

Editorial 2024

Times of Iconoclasm: Jon Fosse and Greta Thunberg

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A Nobel Prize for Norwegianity?

In 2023 as every year, the Nobel Prizes were awarded at Stockholm's Concert Hall on December 10, the anniversary of benefactor Alfred Nobel's death. The Nobel Prize for Literature went to Jon Fosse, making it the fourth time – after Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1903), Knut Hamsun (1920) and Sigrid Undset (1928) – that the honour has gone to Norway.

The innumerable comments on this decision gave prominent emphasis – more than for any other of these authors – to the Nordic and specifically the Norwegian quality of Fosse and his literature. Everything he writes is traced back to his childhood in a small village beside a fjord on Norway's west coast. The fjord, the gloom, the fjord, the melancholic, the fjord, the archaic, the fjord, the unsayable. This reduction to presumed origins such as closeness to nature, introspection and the pietist *bedehus* makes it easy to forget that at the time Fosse started writing, the Norwegian literary field was dominated by socially engaged literature.

Even Norwegian media join in with the national characterisation that pits inner, unsayable wealth against outer, hollow form. The weekly magazine *Morgenbladet*, for instance, prints a four-page feature on the award ceremony and the Nobel Banquet that says less about the event and far more about the journalist's ambivalence, which is marked as typically Norwegian – all in ironic tones, needless to say: torn between national pride and his discomfort with the aristocratic grandeur and pompous rituals of the Nobel ceremony: »I am Norwegian [...]. Deeply and profoundly Norwegian«. ¹ Fosse as an icon of Norwegianity?

A Nobel Prize for iconoclasm

And of course it's true: there are plenty of fjord landscapes in Fosse's publications, be they plays or prose texts; and arguably no one will deny that his stories always circle around the same gloomy themes of disappearing and

¹ »Jeg er norsk [...]. Dypt og inderig norsk«. (Haagensen, Olaf: »Fosse! Fosse! Fosse!«, In: *Morgenbladet* 49, 15–21 December 2023, pp. 44–47).

death, silence and silencing, or that the inner life of his characters exists outside of space and time rather than in the concrete houses and phases of life imposed by the setting of the given plot. Nevertheless, the perennial recourse to Norwegianity in the reception must come as a surprise; Fosse is, after all, an author whose oeuvre is probably best characterised by the adjective ›iconoclastic‹. Fosse's pauses, his broken-off short sentences and his endlessly long sentences have the same effect: they preclude us from forming a coherent, harmonious image out of what is narrated on the stage or between two book covers. Indeed, this image-destroying effect explicitly becomes the theme of his latest mammoth text: the *Septology* begins with the following crossed-out ekphrasis:

And I see myself standing and looking at the picture with the two lines that cross in the middle, one purple line, one brown line, it's a painting wider than it is high and I see that I've painted the lines slowly, the paint is thick, two long wide lines, and they've dripped, where the brown line and purple line cross the colours blend beautifully and drip and I'm thinking this isn't a picture but suddenly the picture is the way it's supposed to be, it's done [...],-but [...] I don't like it much, maybe all things considered it's not really a painting, just two lines²

When the protagonist says he only became a painter in order to ›paint away‹ the images that were lodged inside him,³ it calls to mind the equally mysterious reformulation of the Old Testament's prohibition of images proposed by Horkheimer and Adorno in 1944 in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: ›The right of the image is rescued in the faithful observance of its prohibition.‹⁴ What is meant by ›image‹ here is any representation of the world, be it in a novel, a photograph or even a scholarly article; all too conveniently we forget that what we think of as reality is nothing but our own conviction, which we – intentionally or not – project into reality. However, if our constructed image of reality already carries within it ›the admission of falseness which cancels its power‹, it can be of service to the truth.⁵

The truth about Greta

And Greta Thunberg? She, too, is an icon. She has long stood for Fridays for Future and climate activism; but above all else, she stands for a young generation that speaks out against the pretence that there are no alternatives to the politics of its parents. First, she was made into an image – the child sitting outside the Swedish parliament

² Fosse, Jon: *The Other Name. Septology I-II*. London 2022, pp. 14f. (›Og eg ser meg stå mot biletet med dei to strekane, ein lilla og ein brun, som kryssar einannan på midten, eit avlangt bilete, og eg ser at eg har måla strekane langsamt og med tjukk oljemåling, og ho har runne, og der den brune og den lilla linja kryssar einannan blandar fargen seg vakkert og renn nedetter og eg tenkjer at dette ikkje er noko bilete, men samstundes er bilete slik det skal vera, det er ferdig, [...] eg likar eigentleg slett ikkje biletet, og kanskje er det ikkje noko målarstykke i det heile, berre to strekar« [Fosse, Jon: *Det andre namnet. Septologien I-II*. Oslo 2019, pp. 11f.]).

³ Ibid. p. 41.

⁴ Quoted after Horkheimer, Max & Theodor W. Adorno: *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford 2002, p. 18: ›Gerettet wird das Recht des Bildes in der treuen Durchführung seines Verbots.‹ (Horkheimer, Max & Theodor W. Adorno: *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*, 26. Auflage, Frankfurt a. M. 2022, p. 30)

⁵ Quoted after Horkheimer, Max & Theodor W. Adorno: *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford 2002, p. 18: ›das Eingeständnis seiner Falschheit [...], das ihm seine Macht entreißt und der Wahrheit zueignet.‹ (Horkheimer, Max & Theodor W. Adorno: *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*, 26. Auflage, Frankfurt a. M. 2022, p. 30)

with a hand-written placard, skipping school to strike for the climate – but in the meantime she has mastered the language of precisely this image-type: even as the face of a global movement with not inconsiderable financial resources for campaigning, she still presents the camera with cardboard boxes bearing her own handwriting in felt-tip pen, and thus copies the winning naivety of her beginnings many billions of times into the social media. On *X* she even calls herself an ›autistic climate justice activist‹, flaunting her impairment until it acquires the same function as Fosse's childhood beside the fjord: an authenticity marker.

However, this image-type had its iconoclastic moment when, on October 20 in front of 14.5 million followers on Instagram and 5.6 million on *X*, Thunberg and three of her peers held up another cardboard message to the camera – ›Stand with Gaza‹ – in the early days of the inflamed debate without so much as mentioning the terrorist attack by Hamas on Jewish civilians. Pictured beside her is a small stuffed toy, as if casually tossed aside onto the knee of a fellow activist: a so-called flip octopus that meets the camera with an angry stare. Reversible octopus toys have one angry and one friendly face; their purpose, as Thunberg explains, is to help autistic people who have trouble reading emotions in social settings to express their feelings. So the toy, too, was another stylistic device of naivety, a metonym for Thunberg's claimed authenticity. But the octopus also happens to be a pictorial motif that quotes the rhetoric of global anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. In certain contexts – one being the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – naive authenticity, which can only be gauged against one's own emotional impulses, is simply out of place. The octopus photograph makes it clear that the earlier cardboard-box authenticity was, itself, staged.

Has Thunberg's use of the image damaged the climate activists' cause? It could go either way. Arguably closest to the truth is what Luisa Neubauer told the German newspaper *TAZ* in an interview about her Swedish fellow activist: she did not want to defend Greta Thunberg's omission to mention Jewish suffering on her feed. ›But Greta is also a projection screen for a media world that has long sought something in her that no human being can possibly be. And now this media world is disenchanted with Greta for not being something that she never wanted to be.‹⁶ Even this statement reads like a thought from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Perhaps Thunberg the human being is now liberated from Greta the icon.

NORDEUROPAforum 2024

Iconoclasm is in the ascendent. Scholarship – if it is good scholarship – always takes an iconoclastic attitude towards its own results. Likewise, our editors and editorial board work to ensure that in 2024, NORDEUROPAforum will uphold the same iconoclastic standards as ever. They do this with a constantly changing team – as is usual in academia: while Luise Markwort (Greifswald) is bid farewell with heartfelt thanks, Arne Segelke (Greifswald) and Merle-Maleen Dierks (Greifswald), a new editorial team member and a new student assistant (social media & blog), are warmly welcomed. In addition to an invited article, readers can expect, among other newly published writings, two new special focuses: ›Seas in Scandinavian Literature‹ and ›Literary

⁶ <https://taz.de/Luisa-Neubauer-ueber-die-Klimabewegung/!5972554/> (11.03.2024).

Parasites«. Also new this year are the articles authored by the three winners of the NORDEUROPA *forum* Young Researcher Prize, which was launched in 2023 to mark the 25th anniversary of the scholarly journal NORDEUROPA *forum* and presented to the winners at the year's end. As part of the Young Researcher Prize, the winning articles are revised in collaboration with the authors and subsequently published. On that note, congratulations again to Brandon Taylor Kaaz (Frankfurt a. M.), Leon Struve (Regensburg) and Julianne Witte (Tübingen). By conferring the prize, the journal once more lives up to its aims as a »medium of qualification«.

The anniversary year 2023 and its activities helped to draw greater attention to diamond / platinum open access publications⁷ and to make NORDEUROPA *forum* better known in scholarly and research-adjacent spheres as an interdisciplinary OA journal. Under the website's new rubric, »Forschungsbord« (research shelf),⁸ all Northern Europe scholars are invited to announce major cooperative research projects in German-speaking Scandinavian Studies, Northern European History and Political Science.

The anniversary podium discussion, titled »Epochal shift in the Baltic Region: Which way are we headed?«⁹, held in cooperation with the Representation of the State of Schleswig-Holstein to the Federal Government, honoured the journal's interdisciplinary aims with panel members from research, politics, journalism, and literature (Prof. Bernd Henningsen, journalist Maxi Beigang, author Lotta Lundberg, Director General Grzegorz Poznanski of the Council of the Baltic Sea States Secretariat, and Prof. Clemens Räthel). The event was a fine opportunity to meet past and present members of NORDEUROPA *forum* in person because the editorial team of 13 editors, 21 editorial board members, three student assistants and one editor-in-chief operates from 21 locations in nine countries, no less. What could be more consistent with an iconoclastic, cosmopolitan approach to scholarship?

Munich, April 2024



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⁷ <https://open-access.network/informieren/glossar#c6223> (11.03.2024).

⁸ <https://www.nordeuropaforum.de/forschungsbord/> (11.03.2024).

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4asxnUPUvCE> (11.03.2024).