingly does not mention Bakhtin and the carnivalesque. And, her main focus is on other cultural utterances than the novel, such as cinema, television, and performance art. While I

⁹ Kerridge 2014, p. 372.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Clark 2014, p. 81.

¹² Branch 2014, p. 378.

¹³ Ibid., p. 381.

¹⁴ Zekavat 2019, p. 369.

¹⁵ Bakhtin 1984, p. 12.

¹⁶ Seymour 2018, p. 32.

concur with Seymour's reminder of the »[u]nlimited imaginative possibilities of an era facing some of the most troubling limits we have ever known«,¹⁷ several ecocritics, including myself,¹⁸ argue that the novel holds a »privileged position«. ¹⁹ As Adam Trexler claims, the novel can produce meaning in »unique ways. The imaginative capacities of the novel have made it a vital site for the articulation of the Anthropocene«. ²⁰ This is in line with Mehnert's argument that the novel is »particularly well-suited« to give meaning to the »elusive and abstract character of climate change«. ²¹ However, neither Trexler, Mehnert, nor Bracke makes a case for laughter; they focus on other genres, mainly the realistic novel and science fiction.

Within Norwegian literary fiction, climate change is predominantly addressed in realist novels, often portraying humans as in denial of climate change. ²² Erlend Nødtvedt's *Vestlandet*, which has not so far attracted any interest from ecocritics, is an exception. In this article, I will analyze how climate change, as represented by extreme weather and the storm Vegard, is celebrated, challenged, and laughed at, conveying a humorous aspect of the world. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of laughter and the carnivalesque, I will do a close reading of the novel to investigate how environmental humor offers an alternative vision, a possibility to see ourselves from another perspective, and finally, ask what this perspective actually implies. Is laughter an »appropriate« response to a world in climate crisis? Does laughter raise environmental awareness? By analyzing a neglected genre and using Bakhtin and the carnivalesque as a background theory, I address a lacuna in (Norwegian) ecocriticism.

After a short presentation of *Vestlandet*, as well as the »carnavalesque« form of Nødtvedt's novel, the article is structured around central aspects of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of laughter and the carnivalesque: the logic of the inside out, the universality of laughter, the material-bodily aspects of the carnivalesque, the festive chaos of the carnival, the liberating and subversive potential of laughter, and lastly, the ambivalence of laughter. In a final section, I will discuss what carnivalesque laughter brings to the table of climate fiction.

***Vestlandet* – an Introduction**

In *Vestlandet*, the narrator Erlend, resembling the author himself, and his close companion Yngve, an artist, embark on a road trip in Yngve's ramshackle, old Camry from the city of Bergen to Lærdal and the famous yearly market. In an alcohol-fuelled parody of a pilgrimage, their quest is to return the skull, a relic, of Western Norway's legendary partisan and martyr Anders Lysne to its rightful place, his native soil in the Western Norwegian village of Lærdal. Details of the history of Anders Lysne, which is based on a true story, gradually trickle through the narrative. During the late 18th century, Lysne and other men from Lærdal were employed to maintain the roads, which were often

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁸ See Endreson, Bjørkdahl & Lykke 2017.

¹⁹ Bracke 2019, p. 7.

²⁰ Trexler 2015, p. 23.

²¹ Mehnert 2016, p. 228.

²² See for example Endreson, Bjørkdahl & Lykke 2017.

Climate Change and the Carnavalesque in Erlend O. Nødtvedt's *Vestlandet*

exposed to rockslides, and in return, they were exempted from military service. When the authorities went back on their word, Lysne headed a revolt and was arrested by soldiers, and eventually beheaded in Bergen in 1803. Erlend and Yngve do not only want to make amends for Lysne's misfortune, but also prevent Lysne's skull from being exhibited in Oslo, Norway's capital, which they consider the epicenter of the despised Eastern Norway, with its technocracy and its dull landscape. In a more or less intoxicated condition, the two protagonists cross the limits of human imagination to recreate and map out the *genius loci* of Western Norway: its landscape, its ancient roads, and its artists, creating an antithesis to the values they assign to Eastern Norway. While the narrator Erlend writes, Yngve paints. Climate change – or rather symptoms of climate change – is present throughout the novel, as more or less constant extreme weather and the continuous threat of the storm Vegard. As they reach the famous yearly market in Lærdal, Vegard strikes with full force and ruins the whole village of Lærdal. In spite of the dangerous weather, the protagonists leave the market in their Camry, and in a final apocalyptic natural disaster caused by the storm, they are killed by an avalanche, whereupon the narrator is reborn.

Measured against the conventions of the road novel, which usually is set in a realistic universe and written in prose, the novel stands out thanks to its hybrid form. The narrative of the novel is set in a partly realistic, partly mythical and surrealistic universe. We follow Erlend and Yngve on the road between Bergen and Lærdal through the first-person narration of Erlend, but the narrative perspective occasionally changes as other voices take over Erlend's voice in dreamlike sequences. Hence, the narrator's voice is far from an authoritative monologic voice but tends towards a Bakhtinian dialogic form.²³ Although the narrative is presented chronologically, following their route, temporal transgressions take place intermittently. The novel is structured in chapters following the itinerary of the journey. The titles of the chapters consist of the names of the places they are passing. The distance through the Eastern part of Norway is merely a blank page, a void or lacuna in the text, with only a note of the distance.

The Carnavalesque Form of *Vestlandet*

Evidently, the form of the (realistic) road novel is turned upside down in *Vestlandet*. In the same way as the two (anti)heroes thrive on resistance, the novel itself thrives on an active resistance against the standard form of the novel. In a carnivalesque style, the text is dynamic, »ever changing, playful«,²⁴ frequently appearing like a fabric where threads of the canon of Western Norwegian literature are woven into the speech of the narrator, in visionary, dreamlike sequences, fuelled by excessive intake of alcohol. In temporal transgressions, the boundaries between the present and the past, the dead and the living, and between reality and dream become blurred. The only clear border in the novel is the border between Eastern and Western Norway. Dreamlike sequences are woven seamlessly into the narrative. The novel capitalizes on the rich literary inheritance of Western Norway, with numerous

²³ See Bakhtin 1981.

²⁴ Bakhtin 1984, p. 11.

intertextual references to Western Norwegian poets and authors.²⁵ The high and the low interact, as when magic, lyrical sequences give way to parodic and/or obscene scenes and anecdotes.

The language in the novel fluctuates between the two languages of Norway, Norwegian (*bokmål*) and New Norwegian (*nynorsk*). Frequently the dialect changes within the same sentence, and sometimes even the Danish-influenced language of the historic high official, associated with Eastern Norway and *Austmannen*, appears. On page 186, the narrator has had enough of the »repulsive bookish language«²⁶ (*bokmål*), and the remainder of the novel is written in New Norwegian: »[T]his language is not working anymore, I am no longer able to write the language of the public servants, I can no longer employ this commercial language, this thoroughly false language of power.«²⁷ Mirroring the wild and untamed nature described in the novel, the novel itself appears wild and untamed, challenging the boundaries of the genre. The novel ends with a poem, but now the poem is not integrated into the prose or the text, but it stands alone; the novel eventually dissolves completely into poetry in a final resistance against the form of the novel.

Vestlandet does not only refer to Western Norwegian authors. The playful and adventurous road trip of the two companions and their car suggests a kinship with Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605/15). Bakhtin frequently refers to *Don Quixote*, where he finds that the carnival spirit still reigned. The carnivalesque character of Nødtvedt's novel is accentuated by a number of intertextual references to Cervantes' Renaissance novel, as when Yngve, as usual, intoxicated by alcohol, believes he has been visiting a castle.²⁸ Erlend, with the help of his friend and their old and ramshackle but beloved car, appears as a modern and Western Norwegian *Don Quixote*. The Camry trots like a horse, emphasizing the Rosinante motif: »The Camry might not be as unaffected as we first assumed, the whole car is vibrating, keeping stroke with our own trembling, as we trot into Eidfjord in our nicotine yellow Rosinante.«²⁹ In a similar fashion to Rosinante, the car turns out to be a character in its own right, accentuated by the fact that Yngve refills the windscreen wiper fluid tank with gin and water. Together they fight against the manifestation of climate change, Vegard, resembling *Don Quixote's* fight against windmills.³⁰ In a playful twist of Cervantes', as well as Nødtvedt's, narrative, the Rosinante of *Vestlandet* ends up being the real hero of the tale. As it turns out, the quest to return Anders Lysne's skull to its rightful place is just a pretext. The real reason for writing the novel, the

²⁵ Aasmund Olavsson Vinje, Per Sivle, Olav Nygard, Olav H. Hauge, and Jon Fosse are only some examples.

²⁶ »heslige bokmålet« (Nødtvedt 2017, p. 186).

²⁷ »dette språket duger ikke lenger, jeg kan ikke lenger skrive embetsmenneskes språk, kan ikke lenger bruke dette reklamespråket, dette gjennomfalske maktspråket« (Ibid., p. 185).

²⁸ See *ibid.*, pp. 114–115.

²⁹ »Camryen er kanskje ikke like uberørt som vi først antok, hele bilen vibrerer i takt med våre egne skjelvninger når vi lunter inn i Eidfjord i vår nikotingule Rosinante.« (Ibid., p. 157)

³⁰ The *Don Quixote* motif also occurs in another rare example of Norwegian humorous environmental fiction, Brit Bildøen's novel *Adam Hiorts veg* from 2011. In Bildøen's narrative, the anti-hero Jon Utskott, referred to as a modern *Don Quixote*, and his Sancho Panza (Adam Hiort) travel on a bike – Rosinante – from the Eastern part of Norway to the Western part in order to fight for the environment. While in Bildøen's novel the protagonist is fighting for the environment in a parodic, but earnest struggle, Nødtvedt's heroes, Erlend and Yngve, embrace the extreme weather and the natural disasters, doing nothing to try to change the course of climate change.

Climate Change and the Carnavalesque in Erlend O. Nødtvedt's *Vestlandet*

narrator realizes towards the end of the road trip, is to immortalize »Yngve Pedersen's nicotine-yellow, Texas-imported Toyota Camry from 1986 [...]. Western Norway, Anders Lysne, everything else is just a pretense.«³¹ In line with the logic of the carnival, everything is turned upside down.

The Logic of the »Inside Out« or the World Upside Down

In Bakhtin's spirit of the carnival, the world stands on its head – everything is turned upside down and inside out. This logic of the »inside out« penetrates *Vestlandet*. The attentive reader gets a signal of this logic even before opening the book. The cover depicts a painting of Yngve's hero, the Western Norwegian painter J.C. Dahl, from Bergen.³² The painting presented on the cover is titled *Fra Stalheim* (»View from Stalheim«) and is considered to be a major Norwegian national romantic work. The mountains are depicted as wild and beautiful – more sublime than beautiful really – making the more idyllic and picturesque motive in the foreground, a cluster of small houses and people in national costumes, vulnerable to the wild forces of nature.³³ However, the painting is shown upside down, and thereby serves as a forewarning of the carnivalesque quality of the novel. As a paratext, the painting on the cover is of special significance. Genette describes paratexts, these framing elements of the text, as »thresholds« of interpretation, as »a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text.«³⁴ The cover of *Vestlandet* is literally an illustration of a world that stands on its head and signals a different perspective on the world. During the road trip, Erlend and Yngve actually make a stop at Stalheim, in the exact spot where the »sublime«³⁵ panoramic view depicted in Dahl's painting can be seen. Yngve, in a carnivalesque manner, prefers to turn his back to the (or any) iconic view – a shift from »front to rear«,³⁶ as Bakhtin articulates the movement.

In another paratext, the back cover of the novel, we observe the narrator Erlend and his artist companion posing with the car and the skull of Anders Lysne. Erlend is smoking and Yngve is drinking. The *memento mori* motif emphasizes the theme of the painting on the front cover, but the untraditional setting and merry atmosphere signal an ambivalence, negating the gloom of the skull. In a carnivalesque manner, they keep up a festive approach to a world in climate crisis.

The novel is filled with incidents of things turning, with change and renewal. Their first stop is in Ulvik, to visit one of the most famous Norwegian poets, Olav H. Hauge (1908–1994). Approaching their hotel, the white building has turned dark brown, and the nearby mountain has changed into a fjord. As they return to their hotel after a surreal, alcohol-fuelled encounter with the dead poet, the hotel has magically turned white again, and the mountain

³¹ »Yngve Pedersens nikotingule, texasimporterte Toyota Camry fra 1986 [...]. Vestlandet, Anders Lysne, alt det andre er bare påskudd.« (Nødtvedt 2017, p. 158)

³² J.C. Dahl is regarded one of the most outstanding painters in the history of Norwegian art and also one of Europe's most significant Romantic painters.

³³ See Burke 2008.

³⁴ Genette 1997, p. 2.

³⁵ Nødtvedt 2017, p. 34.

³⁶ Bakhtin 1984, p. 11.

is resurrected. The narrator and his friend often do not seem to know whether they are living in the present or the past, in reality or dream. Waiting in front of Hauge's small red house for the poet to appear, the two companions apparently do not know that Hauge is dead, and wonder why all the furniture is covered with sheets.

Hauge's most famous poem »It's the Dream« is alluded to several times, emblematic of the frequent turn from reality to dream to within the novel. At one (turning) point, as Erlend and Yngve realize that wet snow has blocked the Camry's tail pipe, the reality of their adventurous road trip is undermined:

What is outside comes inside. [...] Is all of it an exhaust-driven, beer-assisted hallucination, are we actually on the bottom of the Sognefjord, or do we lie in a cider-coma on the ice-cold floor in Olav H. Hauge's dark cellar, maybe it is the mold in the bedroom at home in Bergen that has occupied the brain and triggered this whole burlesque damp fantasy.³⁷

The novel might be envisioned as merely a dream, a fantasy, in which only the logic of the »inside out« applies. However, the protagonists soon realize that their road trip is real when representatives of the highway authorities appear to tell them the road is impassable. The ultimate and last turn happens when the narrator is reborn after he is killed by a rockslide caused by Vegard. Hauge's »It's the Dream«³⁸ is now actually played out: time opens up, the mountain opens up, the dream finally opens to the *genius loci* of Western Norway. Apocalypse has metamorphosed into utopia or Western Norway; for the narrator, that is the same thing. In the carnivalesque universe of the novel, the apocalyptic end entails a new beginning. By challenging Vegard, the manifestation of climate change, the narrator experiences a happy ending. Normally such hubris would result in a tragic fall. However, the world is shown upside down.

The Universality of Laughter

Carnavalesque laughter is universal, directed at everyone and towards the comic aspect of the entire world: »The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity.«³⁹ The universalism of laughter implies that

[o]nly relative seriousness is possible [...] Even the lines which in a different context or taken separately would be completely serious [...] acquire in their context an overtone of laughter; the reflexes of surrounding comic images react on them. The aspect of laughter is universal and embraces everything.⁴⁰

³⁷ »Det som er ute kommer inn. [...] Er det hele en eksosdreven, ølassistert hallusinasjon, er vi i virkeligheten på bunnen av Sognefjorden, eller ligger vi i siderkoma på det iskald gulvet i den mørke kjelleren til Olav H. Hauge, kanskje er det muggsoppen på soverommet hjemme i Bergen som har tatt bolig i hjernen og utløst hele denne burleske fuktfantasien.« (Ibid., p. 159)

³⁸ »It's that dream that we carry with us / that something wonderful will happen, / that it has to happen – / that time will open, / that the heart will open, / that doors will open / that the mountains will open, / that wells will leap up – / that the dream will open, / that one morning we'll slip in / to a harbour that we've never known.« (Hauge 2008, p. 65)

³⁹ Bakhtin 1984, p. 11.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 135.

Climate Change and the Carnavalesque in Erlend O. Nødtvedt's *Vestlandet*

Climate change is definitely a serious matter, but in *Vestlandet*, climate change, appearing as various local manifestations,⁴¹ is tinged with laughter. In the novel, climate change is represented through extreme weather and the continuous threat of the storm Vegard. The weather – more or less always heavy rain – is constantly present, introduced as early as the second sentence: »The wind pushes the rain, the perpetual drumming against the wind-screen«. ⁴² The raindrops seem like an army, »the world's wettest, slowest, strongest army«, ⁴³ and is trying to invade them: »What is outside, wants to get inside«⁴⁴ is repeated regularly, like a refrain, emblematic of the carnivalesque logic of the inside out, of the turnabout. Accordingly, the road signs, which are scarcely visible »through the wall of rain«, ⁴⁵ seem like they are turned around. »The rumbling sound from distant rock slides«⁴⁶ joins forces with the rain. In the context of the carnivalesque spirit of the novel, the serious environmental threats which permeate the narrative appear festive; »laughter is universal and embraces everything«. ⁴⁷ Eventually, the rainstorm turns into a character with a name: »Vegard is on his way. The storm that shall devour everything.«⁴⁸ On the radio, Vegard is announced as »a historical low pressure system«, ⁴⁹ but while people are preparing for the worst, securing their belongings and seeking shelter, the protagonists of the novel turn the situation upside down and celebrate the resistance created by Vegard, seeking out the worst possible route: »The path of most resistance! More resistance! More! Good luck, dear Camry!«. ⁵⁰ Reports of a landslide are received with exclamations of joy. They are aware that Vegard will eventually catch them and wish them »good night forever«, ⁵¹ but before they are devoured by Vegard, they are determined to enjoy themselves as much as possible. »[T]he oppressive, claustrophobic horror of actually being inside«⁵² global warming described by Morton does not apply to our two protagonists. They are fascinated and uplifted by this local manifestation of climate change.

Throughout the novel, nature – in particular the weather and Vegard – is presented in antagonistic opposition to humans. As in the example mentioned above, war imagery is frequently used in the depiction of rain. The »army of rain« has a »strategy«⁵³ and is presented as a »superior force«. ⁵⁴ Erlend and Yngve try to »understand what

⁴¹ Timothy Morton labels climate change, or global warming, a »hyperobject«: »things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans« (Morton 2013, p. 1). Hyperobjects are nonlocal, meaning that »any local ›manifestation‹ of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject« (Ibid.). Extreme weather is one such local manifestation of climate change.

⁴² »Vinden skyver regnet, den uavlatelige trommingen mot frontruten.« (Nødtvedt 2017, p. 9)

⁴³ »verdens våtteste, sakteste, sterkeste hær« (Ibid.)

⁴⁴ »Det som er ute, vil inn.« (Ibid.)

⁴⁵ »gjennom regnveggen« (Ibid.)

⁴⁶ »Drønn fra fjerne steinras« (Ibid.)

⁴⁷ Bakhtin 1984, p. 135.

⁴⁸ »Vegard er på vei. Stormen som skal sluke alt.« (Nødtvedt 2017, p. 147)

⁴⁹ »et historisk lavtrykk« (Ibid., p. 145)

⁵⁰ »Meste motstands vei! Mer motstand! Mer! Lykke til, kjære Camry!« (Ibid., p. 147)

⁵¹ »god natt for alltid« (Ibid., p. 146)

⁵² Morton 2013, p. 132.

⁵³ »regnhærens strategi« (Nødtvedt 2017, p. 130)

⁵⁴ »overmakten er for kraftig« (Ibid.)

makes the army of rain launch an attack at exactly this spot.⁵⁵ Even if the two protagonists are not afraid, the use of war imagery depicts humans as helpless against the »forces« of nature. This antagonistic opposition of nature and culture is an idea that has prevailed since the Enlightenment and is still dominant in Norwegian climate change narratives.⁵⁶ However, in *Vestlandet*, the nature-culture dichotomy is a laughing matter. Again, laughter is universal. It embraces everything.

Far from being in a state of denial, Erlend remarks: Imagine, »this is the way it is going to turn out. [...] It will quite simply be too much, neither the land nor the fjords nor the waterfalls nor the rivers will be able to absorb those amounts [of water].«⁵⁷ However, for Nødtvedt's heroes, the changing of the landscape due to extreme weather is not merely a result of the climate change, but also a regular feature of Western Norwegian wild nature. The landscape is described as dynamic. As they pass Mostraumen, a narrow strait of the fjord, Erlend comments on how Mostraumen has changed during the centuries; a flood occurring in 1743 altered the landscape completely. He expects to see a lot of changes in the landscape in the near future, cheering on Vegard – »Vegard! Come on, Vegard! Vegard!«⁵⁸ – and challenging, celebrating, and embracing climate change. A prelude to the actual text of the novel, another relevant paratext, or pretext, accentuates the dynamics of the landscape. In an excerpt from a journey in 1696 (a diary or a letter), the governor U. F. Gyldenløve notes that a rockslide was causing the river – she⁵⁹ – to become constipated and then to swell and grow, resulting in fields, meadows and houses being flooded. Gyldenløve had to take a detour due to the »horrible rockslides«, which caused »inexpressibly severe damage«.⁶⁰ In the universe of the novel, the landscape is and has always been dynamic; natural disasters are presented as normal, events that occur regularly and in line with the Western Norwegian temperament. At one point, Erlend and Yngve had to take a long detour due to a rock slide. On their way to seek help after they get trapped in a tunnel, they meet a tough and colorful female character, the bear-killer Eline. She tells them about several serious natural disasters that have occurred in that area. In 1868, 150 people were wiped out. Like Erlend and Yngve, she is not afraid: »I walk in the mountains and observe the cracks and how the amount of water increases. Well, sooner or later, the whole lot shall fall down, it doesn't weigh me down.«⁶¹ It's no problem living in The Last Days, I think.«⁶² Thus she acknowledges that people in Western Norway always have been living under dangerous conditions.

⁵⁵ »forstå hva som får regnhæren til å sette inn sin offensiv på dette stedet«. (Ibid.)

⁵⁶ See Endreson, Bjørkdahl & Syse 2017.

⁵⁷ »det er slik det skal bli. [...] Det blir rett og slett for mye, verken landet eller fjordene eller fossene eller elvene kan ta unna de [vann]mengdene der.« (Nødtvedt 2017, p. 131)

⁵⁸ »Vegard! Kom igjen, Vegard! Vegard!« (Ibid., p. 148)

⁵⁹ Not surprisingly, the river is gendered as a female. On the projection of female imagery onto the landscape, see e. g. Kolodny 1975 or Merchant 1980.

⁶⁰ »usigelig stor skade« (Nødtvedt 2017, p. 7)

⁶¹ As in Olav H. Hauge's poem »Under bergfallet« (»Beneath the Overhang«) from 1951.

⁶² »Eg går i fjellet og ser sprekkane og korleis vassmengdene aukar. Ja ja, det skal no ned før eller seinare heile rukkelet, eg tek det ikkje så tungt. Det går heilt fint å leve i dei siste tider, tykkjer eg.« (Nødtvedt 2017, p. 55)

Climate Change and the Carnavalesque in Erlend O. Nødtvedt's *Vestlandet*

Later the two companions are warned of climate-change-induced disasters by the leader of a group of so-called »survivalists«. ⁶³ As a contrast to both Eline and the two protagonists, this group takes precautions against what they view as an upcoming apocalypse. In a parody of an Old Testament prophet, the leader of the small anarchist group chants: »Mountains will collapse like in hell. Rivers shall overflow, bridges shall be destroyed by masses of water.« ⁶⁴ As opposed to these survivalists, Erlend and Yngve see no reason to make preparations for an apocalypse and seek shelter. They are heading to Lærdal, an area exposed to extreme weather conditions and that had already been marked as dangerous in 1936, according to a map made by an authority on avalanches. Erlend and Yngve knowingly drive right into the catastrophe, meeting death with a laugh. They have no fear. As Bakhtin argues, liberty is only possible in a fearless world. ⁶⁵ He claims that in carnivalesque literature, »fear is destroyed at its very origin and everything is turned into gaiety«. ⁶⁶ This is the universality of laughter. It »embraces everything«. ⁶⁷

The Material-bodily Aspects of the Carnavalesque

Material-bodily imagery, often in the form of excessive eating and drinking, is an important aspect of the carnivalesque and draws on the idea of the grotesque. »Exaggeration, hyperbolism, [and] excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style.« ⁶⁸ According to Bakhtin, this is a positive hyperbolism, distinguished by a »gay and triumphant tone«. ⁶⁹ During carnival, vast quantities of food and alcohol were consumed, and carnivalesque literature is filled with images of excessive eating and drinking, implying that »[m]an is not afraid of the world, he has defeated it and eats of it«. ⁷⁰ In *Vestlandet*, material-bodily imagery is mainly connected to excessive drinking. Alcohol, euphemistically referred to as »requisites«, ⁷¹ is consumed in abundance. Echoing their experience with the weather in Western Norway, Erlend and Yngve fluctuate between being damp and drenched with alcohol. Vast quantities of alcohol are also consumed while driving. On page 14, Yngve, while driving the Camry, is as damp as their surroundings. This hyperbolism is typical of the carnivalesque. They even, in a profane act of carnival spirit, pay tribute to a dead poet by pouring half a box of red wine on his grave. In the universe of *Vestlandet*, as in carnivalesque literature in general, excessive intake of alcohol is both degrading and uplifting, tied to the creative and regenerative. New forms are created out of old ones. In Nødtvedt's novel, there are several examples of the regenerative power of excessive drinking. The scene where the two companions break into the dead poet Hauge's empty house is emblematic of the regenerative power displayed in the novel. Dream

⁶³ Ibid, p. 94.

⁶⁴ »Fjellsider kjem til å rase til helvete ut. Elvane skal flaume over, bruar skal skyllast vekk.« (Ibid., p. 94)

⁶⁵ See Bakhtin 1984, p. 47.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 39.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 135.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 303.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 278.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 296.

⁷¹ »nødvendighetsartikler« (Nødtvedt 2017, p. 12). The phrase is repeated several times.

and reality merge as they explore Hauge's cellar, which is filled with thousands of books and vast quantities of apple cider, feeling as if they are deep down in the poet's own consciousness. Metaphorically the cellar resembles the »reproductive lower stratum of the body«.⁷² Intoxicated by Hauge's apple cider, Erlend wakes up after a nap to visions of a dark hotel corridor or maybe his hallway at home. Threads from Hauge's famous obscure and dreamlike poem »Gullhanen« (»The Gold Rooster«) from 1956 are woven into Erlend's speech, mixing dream and reality while new forms are born. The language is dissolving, lacking in punctuation, and seamlessly switching between the two Norwegian language variants into a visionary, poetical, and cider-driven stream-of-consciousness monologue, where eventually Hauge himself appears and enlightens them. Scenes like this appear recurrently in the novel, echoing the dynamic, »ever changing, playful, undefined forms«⁷³ of expression of the carnival.

The connection to medieval folk culture is accentuated by allusions to the famous medieval Norwegian ballad *Draumkvedet* (»The Dream Poem«); a visionary poem that tells the story of Olav Åsteson, who on Christmas Eve falls into an ecstatic deep sleep for 13 days, whereupon he rides to church to convey his dreams. The alcohol-induced »dreams« of the narrator of *Vestlandet* can be seen as a twisted and subversive parallel of Olav Åsteson's religious dream vision of life after death, and an example of the high and low interacting and the serious becoming gay and festive. The bodily-material element is both degrading and deeply positive.

The act of eating is also interwoven with climate change in the novel. Vegard is depicted as the ultimate grotesque body as he »devours« the whole village of Lærdal. In the words of Bakhtin, the »body« of Vegard »transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense«.⁷⁴ However, our heroes are not afraid. Yngve even invokes and challenges Vegard: »Vegard! Veeeeegard! Come and take me Vegard, please!«.⁷⁵

The Festive Chaos of the Carnival

The chaos created by Vegard seems like a continuation of the festive chaos that already prevailed at the Lærdal market. Although the whole novel is infused with the carnival spirit, the famous yearly market in Lærdal, with roots dating back to the late medieval period, plays out like a »real« carnival in the novel. The market incarnates the carnival idea of being universal, anarchic, and liberating, belonging to all people, bringing together unlikely groups and categories. The fact that Vegard is approaching does nothing to suppress the excitement and exhilarating atmosphere. The market is described as an endless chaos, a »pulsating cattle show of common intoxication, hollering and fiddle playing«.⁷⁶ Our heroes are frequently hindered by school bands, horsemen, and fools. Watched by a crowd of missing children, a beautiful woman with a beard and a crown, and in national costume, whips an

⁷² Bakhtin 1984, p. 21.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 11.

⁷⁴ Bakhtin 1984, p. 281.

⁷⁵ »Vegard! Veeeeegard! Kom og ta meg Vegard, vær så snill!« (Nødtvedt 2017, p. 174)

⁷⁶ »pulerende fesjået av allmenn beruselse, skrål og felespill« (Ibid., p. 173)

Climate Change and the Carnavalesque in Erlend O. Nødtvedt's *Vestlandet*

enormous bear. The narrator recounts a whole catalog of different people and animals participating. Some of them are fiddlers, children, drunkards, drug barons, animals, traveling theatre troupes, fire eaters, fishermen, fortune tellers, swindlers, antiques dealers, rat catchers, high-class prostitutes in national costumes from Hardanger; the whole Western Norwegian menagerie heads to the market in Lærdal, all of them carrying knives. »The carnivalesque crowd [...] is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized in their own way [...]. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity.«⁷⁷ The crowd at the market of Lærdal does not adhere to any rules, and the hierarchy of »normal« society is abolished. As Bakhtin asserts, the carnival was a celebration of »temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions«.⁷⁸ Excessive amounts of alcohol and food are consumed at the market in Lærdal, illustrative of the carnivalesque body. A drinking tent also serves as accommodation: people sleep in the horses' drinking troughs, piled on top of each other, intimately connecting images of eating and renewal/sleep. A marching band ends up with their instruments filled with sausages after they march through a hot dog stand. The sausage was the most important food at medieval festivals, above all due to its phallic nature.⁷⁹

The central ritualistic act of the medieval carnival was the false coronation and deposition of the carnival king. A variation of this coronation is found in Lærdal with the coronation of the best fighter and fiddler. While the winner is being carried aloft in triumph, the famous fiddler Mosafinn⁸⁰ is reborn to reclaim the crown. Fueled by alcohol, his fiddle playing makes Anders Lysne rise from the dead, whose whole life is played out in front of the roaring crowd, before Mosafinn is interrupted by the storm, making the horses go crazy. In this ludicrous and burlesque fantasy, combining a »crowning« and several rebirths, the boundaries between the dead and the living, between reality and dream, and between the present and the past are once again blurred. In a twisted, carnivalesque way, Nødtvedt »bridge[s] and reconnect[s] time through narratives and storytelling«.⁸¹

The two friends intend to have as much fun as possible at the market, »before Vegard takes us and wishes us a good night forever«.⁸² They insist on keeping »a humorous aspect of the world«.⁸³ There are definitely no traces of environmental melancholia⁸⁴ in the protagonists of *Vestlandet*. When Vegard – now a hurricane – strikes, the chaos reaches a climax: »the market, now a veritable chaos of tents and loose objects flying through the air, from nothing

⁷⁷ Bakhtin 1984, p. 255.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

⁷⁹ In Rabelais Saint Sausage is invoked, and one episode is described as the »sausage war« (Ibid., pp. 191–194). Bakhtin also describes how enormous sausages and buns were part of carnival processions (Ibid., p. 278).

⁸⁰ Mosafinn (1828–1912) was one of the most famous Norwegian fiddlers during the 19th century. He played for Ole Bull and Edvard Grieg several times.

⁸¹ Mehnert 2016, p. 97.

⁸² »før Vegard tar oss og ønsker oss god natt for alltid« (Nødtvedt 2017, p. 146)

⁸³ Bakhtin 1984, p. 5.

⁸⁴ See Lertzman 2015.

Vegard comes as a hurricane, and the air is filled with screams and beating rain, and we can observe that the river grows at a tremendous speed.⁸⁵ The carnival was a feast of change and renewal. Eventually Vegard turns out to cause the ultimate change and renewal as the whole of Lærdal is devoured, becoming »an inferno of water, fire, and wind«.⁸⁶ In this scene, climate change is seen as a natural continuation of the festive spirit of the carnival, as well as of its material-bodily aspect. The laughter in *Vestlandet* is like the laughter of the carnival, festive, universal, and gay. And it is ambivalent, as it »asserts and denies, it buries and revives«.⁸⁷

The Liberating and Subversive Potential of Laughter

Bakhtin emphasizes the liberating and subversive power of carnivalesque laughter, opposed to official hierarchical seriousness. In the universe of Nødtvedt's novel, the source of the liberating and subversive power of the spirit of laughter can only be found in Western Norway. As they cross the border between East and West, Yngve immediately gets inspired to paint, not with the detestable »salon-yellow«⁸⁸ colors of Düsseldorf, but with the intense colors of the Dresden painters, J. C. Dahl-style. The now eye-catching and stimulating landscape also calls for a shift from beer to harder booze, fuelling the inspiration further. As mentioned earlier, the distance through the Eastern part of Norway is merely represented by a blank page, with only a note of the distance. The landscape in Eastern Norway is simply not worth writing about, and they drive through this »vapid«⁸⁹ landscape with their eyes shut. The narrator observes »the drastic contrast between the, at the most, sloping, totally asexual landscape of identical spruces and the knockout sublimity of the Western Norwegian landscape«.⁹⁰ Presumably, the monotonous surroundings of Eastern Norway lack resistance and block the creativity of the two artist companions. In *Vestlandet*, the mind-numbing and sleep-inducing landscape of Eastern Norway is associated with the higher civil servant, which in Bakhtin's carnivalesque terms represents authority and the official culture, official hierarchical seriousness. In the novel, an eerie, ghostlike figure, *Austmannen*, serves to illustrate this official authority. As an incarnation of the Eastern Norwegian technocrat, a destroyer of the Western Norwegian distinctiveness, dressed in a suit, he emerges regularly. His name is a play on the Norwegian word for the devil, *Hinnannen*. Not surprisingly, the invasive Sitka spruce – referred to as »hooligan spruce from Eastern Norway«⁹¹ – which destroys the local flora, is seen as a metaphor for the central official power: »Those spruces destroy all other flora, the forest floor is completely dead. Thus, a suitable image of the central power«.⁹² With small variations, this motif is repeated a couple of times

⁸⁵ »marknaden som no er eit einaste kaos av telt og lause gjenstander som fyk gjennom lufta, frå inkje kjem Vegard med orkan, og lufta er fylt med hyl og piskande regn, og me kan sjå at elva stig i ein uhorvelig fart« (Nødtvedt 2017, p. 186)

⁸⁶ »eit inferno av vatn, eld og vind« (Ibid., p. 187)

⁸⁷ Bakhtin 1984, p. 12.

⁸⁸ »salonggule« (Ibid., p. 163)

⁸⁹ »intetsigende« (Ibid., p. 161)

⁹⁰ »den voldsomme kontrasten mellom et i høyden småkupert, helt aseksuelt landskap av identiske graner og Vestlandets svimeslående sublimitet« (Ibid., p. 163)

⁹¹ »Helvetes pøbelgran frå Austlandet« (Ibid., p. 99)

⁹² »Dei granane øydelegg all annan flora, skogbotnen er heilt daud. Sånn sett eit passende bilete på sentralmakta« (Ibid., p. 98f.)

Climate Change and the Carnavalesque in Erlend O. Nødtvedt's *Vestlandet*

throughout the novel. On only the second page of the novel, representatives of the central power, »the senior civil servants«, are described as eradicators of »everything growing wild, wilful, the ones that will straighten out every curve, [...] vulgarize everything. [...] kill Western Norway«. ⁹³ In a later scene, the actions of the central power are depicted as hubristic violations of nature. They even want to »lay tarmac in all the fjords«. ⁹⁴ Hence, the values ascribed to *Austmannen* and Eastern Norway are implicitly depicted as working against a sustainable practice to maintain biodiversity. Where the nature of Eastern Norway has »conquered« ⁹⁵ the nature of Western Norway, the landscape is described as a barren wasteland.

The Ambivalence of Laughter

Whether a burlesque humid fantasy or a »real« road trip, the novel nevertheless is a celebration and a mythologizing of Western Norway, a contrast to the official hierarchical seriousness and the monotonous surroundings connected with Eastern Norway. The novel is also a celebration and a mythologizing of the Western Norwegian, immortalized by Fosse as well as another of Erlend's favorite authors, Aasmund Olavsson Vinje. ⁹⁶ Vinje has characterized the identity of the Western Norwegian like few others: »He [the Western Norwegian] must battle forward in mountains and wilderness against wind and weather. This sharpens his mind and turns it more inwards, towards himself, making him never at a loss, and unwinds a playful wit and laughter«. ⁹⁷ In other words, the Western Norwegian has an ability and the determination to cough up a black laughter from his own tragedy, or following Bakhtin, an ambivalent laughter.

The laughter is definitely black, or ambivalent, as Erlend and Yngve leave Lærdal and the carnival. Knowing they are in danger of perishing, they drive upwards along the constantly growing Lærdal river; in several places, the water has reached the road, while in other places, half of the road has already been washed away. »Damn, now we can finally talk about resistance for real, quite simply then«, ⁹⁸ Yngve exclaims while he drives like a madman, being fed cigarettes by Erlend. They are intoxicated by a combination of alcohol, cigarettes, and resistance. Backed by the rumble from the mountainsides, they have to get out of the car several times to clear the road of rocks and blown-down trees, hardly able to see anything as the rain whips their eyes. Along the way, they observe several houses floating along the river. The situation gets worse and worse, and eventually, they have to climb out of the car as big rocks and trees are blocking the road. While laughing, they fight the manifestation of climate change,

⁹³ »sentralkmakten [...] som vil fjerne alt det viltvoksende, egenrådige, de som vil utjevne hver sving, [...] forflute alt. [...] drepe Vestlandet« (Ibid., p. 10)

⁹⁴ »asfaltere alle fjorder« (Ibid., p. 29)

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 99.

⁹⁶ Vinje's famous *Ferdaminne*, a travel narrative mixing prose and poetry, can be seen as an antecedent of *Vestlandet*, although Vinje travelled through Norway on foot. The full title is *Ferdaminne frå sommaren 1860* (»A Remembrance of a Journey in the Summer of 1860«).

⁹⁷ Quoted by Ravatn 2017, p. 34.

⁹⁸ »Hellane, no kan me endeleg snakke om motstand på ekte, rett og slett då.« (Ibid., p. 187)

Thorunn Gullaksen Endreson

knowing that there is only one way out. They choose death, as Timothy Morton describes it in *Ecology Without Nature*:

Instead of trying to pull the world out of the mud, we could jump down into the mud, [...] we choose and accept our own death and the fact of mortality among species and ecosystems. This is the ultimate rationality: holding our mind open for the absolutely unknown that is to come.⁹⁹

Morton's open mind sounds like an echo of Bakhtin's fearless world of the carnival.

Before they are taken by the avalanche, in a final apocalyptic natural disaster, the narrator proceeds in a stream of consciousness monologue:

and now I hear yes now that thousand-year bang went off and we turn slowly towards the mountainside and now all of it falls down and Yngve grins and he takes hold of my hand and thanks me politely for the trip quite simply then and now indeed the time has come to open the Hauge-cider and I take a sip as the rocks are approaching and I feel it is greening around me and everything is only growth and crop

I open my eyes

the spring is approaching as I across

chalky white tarmac walks

in Western Norway

home¹⁰⁰

In a carnivalesque spirit, as an illustration of the material-bodily aspect, the narrator drinks apple cider while he is devoured by the rock slide. He is literally being swallowed by the earth in a final act of degradation. The earth, according to Bakhtin, becomes »an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better.«¹⁰¹ The narrator is reborn, in a twisted mirroring of the many rebirths of his literary ancestors throughout the novel. As Erlend wakes up and finds himself walking along the white tarmac roads of Western Norway, he is home, in paradise, for him the same thing. His salvation is the spongy, green, and lush nature of Western Norway. Morton's »absolutely unknown« turns out to be well known. Accepting and choosing death enables him to live in the Western Norway of his own mythologization. Again, this is an illustration of the ambivalence of laughter, as it »asserts and denies, it buries and

⁹⁹ Morton 2007, p. 205.

¹⁰⁰ »og no høyrer eg ja der gjekk det tusenårsdrønnet og me snur oss sakte mot fjellsida og no kjem det ned alt saman og Yngve gliser og han tek handa mi og takkar høfleg for turen rett og slett då og no er vel tida inne for å opne Hauge-sideren og eg tek ein slurk idet steinane kjem eg kjenner det grønskast rundt meg alt er berre vokster og grøde / eg opnar augo / det vårast når eg bortover / drivkvit asfalt går / på Vestlandet / heime«. (Nødtvedt 2017, pp. 190f.)

¹⁰¹ Bakhtin 1984, p. 21.

Climate Change and the Carnavalesque in Erlend O. Nødtvedt's *Vestlandet*

revives«. ¹⁰² In the universe of *Vestlandet*, celebrating and challenging Vegard – a local manifestation of climate change – results in a (utopian) happy ending and festive laughter along the (road)way.

Final Discussion – What Does Laughter Do?

Through a close reading of *Vestlandet* with Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque as a lens, I have demonstrated that the novel appears as a modern form of carnivalesque literature. However, what does laughter do, apart from making us laugh? Does it raise environmental awareness? This is an important question, which also represents a direction for further research. *Vestlandet* could be seen as a fatalistic narrative, a text that legitimates self-destruction, as the protagonists knowingly throw themselves into the apocalypse. However, the end is ambivalent, as the rebirth of Erlend signals utopian hope. Bakhtin claims that carnivalesque literature – like the medieval carnival – fractures oppressive and outmoded ideas and shows a future potential for change and progress. As such, carnivalesque laughter has a liberating, truth-revealing, and utopian potential. However, as the word »potential« indicates, there is a risk involved. There is no guarantee that laughter will lead to increased awareness and action concerning climate change. As Seymour declares in her conclusion, »[t]his is the risk of bad environmentalism [...], it might not lead anywhere [...]. [However,] its pleasures cannot be dismissed.« ¹⁰³

As I have shown, the protagonists of *Vestlandet* flaunt a reckless attitude towards climate change. Far from being in denial, they challenge and celebrate manifestations of climate change. However, the use of war imagery reveals how nature and culture are seen as binary. Clive Hamilton claims that viewing global warming as »natural« by celebrating the power and majesty of nature is a form of denial. He refers to James Lovelock, who argues that Gaia »is indifferent to the fate of humans, who are, after all, only one species among many«. ¹⁰⁴ By »focusing on forces beyond our control«, ¹⁰⁵ we shift the blame: »It is a form of moral disengagement whereby we disavow our responsibility for the problem or the solution.« ¹⁰⁶ The carnivalesque spirit of the novel, however, in both form and content, makes the novel resist categorization and conventional interpretation. By insisting on (ambivalent) laughter, the novel offers an alternative vision; it makes us see the world anew, giving us a possibility to see ourselves from another perspective and giving us »a humorous aspect of the world«. ¹⁰⁷ The solely negative character of the modern literary parody, according to Bakhtin, is deprived of »regenerating ambivalence«. ¹⁰⁸ In adopting the use of carnival imagery, *Vestlandet* has obtained this regenerating ambivalence. The narrator's voice, with its nonauthoritative dialogic form, also points towards a regenerating ambivalence.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰³ Seymour 2018, p. 232.

¹⁰⁴ Hamilton 2015, p. 128.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 127.

¹⁰⁷ Bakhtin 1984, p. 5.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

We certainly need alternative ways of making sense of climate change, and as such, *Vestlandet* contributes to »the construction of new narratives«. ¹⁰⁹ A humorous view of climate change and the environmental apocalypse might ease what Bracke refers to as »a kind of apocalypse or crisis fatigue«. ¹¹⁰ Seymour argues along the same lines. She perceives comedy as offering »alternatives to crisis discourse in an era of crisis fatigue«. ¹¹¹ As Mike Hulme observes, ¹¹² climate change does not lend itself to a grand and easy solution. We have to treat fictional narratives of climate change as imaginative resources, in line with the spirit of the carnivalesque.

Seymour challenges the instrumentalist tendency within the field of ecocriticism: the propensity to judge environmental texts in terms of their usefulness. She points out the often »didactic, prescriptive, and demanding« aspects of environmentalism. Even if texts do not communicate »obvious or recognizable environmentalist agendas, [they can] have something to tell us«. ¹¹³ Texts can potentially bear »witness to crisis, enacting catharsis, serving as cultural diagnoses, and so on«. ¹¹⁴ In Nødtvedt's *Vestlandet*, laughter is directed as much towards the protagonists themselves as their literary heroes (dead or alive), their enemies, and the world at large. And after all, it is not possible to place oneself above or outside of climate change. We are all part of it. As Morton puts it, »inside the belly of the whale that is global warming, [...] there's no ›away‹ anymore«. ¹¹⁵ As such, *Vestlandet* bears witness to crisis, but in an ambivalent way. We laugh, even if it is black laughter.

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¹⁰⁹ Bracke 2019, p. 4.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

¹¹¹ Seymour 2018, p. 230.

¹¹² Cf. Hulme 2009, p. 359.

¹¹³ Seymour 2018, p. 27.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Morton 2013, p. 132.

Climate Change and the Carnavalesque in Erlend O. Nødtvedt's *Vestlandet*

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Thorunn Gullaksen Endreson

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