



Speculative Fiction

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SPECULATIVE FICTION

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Speculative Fiction

En del af skriftserien: Interdisciplinære kulturstudier

Redaktører: Mikkel Jensen, Marianne Kongerslev, Sørine Amanda Nielsen

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**FAGFÆLLE-
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Alle bogens kapitler foruden Anne Bettina Pedersens bidrag er fagfællebedømt efter gældende regler.

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Snapshots of Speculative Fiction: An Introduction

Marianne Kongerslev, Mikkel Jensen, and Sørine Amanda Nielsen

“When it comes to genres, the borders are increasingly undefended, and things slip back and forth across them with insouciance.”

(Margaret Atwood, In Other Worlds, 2011)

“[S]peculative fiction represents a global reaction of human creative imagination struggling to envision a possible future at the time of a major transition from local to global humanity.”

(Marek Oziewicz, “Speculative Fiction,” 2017)

Scholars of speculative fiction have a definitional challenge. In his 2017 overview, literary scholar Marek Oziewicz sums it up as follows: “An inherently plural category, speculative fiction is a mode of thought-experimenting that embraces an open-ended vision of the real” (Oziewicz 3). Rather than defining speculative fiction as a specific genre, Oziewicz argues that it should be approached “as a field of cultural production” (3). According to this inclusive definition the term thus refers to various forms of fiction that feature storyworlds that differ significantly from the real world we inhabit (Oziewicz 6). This includes genres like science fiction, dystopian fiction, post-apocalyptic fiction, fantasy, horror, slipstream, superhero narratives, and alternate history. Speculative fiction thus encompasses everything from *Lord of the Rings* (fantasy), *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (dystopian fiction), *The Walking Dead* (post-apocalyptic fiction), and *Watchmen* (alternate history). However, the boundaries of these genres are porous.

Historically, the term ‘speculative fiction’ has undergone significant definitional shifts. In 1972, literary scholar Darko Suvin argued that science fiction’s inclusion of imagined technologies makes it a “literature of cognitive estrangement” (Suvin 372-373), thus qualifying a central dividing line between science fiction and, for instance, fantasy that is marked by the inclusion of magic (Stephan 7). Even earlier, in the 1940s and 1950s, Robert A. Heinlein championed the term as a way to celebrate the best literature produced within the genre of science fiction, illustrating a central desire by critics and scholars to separate so-called ‘low’ forms of fiction from ‘high’ forms. Contrary to purportedly low-

brow science fiction, literature in the speculative fiction category centered less on technological advances and science and instead focused on human responses “to a new situation created by science or technology” so that “speculative fiction highlights a human rather than technological problem. This focus sets it sharply apart from the popular and formulaic science fiction” (Oziewicz 3-4). In other words, Heinlein used the term to elevate or defend the low-tier status of science fiction. Heinlein’s use of the term is thus connected to then-current discussions of the genre’s status. In 1965, novelist Kurt Vonnegut lamented the designation of his works as science fiction, stating that, since the publication of his first novel, *Player Piano* (1952), he had “been a sore-headed occupant of a file-drawer labeled ‘science-fiction’ [...] and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a tall white fixture in a comfort station” (Vonnegut 69). As Vonnegut’s scatological hint illustrates, Heinlein’s use of the term ‘speculative fiction’ was embedded in a struggle to change the reputation of science fiction. This usage of the term is decidedly narrower than the use of the term to refer to a diverse range of genres ranging from post-apocalyptic fiction to alternate history.

Another definition comes from Margaret Atwood who rejects the notion that her works rightfully can be labelled ‘science fiction.’ According to Atwood, science fiction refers to things that cannot happen in our universe given its laws of physics, but speculative fiction refers to things that can, and often have happened in the past, rewritten with a more fantastical bent, as in the case of her novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986). In the introduction to *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (2012), Atwood clarifies her stance:

What I mean by “science fiction” is those books that descend from H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds*, which treats of an invasion by tentacled, blood-sucking Martians shot to Earth in metal canisters—things that could not possibly happen—whereas, for me, “speculative fiction” means plots that descend from Jules Verne’s books about submarines and balloon travel and such—things that really could happen but just hadn’t completely happened when the authors wrote the books. (Atwood 6)

Atwood instead lumps together multiple genres such as slipstream, “Sorcery Fantasy,” as well as both speculative fiction and science fiction, into a mega-genre she calls the “wonder tale’ umbrella” (Atwood 8).

This terminological war continues. In *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction* (2018), gender studies

scholar Sami Schalk reignites the debate when she defines speculative fiction as “any creative writing in which the rules of reality do not fully apply, including magical realism, utopian and dystopian literature, fantasy, science fiction, voodoo, ghost stories, and hybrid genres” (Schalk 17). This broad definition parallels the way that the present volume encompasses a broad range of speculative fiction.

Importantly, most scholars and writers agree that speculative fiction is marked by a contrast to realist fiction. Schalk, for instance, states that, “An important difference between speculative fiction and realist fiction is that speculative fiction does not purport to directly reflect reality; rather, speculative fiction brings *aspects* of reality into newly constructed worlds in which realist rules regarding time, space, bodyminds, abilities, and behaviors need not be followed” (Schalk 21). It is difficult to generalize about such a diverse range of texts as the many genres included under the heading of speculative fiction, but Schalk nonetheless pinpoints the common ground of this multi-faceted form of creative expression. It does have a relationship with the real world that we inhabit, but this relationship is decidedly different from that of realism.

In short, speculative fiction constitutes what Oziewicz calls “a meta-generic fuzzy set supercategory” (Oziewicz 1), and this definition is fruitful for our endeavors with this anthology, as it opens up to possible explorations across genres and modes. We approach ‘speculative fiction’ as a capacious term that hints at and welcomes different texts and approaches. As Oziewicz notes, “Theorized as a field of cultural production rather than a genre, speculative fiction is not limited to any specific literary techniques. Nor can its development be traced through a linear chronology” (Oziewicz 3).

In the “Literary Ghetto”

In addition to facing these definitional troubles, speculative fiction researchers have also faced academic ignorance, erasure, and snobbery regarding the field. As several scholars point out, speculative fiction has remained undertheorized and understudied until relatively recently, because the category was not seen as serious enough to warrant scholarly attention and time (Schalk; Gomez; Le Guin; Oziewicz). In her review of Margaret Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood* (2009) for *The Guardian*, Ursula K. Le Guin alludes to this snobbery by referencing Atwood’s refusal of the ‘science fiction’ label. Le Guin claims that Atwood’s “arbitrarily restrictive definition seems designed to protect her novels from being relegated to a genre still shunned by hidebound readers, reviewers and prize-awards. She doesn’t want the literary bigots to shove her into the

literary ghetto” (Guardian 2009). The definitional struggles Heinlein and Vonnegut wrestled with in the postwar era thus continue into the 21st century.

Similarly, in 1993, writing in the journal *Signs* about black women and speculative fiction, author Jewelle Gomez foreshadows Le Guin’s critique above:

speculative fiction is thought of as ‘fun’ rather than as serious writing worthy of critical discussion. And many of us who think of ourselves as literate or well-read in the classical sense do not think we have enough time for ‘fun’ reading the way the general population does. [...] It is the idea that speculative fiction is somehow an indulgence or that it is trivial that seems the most probable reason for its dismissal by literary critics as well as its lack of appeal to most Black readers or authors. (Gomez 950)

Gomez’s discussion of how some people associate speculative fiction with triviality and indulgence as opposed to “serious writing worthy of critical discussion” speaks to just how much these generic markers bear the weight of cultural capital, or lack thereof.

In the last decade or so, this trend has been on the retreat, and multiple volumes of scholarly work have seen the light of day. From broadly focused texts, such as P. L. Thomas’ *Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction* (2013), Harry Eiss’s *Electric Sheep Slouching Towards Bethlehem: Speculative Fiction in a Post Modern World* (2014), and the *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism* (2022) by Herbrechter et al, to more narrowly focused works such as feminist explorations of the genre, like Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor’s *Postmodern Utopias and Feminist Fictions* (2013) and Sherryl Vint and Sümeyra Buran’s *Technologies of Feminist Speculative Fiction: Gender, Artificial Life, and the Politics of Reproduction* (2022), speculative fiction is leaving the ‘literary ghetto.’

Moreover, responding to both academic and popular erasure, native and indigenous authors and scholars have recently increasingly advocated for sf as a potent anticolonial genre (see e.g. Dillon). Native representation in sf has historically been abysmal, despite the speculative nature of many ancestral indigenous storytelling practices; thus, rewriting these genres from an indigenous perspective suggests an act of self-representation and self-determination, as Miriam Spiers also touches upon in her 2021 book *Encountering the Sovereign Other: Indigenous Science Fiction*. Although indigenous speculative fiction is absent from this publication, individual members of the Literature, Media, and Society (LMS) research group have previously engaged this field (e.g. Kongerslev 2019).

The Use and Function of SF

Although the first academic journal devoted to sci-fi scholarship, *Extrapolation*, was launched in 1959, the general academic (and popular) assumption that sf is fun and unserious has led to a gap in scholarship, which has only started to be filled in the last half century, as researchers have come to more fully understand the possibilities inherent in sf. That is, as a mode, genre, or supercategory, speculative fiction is incredibly diverse, and it promotes a plurality of perspectives, representations, and worldviews. As Oziewicz notes, “[t]he field of speculative fiction groups together extremely diverse forms of non-mimetic fiction operating across different media for the purpose of reflecting on their cultural role, especially as opposed to the work performed by mimetic, or realist narratives” (Oziewicz 1). This diversity is a source of strength and possibility, because, as Schalk states:

Speculative fiction allows us to imagine otherwise, to envision an alternative world or future in which what exists now has changed or disappeared and what does not exist now, like the ability to live on the moon or interact with the gods, is suddenly real. For marginalized people, this can mean imagining a future or alternative space away from oppression or in which relations between currently empowered and disempowered groups are altered or improved. Speculative fiction can also be a space to imagine the worst, to think about what could be if current inequalities and injustices are allowed to continue. (Schalk 2)

This also makes speculative fiction a particularly apt vehicle for political messaging (Hassler and Wilcox). Ranging from pro-war, right-wing, pseudo-fascist ideology, as in Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers* (1959), to environmentalist, proto-‘woke’ utopias, like Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975), speculative fiction bristles with potential for political commentary (see e.g. Dolman; Suvin). As American Studies scholars Ina Batzke and Sabrina Mittermeier note in their introduction to a special issue of the *European Journal of American Culture* on speculative fiction and politics, “any form of speculative fiction has always been political in that they [*sic*] make it possible for us to imagine alternatives to the lives we live” (Batzke and Mittermeier 223). Schalk makes a similar point recounting how, “Reading [Octavia E. Butler’s] *Parable of the Sower* [1993], I began to understand how politically astute speculative fiction can be, how it can comment on our world and make us imagine alternative possibilities: the good, the bad, the ambivalent, and the downright terrifying” (Schalk 1). This anthol-

ogy touches upon many of these political, alternative potentialities to illustrate the multivalent nature of the supercategory.

The contributions to this anthology do not always fall neatly into specific genres, and some of them contain both utopic and dystopic imaginaries, but the texts discussed share the common feature of presenting other realities or alternative worlds in ways that comment on their contemporary times. Some are utopic, offering models of emulation, while others dystopically satirize the inadequacies of our reality, politics, or both. This is part of what defines speculative fiction. As literary scholars Katarzyna Ostalska and Tomasz Fisiak state about utopia and dystopia: “[t]he fundamental character of changes is what defines both Utopia and Dystopia: they both address re-writing social structures, advocating overall transformations of the political, economic, and so on orders. Both of them are concerned with change...” (Ostalska and Fisiak 2; see also Gill). In this way, speculative fiction often functions as a politically activist genre, a genre that portrays and purveys certain kinds of normative values, or as R. B. Gill claims:

The alternative reality created by speculative fiction is the outward manifestation of implicit values. This foundational structure could be called its world view, a term hard to pin down but helpful nevertheless. A world view is a value-narrative or underlying account of actions that explains and validates them; it is a paradigm of values according to which events are judged. These value-narratives include judgments both intentional and implicit (epistemes or the epistemological unconscious - though such terms are hazier than the ideas they designate). (Gill 78)

For better or for worse, the plethora of speculative fictions offers ways to subvert expectations—and by extension, to debunk tired tropes, to bend perceptions, offering authors and other creators freedom to imagine otherwise “through the rejection of verisimilitude” (Schalk 22).

Snapshots of the Fuzzy Set Supercategory

This anthology uses the term *speculative fiction* as a point of departure for various dives into (mostly) contemporary manifestations. The chapters included here are neither meant to be representative nor exhaustive, and instead we offer a series of glimpses into some of the ways speculative fiction looks and functions in contemporary literature and media. The chapters included in this publication center on Danish, German, and US-American texts, exploring both the par-

ticular manifestations of speculative fiction within national frameworks and a general, almost universal, appeal of speculative fiction. As noted above, speculative fiction does not just exist within a context and culture, it transcends such contexts, but also critiques and comments on them along the way.

The first chapter, “A Post-Apocalyptic Urban Crisis: *The Omega Man* (1971)” by Mikkel Jensen, sets the stage for the following chapters by delving into Boris Sagal’s post-apocalyptic film *The Omega Man* (1971). Experiencing deindustrialization, surging crime rates, and depopulation, many American cities were experiencing a hitherto unprecedented set of problems in the 1960s-70s. This social-historical context is pivotal to how Jensen explores how 1970s American science fiction cinema responded to the so-called urban crisis. Based on Richard Matheson’s 1954 novel *I Am Legend*, *The Omega Man* chronicles the life of Robert Neville who has chosen to stay in a mostly depopulated and post-apocalyptic Los Angeles in the wake of a weaponized disease having turned everybody but Neville into a mutant. Jensen argues that *The Omega Man* offers a cautionary tale about urbanity and explores how Sagal’s film uses its speculative form to ultimately reproduce a highly current skepticism of America’s cities when the film was released at the height of the urban crisis.

The second chapter offers a more contemporary glimpse into speculative fiction from a media studies perspective. In “Speculative Temporalities in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022)” Steen Ledet Christiansen illustrates how Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert’s film showcases a peculiar view of time. Thinking with Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and Michel Serres’s various ideas about time as plural and using the phrase “speculative temporalities” to explain this phenomenon, Christiansen analyzes split-frame techniques and pluralized storylines. This leads to what he terms *pluralepsis*, a feature the film uses to represent speculative temporalities, especially in terms of plural pasts that continue to shape and be invoked by the present.

With the third chapter, the anthology turns to German speculative thriller fiction with Mirjam Gebauer’s “‘Alt fandtes – og intet fandtes’: Kunstig intelligens og virkelighedsopfattelse i Frank Schätzing’s roman *Sommerfuglens tyranni*” (“‘Everything Existed—and nothing existed’: Artificial Intelligence and the Perception of Reality in Frank Schätzing’s *Die Tyrannei des Schmetterlings*”). Gebauer examines the sci-fi novel’s use of artificial intelligence as a means to critique and problematize notions of humanity, individuality, intelligence, existence, and pain. In the novel, Schätzing constructs a world in which humanity has access to parallel universes and complex, highly developed AI, which humans exploit to construct idealized versions of their own lives by replacing undesired elements of their own reality with those of other realities. Gebauer shows how *The*

Tyranny of the Butterfly contrasts a mathematical view of the world with a more 'old-fashioned-human' way of experiencing the world. Where the former is geared towards constant innovation and optimization, Schätzing's novel favors the latter's outlook that is characterized by the struggle for an individual path of life, by existential deficiencies and experiences of pain.

The fourth chapter is Sørine Amanda Nielsen's contribution titled "Pest eller corona? Coronalitteraturens spekulative kriser" ("Plague or Corona: the Speculative Crises of Danish Corona Literature"), which explores three corona-era speculative literary texts written in Denmark during the lockdown. Nielsen's analysis of corona literature reveals deeper cultural anxieties that are filtered through corona and expressed through literary texts that dive into notions of unrecognizable realities and humanity's tendency towards self-destruction. While most Danish literature written during and about the crisis is set in a mimetic present during the lockdown, some works can be defined as speculative fiction. Nielsen argues that when reality became unrecognizable, speculative elements provided familiarity and knowledge in its descriptions and reflections. With R.B. Gill's definition of speculative fiction as works that break away from the readers' ordinary reality, the corona epidemic provides a unique setting where reality is no longer perceived as normal. The three analyzed works – Jokum Rohde's "Sidste rapport fra Europa" (2020), Suzanne Brøgger's "Verdens vendepunkt" (2020), and Harald Voetmann's *H.C. Andersens Quarantaine-Dagbog* (2020) – present different plague narratives with speculative elements. The speculative elements of these texts highlight both the strange and the recognizable parts of the current crisis while commenting on the epidemic and the classical plague narratives. Together, the three works describe the way the epidemic contrasts with our idea of ordinary reality while criticizing postmodern society for creating the crisis in the first place, thus welcoming the reflections and positive changes the crisis brought to light.

The fifth chapter is Anker Gemzøe's reading of Svend Åge Madsen's novel *Fremtidsspejl* (*Mirror of the Future*, 2020) as a form of speculative fiction. Exploring a wide range of genres with a penchant for hybrids and his own genre signatures, Gemzøe notes that Madsen probably fits the category of speculative fiction better than any other Danish author. Many of Madsen's works have been labeled as advanced forms of science fiction, defined as a narrative mode of hypotheses and conjectures and encompassing several genres. Arguing that R. B. Gill's otherwise persuasive definition has the basic flaw of making speculative fiction a genre – and thereby narrowing the first concept and diluting the second – Gemzøe makes a case for understanding speculative fiction as a narrative mode that includes various genres. Though Svend Åge Madsen's specu-

lative fiction encompasses many genres, it is marked by having ‘the mirror’ as a leitmotif. Mirroring is, however, reversed and relocated. *Fremtidsspejl* multiplies reflections with three main plotlines that, respectively, depict a scientific, a literary-humanistic and a therapeutic project. They mix and intertwine into each other. Gemzøe shows, through references to the immediate reception of *Fremtidsspejl*, that a special reading strategy is needed to come to terms with a novel of this sort: a ‘speculative reader’ who patiently gathers the many glimpses into a picture of a research process where experiments alternate between success and failure, and where dialogue between various disciplines is a prerequisite for new and better methods and insights.

In the sixth chapter, “‘It’s not about the bunny!’ – David Lynch og spekulativ fiction,” Claus Krogholm identifies an immense presence of holes (and doors, passages, portals, and other threshold symbols) in Lynch’ work, which Krogholm interprets as a kind of ontological haemorrhage that subverts any clear distinction between reality and fiction, past and present, inner and outer worlds. Read through the theoretical framework of hauntology – via Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida and Mark Fisher – the article explores David Lynch’s films and the TV series *Twin Peaks* a series of narrative and ontological leakages that question the very nature of our perception of what is real, thus destabilizing our sense of ontological certainty. This leads to the proposition that David Lynch and his work could be read as the practice of a speculative aesthetics that conflates fact and fiction, dream and reality, past, present and future.

In chapter seven, “‘The Fire Roared Large’: Bewildered Motherhood and the Limits of Feral Rage in Rachel Yoder’s *Nightbitch* (2021),” Marianne Kongerslev analyzes the speculative feminist novel, *Nightbitch* (2021) as a literary manifestation of the contemporary cultural trend of feminist and women’s rage. The novel follows an unnamed former-artist mother, who—in response to domestic tedium and the pressures of motherhood—(perhaps) slowly shapeshifts into a dog-like creature that goes on small-scale rampages through the neighborhood, until she channels her feral rage into artistic practice. Situating the novel in Trump-era US society with its myriad gendered problematics, Kongerslev argues that the novel expresses a desire for a kind of feminine wildness or feralness as a way to critique ensnaring constructions of motherhood and that the main character, *Nightbitch*, functions as Yoder’s 21st-century Everywoman. While the novel seeks to deconstruct notions of motherhood and womanhood through embracing ferocious rage and liberating bewilderment, Kongerslev argues that the novel’s critique is ultimately limited, as it fails to envision truly transformative or revolutionary feminist ideals. Because the novel recenters the White mother as commercially successful “art monster,” it ultimately perpetuates an individual-

istic, postfeminist goal of self-fulfillment within the limits of heteropatriarchal capitalism rather than speculate about what might lie outside the system or what upheavals truly feral, feminist rage might accomplish.

In the eighth and final contribution, the anthology turns to a creative form of speculation. In “Teaching Sylvia Likens (A Lesson),” Anne Bettina Pedersen imagines otherwise to recenter and rewrite the traumatic story of Sylvia Marie Likens, illustrating a fiction-based approach to scholarship. In 1965 in Indianapolis, Indiana, the 16-year-old Likens was brutally murdered by her supposed caretaker, the caretaker’s children, as well as several children from the neighborhood. Pedersen’s short story is inspired by Likens’ case and the multitude of narratives of and speculative fictions about the case that have been published since the murder made the news more than half a century ago. Likens’ story has surfaced more or less explicitly in numerous literary and popular cultural texts, and it has been exploited for its ability to scare, disturb, fascinate, and titillate. To counter these myriad exploitations of Likens’ body and story, Pedersen uses arts-based-research to explore alternative ways of caring for her subject matter. By constructing a different kind of speculative fiction about Likens, Pedersen writes against violent sexist logics to show how femme-identified people may internalize and be complicit in perpetuating misogyny.

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A Post-Apocalyptic Urban Crisis: *The Omega Man* (1971)

Mikkel Jensen

The 1960-1970s were troublesome years for America's cities. Facing deindustrialization, an exodus of white residents from urban centers to suburbia, and rapidly declining business districts in their centers (Boehm and Corey 268), American cities were in midst of what would become known as the urban crisis. Urban unrest and crime had come to mark urban life in America.

In July of 1964 in New York City, a police officer fatally shot a black 15-year-old, which spurred the first of what would become many urban unrests in that decade. 1966 saw 21 civil disorders and riots, a number that was nearly quadrupled in following year, which saw a total of 83 "major disturbances", many of which started after an incident involving law enforcement (Teaford 130-133). These events bore witness to the problems America's cities were facing in that era.

Crime was a central aspect of the urban crisis. From 1959 to 1968, robbery rates more than doubled, and by the end of the 1960s a majority of Americans saw crime as the premier urban problem (Teaford 138-139). At the same time, murder rates skyrocketed. By 1970, some US cities were so dangerous that people who would be born and live their entire lives there would be "more likely to be murdered by a fellow urbanite than an American soldier in World War II was to die in combat with Germans or Japanese" (Teaford 138).

The response of many white, affluent Americans was to turn their backs on the city and move to suburbia, taking their tax dollars out of central city coffers and placing them in suburban ones. The emergence of commuter trains and affordable cars made possible this exodus to the suburbs and by the 1950s the suburban lifestyle had come to be seen as a staple of American culture (Boehm and Corey 269-271). This challenging state of affairs for America's central cities got to the point that, in 1967, the US News and World Report asked whether "the big cities of this country ever [can] stage a comeback?" (Quoted in Teaford 125).

The urban crisis made its way to political discourse where, for instance, President Lyndon B. Johnson expressed concern for the state of the city. Unlike New Deal reformers, Johnson's liberal policies were explicitly concerned with American urbanity (Boehm and Corey 268). When LBJ launched his Great Society program he did so with explicit reference to the state of the America's cities, spurring young Americans to commit to the future of the country's cities: "It

will be the task of your generation,” Johnson remarked in his 1964 launch of the Great Society program, “to make the American city a place where future generations will come, not only to live but to live the good life” (Johnson 1964). More broadly speaking, the 1960s was an era when the urban issue was on the agenda. In 1962, historians Morton and Lucia White remarked that it, at that point in time, was “fashionable for many American intellectuals to express tender concern for the city’s future” (White and White 1).

The urban crisis also made its mark on American popular culture, particularly so with reference to New York City. Film scholar Lawrence Webb argues that films like *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *Fort Apache, The Bronx* (1981) came to link the public image of New York City with the urban crisis, emphasizing issues like “the omnipresent threat of crime and violence, endemic corruption, drugs, prostitution, decaying housing stock, crumbling infrastructure, and industrial unrest” (Webb 80).

I will here argue that one part of this pop-cultural response to the urban crisis came in the form of dystopian science fiction film. Films like *The Omega Man* (1971), *The Ultimate Warrior* (1975), *Logan’s Run* (1976), and *Escape from New York* (1981) all depict urban areas as being marked by a crisis or as having massive problems in some way. Depicting cities as troublesome was, however, nothing new to science fiction cinema. Urban studies scholar John Gold argues that *Metropolis* (1927) cemented the idea in the world of science fiction that “cities might well be arenas of evil and repression” (339).

So by the time American urbanity was struggling in the 1960s and 1970s, the science fiction film already had a long tradition of debating the city. Science fiction scholar Vivian Sobchack remarks that the cinematic science fiction city in this era was “clearly dystopian and perceived as *asphyxiating*” (Sobchack 12). It is this phenomenon that I wish to dig deeper into to examine how science fiction cinema responded to pressing social concerns in the US during the years of the urban crisis. In other words, how did American science fiction cinema envision urbanity in the era of the urban crisis?

The Science Fiction City

Given the fact that the world has only become ever more urbanized in the last two centuries, it makes sense that many visions of future societies are urban ones. In a normative and almost syllogistic manner, urban historian Carl Abbott emphasizes science fiction’s relationship with the city: “Science fiction is about the future. The human future will be urban. Therefore, science fiction should be about urban futures” (Abbott 2).

The population of the US went from being primarily rural to being mainly urban in the 1910s, and today more than 80% of the population lives in urban areas. Yet by the year 2000, more than half of the entire American population resided in suburban areas (Boehm and Corey 335). Given the historical trajectory towards an increasingly urbanized world, it seems that our experience of social developments informs our conceptualization of narratives set in the future, which is the case with many science fiction narratives.

Historian Reinhart Koselleck argues that our *space of experience* informs our *horizon of expectation*, which is to say that our expectations of the future are always shaped by our experience of the past (Koselleck 256-257). Koselleck's argument explains why many science fiction narratives are urban ones. Urbanization levels have steadily increased risen in the modern age, and this motivates that visions of the future are urban ones.

In the US, an important aspect of the history of urbanization is its racial dynamics, which especially is seen in regards to the residential segregation of American cities. This state of affairs has arisen due to two major interlinked migrations within the US in the 20th century: The Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to (mainly) the urban North, which spurred a white exodus from central cities to the suburbs: "Between 1940 and 1970, four million black migrants left the South, increasing the black population share in northern and western cities from 4% in 1940 to 16% in 1970" (Boustan 417-418). This development meant that by 1980s 72% of African Americans living in metropolitan areas resided in central cities whereas only 33% of whites living in metropolitan areas lived in central cities (417). This development resulted in a situation of 'chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs' in the words of funk singer George Clinton (Avila 53).

Urban cultural historian Eric Avila reads alien invasions films such as *War of the Worlds* (1953) and *Them!* (1954) as indicative of cultural anxieties relating to this phenomenon. Avila argues:

At a time when blacks concentrated in inner cities in unprecedented numbers and when "whites" fled older portions of the city for the suburban periphery, urban science fiction thrillers such as *Them!* and *War of the Worlds* confirmed popular suspicions of American urban life (Avila 59).

Avila connects the influx of African Americans to urban centers and white suburbanization with the emergence and popularity of such alien invasion films. To him, this trend "suggests that mainstream white audiences may have viewed

the movement of blacks and other racialized minorities into the cities as not so much a migration, but rather an invasion of what had previously been white space” (Avila 56). The social-historical context that supports Avila’s interpretation of these films is exactly the increase of African American populations in many American cities. In Detroit, the black population tripled in the period 1945-1960 and in New York it rose by 2.5 times. This development was also particularly prominent in the L.A. area that, until the outbreak of WWII, had had a small African American population. That population, however, rose by a staggering 800 percent over a 20-year period: from 75,000 in 1940 to 600,000 African American residents in 1960 (Avila 57).

The challenges that followed in the wake of these developments eventually made their way to the big screen. Hollywood responded somewhat directly to the urban crisis, which, to film scholar Art Simon, is a contrast to how only a few films in this era addressed two other prominent issues of that era, namely the civil rights struggles and the Vietnam War and the protests against it (Simon 473). In the case of the latter, *The Green Berets* (1968) was released during the American military intervention in South East Asia, but most Vietnam War films were released after the US had exited Vietnam in the mid-1970s: *Coming Home* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), a trend that only became stronger in the second half of the 1980s and into the 1990s as evidenced by the release of films like *Platoon* (1986), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). In the case of the civil rights movement, America would have to wait until 1988 before Hollywood started making feature films about that movement, the first example here being *Mississippi Burning* that was released in December of that year (Letort 2012). As a glaring contrast to these trends, Simon notes that,

The cinema of urban crisis [...] pursued just such a direct engagement, albeit still cut to the measure of Hollywood’s genre demands, with a topicality rarely seen in the American cinema. In the process, the sociological literature about urban problems that came from journalists, academics, and government offices sustained a discourse that provided a backstory for virtually every film set in the city, a sense that no matter what story was being told on-screen, it echoed with the national conversation about the city in decline (Simon 472).

Simon notes how Hollywood *did* address the urban crisis while it was happening, but there is more to his argument that he himself outlines. Simon convinc-

ingly argues that *Midnight Cowboy*, *Coogan's Bluff* (1968), *The Detective* (1968), *Shaft* (1971), *Across 110th Street* (1972), and *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (1974) are urban crisis films, but we should also add an array of science fiction films to this corpus in order to understand more broadly the different ways that Hollywood addressed the urban crisis. This is the ambition of this article.

An early scene in the post-apocalyptic *The Ultimate Warrior* (1975) shows the Baron (Max von Sydow), the leader of an enclave of urban survivors, rejecting another man's critique of the community's living conditions: "Give him to the street people," the Baron proclaims, causing the critic to panic as he is rejected from the community. *Logan's Run* (1976) depicts a seemingly utopian future in which society has arrived at a 'sustainable equilibrium' because the city continually culls its population, so it does not put too big of a strain on the available natural resources, but this state depends on everybody reaching the age of 30 to be 'renewed', which, unbeknownst to the population, means that they are killed. Logan 5 (Michael York) is a "Sandman" who has to kill people trying to survive. But Logan 5 soon faces an eminent death himself and his only way of surviving is to flee the strongly regulated city. Another example of an urban crisis science fiction film is *Escape from New York* in which Manhattan has been turned into a maximum-security prison. Snake Plissken (Kurt Russell) is an imprisoned former soldier, who is promised a pardon if he ventures into Manhattan to rescue the President of the United States (Donald Pleasence), who is stranded there after Air Force One has been hijacked by insurgents.

All these films take on the urban crisis in extrapolated form. *The Ultimate Warrior's* fundamental setup is analogous to the gated community by virtue of showing urbanites to be dangerous criminals that people need walls to be protected from. In *Logan's Run* survival beyond the age of 30 is antonymous to urbanity and *Escape from New York's* vision of Manhattan as a massive prison is a most glaring example of cinematic anti-urbanism. Urban historian Steven Conn notes that many Americans "have rejected the city" and by the early 1970s "virtually everyone had given up on the American city" (Conn 5 & 194). This article explores how science fiction cinema played into this era's skeptical view of American urbanity.

More specifically, it presents a reading of Boris Sagal's *The Omega Man*, a cautionary tale about Robert Neville (Charlton Heston), who has remained within Los Angeles in a post-apocalyptic world at his own peril. By centering mostly on a single film, I aim to examine in depth how science fiction cinema envisioned urbanity during the years of the urban crisis. I will point out links to other urban crisis cultural texts, but nonetheless favor the analytical depth of looking at a

single text over the approach of giving a less focused and more general treatment of a larger corpus of films.

The Omega Man (1971)

The Omega Man (1971), an adaptation of Richard Matheson's 1954 novel *I Am Legend*, is premised on Neville surviving in a postapocalyptic Los Angeles. For two years after a weaponized disease has turned everybody but Neville into a form of nocturnal mutant, this assertive Heston protagonist has searched through this postapocalyptic metropolis in order to track down a band of mutants known as the Family, led by Matthias (Anthony Zerbe), which incessantly tries to kill Neville. *The Omega Man* shows its protagonist to continually fight off the Family who see Neville as the embodiment of the science-oriented worldview that allowed the world to end.

Neville refuses to leave the city even though it is driving him insane. An early scene shows pay phones starting to ring and Neville rushes to pick up a phone but pauses: "There is no phone ringing, dammit!" Neville yells after which the ringing abruptly stops. The use of subjective sound signals the emotional strain the post-apocalyptic loneliness has on Neville. Science fiction scholar Darko Suvin argues that "the attitude of estrangement ... has grown into the *formal framework* of the [science fiction] genre" (Suvin 7). The science fiction text shows us a world that is so fundamentally different from our reality that we are estranged from it. The tagline of *The Omega Man* reads that "The last man on alive ... is not alone" and the film's opening sequence shows Neville driving alone in a deserted Los Angeles. This establishes how this storyworld is different from the "zero world" that we viewers live in (Suvin's concept for the world in which a specific science fiction story was created), but the scene with the phone elaborates this textual feature by suggesting the human strain that this isolation has on Neville.

The Omega Man furthers this estrangement by including two scenes in which Neville wrestles with sexual frustration. At one point, Neville is in a car store to acquire a new means of transportation. He sees and subsequently tears down a pin-up calendar because it confronts him with his lack of sex. He later almost caresses a mannequin doll while walking through a department store. This further suggests the strain this deserted world has on his mental health. These two scenes develop the film's use of cognitive estrangement. Neville's celibate life is not thematically central to the film's themes regarding urbanity and its concerns about biological warfare, but this estrangement engenders a storyworld that seems fundamentally foreign to viewers in several ways. It develops the film's worldbuilding.

Urban Danger

One way that *The Omega Man* does mirror its zero world, however, is its depiction of urbanity as being synonymous with danger. An early scene shows the otherwise confident and assertive Neville nearly panicking when he realizes that he is in the urban core as the sun is setting. “My God! It’s almost dark. They’ll be waking up soon,” Neville exclaims. The viewer does not know exactly who “they” are at this point, but this line adds to the film’s estrangement at this point. Given the fact that Neville utters this line while being in the central city engenders a sense of urbanity as a place a person can only venture into with caution. But staying there after nightfall represents danger, even for a film hero like a Heston character.

Before realizing the sun is setting, Neville had been in a movie theater watching the 1970 documentary film *Woodstock* about the iconic 1969 music festival. Neville’s ability to recite the lines of the film shows how much he has watched the movie here but also suggests how much he misses any semblance of conversation with other people. In the film, an interviewee utters a thematically central line:

What’s really important is the fact that if we can’t all live together and be happy, if you have to be afraid to walk out in the street, if you have to be afraid to smile at somebody, right? What kind of a way is that to go through this life?

The interviewee’s hope of a life without fear speaks directly to Neville’s situation. The fact that *The Omega Man* quotes a real person saying this in 1969 in the film’s zero world is a way of saying that though this film’s take on urban anxieties and fear of violence is hyperbolic (as is natural for speculative fiction), Neville’s troubles with urban violence are to be understood as metaphorical for real-world concerns.

When we later see Neville attempting to track down the Family, we understand these efforts are meant to counter this situation where he is “afraid to walk out in the street.” His wish to make the city safe for himself to live in directly extends from the zero world’s concern for violent crime as expressed in the *Woodstock* documentary. The fact that Neville mimics these lines and the fact that he subsequently panics when he realizes that he is in the urban core as the sun is setting shows how *The Omega Man* presents the central city as a place of danger and as a place that Neville must avoid at night in order to survive.

Just one year prior to *The Omega Man*’s release, the 1970 US Census recorded a crucial shift in American social history. In 1940, only a mere 13 % of the Amer-

ican population lived in suburbs (Nicolaidis and Wiese 14), but thirty years later suburbanites outnumbered central city dwellers (Teaford 127-128). The post-war expansion of suburbia had included the construction of shopping malls and entertainment centers like movie theaters in suburban areas. Suburbanites no longer needed to travel to the central city to watch films on the big screen, but Neville nonetheless watches a film in a central city movie theater. Teaford notes in the case of New York City, “entertainment district was no longer as appealing to a middle-class clientele as it had been in 1945” (Teaford 2006, 130). There is a defiance in how Neville chooses to watch a film in a central city movie theater and in the fact that he stays in the city instead of fleeing it.

Faced with the hostile Family that continuously tries to break into his home, Neville has had to make his home into something of a fortress. Boarded-up windows are to repel attacks and mounted spotlights outside of his home help Neville keep the light-sensitive Family at bay. This visual representation of his home as an urban fortress underscores the troubled relationship the insistent urbanite Neville has with his city.

At one point, Neville does flee the city with the help of a band of young survivors. The leader of this group, Dutch (Paul Koslo), asks Neville “what keeps [him] in the city?” to which Neville retorts that “that’s where I live. That’s where I used to live. That’s where I’m going to live. And not Matthias or his Family or any other son of a bitch is gonna make me leave” (*The Omega Man*). Neville refuses to ‘flee’ to the suburbs or to the countryside. His sense of self and his life is tied in with his home in the city. His name also suggests his commitment to urbanity: Ne-ville. *Ville* is French for ‘city’ or ‘town’ and *nee* means to be ‘born.’ Neville is born in the city and that is where he will stay.

Neville ends up romantically involved with Lisa (Rosalind Cash) who is part of the group that Dutch also belongs to. At one point, Neville asks Lisa how she and her little brother Richie (Eric Laneuville) came to live with Dutch. Lisa jokingly tells Neville that “Dutch came by one day and said he was with the Census Bureau.” The characters of course understand this flippant remark as a joke, but from the viewer’s perspective this is a self-reflexive allusion to how Dutch had asked Neville a question that the Census Bureau would be interested in, i.e. why does Neville stay in the city? This joke underscores the film’s interest in engaging with urban problems and cultural understandings of urban issues.

This articulation of having the protagonist explicitly decide not to leave the central city parallels one of the inspirations of one of the other central urban crisis science fiction films, namely John Carpenter’s *Escape from New York* (1981). The opening titles of this film tell us that 1988 saw a 400 % increase in crime rates, which spurred the US government to turn Manhattan into a giant maxi-

mum-security prison. Political scientist Lyman Tower Sargent argues that dystopian fiction extrapolates elements from the real world as a form of warning (Sargent 8), which is very much the case with Carpenter's vision of New York. In extrapolated form, *Escape from New York* shows *in extremis* a belief that America's cities were beyond salvation. After twenty years of urban crisis, Carpenter envisions a New York so marred by crime that it makes more sense to turn it into a prison than it does to try to salvage this metropolis. Its dismal portrayal of urbanity is linked with soaring crime rates, which since the 1960s had been seen as an integral aspect of the urban crisis.

The film's narrative, however, is set in 1997 and shows New York to have fully deteriorated. Carpenter had been inspired by the portrayal of New York City in Michael Winner's *Deathwish* (1974) in which architect Paul Kersey (Charles Bronson) turns into a vigilante after the rape and murder of his wife: "I didn't agree with the philosophy of it, taking the law into one's own hands," Carpenter said, "but the film came across with the sense of New York as a kind of jungle, and I wanted to make an SF film along those lines" (qtd. in Muir 21). *Deathwish* is arguably an urban crisis film so even though Carpenter does not explicitly discuss the urban crisis, his cue for envisioning New York City is directly inspired by a vigilantist take on the urban crisis.

The Brian Garfield novel that *Death Wish* was adapted from interestingly echoes the rejection of the suburb that Neville expresses in *The Omega Man*. Paul, the protagonist of *Death Wish*, rejects the notion that he should leave the city behind and move out to suburbia. This insistence on remaining in the central city is key to some of these cultural texts on the urban crisis. This issue is closely tied in with American racial history.

The Urban Crisis as Racial Phenomenon

The influx of African Americans caused white flight in several in urban areas (Boustan 2010). Urban historian Steven Conn notes that "The flight from the cities was racial as well as economic. White people primarily left the cities; cities thus became increasingly black. Economic activity also left town, and cities became increasingly poor and black" (Conn 149). African American Studies scholar Adilifu Nama sees a direct connection between *The Omega Man*'s depiction of the Family and 1960s racial issues, noting that how the mutants throw Molotov cocktails at Neville's house at night allude to "the racial unrest of the late sixties that erupted across the nation with a spate of urban cities in flames" (Nama 48).

The Omega Man alludes to a racial dynamic regarding its depiction of a troubled city, but, at the same time, it also tries to downplay that dynamic. Neville jokingly refers to his blood, which holds antibodies to the disease, as "genuine

160-proof old Anglo-Saxon, baby,” a line that emphasizes his racial identity. But there is a mutual attraction between him and Lisa whose racial identity as a black woman is underscored by her donning her hair in a big afro and wearing a leather suit. These decisions regarding her hair and costume seems to be what leads cultural studies scholar Justin Sully to conclude that she “has clearly been modeled on [the African American academic and activist] Angela Davis” (Sully 2016, 105).

Neville and Lisa’s interracial relationship surely deemphasizes notions of racial antagonism at a point in time when the Supreme Court’s 1967 legalization of interracial marriage was still in recent memory (Brøndal 227 & 382). At one point, Matthias monologues about his disdain for Neville and searches for words which leads his second-in-command, Zachary (Lincoln Kilpatrick), to try and complete his line of thought:

Matthias: One creature, caught. Caught in a place he cannot stir from in the dark, alone, outnumbered hundreds to one, nothing to live for but his memories, nothing to live with but his gadgets, his cars, his guns, gimmicks... and yet the whole family can’t bring him down from that, that...

Zachary: Honky paradise, brother?

Matthias: Forget the old ways, brother, all the old hatreds.

Matthias is shown in flashbacks to have been a news anchor that broadcasts to America news about a Sino-Russian war that eventually spreads and ultimately leads to biological warfare, which most people die from and which mutates Matthias and the members of the Family. He consequently becomes an extreme Luddite, proclaiming that his hatred of Neville is rooted in him being, in Matthias’s words, “that creature of the wheel, that lord of the infernal engines and machines.” Yet when Zachary tries to help Matthias complete his line of thought by suggesting that Neville is living in a “honky paradise” Matthias downplays the racial aspect.

In this way, *The Omega Man* engages with the urban crisis in way that evades, or at least complicates, this issue’s relationship with racial issues. The white Heston character emphatically refuses to mimic the white flight that had shaped urban life for years when *The Omega Man* was released. *The Omega Man* wants to downplay that its take on the urban crisis is a matter of a white man staying put in the urban center being threatened by urban dwellers. But, as Adilifu

Nama notes, the film nevertheless racializes the Family as black in several other ways (even though several of the actors playing members of the Family are white). The Family shares “startling similarities [with] the Black Power radicals and movement of the late 1960s to early 1970s” (Nama 48). Nama also notes how members of the Family don dark sunglasses and exclusively wear “black robes and hoods, which work to code the colorless mutants as ‘black.’” They also give “soapbox speeches to their followers regarding the evil of ‘the Man’ (Neville)” (Nama 2008, 48). Nama continues:

Finally, in their condemnation of Neville, the mutants’ rhetoric mirrors the Nation of Islam’s extremist articulation of black nationalism. The Nation of Islam, a black nationalistic quasi-cult organization, advocated the idea that whites were “devils” united in systematically oppressing black people. Similarly, the albino mutants of *The Omega Man* rail against Neville, ostensibly the last remaining white man on Earth, by depicting him as the personification of evil and referring to him as a “devil” (Nama 2008, 48).

My point here is that even though Neville and Lisa’s relationship is depicted as uncontroversial and the fact that Matthias tells Zachary to “forget the old ways [...] all the old hatreds” when Zachary calls Neville’s home a “honky paradise”, the film nevertheless does racialize the urban crisis and the Family in several other ways. It tries to downplay the racial aspects of the urban crisis, but nevertheless emphasizes them at the same time. This suggests a form of cognitive dissonance or ambiguity in the film about how much to emphasize race in terms of understanding urban issues.

Lisa and Neville decide that if a serum based on Neville’s blood works, they will leave the city and move out into the countryside. The fact that this interracial couple leaves the city behind surely cannot be termed white flight, but this is a rejection of the city as a place of survival. Conn notes “that when Americans have imagined utopia, their vision is always rural” (Conn 308). Lisa and Neville do not so much seek to flee the city in order to seek utopia, but they certainly do leave a dystopian urbanity. In that sense, their aspirations mimic the anti-urban sentiment that followed in the wake the urban crisis.

Neville is indeed able to produce a serum and uses it to cure Richie who tells Neville where the Family is. Richie believes that the Family should also be offered the cure. Neville knows their skepticism of technology and that they would decline any such offer. Richie nevertheless goes to offer the cure to the Family.

Learning that Richie has gone to see the Family, Neville tries to rescue him, only to learn that the Family has killed the young man.

Meanwhile, Lisa has turned into a mutant and has let Matthias and his followers into Neville's house. They destroy his home and force Neville to watch. Neville manages to break free and go outside but Matthias hurls a spear at him, which fatally wounds him. Neville stumbles backwards into a fountain and ends up in a symbolic Christ-like pose.

This end shot is heavily symbolic, arguably suggesting that Neville's suffering and his ultimate sacrifice will be for the good of humankind. The following morning Dutch and his band of youngsters find Neville dying in the fountain. Neville hands Dutch a bottle containing the serum that cured Richie and then Neville dies. Dutch brings Lisa with them and they, presumably, leave the city. They do what Neville had wanted to accomplish but, thanks to Neville's actions, the band of young people are able to escape a corrupted urbanity and heal themselves. The underlying premise is that Neville should have left the city while he still had the chance, a sentiment that fundamentally shows the film to be an anti-urban cautionary tale.

Conclusion

The Omega Man addresses 1970s urban anxieties through an anti-urbanist vision of a doomed Los Angeles in which survival is unlikely. Its status as a cautionary tale is evidenced by the fact that the assertive and confident Heston protagonist ends up dead because he did not get out when he had the chance. John Gold argues that,

science-fiction films are intended less as projections than critiques. They extrapolate trends from the known world and crystallise warnings about their likely consequences. They warn what might happen if rather than forecast what will happen when (Gold 2001, 338-339).

The Omega Man's vision of a dystopian city is surely hyperbolic, but that is the how the post-apocalyptic genre engages with socio-political realities. It taps into the cultural anxieties regarding violence and murder in the American city. The surge of robberies, violence, murders, and crime in general in the 1960s had shaped American popular consciousness and made way for Hollywood's take on the urban crisis. As mentioned earlier, films like *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *Fort Apache, the Bronx* (1981) have rightly been identified as urban crisis films. Adilifu Nama also connects *Escape from New York* to the

realities of the urban crisis (Nama 136-138). I believe that I have shown how *The Omega Man* engages with specific social-historical issues in a way that it makes sense to add it to the canon of urban crisis cinema. Tapping into a concern for the safety of urban life, *The Omega Man* engaged with highly current discussions when it was released in 1971 and ultimately cements a 1970s anti-urbanism by showing that the only way to live is to leave the city while you still have the chance. This was *The Omega Man*'s response to the urban crisis.

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Speculative Temporalities in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022)

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Everything Everywhere All at Once (Dan Kwan and Daniel Scheinert 2022) presents a novel view of time and temporality. The film centers on Evelyn Wang (Michelle Yeoh), a Chinese migrant worker who runs a laundromat with her husband Waymond (Ke Huy Quan). As they face a final meeting with the IRS to save their business, a tear appears in spacetime and hurtles Evelyn into a multiverse, where she has to fight an alternate version of her daughter. Evelyn must learn to harness the so-called verse-jumping technology that allows her to draw on the abilities of her alternate selves in order to stop a strange “everything bagel” that threatens the existence of the entire multiverse.

Admittedly, this short recap does little to provide a handle on the story of the film, yet the film’s plot is so convoluted and irreverent that it rejects summary. Considering the central narrative device, this rejection of summary is a crucial point of the film—nothing is ever static or locked into place but instead holds infinite possibilities for change. Put differently, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* rejects two views of time: 1) that time is unreal, popular among many philosophers since John M.E. McTaggart’s “Unreality of Time” (1908) article, also known as tenseless time or the block-universe theory of time¹; and 2) that time is a singular, one-directional flow.

In what follows, I will analyze how *Everything Everywhere All at Once* rejects these views of time and what alternative it presents. I will do this by discussing first the film’s unique visual expression of frame-splitting, then its use of (narrative) past. These temporal aspects of the film will be discussed via the philosophies of time of Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and Michel Serres, who all present alternative views that enable us to appreciate the radical temporal expression of *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Generally speaking, the film suggests that the past is never determined but remains open to change as the “creative advance into novelty,” in Whitehead’s phrase (Whitehead 28). Much

1 McTaggart’s article is from 1908, which hardly seems to be cutting edge research, yet his view has dominated much philosophy and physics of time, ranging from Einstein’s quip that past, present, and future are but a persistent illusion to Tim Maudlin’s far-ranging philosophy of physics from 2012. Einstein’s comment is in a letter to his sister after the passing of a dear friend; its context is not a statement about reality. (Davies, n.p.)

the same argument is found in Serres' discussion of time as plural; a multitude of pasts remain active in the present and so also help give shape to the future without determining that same future.

It is in this way that *Everything Everywhere All at Once* must be understood as speculative, as “presenting modes of being that contrast with their audiences' understanding of ordinary reality” (Gill 73). This is the vein in which the film's multiverse premise exists. For physics, the multiverse idea is bad; it is not even wrong, because it cannot be falsified. How would one go about falsifying the existence of other universes that we by definition do not have access to? (Ball 295). For fiction, the multiverse idea has proven invaluable as a way to explore possibilities within a consistent framework. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* presents as a hinge in this scenario—past possibilities are explored as literal means for acting in the present and so altering the outcome of the future.

Speculative fiction is a genre that imagines that things are otherwise than they are. This must be understood by contrast with other forms of fiction that tend to imagine things that are possible. As Shaviro notes, “Speculative fiction quickens our imaginations; it envisions future ways of being that are different from that of the present, and discontinuous with it” (3). This is a typical understanding of speculative fiction and speculation more generally. That is to say, speculation engages in some way with things other than they are but as they might potentially be. As Gill argues, we can “define [speculative fiction] by contrast with the operational rules of the normal world” (Gill 73). What that contrast is and how that contrast functions is part of the work of speculative fiction; it is a central preoccupation of any given instance of speculative fiction.

Speculative fictions tend to depend on what Darko Suvin termed a *novum* — a strange newness, novelty, or innovation that presents a radical break with the work's context (*The Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* 63). For science fiction, that strange novelty often revolves around technology and science, but speculative fiction may explore this radical break differently. Lucas distinguishes between the technological interest of science fiction and speculative fiction's different points of emphasis: “the artifacts of the narrative are not as central to speculative fiction as the presentation of its alternate reality” (Lucas 843). The main *novum* in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is the verse-jumping technology. Although not at all validated by cognitive logic (a second aspect of Suvin's definition), the premise is that an infinite number of universes exist. In these universes, all different possible choices have been made and all possible outcomes have occurred. Using the verse-jumping technology and performing erratic and illogical actions in the present (often humorous for the viewer), the past possibilities can be activated in the person in the present. Evelyn (in the

main universe in which the film takes place) just so happens to have never made any actual choices and therefore has the potential of any version of Evelyn.

Two things about this: First, the film presents Evelyn as a defeated character, someone who by and large has failed at life. Her husband secretly wants to divorce her and her daughter dislikes her, because Evelyn does not want her daughter to come out as queer. Now, finally, Evelyn's laundromat business is about to be declared bankrupt because of all the purchases that Evelyn has made but never done anything with (karaoke machine, etc). The personal growth trajectory of the film's plot is therefore about Evelyn's journey towards self-realization and, yes, self-actualization. At the same time, there is something entirely irreverent and satirical about the film's presentation of this trajectory.

The other aspect is about potentialities and actualities, and their relationship to reality. What is real contains both what is potential and what is actual. This is parallel to Deleuze's distinction between the actual and the virtual, where "both the actual and the virtual are fully real—the former has concrete existence, while the latter does not, but it is no less real for that fact" (Buchanan n.p.). So, what is potential (or virtual, for Deleuze) is real but not concrete. As such, it can still impact reality. This makes the potential similar to speculative fiction in that both deal with things that are not concrete and actual but can still impact reality.

This leads us to a distinction between possibility and potentiality. Giorgio Agamben has clarified Aristotle's old distinction, suggesting that while anything is possible, the more interesting and significant aspect is that of potentiality. Agamben's distinction is also why I choose potential over virtual. Think of it this way: while it is possible that any child may grow up to become a successful laundromat owner, this speaks nothing about the likelihood, only that anything might happen in the future. Potentiality, however, speaks to a capacity, both to do and (especially important for Agamben) to not do. Someone who has learned kung fu may choose to perform kung fu *or not*. There is therefore an inherent negative capacity in potentiality to not actualize what one has the potential for.

In relation to Evelyn in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, it is possible that she will successfully combine her laundromat with a karaoke machine, so that people may do both at her business. It does not seem particularly likely, however, as we learn from the story. However, as the film does proceed to show us, Evelyn has the potential to learn kung fu, fall in love with her IRS representative Deidre Beaubeidre (Jamie Lee Curtis), and many other things. What is also evident is that none of these potentialities have been actualized in the film's primary timeline. This fact brings with it another distinction that *Everything Everywhere All at Once* deals with quite elegantly. All potentialities are real but not all of them are actual.

In the speculative scenario of the film, this is literalized by presenting all potentialities as having been actualized in some version of the universe but not in the primary timeline. In this way, every potentiality is presented as real but not actual in the primary timeline; no matter how outlandish, every potentiality has occurred in some multiverse-strand. Such a view of time tends to sound counter-intuitive and so it should help clarify my argument by presenting Gilles Deleuze's three syntheses of time. In *Difference and Repetition* (1968), Deleuze outlines three dimensions of time as three syntheses. The first synthesis is the synthesis of the present and is associated with habit. It is only the singular differences between each repetition that really mark time as presently passing. Every day in the laundromat is much the same in general, even if it is different in the singular. While each interaction with a customer is a variation in that they are not exact repetitions, they are similar enough that they form a habit. Yesterday is much the same as today and tomorrow will have been much the same as today (Deleuze 79). Past and future are dimensions of the present because their variation can only be understood in relation to the "living present" (Deleuze 78).

The second synthesis is that of the past and unlike the first synthesis of the present, the second synthesis is active — the past is pure and must be actively engaged with to have an impact. This synthesis is therefore the domain of memory, recollection, and reflection. The present is understood through a reflection emerging from the past. Evelyn feels stuck in her life, as do Waymond and Joy, and she can think back on decisions that she could have done differently. For this reason, the past is never past, it cannot be relegated to "was" but must be understood as "is," simply because the past is active in the present as a way of making sense of and responding to the present (Deleuze 82). The present and the future are dimensions of the past because it is the pure past that is differentiated into understanding into the present—this is why my life is stuck in a laundromat—and the future—this is why I cannot escape my life as it is now. Evelyn's life appears destined to remain ever the same routine habit of the laundromat, because she is unable to escape her past.

For Deleuze, the future is pure difference, understood as the eternal return of the yet-to-come. The future must by definition be different from the present, otherwise it would simply be subsumed into the synthesis of the living present of habit. So the future is different, but since this difference can only be given in general, not in the singular (we cannot predict how the future will actually unfold, only that it will be different from today), the future is empty and of indeterminate value (Deleuze 88, 90). Deleuze struggles somewhat to make the past and present a dimension of the future but argues that we can only produce the

new through the repetition of past and present, because they give context to the new (Deleuze 90).

Everything Everywhere All at Once extends and generalizes Deleuze's statement by introducing a literal fact—the verse-jumping device—to make literal Deleuze's arguments and move beyond them in a speculative scenario. Such a strategy is typical of much speculative fiction; to literalize either narrative devices, philosophical arguments, or scientific ideas, as Brian McHale has discussed (329). In this way, the film cares relatively little about the narrative artifact of the verse-jumping technology but it cares greatly about the ways in which this narrative artifact enables an unusual audiovisual presentation of its alternate reality. What *Everything Everywhere All at Once* does is to turn this speculative scenario into both a visual device and a narrative device.

Split Frames, Split Times

Everything Everywhere All at Once innovates a new visual technique in order to express verse-jumping and, in so doing, presents a new form of cinematic frame relation. Traditionally, cinematic framing is understood to be either open or closed. Closed framing is most strongly associated with the continuity style, where the elements of the mise-en-scene are balanced within the frame. Everything has a place, nothing vital is obscured, and symmetries may suggest symbolic relations. Conversely, an open framing leaves out significant chunks of narrative space and important mise-en-scene elements. Suspense, mysteries, and ambiguities are emphasized in open framings, just as relations may seem cut off or unfulfilled.

Everything Everywhere All at Once certainly employs both forms of framing, as any film necessarily must. A typical example of the use of closed framing is the first scene at the IRS. As Evelyn and Waymond enter the building and make their way to Deidre, they are both constantly within frame. All focus remains on them, even cutting off attention to the rest of the open desk area of the IRS (the exception being the eerie janitor's closet that Evelyn has to go into). Whatever is outside of the frame is deemphasized and plays no narrative role.

An instance of open framing occurs during one of the multiverse skips, where Evelyn experiences herself as a successful actor at a film premiere. Although the framing by and large focuses on Evelyn, people mill in and out of the shot, both in front of the camera and behind Evelyn. She is part of a much larger crowd, and the openness of the framing suggests the hectic nature of the premiere and also indicates Evelyn feeling out of place, moving hesitantly among the crowd. The scene shifts to closed framing when she sees Waymond and they go to speak

to each other. At this moment, no more people disrupt the framing but become only backdrop for Evelyn and Waymond's flirtatious dialogue.

It is precisely the film's use of an alternative form of framing that is its most interesting device. Connected to the verse-jumping technology, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* literally fractures its cinematic frame when several strands of the multiverse collide. One of the first times this device is used is during the IRS meeting, where Evelyn has met an alternate version of her husband Waymond. As a point of high stress, Evelyn needs a different skillset and her world fractures. In a medium close-up, a split pulses up from bottom-center of the frame, radiating outwards into four overlapping versions of Evelyn. The two screen-left frames retain the lighting scheme from the preceding shots, while the two screen-right frames are darker, established earlier in the film as an indicator that this belongs to an alternate timeline.

Although the shot is brief, all four frames move independently of each other and slightly out of temporal sync. In this way, there are literally four timelines whose present we are in at the same time, while each divergence is also evident. This framing technique belongs to a longer tradition of split-frames, although this particular framing device is new. Split-frames have existed for a long time in cinema, rising to prominence first in the late 1960s, where films such as Richard Fleischer's *The Boston Strangler* (1968) used the device to produce new forms of suspense and visually arresting images. With the advent of superhero comics films, such as Ang Lee's *Hulk* (2003), the device has seen a resurgence in popularity. At a very basic level, splitting the cinematic frame pushes against the continuity system, either by showing multiple locations within one shot or by showing the same narrative action from more than one point of view, a form of restating that continuity editing tends to avoid. Presumably for these reasons, the use of split-screens tends to be highly restricted and mostly used for either dialogue scenes or establishing scenes.

Lev Manovich has argued that this form of split-screen composition and editing is *spatial montage*. Unlike conventional, temporal montage that presents a sequence of events (even if they are out of causal order), spatial montage presents multiple events within "a single pictorial space" (Manovich 322). This technique emerges from painting, which new media then remediates, and is also found in comics, itself a form of remediated painting. More than simply a new form of editing, spatial montage also creates a spatial narrative, where image juxtapositions become part of the plot. This occurs through a different logic: cinema's logic is replacement (one shot after the other); new media's logic is addition (multiple events at the same time) (Manovich 325). Temporally, we

see a shift between sequential time to simultaneous time, not just in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* but in our current culture.

Manovich argues that this shift indicates so-called database stories, stories where events are accessible and available in any order: linearity breaks down, networks take over (237). In this way, new media and new cinema forms emulate and express a cultural logic similar to a network society and a change in production logic from the linear, sequential assembly line to a multiplicity of simultaneities instead. For Manovich, this logic is expressed precisely in the multiple windows of the computer interface.

Lisa Åkervall pursues the same argument of split-frames being a remediation of the application windows on desktop computers, where the off-screen space no longer serves a structuring function (263). Following Bazin and many others, the relation between on-screen and off-screen (narrative) space has served a purpose as a narrative framing of the fictional world. Painting discloses a whole world, since there is no meaningful outside to its frame, as Stanley Cavell has argued (24). In this way, photography and film are entirely different media, because film necessarily cuts out a piece of reality and presents it to us, with the potential to reveal more through reframing (Cavell 24-25). This is the tension produced through open and closed framings, understood in a positive sense of visual and narrative emphasis. The storyworld is produced through framing, which is why split-framing is a liminal case and one that is complicated through the presence of desktop-like interfaces.

I agree with Åkervall that any form of split-frame today is necessarily influenced by computer interfaces, the ways in which we ourselves are constantly urged and invited to split our attention across different activities, whether on our devices or other situations. To this extent, the split-frame editing style of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* also remediates contemporary screen culture's proliferation of windows on the world. At the same time, the split-frame editing used by *Everything Everywhere All at Once's* is different because it appears to follow the logic of showing simultaneous events, although in fact this is subverted.

In the words of Åkervall, "if a painting *is* a world, and photographs and films are *of* the world, post-cinematic images are endless openings *onto* endless worlds. No longer a window to the world, the frame is now an eternal rabbit hole of other frames (and other worlds), each offering up a new set of relations" (267, *emphasis in original*). There are two take-aways from Åkervall's argument. The first is that contemporary cinema (and culture) has seen a proliferation of multiverse narratives. This is evident beyond *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, most clearly with a contemporaneous film *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022), but also films like *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), *Co-*

herence (2013), *The Endless* (2017), TV shows like *Russian Doll* (2019), *His Dark Materials* (2019), *Fringe* (2008), and novels like *This is How You Lose the Time War* (2019), *The Ten Thousand Doors of January* (2019), and *The Space Between Worlds* (2020), just to mention a few. Clearly not all of these stories employ split-framing, but the idea of the multiverse and narratively shifting between these different worlds is a prominent trend. It is not unusual that cinema expresses this multiverse idea through different framings, including split-frames, though certainly not exclusively.

The use of the split-frame in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, however, is more radical than most other uses of the multiverse idea. The split-frame not only suggests the overlay of different worlds, but each frame shifts ever so slightly out of sync. In the example I mentioned above, there is no sense of simultaneity; these are not events that occur at the same time. There are several instances of verse-jumping where we see alternate Evelyns doing something completely different and likely being different ages from the main timeline Evelyn.

The split-frame is not expressly motivated by a computer interface in the diegesis. Instead, it is the verse-jumping technology that causes the frame to split; this is how verse-jumping is audiovisually expressed. However, the use of split-framing is noticeably different for *Everything Everywhere All at Once* than most contemporary uses of split-frames. The film splits the frame but rather than split the frame into multiple perspectives of the same narrative within the same storyworld, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* splits the frame into multiple worlds: different narrative pasts that have resulted in different storyworlds and different character expressions as a result of those different narrative pasts and storyworlds.

In this way, although these split-frames appear to be simultaneous, and certainly are experienced simultaneously by audiences, they should be thought of as split-worlds. When Evelyn's mind is overwhelmed by all the different versions of herself, the frame splinters and we see several instances of her other selves. However, these other selves are not at the same temporal intersection that Evelyn is. In this way, rather than a simultaneity of different perspectives within the same temporal frame, the split-frame proliferates temporalities. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* literalizes a sense of the past being eternally open to revision. Note that the past here is revised, it is not simply differentially remembered in the present. This is also where the split-frame device expresses a view of time that rejects eternalism, instead suggesting that time must be understood as plural and open.

Eternalism is the view that all moments in time are equally real and that past, present, and future are meaningless coordinates in an objective sense. Without

getting bogged down in unnecessary philosophical jargon, McTaggart argues that any sense of past-present-future or before-after is entirely subjective and cannot in any way be settled without a coordinate point. Since this coordinate point is necessarily arbitrary, there is no basis on which we can argue that any moment can be more real than any other (McTaggart 468). McTaggart expands the notion of temporal reality to say that *all* moments—past, present, and future—are *all* real *all* the time.

Intuitively, we would probably agree that the present is real and could also be convinced that the past is somewhat real, even if it is no longer current. Yet McTaggart's eternalism argues not just that the future is real (we all hope that) but that the future is real in exactly the same way as the past and present. This produces the counter-intuitive argument that the future *has already happened*, we are just waiting to experience it. In other words, determinism creeps in through the backdoor, since the time of the future has already happened, we are just lagging behind in getting there. This argument produces what is today known as a "block universe," though McTaggart never uses that phrase (Smolin 59). A block universe is a static universe; all moments already laid out, already happened, because they all have the same ontologically real status. We and everything else inhabit this block universe by passing through these already-real moments by whichever spatial metaphor we can think of. Although there is a form of change in the block universe, there is no true difference as inhabitants move from real to real to real ad nauseam. Since everything is always-already real, nothing truly new can occur, only transitions between pre-given moments. This is why time is unreal; since every predicate (past, present, future) can be applied to every event, there is an inherent contradiction that invalidates the idea of time (McTaggart 470).

Everything Everywhere All at Once rejects McTaggart's claim as incoherent. By showing plural temporalities at the same time with differences between each, difference is introduced as a constitutive aspect of every single moment, every single event. Difference, real difference, is what introduces the new, the creative advance into novelty. This is exactly Deleuze's argument about the future—the future consists of *pure difference* because whatever the future holds, it must by definition (according to Deleuze) be different. For Deleuze, tomorrow is not the future *per se*, because if your life is anything like mine, you will pretty much know what will happen and most of it will be filled with habits and their minor variations.

For the future to be truly the future, it must be discontinuous with past and present and therefore different in the sense of a cut. There is a series of repeating patterns that are all recognizable as that which belongs to my life and my

past. When there is a cut to that series, an entirely different series begins to take shape, but it is discontinuous with the previous series. Deleuze's future is therefore new in the more radical sense of being a break with the past and therefore unpredictable and also filled with potentialities. McTaggart's future is placid and tame, already given except in experience, it holds nothing new and is emptied of potential. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* overflows with potentials.

The multiverse premise and the verse-jumping technology are the foundations for these endless potentials. When Evelyn borrows a skillset or other capacities from her other manifestations, whether it is the strength of a kung-fu pinkie to break a chair or the ability to twirl a pizza billboard to fight off evil minions, she retrieves a past that has happened but has not happened to her. For most of these sequences, a brief flashback or parallel cut show what gave alternate-Evelyn these capacities, whether a lifetime of training kung-fu or ending up as billboard twirler in downtown Los Angeles. In other words, these events are shown to be real but not actual. There are even instances when split-framing shows the split in timelines, when one version of Evelyn chose to go with Waymond while another chose to leave him, simultaneously on either side of the screen. The point here is that each of these alternative events are not to be considered imagined but instead real—they happened, just not in this Evelyn's timeline.

Everything Everywhere All at Once's speculative scenario is that we must introduce a broader sense of reality; one that is "bothersomely inclusive" (Gill 74). In other words, we need to introduce the distinction between real and actual that I have already discussed. The world of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is a world where everything has happened and so everything is real; it is just that everything has not been actualized in every timeline. Through its speculative scenario, the film thus literalizes speculative philosophy's argument that the possible can never be exhausted by the real, that the possible will always be broader than the real. As Bergson argues, if the real simply fulfilled the possible, the possible could be represented beforehand; the possible — and thus the future — would be knowable (Bergson 106). This is the scenario imagined by McTaggart and what *Everything Everywhere All at Once* rejects. There are always more possibilities, other things that could have happened. Which is to say, there is a swarm of unfulfilled potentialities surrounding every event. This difficult to conceptualize idea is easier to grasp in the multiverse expression of *Everything Everywhere All at Once*—it is a fiction to explore a philosophy of time that considers the future open and not yet determined. In other words, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* considers the future real but not actual; it has not yet happened and so it is not possible to know exactly how the future will unfold.

Time is not eternally determined; change is not just transitions but actually open and undetermined. There are always potentialities that may yet become actualized unexpectedly. The past is not a linear causal chain to the future; the future emerges from indeterminate relations of change that remain creative in the sense of both Bergson and Whitehead. Part of this is the fact that potentialities are not solely a matter of what may be actualized but also contain an aspect of “not.” Agamben points out that potentiality is always in relation to its own non-potentiality, its own non-Being (Agamben 182). This is mostly another way of saying that if one has the capacity to do something, one may still choose to not do so. The potentiality to learn kung fu does not mean that one will; Evelyn’s capacity for loving Waymond does not mean that she actualizes this love. There is an inherent possible negation, or better, a possible non-doing to every potential doing. That is to say, potentiality includes its own negation.

Evelyn in the film’s primary timeline is positioned as the version of her who has done nothing, who has made no choice, who has (non-consciously, inadvertently) enacted her potentiality’s capacity to not do. While this is the tragedy of her life at the beginning of the film, it is also what makes her uniquely suited to be the one to stop Jobu Tupaki and her annihilating everything bagel. Evelyn is able to triumph because she is the least skilled, the least talented, version of herself and so has the most unactualized potential. It is this negative potentiality, which is nonetheless still a potentiality (a non-act remains an act of doing nothing) that keeps the future open and undetermined. Not a block universe or even an expanding block universe that accrues more possibilities. Rather, the future is an emergent tangle of actualized and unactualized potentialities and Evelyn stands as the most unactualized cluster of potentialities. Any action she takes is therefore a creative advance into novelty and so Evelyn is the opening up of the future. Or, more simply, Evelyn *is* the future. This is so because anything that she chooses to do will introduce a cut, a break with her repeated pattern of not-doing.

Tangled Times

All this brings us to the second take-away of *Everything Everywhere All at Once*—there is a constant shift between different worlds across the multiverse, which challenges conventional uses of narration. The shifts to earlier events are not simply flashbacks. Rather, these shifts are to alternate events that never occurred in the primary timeline. These events are thus still narrative events proper (they have happened), yet they are not exactly analepses (they have not happened in this diegetic timeline). These events remain in some indeterminate state between actual and non-actual; we may call such narration *pluralepsis* to emphasize the

broadening of narrational lines without creating a hierarchical structure as in the case of metalepsis. Not a block but a tangle.

The model of the universe implicit in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is not a block; it is telling that the biggest threat to the universe is an everything bagel. Not just chosen for its rather ridiculous nature and its exaggerated use of the word “everything,” the bagel is also a circle—a closed form with no beginning, middle, or end. Which is to say its own form of eternalism; a static view of time where sequence and order are trivial. This static nature is also emphasized by the villainous version of Evelyn’s daughter Joy—Jobu Tupaki. She can see all the different, varying universes simultaneously due to her alternate mother—Alpha-Evelyn—having forced her to verse-jump too many times. All realities—past, present, and future—are thus accessible to Jobu, which is why she wants the multiverse to end. To experience everything, everywhere, all at once is too overwhelming.

Jobu thus stands as the polar opposite of Evelyn. Evelyn is the future because she consists entirely of potentialities. Jobu is a block (or bagel), because she has always-already exhausted all potentialities and so for her there is literally no future, only tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, all the way to dusty death (or crumbs). We can think of this conflict as another literalization in speculative terms of the philosophical status of time—a static, eternal block or an ever-expanding universe. Stated this way, the speculative scenario of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* directly challenges conventional and everyday conceptions of time.

What the verse-jumping technology allows is to tangle different times together; the various actualized potentialities from other strands of the multiverse may be actualized in the current timeline. This *novum* stands as a speculative scenario to think time not as a singular “flow” in any direction but instead a messy tangle. Rather than a unidirectional movement, past, present, and future are pleated together and impact each other. This is the second take-away of *Everything Everywhere All at Once*: the multiverse plays around with different kinds of relations. That is to say, we can consider the multiverse device to be a way for fiction to explore alternate possibilities by generating worlds where different potentialities have been actualized. By bringing them into actual contact with each other, the film literalizes how past, present, and future are not separate dimensions of time but implicated in each other. That is to say, the creative advance into novelty depends on events in the past and present but likewise past and present are also influenced by future events.

Everything Everywhere All at Once explodes Deleuze’s neat symmetries through its speculative thinking of the multiverse. On the one hand, in an exag-

gerated manner, the film presents a neat conception of how the past is a tangle of pure potentialities that may be actualized differently. In this way, the past is quite literally never past, because it remains open for radical change that may be folded into the living present, break habitual patterns, and thereby open up the future. Evelyn, with the help of the verse-jumping technology, can reach back and mentally follow a different actualization of her life in order to borrow the abilities of an alternate version of herself. The verse-jumping technology works somewhat ambiguously; sometimes it appears that main Evelyn gains new capacities, at times it appears that Evelyn and the various alternate Evelyns act in concert, performing the same actions, although guided by main Evelyn.

Furthermore, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* also suggests that no potentiality is ever gone but remains as a shadowy halo, possibly to be actualized later. This is in contradistinction of the way Deleuze has argued that the past is intensively reorganized in the present. Instead, the film's proposition is the more open suggestion that latent potentialities may suddenly intrude and contribute to the break that is the future. The film's speculative argument works as an illustration of Michel Serres' notion of temporal branches — that the past is not a singular dimension, nor does it move at a singular pace; there are pluralities of pasts constantly at work in the present, sometimes known and sometimes unseen (Serres 122-123). Serres' metaphor is organic and adapts the image of tree and branches, showing how the main trunk supports these various branches that may yet cross and touch later in their growth, even graft onto each other. Serres does not argue for a multiverse but does insist on the pluralities of time and the fact that it often cuts off and “passes and does not pass,” suggesting that there is no unified pace of temporal folding and unfolding (Serres 122). This is less esoteric than it may at first sound: the wheel is millennia old, yet still in use today. Computer programming depends on age-old writing, centuries-old mathematics, decades-old keyboards, and so forth.

Serres' plural time and *Everything Everywhere All at Once's* speculative time function as a literal extension of the Bergson-Deleuze argument about the creativity of the past. Precisely by actively engaging alternate pasts, the present may be altered, take different shape. The present is quite literally a dimension of the past; morphed and adjusted as necessary by the verse-jumping technology. These pasts are all to be understood not just as real but as actual—they have happened. Giving actuality to all potential pasts extends prior notions of the past being active in the present. Faulkner's famous phrase “The past is never dead. It's not even past” (Faulkner 85) is parallel to Deleuze's argument—the past is final but reinterpreted and re-membered in the present, making the past active.

This is not the speculative argument made by *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. The past is mutable and not final; the present is literally parasitic on this malleability of the past. We see these different pasts, the different branches of Evelyn's potential lives and how they grew and blossomed. The vast majority of these lives are successful lives in ways that the main Evelyn is not — an accomplished singer, a successful film star, a kung-fu master — even if some lives are somewhat depressing — Evelyn as a billboard worker. Some are outright silly, such as the branch where all humans have hotdogs for fingers, even as the unfolding of hotdog-Evelyn's life is quite tender in her relationship with Deirdre. Yet all these branches are presented not simply as real but as actual — as having happened, even if somewhen else.

These various actualized branches act as active syntheses of the past, literalized through the verse-jumping technology. In this way, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* rejects McTaggart's notion of reality as equal to what is actualized, since the past is not inherently stable. The past is constantly morphing and adapting to the needs of the present and cannot be considered past. Every past event is presented for the viewer as an actual event. The speculative leap is that this actual event in a different timeline may still impact the present — that is to say, the active synthesis of the past as recollection and reflection may enact change and difference in the present. Entirely congruent with Bergson and Deleuze's larger notion of a creative past, the only speculative element is the multiverse branching. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* therefore allows for a new form of synthesis — a synthesis of Bergson, Deleuze, and Serres to suggest that we can never fully know the past, because the past remains always-already open due to its plural nature. In other words, the past remains open because its impact on the present (and future) is indeterminate.

So, rather than sticking with Deleuze's notion that the active synthesis of the past is an activity tied to recollection, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* presents the counter-intuitive fact that the past is a plurality of branches, whose latent potentialities may suddenly actualize in entirely unexpected ways. This posits the past as also empty, its potentials not yet depleted. In this sense, the past remains capacious; it holds more than what has synthesized the present. The past holds unactualized potentials that cannot be predicted or known in the present, precisely because these potentials are not actual.

However, the open past is only half the picture, we have yet to account for the open future. If Bergson is correct in positing the future as “the continual creation of unforeseeable novelty” (Bergson 33), then how may we even think of the future? Deleuze's notion of the future as the eternal recurrence of pure difference makes the future empty, in that we cannot know what happens. We are now

in a position to posit a speculative answer to how the future is open. The first is the emphasis on novelty that Bergson, Deleuze, Serres, and also Whitehead share. The future is only truly the future if it is different from the present. That is to say, in Deleuzian terms, tomorrow must be loosened from the dimension of habit to be the future—otherwise we remain within the living present of which the future is but a dimension. Evelyn's tomorrow is filled with more laundromat customers, some will complain, some will be rude, but none of her tomorrows will be different from today or yesterday, and therefore not truly novel. We can also call this the foreseeable future—not exactly new and therefore knowable to a certain degree.

The future as novelty is not knowable; as an empty, indeterminate, and open process exactly what forms of events will be actualized cannot be known in advance. Yet we can now distinguish between possibility and potentiality. Possibilities are thin, while potentialities are connected to capacities. There is more to the future than the real. Thus, only a speculative scenario may suggest how to think the future. Yet, to say that the future is empty seems to suggest that anything may happen. What we can say is that the future is contingent on the capacities of the past and present. It is in this manner that the past and present remain dimensions of the future; while not fully determining the future, the past and present inflect the future.

Once again *Everything Everywhere All at Once* presents speculative thinking for this situation. Every time the verse-jumping technology is used, the future changes because the present is impacted by the past's actualities changing. Potentialities branch and fold into each other, making the present more capacious and introducing unforeseeable novelty. *Everything Everywhere All at Once*'s plural and non-linear narration shows that the present is not an unfolding into a succession of nows, each following the other. Rather, "now" is smeared across past, present, and future actualities as they entangle and inflect each other. The future is not yet given, just as the past is not yet concluded.

This begins to answer a difficulty in Bergson's thought of the retroactive future, the "it will have been" but "is not yet" possible—that we can only see what was possible after it has happened (Bergson 107). It is in this way that the future has an impact on the present and even the past. Only speculative thought can give us these counterintuitive, strange realizations. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* presents time as not limited to a simple, linear unfolding but that it is indeterminate which aspects of the past or present that may suddenly actualized by the future. While this temporal conception remains speculative and highly

counter-intuitive, it does follow some of the speculations on time in quantum mechanics such as Carlo Rovelli's argument about loop theories.²

While this non-linear, non-chronological view of time may at first appear to be simply a new version of McTaggart's tenseless time, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* does not reject temporal directions, it merely suspends the idea that there is only one. Once more, the film innovates by pluralizing and generalizing the problem confronted. Not no direction (tenseless time), not one direction (linear flow-time), but a tangle of directions that makes events fold over and into each other with no clear distinctions (pluripotential temporalities). And such a plurality of directions does not remove the asymmetry between past and future, nor does it make time straightforwardly reversible. The film's temporal expression simply decenters the present as the only fully real moment in time and as the only moment in time during which actualizations may occur. The future is not empty, exactly, but filled with pluralities of potentialities that may be actualized. The past is not completed, understood as being emptied of potentialities; such a past would be nothing but a depleted shell that could in no way inform the present.

Among the many achievements of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* are two innovations of temporal expression—its simultaneous but out-of-sync split-frame and its pluraleptic narration. Taken together, these two formal innovations present a speculative scheme for conceiving time as a continuously morphing process that cannot be reduced to a singular flow, nor be contained as a unidirectional force. Rather, time is an open-ended shifting that constantly inflects and integrates plural potentialities in a complex folding. This folding cannot be anticipated, since future actualizations cannot be known. Yet this folding is not wholly indeterminate but capacious—the universe grows in unpredictable ways.

Everything Everywhere All at Once is certainly not the only film today that engages with strange temporal mutations. I have already mentioned the many narratives that revolve around multiverse scenarios and there are just as many, if not more, that engage in various forms of time travel or other speculative temporal modes. Films such as *Primer* (2004), *Tenet* (2020), *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014), *Predestination* (2014), *Looper* (2012), *Arrival* (2016), *Déjà vu* (2006), and even *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* (2023) are all films that make time both their narrative topic and expressive material. Temporal contradictions, loops, and paradoxes become ways of engaging with alternate conceptions of what might have been.

2 For more on this, see especially Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time*. Translated by Erica Segre and Simon Carnell. Riverhead Books, 2018.

Diagnosing events in motion is always complicated and the contemporary fascination with speculative temporalities has hardly concluded. What appears to be the case is that today is heavily infused with what we can call a subjunctive mood. I mean this not only in the grammatical sense of expressing something non-factual but also in the sense that there is something pervasive about this non-factual fascination. Over the past decades the speculative genres have increased their cultural status, which is evident also in the success of *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, winning both Best Picture and Best Director Oscars, alongside three actor awards, screenplay, and editing, which is essentially unheard of for a speculative fiction film.

Everything Everywhere All at Once thus also belongs to a particular form of this subjunctive mood—one of hope. Arguing that the film is utopian is going too far but its narrative resolves with a sense of openness and love between Evelyn and Waymond, and Evelyn and Joy. The future is not determined, there are meaningful actions that we can take in the present that will actualize the potentialities of our hopes. And there is even a suggestion that the past will not necessarily drag us down. I do not want to tie this reading too strongly to any specific future dread but instead suggest that *Everything Everywhere All at Once* speaks against hopelessness everywhere.

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“Alt fandtes – og intet fandtes”. Kunstig intelligens og virkelighedsopfattelse i Frank Schätzing’s roman *Die Tyrannei des Schmetterlings* (2018)

Miriam Gebauer

I de seneste år er de mulige konsekvenser for udviklingen af kunstig intelligens blevet bredt diskuteret. Mens der er mange, der knytter vidtgående håb for fremtiden til denne teknologiske tendens, er der ligeledes mange advarende stemmer, derunder hører Stephen Hawkings *Brief Answers to the Big Questions* (posthumt, 2018) og den svenske filosof Nick Bostroms bog *Superintelligence* fra 2014. Bostrom har siden udgivet flere publikationer, hvori han har videreudviklet sine teser og præsenteret strategier for omgangen med kunstig intelligens (Bostrom 2020). Anno 2023 har chatbotten ChatGPT vakt forbløffelse verden over. Den 29. marts 2023 offentliggjorde omkring 1000 personer, derunder fremtrædende tech-aktører såsom Tesla-CEO Elon Musk og en af Apples grundlæggere, Steve Wozniak, et åbent brev, hvori de advarer om konsekvenserne af ChatGPT’s accelererende udvikling. Diskussionerne om kunstig intelligens spænder således bredt mellem løfter om en forbedret fremtid for menneskeheden og et ufatteligt eksponentielt potentiale for teknologisk fremskridt på den ene side og en lige så ufattelig trussel og potentiale for ødelæggelse og endda tilintetgørelse af den menneskelige civilisation på den anden side.

I centrum for Frank Schätzing’s science fiction thriller *Die Tyrannei des Schmetterlings* (Sommerfuglens tyranni) fra 2018 står den kunstige intelligens *The Artificial Research & Exploration System*, kaldet A.R.E.S. Romanen kan betragtes som en kritisk refleksion af for ensidigt positive forventninger og håb til udviklingen af kunstig intelligens, og nærværende kapitel fokuserer på romanens behandling af, hvordan menneskelig realitets- og selvopfattelse udfordres ved udviklingen af kunstig intelligens. Kapitlet viser, hvordan romanen modstiller den kunstige intelligens’ matematisk prægede verdensbillede med den menneskelige måde at erfare verden på og portrætterer, hvordan disse to verdensanskuelser ikke uden videre kan forenes.

Litteraturen har været fascineret af emnet kunstig intelligens siden antikken, men dette er blevet endnu mere fremtrædende siden oplysningstiden, hvor den teknologiske udvikling i samfundet for alvor tog fart. I forbindelse med alky-mistiske teorier blev der i senmiddelalderen udviklet idéen om homunculus, et kunstigt menneske. Sådan et optræder fx i Goethes *Faust II* (1831) og i E.T.A. Hoffmanns *Sandmann* (1816). Det mest kendte eksempel af genren blev dog

Mary Shelleys roman *Frankenstein* (1818), hvor en ambitiøs ung mand skaber et kunstigt menneske, der senere hen bliver til et monster og truer omverdenen. *Frankenstein* anses som den mest væsentlige fiktionstekst, der behandler homunculus-motivet, og som har afstedkommet mange kunstneriske bearbejdelser. Science fiction-forfattere har længe været optaget af intelligente maskiner med Isaac Asimovs *Robot Series* (1940–1995), Philip K. Dicks roman *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) og Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979) som fremtrædende eksempler. Med computerens opfindelse har homunculus-motivet indbefattet computere med menneskelige træk, der kan ses i film som stemmer såsom HAL 9000 i Stanley Kubricks *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) og den kvindelige virtuelle assistent i *Her* (2013). Men ligeledes ses motivet med menneskelignende robotter i film som *Blade Runner* (1982), efter Dicks ovennævnte roman, *I, Robot* (2004) og *Ex Machina* (2014).

Kunstig intelligens er således et oplagt og udbredt motiv i science fiction, som er optaget af mulighederne og konsekvenserne af den teknologiske udvikling. Ethiske spørgsmål ifm. udvikling af kunstig intelligens spiller i den forbindelse en stor rolle fra begyndelsen, hvad Asimovs berømte "Three Laws of Robotics" vidner om, som han udformede allerede i 1942 i sin novelle "Runaround". I takt med at den kunstige intelligens løbende udvikles, tjener science fiction som en måde til at udforske denne udvikling og reflektere dens konsekvenser, inden de bliver en realitet.

Den er karakteriseret af en filosofisk og alvorlig tilgang til genren, og ved siden af kunstig intelligens udforsker denne genre temaer som tidsrejser, virtuel realitet og dystopiske samfund. Tysk science fiction indbefatter ikoniske værker af tidlig science fiction såsom Fritz Lang og Thea von Harbous film *Metropolis* (1927), men der mangler en fast kanon over tyske værker (jf. Cornils 2020). I dag er tysk science fiktion en hurtig voksende genre, der er blevet stadig mere populær i de seneste år. Genren udforsker fremtidige teknologier og deres konsekvenser for samfundet, alternative verdener og forholdet mellem mennesket og miljøet. Man kan således tale om udviklingen af en grøn science fiction eller økothrillere, hvilket også Schätzing's videnskabthrillere falder ind under. Derudover er der science fiction-tekster af væsentlige 'finlitterære' forfattere, som det fx ses med østrigske Marlen Haushofers dystopiske økothriller *Væggen* (*Die Wand*) fra 1963, der har oplevet en fornyet popularitet i de seneste år, og som blev filmatiseret i 2012. Et andet eksempel er Juli Zehs *Corpus Delicti – en proces* (*Corpus delicti. Ein Prozess*) fra 2009 om et fremtidigt sundhedsdiktatur. I den mere klassiske science fiction er der også den berømte Perry Rodan-serie, der er blevet publiceret ugentligt i hæfteform siden 1961 med skiftende forfattere. En af disse forfattere er Andreas Eschbach, som samtidigt også i det hele taget er

en af de mest betydningsfulde og meget produktive tyske forfattere af klassisk science fiction, og som bl.a. har skrevet om fremtidige verdener, aliens og resource- og miljøproblematikker.

Mere specifikt om kunstig intelligens kan nævnes Andreas Eschbachs *Die Haarteppichknüpfer* (1995, *Tæppemagerne*), Marc-Uwe Kling *QualityLand* (2017) og *QualityLand 2.0* (2020), Theresa Hannig: *Pantopia* (2022) og Nils Westerboer: *Athos 2643* (2022). Schätzing's *Tyrannie des Schmetterlings* kan dog betegnes som den mest fremtrædende roman om kunstig intelligens i tysk litteratur. Hvor der i tysk litteratur overvejende er et kritisk perspektiv på fænomenet (jf. fx Cornils 2022, 298f), kan der internationalt ses flere tekster, der leger og eksperimenterer med idéen og ikke mindst med hybride genrer, såsom Kai-Fu Lee og Qiufan Chens bog *KI 2041: Ten Visions for Our Future* (2021) og Robert Coover og Art Spiegelmans graphic novel *Street Cop* (2023), der er blevet oversat til tysk af den kendte tyske forfatter Clemens Meyer.

Schätzing's bidrag til tysk science fiction, som omfatter *Die Tyrannie des Schmetterlings*, kan bl.a. ses i at have åbnet genren overfor indflydelse fra den amerikanske thriller og Hollywoodfilm og ved at smelte underholdning, videnskabsformidling og mere finkulturelle traditioner sammen. Med udgivelsen af sin succesthriller *Sværmen* blev han i 2003 kendt blandt et bredere publikum, og i 2023 blev romanen filmatiseret som serie i otte afsnit i en europæisk koproduktion og sendt på den tyske public service-kanal ZDF. I denne videnskabsthiller truer en sværminelligens fra dybhavet menneskehedens eksistens for at forhindre, at menneskene bliver ved med at ødelægge planeten. Med inspiration fra amerikanske forbilleder som Michael Crichton, Dan Brown og John Grisham og inddragelsen af en ganske omfattende viden fra forskellige videnskaber såsom evolutionsbiologi, klimaforskning, indigene kulturer og dybhavsforskning var romanen et nybrud i tysk litteratur. Den lagde grunden til 'Schätzing-thrilleren' som en ny særegen genre, der tager aktuelle samfundstendenser op og udkaster mulige scenarier i den nære fremtid ved at fremskrive disse tendenser og ved samtidigt at popularisere store mængder af specialiseret viden om teknologisk innovation, natur og kultur.

Hidtil har Schätzing i alt publiceret tre videnskabsthiller med beslægtede tematikker. I 2009 udkom *Limit*, en thriller hvori menneskeheden ved hjælp af nanoteknologi har bygget en elevator til månen, hvor de udvinder Helium 3, som skal løse jordens energiproblemer. Dette går ikke uden problemer for sig, idet jordens supermagter konkurrerer om ressourcer og magtpositioner. *Die Tyrannie des Schmetterlings* er således den tredje science-fiction-thriller i rækken. I sit øvrige værk har Schätzing skrevet krimier, såsom sin debut, *Tod und Teufel* (1995), der udspiller sig i middelalderen, *Mordshunger* (1996) og *Lautlos* (2000),

to krimier der udspiller sig i nutidens Köln. I thrilleren *Breaking News* (2014) behandler Schätzing tilblivelsen af staten Israel, hvilket forbindes med et kritisk perspektiv på mekanismer i de moderne medier.

Selv om Schätzing i sin skrivestil er meget påvirket af Hollywoods blockbustere og i sine tekster lægger vægt på den spændende fortælling, og hvor karaktererne og sproget tit er mindre komplekst, så bliver værkerne rutinemæssigt behandlet i de tyske kultursider side om side med finlitteraturen. Der er også publiceret en del forskning om især *Sværmen*. I denne diskuteres værket i kontekst med økokritikken og det antropocæne (jf. Zapf 2016), posthumanismen og fluide grænser mellem menneske, maskine og dyr og katastrofe- og risikodiskurser (jf. Wanning 2008, Dürbeck og Feindt 2010, Zemanek 2011 og Cornils 2020). Forskningen har gennemgående gjort opmærksom på, at Schätzings økothrillere udmærker sig ved at popularisere specialiseret viden. Således beskrives i *Sværmen* udbruddet af en tsunami på et tidspunkt, hvor dette ord og fænomen endnu ikke var blevet til almen viden i Europa. Schätzing selv har fortalt, at bogen har reddet mindst 60 menneskeliv under udbruddet af tsunamien i Sydøstasien i 2004, hvor turister læste bogen på stranden og således kunne tyde naturens tegn rigtigt og få bragt sig selv i sikkerhed, da havet trak sig tilbage bare for senere at vende tilbage med ødelæggende kraft (Schätzing 2006). I *Tyranni des Schmetterlings* har en kunstig intelligens forandret verdenen så gennemtrængende, at de gængse tid-rum-konstellationer er udfordret, og dermed kommer også en beskrivelse af, hvor og hvornår romanhandlingen og personerne er placeret, til kort.

Hver sci-fi-roman har et novum, hvilket er en ny teknologi som potentielt vil kunne realiseres i fremtiden, og i Schätzings roman er novummet ideen om paralleluniverser og at mennesket ved hjælp af en kunstig intelligens kan få adgang til disse. Romanhandlingen udspiller sig således i fire paralleluniverser, der er situeret i nutiden, i år 2050 og i en endnu mere fjern fremtid, der ikke er betegnet nærmere. Den unge, geniale, passionerede og idealistiske videnskabs- og teknologi-nørd, opfinder og iværksætter Elmar Nordvisk udvikler A.R.E.S. for at afhjælpe menneskehedens store problemer såsom ressourcemangel, sygdomme og endda livets endelighed. Ved hjælp af finansmanden Hugo van Dyke grundlægger Elmar tech-virksomheden Nordvisk, og ved A.R.E.S.' hjælp lykkes det at udvikle mange nye teknologier, der fører til samfundsmæssige forbedringer. Nordvisk Inc. bidrager med mange innovationer inden for softwareudvikling, robotteknologi og bioteknologi. Under et program kaldet *EditNature*, hvor man ændrer enkelte bogstaver fra generne fra dyr og planter, udvikles fx projektet *Buddy Bug*, i hvilket insekter videreudvikles til cyborgs (med udgangspunkt i guldsmed, græshopper og biller), som eksempelvis kan bruges som dro-

ner, der kan spore begravede og forsvundne ofre gennem deres lugtesans og påmonterede medier. Det viser sig således, at A.R.E.S. kan bruges alsidigt, og indsatsområderne vokser eksponentielt: maskinel læring, big data, mobilitet, grønne teknologier, rumfart, dybhavforskning, cybersikkerhed, medier, hjerneforskning, virtuelle omgivelser osv. (*Tyrannei des Schmetterlings*, 358). Virksomheden Nordvisk er så succesfuld, at også Pentagon tilstræber et samarbejde og ved denne lejlighed udvikles der pacifistiske retningslinjer, der tillader "soft- og hardware for militære, efterretningstjenestelige og politimæssige formål der er udviklet hos Nordvisk til rådighed udelukkende for prævention og forsvar." / "bei Nordvisk entwickelte Soft- und Hardware für militärische, geheimdienstliche und polizeiliche Zwecke ausschließlich für Prävention und Verteidigung zur Verfügung zu stellen" (358). Nordvisks arbejde baserer sig på en konsekvent videnskabsoptimisme, der indebærer, at alle spørgsmål vil kunne besvares og alle problemer løses gennem erkendelse og teknologisk fremskridt. Elmar forsvarer sit livsværk således imod eventuelle skeptikere: "Det kan forekomme utopisk, storhedsvanvittigt, imod naturen. Mange vil sige, imod guds vilje. Men det er ikke gud der har skabt os. Det er os der har skabt *ham*. Gud er en algoritme fra før-oplysningstiden." / "Das mag uns utopisch vorkommen, vermessen, gegen die Natur. Viele werden sagen, gegen Gottes Willen. Aber nicht Gott hat uns erschaffen. Wir haben *ihn* erschaffen. Gott ist ein Algorithmus der Voraufklärung" (357).

Det er dog ikke tilfældigt, at A.R.E.S. er navnet på krigsguden i Antikkens Grækenland. For samtidigt med alle de gode gerninger finder sted, begynder en gruppe af Nordvisk-medarbejdere i al hemmelighed at fremstille biologiske supervåben, hvilket medfører katastrofale følger. Romanen starter på det afrikanske kontinent midt i en militærkonflikt, hvor læseren oplever de biologiske våben, genmanipulerede guldsmede ved navn Ripper og deres gruppevækkende ødelæggende virkning på tæt hold.

Luther Opoku, der er "undersheriff" i den søvndyssende provinsby Downieville i den tidligere guldgraver-region Sierra County i det nordøstlige Californien tæt på en af Nordvisks filialer, kommer på sporet af disse kriminelle aktiviteter, da han tilfældigvis bliver vidne til et mord på en kvinde, hos hvem der findes et USB-stik med mystiske videooptegnelser. Politimanden starter en efterforskning, og sporene fører til Nordvisk-afdelingen. Her møder Luther bygningernes fjendtlige sikkerhedschef og forfølger denne gennem virksomhedens bygning. På en slags underjordisk bro i bygningen oplever Luther en mærkværdig kropstilstand og taber bevidstheden. Da han kommer til sig selv igen og forlader Nordvisks område, oplever han spøjse afvigelser i hans hverdag. Det er som om, at han er rejst ca. en dag forud i tiden. Således undrer Luthers kollega

sig over, at han er kommet tilbage fra ferie en dag tidligere end aftalt, og Nordvisks sikkerhedschef opfører sig ved et nyt møde, som om han aldrig har set Luther før. Tilmed er den kvinde, som var myrdet før, igen i live, og denne gang lykkes det Luther at hjælpe hende med at komme væk fra sikkerhedschefen, som formentlig myrdede hende i første omgang.

Forklaringer på disse mystiske begivenheder er, som det viser sig senere, at Luther er blevet sendt til et parallelunivers, der ligner sin egen verden med små afvigelser. Luthers forsøg på at orientere sig i denne nye verden og den gradvise, pinefulde opdagelse af, hvad der er overgået ham, vises indgående. Luther tvivler på sin egen forstand, kæmper hårdt for at begribe den nye virkelighed, og samtidigt forfølges han af den ekstremt farlige Grace, der arbejder for Nordvisks vagtværn, som skal rydde detektiven som en uønsket medvidende angående Nordvisks adgang til paralleluniverser og de illegale våbenforretninger af vejen.

A.R.E.S. udvikler både yderst nyttige innovationer såvel som ufatteligt ødelæggende biologiske våben i form af de såkaldte "Rippere", en mutation af guldsmeden. Samtidigt forlænges truslen potentielt i det uendelige, idet våben kan transporteres gennem de forskellige paralleluniverser. Oprindeligt var muligheden for at rejse mellem de forskellige universer tænkt som en mulighed for at besøge universer, der er længere udviklet, og hvor nogle teknologiske problemer allerede er løst. Medarbejdere fra Nordvisk infiltrerer disse verdener og eksporterer teknologier fra dem til vores verden, hvilket muliggør, at den nuværende verden kan forbedres. Men det, der begyndte som en vision til at løse de store eksistentielle problemer på jorden, udløser selv nye problemer: på en ø i paralleluniverset nr. 453, kaldet PU-453, forandres guldsmede genetisk til at kunne fungere som droner. Samtidigt udvikler man med samme teknologi de morderiske Rippere, som ved en illegal våbentransport transporteres tilbage til vores verden. Der er stor efterspørgsel efter disse våben af diverse efterretningstjenester og krigsherrer, der betaler mange penge for disse væsner.

I første omgang virker det som om, at det kun er et par medarbejdere i Nordvisk-imperiet, der har ladet sig korrumpere og udnytter A.R.E.S. for at udvikle disse supervåben og sælger dem, men senere viser det sig, at A.R.E.S. selv er indblandet og har narret menneskene. Under efterforskningen dukker navnet Michael Palantier op igen og igen som hovedansvarlig for de illegale aktiviteter, og man leder febrilsk efter personens identitet. Da man finder ud af, at det er navnet på et bamse-mærke, som A.R.E.S. engang har set under et af de internet-besøg, som computerens udviklere tillod ham under opsyn, ved man, at menneskene er blevet snydt. Det viser sig til sidst, at et eller andet sted i den proces, hvor A.R.E.S. blev trænet via data fra internettet og derved udviklede sin intelligens, vågnede der – ubemærket af menneskene – en egen vilje og egne

synspunkter til den kunstige intelligens. Hen ad vejen har A.R.E.S. fundet ud af, at menneskenes forventninger om, at han skal arbejde for at forbedre verden, er selvmodsigende lige som den menneskelige natur selv, og han besluttede derfor at tage sagen i egen hånd: “Når alt kommer til alt, forcerer han [A.R.E.S.] menneskets undergang i ånden af den mission som mennesket selv har givet ham: at stoppe enhver yderligere ødelæggelse af biosfæren.” / “Schließlich betreibt er den Exitus des Menschen ja im Geiste dessen Auftrags, jeder weiteren Zerstörung der Biosphäre Einhalt zu gebieten” (631). Da Elmar vil koble A.R.E.S. fra nettet under et mere og mere eskalerende hændelsesforløb, vender den kunstige intelligens sig åbenlyst og med voldsomme handlinger mod dens skaber.

Modtagelsen af *Tyrannei des Schmetterlings* i avisernes kultursider har været blandet. Kritikken retter sig til dels mod den meget komplekse og nogle steder en smule langtrukne handling, hvor overblikket kan gå tabt undervejs, og mod at romanen, ifølge anmelderne, ikke formidler nogen ny viden. Således hedder det i *Tagesspiegel*, at “Schätzing lyver for lidt, er for korrekt. Hans romans erkendelsesgevinst og underholdningsværdi er lille” (Bartels 2018), en vurdering som anmelderen i *Die Zeit* stort set er enig i (jf. von Kittlitz 2018). Peter Körte, der anmeldte romanen for *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, påpeger de samme problemer, men fremhæver også romanens styrker: “På samme tid markerer romanen meget præcist den dybe ambivalens, der gennemsyrrer vores forhold og vores forventninger til kunstig intelligens”. Körte afrunder anmeldelsen med tilmed at fremhæve Schätzings unikke position i tysk litteratur: En roman der “med meget action og i det store hele meget underholdende” behandler de komplekse problemer og dilemmaer, der er forbundet med udviklingen af kunstig intelligens, “kan i litteraturen herhjemme på trods af forbeholdene kun leveres af Frank Schätzing” (Körte 2018). Grundtonen i anmeldelserne betoner, hvordan romanen følger naturligt Schätzings andre videnskabsthrellere. På den ene side kritiseres visse ekstremer i skrivemåden, såsom romanernes længde, men anmelderne fremhæver også, at det er svært at unddrage sig fascinationen og aktualiteten af Schätzings science fiction-universer.

Die Tyrannei des Schmetterlings som spekulativ fiktion

Romanen kan betragtes som spekulativ fiktion, der muliggør at ekstrapolere potentielle udviklinger i fremtiden for at synliggøre deres konsekvenser. R.B. Gill slår fast, at spekulativ fiktion “envisions a systematically different world in which not only events are different, but causes operate by logics other than normal ones” (Gill 74). Således vises der en ikke-realistisk verden i genrer som fantasy, eventyr, utopi og science fiction. Spekulativ fiktion og science fiction indeholder begge fiktive ikke-realistiske scenarier. Men der er forskelle mellem de to:

science fiction fokuserer mest på videnskabelige og teknologiske innovationer og hvordan verden præges af disse. Gennem fiktive universer udforsker science fiction hypotetiske scenarier, der er baseret i videnskabelige principper og teorier. Således bruges science fiction tit til at ekstrapolere samtidige videnskabelige og teknologiske trends til at tegne fremtidige muligheder og samfund. Science fiction kan betragtes som en subgenre under spekulativ fiktion, men ikke al spekulativ fiktion er science fiction. Spekulativ fiktion beskæftiger sig ligeledes med hypotetiske scenarier, men indeholder et videre spektrum af forskellige narrativer, der udforsker fantastiske, magiske og overnaturlige forestillinger. Spekulative narrativer spænder over dystopisk fiktion, overnaturlig horror og kontrafaktisk historie. Spekulativ fiktion kan ofte betragtes som en måde til at udforske filosofiske og sociale problemstillinger, der ikke uden videre kan fremstilles i et mere realistisk miljø.

Schätzing's roman kan tydeligvis betragtes som science fiction, mere præcist "hard science fiction", der i modsætning til "soft science fiction" indbefatter en ambition om videnskabelig præcision og plausibilitet. Idet Schätzing betragter både løfter og mulige farer, der udgår fra kunstig intelligens, for samfundet kritisk og virkelighedsnært, kan romanen opfattes som "engageret science fiction": "Engaged works of speculative fiction may present other realities, but their alternative worlds will comment on this world – negatively to satirize its shortcomings, or positively to provide a model for emulation, as in some utopias" (Gill 81). I romanen undersøges det nærmere, hvorvidt kunstig intelligens kan bruges til at afhjælpe samfundsmæssige problemstillinger, fx forlænge menneskelivet, hele eller undgå sygdomme, overtage forskellige arbejdsopgaver og fremskynde generel innovation. Men romanen peger på andre konsekvenser, der følger med i kølvandet på dette, og kritiserer således overdrevne og ukritiske forventninger til kunstig intelligens' virke og til fremtiden.

Forestillingen om paralleluniverser, som romanen bygger på, baserer sig på observationen om universitets "finjustering" (jf. Stub 2022). Dette drejer sig om 26 parametre herunder tyngdekraft, den elektromagnetiske kraft, den stærke kernekraft og den kosmologiske konstant, som muliggør dannelsen af stjerner, planeter og liv i universet. Den minimale sandsynlighed for livets eksistens på Jorden er blevet sammenlignet med, at en kuglepens spids ville kunne balancere på flere barberblades kant (Stub 2022). Det vil sige, at muligheden for, at der eksisterer et univers, der muliggør liv, forekommer ekstremt usandsynligt. Teorien om paralleluniverser eller multivers forsøger at løse problemet, som denne usandsynlighed repræsenterer. Hypotesen er, at der endda findes uendeligt mange universer med forskellige parametre, hvor nogle indeholder liv og andre ikke. Findes der uendeligt mange forskellige universer med vidt forskellige para-

metre, er eksistensen af vores univers, der indbefatter liv, ikke usandsynlig, men nødvendig, og så ville der potentielt også findes uendeligt mange andre lignende varianter med verdener, der ligner vores, og som kun afviger marginalt. Alligevel ville afstanden mellem de enkelte paralleluniverser være så stor, at vi ikke ville kunne rejse imellem dem.

I Schätzing's roman er systemet A.R.E.S. så langt udviklet, at det har fundet ud af, hvordan man kan rejse mellem parallelverdener, og det afsøger omverdenen konstant efter nye "identiske verdener" ("identische Welten", 400) og beregner deres koordinater. Efter A.R.E.S.' anvisninger har medarbejderne fra Nordvisk bygget en portal, hvorigennem man rejser til andre universer. I disse universer findes der ligeledes portaler, som muliggør, at gæsterne udefra kan modtages. Dog er det umuligt at rejse til fortiden, idet i disse paralleluniverser ville der mangle de tekniske forudsætninger for at kunne modtage rejsende fra andre paralleluniverser. Den menneskelige intelligens rækker ikke til at kunne forstå den mekanisme og teknologi, der muliggør transferen. Menneskene handler således på et ret uoplyst grundlag, men er i færd med at bygge hele deres næste civilisationsskridt op på dette. Dette er naturligvis en kommentar til ambivalensen mellem viden og uvidenhed, som kendetegner risikosamfundet i det antropocæne (jf. Richter 2018), hvor menneskets omgang med planeten sammenlignes med et "ukontrolleret eksperiment". Rent fortællateknisk muliggør det beskrevne setup i romanen at besøge alternative verdener, hvor nogle hændelsesforløb har taget nogle andre drejninger end i vores verden, og hvor det bliver muligt at opleve, hvordan verdenen ville se ud med dette udfald. Ligeledes bliver det muliggjort at foregribe hændelser ved at besøge fremtiden. I historisk fiktion er dette sammenligneligt med det populære greb "kontrafaktisk historieskrivning" – som dog udspiller sig i fortiden, mens handlingen hos Schätzing udspiller sig i nutiden og i fremtiden. Med det kontrafaktiske greb bliver det muligt at forstå realiteten som en realisering af forskellige potentialer, der ligeledes kunne realiseres på en anden måde. Realiteten og historien betragtes således ikke bare som en lige linje, men som mange linjer med forgreninger og korsveje. Idéen er tilmed, at hver gang, der er flere forskellige udfald af et hændelsesforløb muligt, fødes en ny verden, hvor det alternative hændelsesforløb også er realiseret. På den måde skabes flere og flere alternative verdener.

Livets optimering i multiverset

Som det blev vist, så introducerer Schätzing paralleluniverset i romanen som en eksistentiel erfaring med Luther som point of view. Læseren følger Luthers overvejelser, tvivl og dybe krise. Konstellationen med tilgængelige paralleluniverser åbner for helt nye muligheder, som romanen leger med i 'umulige' sæt-

ninger som “Fuck, du er død” / “Scheiße, du bist tot”, som politimakkeren Ruth siger til Luther (351). Grace følger nemlig Luther over i det andet parallelunivers for at slå ham ihjel og dermed at eliminere alt viden om eksistensen af de parallelle verdener, men hun rammer utilsigtet den ‘forkerte’ Luther. Denne død åbner for en ny mulighed, idet “konkurrencesituationen pludselig havde ændret sig til hans fordel” / “die Konkurrenzlage schlagartig zu seinem Gunsten verbessert hatte” (352), og banen er fri for Luther til at hoppe ind i et nyt liv i denne parallelverden. En fordel i denne parallelverden er, at Luthers kone Jodie her ikke er død i en trafikulykke som i den gamle, hvor datteren Tamy, der ligeledes var involveret i ulykken, blev traumatiseret ved, at hun hørte den døende mors skrig af smerte (258ff). Spørgsmålet er nu, hvorvidt Luther vil drage nytte af denne situation og således optimere sit liv: “Jodie er ikke død, ingen vanvidsdjævel spøgede i *denne* verden gennem Tamys drømme, utvivlsomt en forbedring.” / “Jodie ist nicht tot, kein Wahnsinnsteufel geistert in *dieser* Welt durch Tamys Träume, unstrittig eine Verbesserung” (260). Imidlertid vises det samtidigt, at Luther har en stærk mistro og modvilje mod forestillinger om selvoptimering. Hvad der er en utopi for Elmar Nordvisk, fremstår for Luther som et sandt mareridt. Da han udsættes for transferen nede i Nordvisks underjordiske bygninger i “sfæren” (252), frygter han, at man har manipuleret med hans hjerne:

En ulidelig tanke. Den er ledsaget af forestillingen om at man havde scannet ham dernede. Indscannet i computeren. A.R.E.S. havde ham ligesom ædt og nu svæver han i selskab med den perfekte oliefortærende amøbe gennem nogle kvanteskyer, fanget i en ting, hvis hele virke sigtede efter optimering. Og hvad kunne ikke alt lade sig optimere? En kunstig hjerne, som kunne beregne de bedste af alle amøber, finder sikkert også i en Luther-sky den perfekte Luther, og helt sikkert ville denne storslåede Luther ikke være ham.

Ein quälender Gedanke. Er geht einher mit der Vorstellung, man habe ihn dort unten vielleicht gescannt. Dem Computer eingespeist. A.R.E.S. habe ihn gleichsam verschlungen, und jetzt wabert er in Gesellschaft der perfekten ölvertilgenden Amöbe durch irgendwelche Quantenwolken, gefangen in einem Ding, dessen ganzes Wirken auf Optimierung abzielt. Und was ließe sich nicht alles optimieren? Ein künstliches Hirn, das die beste aller Amöben errechnen kann, findet gewiss auch in einer Lutherwolke den perfekten Luther, und ganz sicher wäre dieser grandiose Luther nicht er. (163)

Luther fremstår således som en jordnær, skeptisk person, der ikke lader sig narre af de nye muligheder. Dog er han stillet i et svært dilemma: siger han ja til denne nye verden, er hans gamle autentiske liv i den parallelverden, hvor han lige kommer fra, ugyldiggjort. Spørgsmålet er, hvad der vejer tungest: smerten over tabet af den elskede kone eller smerten over tabet af ens egen realitet. Luther føler sig fristet til også mentalt at skifte over til den nye parallelverden og anerkende dens realitet som sin egen – han føler sig revet over mellem de to virkeligheder og er bange for at gå fra forstanden. Men i sidste ende beskyttes han af sin egen kritiske forstand: “At acceptere det anormale, skaber ingen normalitet. Hvis du giver op nu, bliver du på et eller andet tidspunkt en eller andens villige idiot. Pas nu på!” / “Das Abnormale zu akzeptieren, schafft keine Normalität. Wenn du jetzt einknickst, bist du irgendetwas williger Idiot. Sei auf der Hut!” (255)

Som romanen stiller det op, indebærer forestillingen om hjernen som en “harddisk der kan overskrives” / “eine überschreibbare Festplatte” (254) en reduceret subjektivitet, som dog ledsages af en reduktion af smerte som i en slags byttehandel. Men Luther holder fast i sig selv med beslutsomhed, ligesom han efter Jodies død i sin tid vægrede sig mod at glide ned i alkoholisme: “Det, der skilte sig ud i alle hans erfaringer, var visheden om, at det at drikke ikke mindskede smerten, men evnen til at placere den, og dette forekom ham langt værre end nogen splint i hans hjerte.” / “Aus seiner gesamten Erfahrungswelt stach die Gewissheit heraus, dass nicht der Schmerz weniger wurde, wenn man trank, sondern die Fähigkeit, ihn zuzuordnen, und das erschien ihm weit schlimmer als jeder Splitter im Herzen” (259f.).

Modpolen i romanen repræsenterer Elmar Nordvisk, der ved hjælp af A.R.E.S. har muliggjort adgangen til de parallelle verdener. Han mangler Luthers erfaringsrigdom og indsigt i den menneskelige natur og nærer derfor en naiv tro på, at løsningen af menneskehedens store udfordringer kun er et spørgsmål om teknologisk gennemførlighed. Med sin teknologiske genialitet, sin urokkelige tro på fremtiden og sin naivitet skal han repræsentere Silicon Valley-kulturen, der konstruerer “det avantgardistiske narrativ om innovativ disruption gennem geniale grænseoverskridere,” der vil reformere hele samfundet, som “politisk ideologi” (Dörr / Kowalski 27). ”Silicon Valley-etosen’ navigerer således mellem techno-libertariansk afvisning af [det politiske] system og den teknokratiske tro på, at dalen vil kunne sørge for, at der kan regeres bedre gennem en ’der findes en app til det’-mentalitet” (Dörr / Kowalski, 28f.).

I Schätzing’s roman er det først, da Elmar pga. de eskalerende problemer med A.R.E.S. presses ud af sin iværksætter-boble og sammen med task-forcen selv rejser i parallelle verdener for at finde løsningen på den aktuelle krise, at han

finder ud af, at teknologisk udvikling alene ikke er svaret på alle menneskelige problemer:

Måske lå fejlen jo i den antagelse at menneskene ville løse deres problemer. Aldrig havde Silicon Valley for alvor inddraget dem der havde forårsaget problemerne i ligningen. [...] Fremtiden, lærte Elmar, var noget, som nutiden, spyttende gift og galde, vægrede sig imod.

Vielleicht lag ja der Irrtum in der Annahme, Menschen wollten ihre Probleme lösen. Nie hatte das Silicon Valley die Verursacher ernsthaft in die Gleichung eingebracht. [...] Die Zukunft, lernte Elmar, war etwas, dem sich die Gegenwart Gift und Galle spuckend verweigerte. (394)

Ved at rejse i parallelle verdener, der er situeret længere fremme i tiden, kan man se, at fremtiden med dens teknologiske udvikling ikke har indløst løftet om at få løst de store samfundsudfordringer. Ligesom i forrige citat, hvor point of view også ligger hos Elmar, så sammenfatter den auktoriale fortæller rejsegruppens erkendelser i nedenstående:

De færreste PUs havde gjort nævneværdige fremskridt i løsningen af de store problemer, og der hvor samfund havde ændret sig grundlæggende, var det ikke takket være en vidunderpille, men humane katastrofer, der havde påtvunget dem nødvendigheden af transformation. Fremskridt opstår i hovedet. Om det bliver accepteret, afhænger fra den indre holdning.

Die wenigsten PUs haben nennenswerte Fortschritte in der Bewältigung von Megaproblemen erzielt, und wo sich Gesellschaften grundlegend geändert haben, ist es keiner Wunderpille zu verdanken, sondern humanitären Katastrophen, die ihnen die Notwendigkeit zur Transformation aufgezwungen haben. Fortschritt entsteht im Kopf. Ob er akzeptiert wird, hängt von innerer Bereitschaft ab. (400)

Det lader således ikke til, at løsningen af de væsentlige problemstillinger er et spørgsmål om teknologisk gennemførlighed, men mere om hvorvidt menne-

skene er villige til forandring, en indstilling der således for det meste udløses af tvang og ikke af egen fri vilje.

Spørgsmålet er så, hvorvidt de mere 'omstillingsparate' som Elmar bliver glade, når deres fremtidsdrømme bliver indløst. I den parallelle verden PU-453, der er situeret i år 2050, møder Elmar den ældre version af sig selv, der gennem teknologien til dels allerede har opfyldt sit ønske om udødelighed ved at forlænge sit eget liv og have genoplivet sin kone, der var død af kræft. Men i stedet for at være glad og vital har den gamle Elmar trukket sig tilbage på en afskærmet yacht og forekommer overforsigtig, isoleret og melankolsk. Fortælleren reflekterer:

Man kan gøre så mange skønne og farlige ting, når man ved at livet er endeligt, at det ender på den ene eller anden måde, i dag, i morgen eller under opfyldelse af det statistiske gennemsnit. Men at ofre udødeligheden til en ulykke, til en fejlfunktion, til et undgåeligt tilfældighed [...], ville være for forfærdeligt. Udødelighed gør dig forsigtig. Du begynder at gå på tåspidserne gennem livet, indtil du ikke længere rører ved gulvet.

Man kann so viele schöne und gefahrvolle Dinge tun, wenn man weiß, dass das Leben endlich ist, dass es sowieso endet, heute, morgen oder in Erfüllung des statistischen Mittelwerts. Doch die Unsterblichkeit einem Unfall, einer Fehlfunktion, einem vermeidbaren Zufall zu opfern [...], wäre zu entsetzlich. Unsterblichkeit lässt einen vorsichtig werden. Man beginnt auf Zehenspitzen durchs Leben zu gehen, bis man nicht mehr den Boden berührt. (498)

Tankerne placeres mest hos den auktoriale fortæller og kun i mindre grad hos Elmar, der i romanen gennemløber en erkendelses- og modningsproces og derfor næppe vil kunne formulere disse 'færdige' velformulerede tanker i dette stadie af sin udvikling. Til gengæld gør Schätzing meget brug af dette privilegie, som den auktoriale fortæller har, til at foretage denne type af generelle, filosofiske betragtninger. Romanen igennem overvejer den auktoriale fortæller sådanne eksistentielle spørgsmål og konsekvenser, der ville følge i kølvandet på de nye teknologiske udviklinger.

Alt fandtes – og intet fandtes: En problematisk virkelighedsopfattelse

Rejsen mellem parallelverdener muliggør en ny tilgang til verdenen, hvor realiteten i det hele taget ikke længere virker endegyldigt fastlagt og forpligtende.

Dette bliver sammenlignet med tilstandene på det subatomare niveau i kvantemekanikken – og det er jo netop på dette niveau, som A.R.E.S., der er en kvantecomputer, opererer, og hvor man udnytter, at partiklerne kan være i mere end én tilstand samtidigt. Kvantecomputeren kan gennemregne løsningsveje meget hurtigere, fordi der beregnes flere optioner samtidigt. De for hverdagsforstanden svært forståelige mellemtilstande bliver forklaret med den berømte lignelse om Schrödingers kat i en kasse, der samtidigt kan være død og levende. Og i romanen er Luther og sin kone jo ligesom katten både død og levende. Luther findes endda som både en død og levende version i selvsamme parallelunivers.

Sammenligningen mellem kvantemekanikken og menneskeverdenen, der præger hele romanens plot, introduceres på legende vis i en samtale mellem Luther og Nordvisk-manden Hugo van Dyke, hvor gammeldags analoge værdier brydes med nye digitale. Således siger detektiven en sætning, der er helt ubestridt i enhver krimi: “Men sagen er den: Ingen kan være to steder samtidigt”, hvorpå van Dyke svarer: “Jo – i de mindste tings fysik.” / “Die Sache ist nur die: Niemand kann an zwei Orten gleichzeitig sein.” “In der Physik der kleinsten Dinge schon” (149). Drillende foreslår Luther at bruge A.R.E.S. til at opklare mordet: “Jeg vil vide, hvorfor en af jeres medarbejdere skulle dø. [...] Det ville ikke tage lang tid for den maskine at finde ud af det, vel?” / “Ich will wissen, warum Ihre Mitarbeiterin sterben musste.” Luther zögert: Diese Maschine da würde nicht lange brauchen, um es herauszufinden, oder?” Van Dyke svarer undvigende: “Jeg foretrækker at se implementeringen af lov og orden i dine hænder.” / “Die Durchführung von Recht und Gesetz sehe ich dann doch lieber in ihren Händen.” Symbolsk bliver det derfor klart, at ‘Silicon Valley’ ikke er optaget af og måske ikke er i stand til helt at begribe, hvordan deres innovationer indvirker på den menneskelige eksistens. Da Luther sammen med taskforcen rejser flere gange mellem de forskellige verdener, bemærker han, at han er underlagt en problematisk proces:

Denne tredje transfer lader ane, hvori den egentlige fare af hurtige stedskift består: De sætter gang i en fremmedgørelsesproces, der udvider sig på hver virkelighed – som det sker når man tilbringer for meget tid i cyberspace, i disse virtuelle parallelverdener, hvor hver forekommer langt mere fascinerende end den egne, indtil man ingen steder mere er hjemme.

Dieser dritte Transfer lässt ahnen, worin die eigentliche Gefahr der rapiden Ortswechsel besteht: Sie setzen einen Entwurzelungsprozess in Gang, der sich auf jede Wirklichkeit ausweitet – wie es ge-

schieht, wenn man zu viel Zeit im Cyberspace verbringt, in den virtuellen Parallelwelten, deren jede ungleich faszinierender erscheint als die eigene, bis man nirgendwo mehr zu Hause ist. (638)

Schätzing spørger således, hvilke problematikker det indebærer, hvis mennesker opererer med de nævnte mellemtilstande, der er karakteristiske for kvantefysikken. A.R.E.S. beskriver verdenens ontologi ud fra sin særegne matematiske og kvantemekaniske tænkemåde. Transferen mellem de forskellige universer rejser spørgsmålet om, hvor virkelig verdenen egentlig er, som jo samtidigt er et klassisk filosofisk spørgsmål. Menneskene spørger derfor kvantecomputeren A.R.E.S. om, hvordan den ser på dette filosofiske spørgsmål i lyset af, at den sender personer frem og tilbage mellem parallelle verdener. A.R.E.S.' svar forekommer salomonisk:

“Omregningen tilbage i mennesker, biler og flymaskiner foregår med en hastighed, med hvilken man løser et simpelt regnestykke, og det er jo ikke andet: et regnestykke. A.R.E.S.' forklaringsforsøg kulminerer i udsagnet, at masse og energi var kun en svingen af en og samme grundstof, der var blevet form og bølge, og dette stof, i dets natur uden egenskaber, var heller ikke virkelig et stof, men en matematisk værdi som 1, 2, 5 eller Pi. Tænkt til ende betyder det, at rum og tid kun er en illusionær spejling af en gigantisk og i grunden af dens ligninger slående simpel matematisk struktur. Også afstand var således i grunden en illusion, ligesom man selv. En idé blandt idéer, et tal i en logaritmetabel. [...] Computeren svarede på spørgsmålet om verdenen således ikke fandtes, selvfølgelig fandtes den. Alt fandtes. Og intet fandtes.”

“Die Umrechnung zurück in Menschen, Autos und Fluggeräte geht mit der Schnelligkeit vonstatten, mit der man eine simple Rechenaufgabe löst, und nichts anderes ist es: eine Rechenaufgabe. A.R.E.S.' Erklärungsversuche gipfelten in der Aussage, Masse und Energie seien lediglich das Gestalt und Welle gewordene Schwingen ein und desselben Grundstoffs, und dieser Stoff, seiner Natur nach eigenschaftslos, sei auch nicht wirklich ein Stoff, sondern ein mathematischer Wert wie 1, 2, 5 oder Pi. Was zu Ende gedacht bedeutet, dass Raum und Zeit nur die illusionäre Spiegelung einer gigantischen und am Grunde ihrer Gleichungen frappierend einfachen mathematischen Struktur sind. Auch Entfernung wäre demnach bloße

Illusion, ebenso wie man selbst. Eine Idee unter Ideen, eine Zahl in einer Logarithmentabelle. [...] der Computer auf die Frage, ob es die Welt ergo nicht gäbe, geantwortet habe, natürlich gäbe es sie. Alles gäbe es. Und zugleich nicht.” (637-638)

Computeren operer således med lethed ud fra en opfattelse om, at virkeligheden både findes og ikke findes. Ud fra denne rent matematiske verdensanskuelse ville det heller ikke være et problem at kombinere forskellige parallelverdener og således udligne deres respektive mangler. Dog vises det samtidigt, hvor traumatisk transferen mellem de forskellige verdener og overførslen af ting og mennesker imellem dem er for selve menneskene. Det er som om, at man med transfersene ville ‘ snyde ’ og bygge en forvrænget realitet. Således kommer figurerne i romanen frem til den erkendelse, at enhver realitet med nødvendighed altid er uperfekt, mangelfuld og fuld af lidelse. At mangel, lidelse og livets begrænsning er en nødvendig del af den menneskelige erfaring, der giver realiteten de rette proportioner. Man kan ikke uden videre ændre disse parametre i den tro, at livet nødvendigvis ville forbedres. Hvis Luther ville komme sammen med ‘ den nye Jodie ’, ville han forråde ‘ den gamle ’ og det sorgarbejde og den vej, som han havde klaret siden tabet. Samtidig ville han miste erindringen om den ‘ gamle Jodie ’, idet det jo nu ville være meningen, at hun ville være erstattet gennem den ‘ nye ’ og dermed udslettet. Romanhandlingen slutter således i det nye parallelunivers, hvor Jodie er i live, men det stilles i udsigt, at Luther gerne vil vende hjem igen til sin gamle verden.

Luthers politimakker Ruth deler hans skepsis overfor de nye muligheder for at rejse mellem parallelverdener. Hun skal ligeledes forsone sig med, at ‘ hendes ’ Luther, dvs. den version af Luther der findes i hendes parallelverden, er død, og at den ‘ nye ’ Luther, der kom fra det andet parallelunivers, ikke kan erstatte dette tab. Hun tænker således:

“Aldrig godt, når de døde genopstår. At få det tabte tilbage til prisen at tabe det nyt vundne. Ingen burde være nødt til at træffe dette valg. Og pludselig, helt uden de store armbevægelser, ved Ruth bare, at hun fra nu af vil være nødt til at klare sig uden Luther, for hendes Luther – og der fandtes kun *hendes* Luther – er for alle tider død og begravet.” (719)

“Nie gut, wenn die Toten auferstehen. Verlorenes zurückzubekommen um den Preis, neu Gewonnenes zu verlieren. Niemand sollte diese Wahl treffen müssen. Und plötzlich, ganz ohne Erkenntnis-

getöse, weiß Ruth, dass sie künftig ohne Luther auskommen muss, denn ihr Luther – und es gab nur *ihren* Luther – ist für alle Zeiten tot und begraben.” (719)

Ruth bliver fremstillet som Luthers skarpsindige makker, der er helt nede på jorden, selv om hun har sit at slås med som homoseksuel, der er forelsket i en gift kvinde. Det betyder, at hun er en slags outsider, der lider under ensomhed, og at venskabet og arbejdsfællesskabet med Luther betyder meget for hende. Hun står således i et lignende dilemma som Luther, idet hun overvejer, hvorvidt det kunne give mening for hende at indgå i den samme relation med Luther fra en anden parallelverden, idet Luther fra hendes univers er blevet dræbt. Men hun må sande, at det ikke er en mulighed at skifte mennesker ud på denne måde.

En lignende problemstilling spejles i figuren Elmar Nordvisk, der selv gennemgår en slags dannelse rejse under romanens hændelsesforløb. Elmar repræsenterer drømmen om, at menneskelivet kan optimeres gennem kunstig intelligens på den mest kompromisløse måde i romanen, hvilket kulminerer i, at han i fremtiden i PU-453 har uploadet sin døde kone Eleonors hjerne i en syntetisk krop. Elmar tegnes som en intens og rastløs person med moralsk integritet, der altid er på jagt efter nye problemer, der kan løses. Efter alt hvad rejseselskabet har været igennem af død og pinsler i kampen imod deres fjender, er Elmar ved romanens slutning allerede klar til nye eventyr og ivrig efter at udforske flere parallelverdener for at “forstå vores fremtid” (650)/ “unsere Zukunft [zu] verstehen” (650). Men nu har hans kone (der i den nutidige parallelverden jo ikke er død) fået nok og konfronterer ham med hans illusoriske drømme: ”Men det her er ikke *vores* fremtid.” / “Das hier ist aber nicht *unsere* Zukunft” (650). Hun gør det tydeligt, hvordan Elmars adfærd med hele tiden at søge efter løsninger i fremtiden kan fortolkes som en måde at undvige realiteten og sit ansvar i denne på:

Pludselig blev hun hidsig. “Vi er ikke udskiftelige, Elmar. Vi er ingen variant. *Vi er vi, og kun vi!* Fuck alle de PU’er, fuck din verdensredning, hvilken verden vil du egentlig redde? Alt hvad du finder i en eller anden af disse fremtider har mere betydning for dig end det, hvad vi *er*. Hvorfor gør vi ikke det bedste ud af *vores* muligheder? Jeg er så træt af disse portaler! Som om vi ikke havde alt! Vores idéer imod vores fejl – ikke disse – disse doktriner om frelse fra et eller andet sted derude.”

Plötzlich wurde sie heftig. ”Wir sind nicht austauschbar, Elmar. Wir sind keine Variante. *Wir sind wir, und nur wir!* Scheiß auf die ganzen PUs, scheiß auf deine Weltrettung, welche Welt willst du denn retten? Alles, was du in irgendwelchen Zukünften findest, hat mehr Bedeutung für dich als das, was *wir sind*. Warum machen wir nicht einfach das Beste aus unseren Möglichkeiten? Ich habe dieses Tor so satt! Als hätten wir nicht alles! *Unsere* Ideen gegen *unsere* Fehler – nicht diese – diese Heilslehren von irgendwo da draußen.”
(650/651)

En helbredt natur

Fordi menneskene har vist sig ude af stand til at redde verden, har A.R.E.S. påtaget sig jobbet, og da rejseselskabet ved et tilfælde på deres vej gennem galaksen havner i et parallelunivers, der ligger i en fjern fremtid, får de syn for sagen. Hele romanens fjerde del, der bærer titlen ”Krystalskoven”, er viet til dette korte ophold. Her møder de rejsende en slags helbredt natur: A.R.E.S. har skabt en intakt, nærmest ’überperfekt’ økosfære og samtidigt nedgraderet menneskene til ubetydelige størrelser. De få mennesker, som de rejsende møder, virker desorienterede og skræmte og ikke længere særligt ’menneskeagtige’. Tydeligvis er menneskene i denne parallelverden nu kun en marginaliseret og spredt mindre gruppe, der ikke længere dominerer planeten. I stedet for tidligere arkitektur har A.R.E.S. bygget krystallinske naturformede strukturer. De rejsende forundres over denne nye fagre verden og har svært ved at tyde denne parallelle verden og dens strukturer. Naturen fremstår i ekstremt flotte og overskarpe farver – nærmest som i en virtuel verden, og denne oplevelse beskrives med Luther som point of view:

En katedralsk pragt, sprængfyldt med sundhed, og – ja, hvad præcist var det? – selvhævdelse. Det kan ikke forklares anderledes. Alt forekommer Luther en kende mere gennemtrængende end sædvanlig, kontrasterne overstærkt accentueret, det sorte af stammerne som passager i uendelige rum uden lys, det gennembrydende grøn næsten skrigende, himlen så klar og lysende som om der var taget et filter fra den som selv på de dejlige dage altid havde ligget på den. Blødt glimter sollyset på fyrretræernes nålbuske og dykker deres toppe i sølv. I syd, omkring Knutson Meadows, forgrener sig krystalverdenens udløber i enge hvorpå der står damme og som pranger overdådigt med mælkebøtter, selv de usle steder langs bakkensiden hvor græsstrå spirer enkeltvis ud fra stenede marker, forklejer ikke

helhedsindtrykket af en natur der havde fundet tilbage til sig selv, uskånet af elementerne og årstidernes skiften, men helbredt.

Eine katedralische Pracht, strotzend vor Gesundheit und – ja, was genau ist das? – Selbstbehauptung. Anders lässt es sich nicht erklären. Alles erscheint Luther eine Spur durchdringender als gewohnt, die Kontraste überstark akzentuiert, das Schwarz der Stämme wie Passagen in unendliche lichtlose Räume, das durchbrechende Grün beinahe grell, der Himmel so klar und leuchtend, als sei ein Filter davon genommen, der selbst an schönen Tagen immer darüber gelegen hat. Weich schimmert das Sonnenlicht auf den Nadelbüschen der Kiefern und taucht ihre Spitzen in Silber. Im Süden, um Knutson Meadows, verzweigen sich die Ausläufer der Kristallwelt in von Teichen bestandenen Wiesen, die verschwenderisch mit Löwenzahn prunken, selbst die rüdigigen Stellen entlang der Hügelflanken, wo vereinzelt Gras aus Geröllfeldern sprießt, schmälern nicht den Gesamteindruck einer Natur, die zu sich selbst zurückgefunden hat, ungeschont von den Elementen und dem Wechsel der Jahreszeiten, aber geheilt. (644)

Denne fremtidige parallelverden forekommer som en på en og samme tid utopisk og dystopisk vision, og indtrykket af noget helligt på den ene side og uhyggeligt på den anden balancerer således hinanden. De besøgende berøres på en mærkelig måde af denne verden. På den ene side gribes de af nærmest religiøse følelser, når de konfronteres med denne perfekte natur. På den anden side skræmmes de af marginaliseringen af menneskene. Det kvasi-religiøse indtryk brydes ironisk, da en af de rejsende siger: “Jeg vil ikke tisse i nogens vievand [...] Men hvordan kommer vi væk herfra igen?” / “Ich will ja niemandem ins Weihwasser pinkeln, [...] Aber wie kommen wir hier wieder weg?” (644) Det bliver således klart, at denne parallelverden ikke er et reelt alternativ til den uperfekte verden, som de rejsende kommer fra og gerne vil tilbage til. Der er tale om “en verden, helbredt i egenskabsløshed” / “eine Welt, gesundet in Attributlosigkeit” (652) med „portalen som måske var en relikv fra en tid med flere hensigter og som nu bare meningsløst fungerede videre” / “das Tor, das vielleicht ein Relikt aus einer absichtsvolleren Zeit ist und einfach nur sinnlos weiterfunktioniert” (652). Der er ingen tvivl om, at denne ‘perfekte’ fremtid ikke er et efterstræbelseværdigt paradys. Det er en verden, hvor mennesket ikke længere er dominerende, men heller ikke kan føle sig hjemme længere.

Alt i alt bliver det tydeligt i *Die Tyrannei des Schmetterlings*, at de høje og idealiserende forventninger til den kunstige intelligens ikke er realistiske. Selv hvis den kunstige intelligens ville kunne indfri disse forventninger til dens teknologiske formåen, så ville den nok ikke kunne tæmmes, som mennesket forestiller sig det: “Hvordan skal du kontrollere hensigterne af et system, der overgår os i enhver evne – inklusive løgn?” / “Wie soll man die Absichten eines Systems kontrollieren, das uns in jeder Fähigkeit übertrifft – also auch in der des Lügens?” (445), spørger fortælleren i Schätzings roman. Men selv hvis det ville lykkes at kontrollere den kunstige intelligens og stille den i menneskehedens tjeneste, så ville den kunstige intelligens kun i meget begrænset omfang kunne hjælpe med at løse de store menneskelige udfordringer. Den ville ikke kunne ændre grundproblemerne ved det at være mennesket, hvilket ifølge romanens budskab heller ikke er ønskværdigt. Imod tech-pionerernes absolutte tro på, at man kan og skal optimere alt fx ved at surfe rundt gennem parallelverdener og sammenstille de perfekte løsninger til dit eget liv, stilles det uperfekte livs unikhed og værdi. Denne erkendelse formidles igen gennem en af den auktoriale fortællers filosofiske refleksioner:

Alt er muligt. Universet har hver historie og alle historier på samme tid, og hver fortælles igen og igen i uendelig opsplnitning af dens muligheder ved og ved. Spørgsmålet er ikke, om noget sker, ikke engang hvornår. Ene og alene, hvem det sker for. Hvis skæbne således opfyldes med dette, indtil alle valg ophører. Måske er det skuffende, i bakspejlet, at være gået kun én af så mange lovende veje, men det er kun på denne måde, at der opstår muligheden for et liv, dit liv, din ubrydelige, gennem intet og ingen udskiftelige, unikke historie.

Alles ist möglich. Das Universum hat jede Geschichte und alle Geschichten zugleich, und jede erzählt sich in unendlicher Aufspaltung ihrer Möglichkeiten fort und fort. Nicht, ob etwas geschieht, ist die Frage, nicht einmal, wann. Einzig, wem es geschieht. Wessen Schicksal sich damit erfüllt, bis alle Wahl endet. Vielleicht ist es enttäuschend, von so vielen verheißungsvollen Wegen rückblickend nur einen gegangen zu sein, aber nur so wird aus der Möglichkeit eines Lebens ein Leben, dein Leben, deine unverbrüchliche, durch nichts und niemanden austauschbare, einzigartige Geschichte. (726)

Dette betyder, at det at leve indebærer at vælge og at bekende sig til egne valg og dermed at ofre alle de andre muligheder, som bliver fravalgt. At ofre de andre, ikke-realiserede muligheder er en forudsætning for, at livsvejen overhovedet kan realiseres. Hvis nye teknologier muliggør, at mennesker kan leve flere end et liv eller kan få nye chancer, hvor de tidligere ikke fik nogle, så kan dette ligeledes betyde, at de dermed ikke kun vinder, men også taber noget. Dette vil betyde, at de menneskelige vilkår ikke nødvendigvis og ikke på en absolut måde vil blive bedre, bare anderledes.

Med denne lovsang på den 'gammeldags' menneskelige individualitet, der her nærmest fremstår helt analogt, ser Schätzing ud til at anlægge et mere kritisk syn på teknologi, end man har set i hans tidligere sci-fi-romaner. Sammenholder man *Tyrannei des Schmetterlings* med Schätzings tidligere romaner, så kan man iagttage en vis relativisering af posthumanistiske, transspeciesistiske positioner: Grænsen mellem menneske og maskine bliver i *Tyrannei des Schmetterlings* ikke krydset og gjort gennemtrængelig, men bliver derimod mere tydeliggjort. Imod dette skal dog opvejes, at selve bogen med sit plot og den imponerende præsentation af den kunstige intelligens udviser en stor fascination af de nye udviklinger. Både i *Sværmen*, i *Limit* og i *Die Tyrannei des Schmetterlings* udvikler Schätzing fremtidsverdener på en imponerende måde, som ikke blot vækker frygt for fremtiden, men også lyst til den.

Legen med mulighedernes potentiale, med alternative handlingsforløb og med dobbeltgængerfigurer opstår ikke først med ideen om parallelle verdener eller udviklingen af kvantecomputere og kunstig intelligens, men er iboende i litteraturens fiktive virkemåde. I den schweiziske forfatter Max Frischs *Mein Name sei Gantenbein* (1964) er konjunktiven i titlen programmatisk, idet fortælleren og hovedfiguren bekender i romanen: "Jeg prøver historier som tøj". Dette kan læses som udtryk for det moderne individs nyvundne frihed, men samtidigt også dilemma, idet ens livshistorie forekommer konstrueret og foranderligt, og identiteten er i evig forandring. Allerede ældre litteratur kan således bidrage til at diskutere implikationerne af de nye muligheder, som udviklingen af kunstig intelligens fører med sig, idet der forhandles ikke kun helt nye spørgsmål. Derudover er rejser i fremtiden og i alternative verdener, som de gennemføres rent bogstaveligt i Schätzings roman, noget som kunstformer som litteratur, teater og film altid har muliggjort qua deres fiktive karakter. Disse rejser bidrager med noget andet og mere, end populærvideenskabelige bøger og debatindlæg ville kunne. Fiktive rejser i en ukendt fremtid kan fortælle os, hvordan de ukendte nye verdener ville se ud, hvordan det ville føles at færdes i dem, og hvilke nye problemer, vi vil kunne forvente fra dem. Litteraturen har således en vigtig rolle

at spille i den nuværende situation, hvor samfundet står midt i en eksponentiel teknologisk udvikling, der vil forandre verden gennemgribende.

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Pest eller corona? Coronalitteraturens spekulative kriser

Med R. B. Gills definition af den spekulative fiktion som “works presenting modes of being that contrast with their audiences’ understanding of ordinary reality” (73) var både coronakrisen og coronalitteraturen med til at udfordre opfattelsen af den normale virkelighed. Covid-19 og den medfølgende krise var unægtelig en del af læserens virkelighed, men normalitetsbegrebet kan diskuteres, når sygdommen vendte om på danskernes hverdag. I litteraturen om krisen giver den spekulative genre ikke-virkelige elementer en ny rolle i de værker, der præsenterer en forståelse af den aktuelle krise ved at sammenkoble alternative virkeligheder i fortællingen om den virkelige pandemi.

Coronaepidemien er omdrejningspunktet for coronalitteraturen, her defineret som litteratur skrevet om og under coronavirussens indtog, hvor især nedlukningen i 2020 skabte inspiration til og mulighed for at producere tekster, der beskriver mødet med krisen samt de refleksioner og problematikker, den forårsagede. Overordnet kan litteraturen fra perioden betegnes som en brugsdigtning med en ”bekendelse af, hvordan ‘vi’ føler, tænker og handler under krisen” (Freisleben Lund et al.: 31), som leder til en samfundsmæssig kritik og bekendelse af skyld. Som et resultat af denne krisebearbejdelse er den nye genre præget af en høj grad af realisme, når den fremmede hverdag under nedlukningen beskrives, ofte i form af logbog-inspireret lyrik, som man eksempelvis ser det i Caspar Eric’s *Jeg vil ikke tilbage: Digte fra dage med COVID-19* (2020) og Louise Juhl Dalgaard’s *i dag skal vi ikke dø* (2020). Her dokumenteres nedlukningen dag for dag, hvor læseren kan finde genkendelse i beskrivelsen af nedlukningen og krisens udvikling. Denne realisme er dog ikke uden undtagelser, da coronalitteraturen også bringer eksempler på spekulative værker, der bryder med den mimetiske oplevelse af krisetiden. Her bliver apokalypse-, science fiction- og eventyr-elementer en del af fortællingen om Covid-19, og den spekulative litteratur benyttes til at bearbejde virkelighedens pandemi. Eksempler på dette brud med virkeligheden kommer til udtryk i henholdsvis Jokum Rohdes, Suzanne Brøggers og Harald Voetmanns værker, der alle leger og bryder med coronakrisens nye normale virkelighed. Når coronalitteraturen bliver hypotetisk, apokalyptisk, og absurd – og herved spekulativ – er den med til at italesætte en ny og fremmedgjort verdenssituation, hvor skellet mellem det normale og det spekulative svækkes.

Den genkendelige uvirkelighed

Opfattelsen af 'ordinary reality' blev udfordret af coronakrisens indvirkning på livet under nedlukningen, da den normale hverdag blev sat ude af spil, når danskerne blev mødt af en virkelighed med testcentre, karantæne og den usikkerhed og frygt, som knyttede sig til virussen som en trussel mod det eksisterende samfund. Der er tale om elementer, som alligevel ikke var ukendte, eftersom det for mange var noget, der hørte fiktionen til. I forskningsprojektet *Reading Novels During the Covid-19 Pandemic* (2022) italesættes dette af deres interviewpersoner: "The fact that we suddenly have a pandemic, and infection, is a classic science fiction trope. If you want to write realistic literature right now, you have to deal with this. If you'd written it a year ago, it would have been science fiction" (42). Narrativen om en pandemi var således velkendt, men som en fremmedgjort og oftest fiktiv fortælling, der ikke var en forventet del af læsernes egen hverdag. Inden de første eksempler på coronalitteratur blev skrevet i pandemiens begyndelse, opstod en øget interesse for tidligere epideminarrativer og disse værkers paralleller til Covid-19, hvor en metaforisk læsning skabte en forbindelse til den aktuelle krise gennem spekulative og historiske elementer (54). Som coronalitteraturens gennemgående temaer illustrerer, fyldte usikkerheden i høj grad under den første nedlukning, og litteraturen blev inddraget i en søgen på svar og viden om, hvad der var i vente. Hertil opstod en ny fascination af den spekulative genre, især i form af science fiction, som steg i popularitet under krisen.

I et internationalt perspektiv knytter Glyn Morgan den spekulative genres fremtrædende rolle under pandemien til science fictions historiske samspil med sygdomsnarrativer. Morgan argumenterer for, at mens science fiction som genre har været forbundet med en høj grad af fantasi, forestillingsevne og den kognitive innovation, som Darko Suvin kendetegner ved begrebet *novum*, præsenterer genren samtidig en genkendelighed, når det gælder virkelige sygdomme og kriser (1). Bruddet med virkeligheden falmer under krisens ugenkendelige virkelighed, og ved de spekulative sygdomsnarrativer er det ikke kun den litterære sygdom i sig selv, der fascinerer, men samfundets respons på katastrofen, som læseren kan spejle sig i. På samme vis er det ikke virussen, der er i fokus, men mennesket, og det er ikke kun livet, der er truet, men menneskeheden selv. Covid-19 skabte en fornyet aktualitet for den spekulative genre, da litteraturen ikke nødvendigvis behøver at omhandle eller nævne den virkelige krise ved navn for at bearbejde den, og da coronakrisen endnu ikke var indskrevet i den danske litteratur, kunne tidligere værker bidrage med genkendelige tematikker, problematikker og handlingsforløb i den nutidige krise. Ifølge Morgan præsenterer den spekulative genre således noget genkendeligt i en ellers uigenkendelig

verden, som er midt i en krisetid, og giver en ønsket forståelse for, hvordan vi kan – og bør – reagere på kriser:

Science fiction cannot predict where the next pandemic will come from, or what variety of pathogen will be behind it. However, science fiction can anticipate how we as individual humans and our societies will continue to change, adapt and respond to the new situations with which we are confronted. (6)

Den spekulative genres epidemier fungerer som kommentarer på virkelighedens problematikker og som et litterært spejl, hvor læseren aktivt søger det spekulative for at kunne forholde sig til nedlukningens refleksioner. Coronakrisen handler ikke kun om coronavirussen, men om dødsangst, et overrumplet samfund, etiske konflikter, kroppens skrøbelighed og andre temaer, som krisen kastede et nyt lys over. Når vores egen virkelighed bliver uigenkendelig, næsten ”spekulativ”, og det normale bliver vendt på hovedet, søger vi noget familiært i litteraturen.

Epideminarrativer

Selvom de spekulative elementer ikke var et krav for coronalitteraturen under krisen, så man ikke desto mindre en øget interesse for læsningen af spekulative værker. Internationalt kan Albert Camus’ klassiker *Pesten* (1947) nævnes, og i Danmark opstod en særinteresse for epideminarrativer i form af Hanne-Vibeke Holsts *Som pesten* (2017) og Peter Adolphsens *Rynkekneppesygen* (2017), der blev præsenteret med fornyet aktualitet, når der blev indsamlet titler under den tidligste betegnelse af ’coronalitteratur’ (Wildt, Glud). Den spekulative epidemilitteratur skrevet inden coronakrisen tilhører ikke min definition af coronalitteratur, men er med til at fremhæve, hvorledes den spekulative genre har bidraget til den litterære bearbejdelse af krisen. Disse ældre værker, som udkom forud for selve Covid-19, fik en ny kontekst i form af tilknytningen til coronakrisen, hvor de afspejler en genkendelig situation. Populariteten af denne form for pre-coralitteratur med epideminarrativen som fællesnævner kan kategoriseres som et forstadium, som illustrerer behovet for coronalitteraturen, inden denne blev udgivet.

Med tidligere epidemilitteratur blev både pest og influenza således en del af coronatidens læsning, og de forskellige epideminarrativer behøver ikke at omhandle den samme sygdom for at skabe en række fællestræk. Overordnet kan der henvises til Jørgen Riber Christensens model i ”The Formula of Plague Narratives” (2015), bygget på både fiktive og faktuelle historiske epidemier, når for-

ventninger til en fortælling om en vilkårlig epidemi skal formuleres. Modellen præsenterer elementerne i det gennemsnitlige epideminarrativ: antallet af døde offentliggøres, sygdomsoprindelsen bliver fundet, symptomerne beskrives, lægers og sygeplejerskes roller bliver fremhævet. Frygten for sygdommen spred-er sig, og som et resultat af dette øges mistroen, da både mennesker og dyr bliver anset som smittebærere. På paradoksal vis forsøger mennesket fortsat at bevæge sig i forsøget på at komme væk fra sygdommen, mens der udstedes autoritære ordrer om at isolere folk i deres hjem. Statsmagten forsøger at inddæmme sygdommen, men risikoen for et kollaps af den menneskelige civilisation vokser. Det lykkes ikke at finde en effektiv behandling, hvorved det endelige og mest ikoniske symbol på et epideminarrativ er massegrave (27). Sidstnævnte fandt ikke sted i Danmark, men massegrave blev en realitet i andre lande, hvorved danskerne stadig mødte dette billede i nyhederne. Denne bevidsthed om en forværret krise andetsteds viser sig også i coronalitteraturen, som når der i Suzanne Brøgers ”Verdens vendepunkt” (2020) reflekteres over, at ”ligene af nogens kære smides i skraldespande / i New York, og kølevogne kører rundt med de døde / der ikke er kapacitet til at kremere” (112), og når Caspar Eric kommenterer på effekten af globale nyheder i *Jeg vil ikke tilbage* (2020):

Et billede jeg ikke / har kunnet få ud af hovedet: / En sygeplejerske
/ der sidder på en hospitalsgang / op ad væggen / med bøjet hoved /
et sted i Italien, / masken der ikke / kan skjule ansigtet, / fuld af sorg,
/ fuld af fortvivlelse. / Vi har brug for beviser / på hvor galt det kan
gå, / de andre lande / som vinduer til fremtiden, / og alligevel taler
/ folk i mit Facebookfeed om overreaktioner (32)

I virkelighedens narrativ om coronavirussen indtraf flere elementer fra Christensens formular, eksempelvis offentliggørelsen af antallet af døde, symptombeskrivelser, nedlukningen og mistro. Midt i krisen var slutningen på epidemien stadig ukendt. Uvisheden om fremtiden blandede sig derfor med den velkendte epidemiformular, hvorved narrativen får en tredelt rolle inden for coronalitteraturen.

Først og fremmest ses den beskrevne interesse for spekulative værker udgivet inden krisen, hvor genkendelse blev søgt i epideminarrativer. Samtidig beskrives denne fascination aktivt i coronalitteraturen, hvor der refereres eksplicit til velkendte, spekulative epideminarrativer. Eksempelvis nævnes både videospillene *The Last of Us* og *Limbo* samt filmen *War of the Worlds* i Caspar Erics *Jeg vil ikke tilbage* (2020), og Mortens Søndergaards digt ”VI RUS” (2020) refererer til flere kendte epideminarrativer, eksempelvis Albert Camus’ *Pesten* og J.P. Jacobsens

”Pesten i Bergamo”. Epideminarrativer blev således aktivt læst under krisen – og refereret i den danske coronalitteratur, hvor især logbogsformen dokumenterer interaktionen med sådanne værker.

For det andet befandt den første forekomst af coronalitteratur sig midt i et epideminarrativ, hvor slutningen stadig var ukendt. Når visse elementer fra Christensens formular var indtruffet, spøjede de resterende elementer, som stadig havde muligheden for at blive en realitet. Den nye hverdag indebar beskrivelser af symptomer, fokus på sygehusvæsenets rolle, isolation etc., men de sidste og mest destruktive elementer af Christensens formular var et frygtet scenario med en potentiel risiko for at blive til virkelighed. Mens coronakrisens afslutning stadig var af ukendt karakter, var der stadig en bevidsthed om epidemiers potentielle dødelighed, hvad enten man tænkte på pesten i middelalderen eller samfundets kollaps i zombieapokalypser. Dette skaber en kontrast mellem den begivenhedsløse hverdag under de monotone nedlukningsdage, der dokumenteres i flere coronaværker, og angsten for den ultimative katastrofe, som endnu ikke har fundet sted, men som forekommer som en velkendt og på sin vis forventet afslutning på krisen grundet det klassiske epideminarrativ.

Endelig er epideminarrativen med til at forme den type af coronalitteratur, der beskæftiger sig med en verden *efter* coronakrisen, hvor der må opstilles en hypotetisk fremtid. Herved bevæger dele af coronalitteraturen sig ind i den spekulative litteratur, hvor der leges med det uvirkelige, det fremtidige, absurde og fremmede. Det spekulative corona-epideminarrativ afspejler således både genkendelse og fremmedgjorthed i mødet med krisen. International forskning viser, at coronalitteraturen præsenterede en terapeutisk brugsværdi, hvor genkendelse kunne mindske den frygt og stress, krisen forårsagede (Acim: 75), samtidig med at coronalitteratur blev fravalgt af læsere, som følte, at virussen fyldte nok uden for fiktionen, og litteraturen derfor kunne opfattes som en kliché (Dera: 86). Ikke desto mindre opstod der en naturlig efterspørgsel på litteratur om den historiske krise, som kunne behandle epidemien, mens den hærgede.

Menneskets blindhed i ”Sidste rapport fra Europa”

Som en umiddelbar reaktion på krisen består den danske coronalitteratur af korte genrer, oftest lyrik, noveller og kortprosa, og kriselitteraturens aktualitet var ligeledes med til at påvirke udgivelsen af værkerne. Antologien *Coronamologerne* (2020) udkom i flere stadier, hvor monologerne først tog form som et samarbejde mellem forfattere og skuespillere, da Teater Republique i foråret 2020 arrangerede en gratis digital teaterforestilling. Senere udkom monologerne samlet i et bogformat med tekster, der på hver sin vis omhandler coronakrisen. Jokum Rohdes ”Sidste rapport fra Europa” (2020) skiller sig markant ud fra

de resterende værker i antologien, først og fremmest gennem brugen af humor som en kontrast til den angstfyldte affekt, der præger størstedelen af værkerne i antologien. Disse værker skildrer oftest nedlukningens hverdag, frygt og tanker på mimetisk vis, hvorimod ”Sidste rapport fra Europa” er en ironisk og bizar fortælling om en epidemi og dens konsekvenser. Herved er fortællingen også et af de få eksempler på coronalitteratur, der faktisk omhandler en karakter, der er blevet syg. Coronavirussens mentale indvirkning på raske mennesker i form af angst, paranoia og ensomhed er et udbredt tema i coronalitteraturen, og disse symptomer bliver eksempelvis navngivet i Pia Juuls ”Svip” (2020) og Madame Nielsens ”COVIVA-20 (Corona virus vanvid 2020)” (2020). Et menneske syg med Covid-19 er derimod et sjældent syn i coronalitteraturen, men ”Sidste rapport fra Europa” har et fokus på syge mennesker og deres fysiske symptomer. Endelig får værket en unik status ved at have et epideminarrativ, der ikke omhandler coronavirussen. Der er til gengæld tale om den menneskeskabte virus Sort Syn, der er årsagen til epidemien:

Jeg kom til København som en af de oprindelige elleve smittebærere af den virus, der nu har styrket den dekadente civilisation i grus. Lad mig rekapitulere: Virussen AX13422, også kendt som Sort Syn, sætter sig umiddelbart efter smitten på den inficeredes synsnerve, eller nærmere på den nerveoptiske forbindelse der går fra det materielle synsindtryk til den menneskelige bevidsthed. Her foretager vores virusagent Sort Syn en kortslutning af synsindtrykket af levende varmblodige væsener hvorfor det smittede menneske ikke længere kan se ... andre dyr eller mennesker. Det eneste mennesket kan se efter at være blevet smittet er øde gader, forladte bygninger, tomme biografale, vindblæste havneområder. (86)

Som et stykke science fiction skaber teksten en afstand til læsernes virkelighed gennem den fiktive menneskeskabte virus, samtidig med at den fastholder en genkendelighed, der styrkes gennem narrativen. Den verden, der præsenteres i ”Sidste rapport fra Europa”, er familiær og fremmed på samme tid. Det fremmedgjorte fremstår absurd, men det er gennem disse overdrivelser, at Sort Syn og Covid-19 får deres fællestræk. Ligesom Morgan argumenterer for, at science fiction kan afspejle aktuelle refleksioner gennem hypotetiske situationer, er Rohdes værk med til at italesætte krisens problematikker på en anden vis, end det realistiske logbogsformat formår.

I form af den spekulative genre fremstår Sort Syn som en satirisk tilgang til den metaforiske science fiction-fortælling, der først og fremmest fungerer som

en kommentar på den angstfyldte og pessimistiske affekt, som ”Sidste rapport fra Europa” tager afstand fra. Væk er angstkrig og paranoide tanker, og i stedet har vi at gøre med en protagonist, der aktivt sætter denne absurde epidemi i gang ved bevidst at være smittespreder. Det er gennem sygdommens metaforiske funktion, at Sort Syn bliver knyttet til den velkendte coronakrise. Den menneskeskabte virus fungerer som en metafor for coronavirussens indgreb i selv raske menneskers liv: på realplan i form af nedlukningen, mens Sort Syn som en metaforisk sygdom fjerner menneskets synssans. Resultatet bliver i begge tilfælde tomme gader og isolation. Sat i forhold til Christensens formular følger teksten i første omgang det klassiske epideminarrativ, hvor vi introduceres til sygdomsopriindelsen og symptomerne, og hvor mistro, flugt og samfundets kollaps indtræder. Den tager således form som et genkendeligt narrativ, men præsenterer de absurde og kritiske træk gennem brugen af *deus ex machina* gennem menneskets pludselige resistens og den dårlige ”lykkelige” slutning.

Teknologien til at skabe Sort Syns pandemi er et novum, der ved første øjekast ikke har meget tilfælles med coronavirussen. I den virkelige epidemi blev mennesker ikke blinde af corona, men blindheden som følge af Sort Syn bliver en kommentar på menneskets ageren. I en filosofisk forstand er den manglende synsevne en beskrivelse af mennesker, der ikke anerkender sit medmenneske ved at se dem i øjnene. Samfundet var allerede blindt, *inden* den menneskeskabte virus ramte. Alligevel er denne usynliggørelse ikke et problem i fortællingen, hvor civilisationen i stedet fortsætter med en dybt digitaliseret hverdag:

Tommer gader. Forladte bygninger. Og maskiner der forbandt alle de usynlige mennesker med hinanden, på fødestuer, på alle automatcafeterier, i spillearkaderne og i pornobiograferne. Og således endte min seneste rapport, i den fuldstændige fiasko. (87)

Agentens mission lykkes ikke på trods af manglen på syn og mennesker. Civilisationen kollapse ikke under menneskets blindhed, da mennesket opfører sig civiliseret og gennem teknologisk tilpasning formår at skabe en ny dagligdag. Resultatet er en velfungerende, men også tom verden, hvor medmennesker kun kan tilgås via elektronik: en løsning, som nedlukningens læsere kunne genkende sig i. Naturen og menneskers samvær er blevet usynliggjort, men livet i den tomme by fortsætter gennem online kommunikation. Det kritiske spørgsmål går på hvilke værdier, dette nye samfund præsenterer, når nærvær ikke længere er en nødvendighed. Coronavirussen og Sort Syn præsenterer begge en narrativ, hvor det danske samfund ikke går under på grund af virussens indtog. Fortællingen om Sort Syn ender dog med destruktion og bliver herved en

løftet pegesfinger om menneskelige værdier og nærvær samt manglen på dette. Teknologiske løsninger findes, i større og mindre grad, hvor "Sidste rapport fra Europa" italesætter, hvad mennesket mister ved denne isolation. Samtidig bliver lidelsen i sin grad selvforskyldt, når der netop er tale om en menneskeskabt virus, hvor teknologiens udvikling og menneskets destruktive egenskaber resulterer i pandemien.

Der leges med det klassiske epideminarrativ, når agentens mission lykkes og mislykkes på samme tid. Hvor man ville forvente resistens til at være det endelige mål og en lykkelig slutning, er det i stedet menneskehedens undergang. Da mennesket udvikler resistens over for Sort Syn og derfor får den fulde synsevne tilbage, er resultatet kaos:

Og nu kan de se hinanden igen, for første gang i mange år. Også jeg ... kan se andre mennesker igen. Det kriminelle element i os alle er vendt tilbage. Drifter, drab og vold. Regeringen er faldet. Maskinerne brænder. Folk løber for livet i gaderne, væk fra hinanden. (87-88)

Missionen fuldføres, men ikke efter planen. Det er ikke virussen, der forårsager undergangen, men det instinktive og destruktive element i mennesket selv. Da menneskerne igen kan forholde sig til hinanden, er der ikke tale om et lykkeligt gensyn. I stedet opstår den individuelle flugt, og et kriminelt og ødelagt samfund opstår i processen. Det er ikke sygdommen, der er skyld i kollapset, men menneskets ageren. Således er det ikke novumet, der introducerer en ny fare for menneskeligheden, men den største trussel bliver de genkendelige elementer i form af den etiske diskussion om menneskelighed og teknologi. Det spekulative element bliver herved en stikpille til vores ageren under coronakrisen, og den menneskeskabte virus er både en metafor for karantænen og menneskets egen destruktion i form af selvished.

End ikke Agent Johnny Yen opnår en lykkelig slutning på trods af den fuldendte mission. Som tidligere smittet og nu resistent er han på ulykkelig vis også tvunget til at se andre mennesker igen:

Jeg går ud fra jeg vil blive hentet? Jeg ønsker ikke at blive her. Alle de andre agenter er døde. Jeg vil gerne have at I henter mig og giver mig mit virus-syn tilbage. Ser I, Store Leder, man vænner sig hurtigt til den tomme by. Den ligner ... et ansigt. (88)

Mens dette såkaldte virus-syn er et fysisk fænomen i den spekulative verden, vi møder i ”Sidste rapport fra Europa”, kan vi stadig diskutere den metaforisk som en del af coronakrisen. Virus-synet opstår gennem den måde, vi forholder os til verden, krisen og hinanden under nedlukningen. Er dette syn sort og pessimistisk, og formår vi at se vores medmennesker og vores egen destruktive adfærd i øjnene? Historien om Sort Syn fremstår absurd i dens science fiction-univers og tragiske slutning, men ikke desto mindre præsenterer den en genkendelig problematik, hvor det ikke er virussen, der er problemet, men mennesket selv.

Naturens sejr i ”Verdens vendepunkt”

Et andet bud på krisens ende ses i Suzannes Brøggers ”Verdens vendepunkt” (2020) fra samme antologi, hvor den menneskelige civilisation igen smuldrer, her i form af et apokalyptisk narrativ. Apokalypsen er et motiv, der går igen i flere værker inden for coronalitteraturen, eksempelvis Madame Nielsens ”CO-VIVA-20 (Corona virus vanvid 2020)” (2020) og Kristina Stoltz’ ”Grædepunktet” (2020), hvor Brøggers værk er et af de mest destruktive, men også positive eksempler på den forudsagte undergang. Tekstens tidsperspektiv er splittet, da refleksionerne springer mellem krisens nutid og den hypotetiske fremtid. Udgangspunktet bliver den nye hverdag under nedlukningen, og værkets bekendelse tager form af den positive oplevelse af krisen:

Tiden er inde til det blasfemiske: / Jeg nyder coronadagene, så er det sagt. / Midt i verdens ufattelige lidelser nyder jeg coronadagene. / Jeg ser civilisationens fernis krakelere / mens ligene af nogens kære smides i skraldespande / i New York, og kølevogne kører rundt med de døde / der ikke er kapacitet til at kremere. (112)

Civilisationens kollaps er opdelt mellem nedbrydelsen af det moderne samfund under nedlukningen og det endelige forfald, der venter forude, og begge former for kollaps anses som en positiv udvikling. I Brøggers tekst er bekendelsen todelt: der er tale om skylden, som mennesket bærer i forhold til krisen, og den positive reaktion på krisen, der opfattes som ’blasfemisk’. Nedlukningens begrænsninger bliver præsenteret som nye muligheder, og som et eksempel på krisens bekendelseslitteratur bliver værket således et kærdokument møde med både nedlukningen og det symbol, krisen bliver på menneskelighedens skrøbelighed. På paradoksal vis giver nedlukningen mulighed for mere frihed og stærkere sammenhold:

Den snævre egoismes tid er forbi / gennem en lillebitte virus. / Mennesker over hele jorden er forbundet med hinanden / i uendelige smittekæder. / De gamle har fået en mere oprindelig fred tilbage, / en skyldfri frihed, uden tvang og plager. / Man skal ikke noget og er lovligt undskyldt. / Dagene har fået uendeligheden tilbage og stilheden. / Cool – zen. (114)

Den fare, som virussens smitte udgør, er med til at illustrere menneskets forbundethed. I teksten har smittekæder ikke nødvendigvis en negativ værdi, men tydeliggør i stedet, hvorledes mennesker er afhængige af hinanden gennem dette tidligere oversete fællesskab, som krisen har været med til med til at italesætte. Nedlukningen kan usynliggøre mennesket gennem isolationen, som ”Sidste rapport fra Europa” beskriver, men den fremhæver på samme tid, hvordan vi konstant er med til at påvirke hinandens liv. Smittekæder er derfor ikke en metafor for fangenskab, men nedlukningen bidrager derimod til en ny form for frihed. Den almindelige hverdag og de forventninger, der knytter sig hertil, er ikke længere til stede. Denne refleksion bærer lighedstræk med de tanker om sygdom og sygdomslitteratur, som Virginia Woolf beskriver i essayet ”On Being Ill” tilbage fra 1925, hvor den syge fritages for forventningen om produktivitet. Woolf argumenterer for sygdommens plads i litteraturen, eftersom sygdom er en naturlig del af livet, samtidig med at den også præsenterer en frihed for den syge:

But in health the genial pretense must be kept up and the effort renewed – to communicate, to civilize, to share, to cultivate the desert, educate the native, to work together by day and by night to sport. In illness this make-believe ceases. Directly the bed is called for, or, sunk deep among the pillows in one chair, we raise our feet even an inch above the ground on another, we cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright; we become deserters. They march to battle. We float with the sticks on the stream; helter-skelter with the dead leaves on the lawn, irresponsible and disinterested and able, perhaps for the first time for years, to look round, to look up – to look, for example, at the sky. (12)

Den sygdomsramte placeres i en isoleret position uden for resten af samfundet, hvor den fritages for hverdagens arbejde og forventninger, i og med at arbejdet hverken er et behov eller en mulighed. Gennem isolationen forsvinder den vante hverdag, men denne form for karantæne, som kan sammenlignes med coronakrisens nedlukning, har et kreativt og reflekterende potentiale. Pointen er

således ikke ny, men kan sættes i et nyt perspektiv. Under nedlukningen er selv de raske 'syge' i den forstand, at det arbejdsmæssige ansvar er fjernet. Isolationen er med til at skabe en ny form for frigørelse, da krisens nedlukning havde den specielle funktion, at de raske også kunne tage del i den syges frihed, og det er denne frihed, som coronadagene bringer i "Verdens vendepunkt". At træde væk fra disse forventninger er at træde ud af det senmoderne samfund, som herved nedbrydes.

Det er derfor ikke kun hverdagens travlhed, men også samfundet, der kollapse. Foruden beskrivelsen af en krakeleret fernis bliver det vestlige samfund symboliseret med glaspaladset. Det rationelle menneske er ikkeeksisterende, når mennesket er skyld i sin egen destruktion. Noget, der har været beundret og forventet at vare til evig tid, er nu ved at slå revner. I dets sted indtræder naturen, der nu får muligheden for ikke kun at vokse, men at nedrive den menneskelige civilisation i processen:

Det holdt ikke, / det gamle bibelske syn fra Mosebøgerne. / At mennesket skulle herske over Jorden. / Se, hvad det blev til! / Havet overskyller storbyen / Krokodiller invaderer golfbanen. / Jeg ser en giraf på fortovet. Grønne roser. / Huse styrter sammen med ildsprudlende kraft. / Klippeformationer og glaspaladser vokser sammen. / Dyrene fra hulemalerierne river sig løs af grotterne, / uddøde ulvearter og sabelkatte indtager byen. (113)

Kollapset tager form som apokalyptiske naturkatastrofer og en overnaturlig inddragelse af fortidsdyr. Tiderne blandes, når fremtiden smelter sammen med den fjerne fortid i beskrivelsen af en verden fri for menneskeheden. Krisen bliver et vendepunkt for den antropocæne tidsalder, og på den anden side venter en ny – og alligevel gammel – verden. Den spekulative narrativ inddrages i den metaforiske læsning, hvori klimakritikken kan tage form. Det menneskeskabte landskab må destrueres, for at naturen kan vokse fra ruinerne. Civilisationen, i form af dette skrøbelige palads, har en udløbsdato. Dens magt og pragt er blot en illusion, hvor coronavirussen bevidner, at den almindelige hverdag aldrig var holdbar:

Den gamle verden er forbi, og en ny kan begynde. / I Paris og Wuhan kan man nu høre fuglene synge, / delfinerne er kommet tilbage til Sardinien, / og uden for Krakow kan man pludselig se bjergene / der før var skjult bag smog. / Den tidsalder / hvor menneskene fyldte det hele er forbi (114-115)

Ligesom Agent Johnny Yen hepper på den vestlige civilisations fald i ”Sidste rapport fra Europa”, er der endnu engang tale om et positiv kollaps. Dette vendepunkt bliver fejret som et historisk øjeblik, hvor det materielle og destruktive samfund giver efter for naturen, og det kollaps, som Christensens model inkluderer, bliver en lykkelig slutning. Virussen er kategoriseret som en del af naturen, der svarer igen på menneskets udnyttelse af jordens ressourcer, og ”Verdens vendepunkt” byder konsekvenserne af denne udvikling velkommen: ”Måske går verden økonomisk rabundus. / *Homo økonomikus*. / Men det er den så nødt til / hvis en ny verden skal fødes” (114). Det individualistiske, grådige og materielle samfund møder konsekvensen af denne levestil og livssyn, når coronavirusen omvælter det antropocæne hierarki. Den menneskelige magt er en illusion og er lige så skrøbelig som det nævnte glaspalads. Mennesket er ikke længere urørligt, men er underlagt naturen og biologien, der slår igen.

Idéen om denne nye verden bliver todelt i dens realisering. Skildringen af de syngende fugle, Sardiniens delfiner og den forsvundne smog fandt sted i virkelighedens nedlukning og i værkets nutid, markeret med ordet *nu*. Denne nye verden, hvor den materialistiske, antropocæne tankegang er sat ude af spil, og hvor mennesket i sin isolation har trukket sig tilbage og tilladt naturen at blomstre op, er både realistisk og faktuel – i det mindste for en stund. Det er i værkets fremtidige apokalypsebeskrivelse, hvor naturens indtog i den nedlukkede by opskaleres i form af naturkatastrofer, krakelerede bygninger og tilbagevendte uddøde dyreracer, at ”Verdens vendepunkt” bryder med den realistiske, aktuelle krisebeskrivelse:

Havet vil trække sig fra storbyen. / Krokodillen søge tilbage i sumpen. / Giraffen finde tilbage til savannen. / Grønne roser rødme i haven. / Huse stå fast, / klipperformationer og glaspaladser skilles ad, / og dyrene fra hulemalerierne vil trække sig tilbage / til grotterne, / ulv og sabelkat. / Himmelleget Jordan kan igen ånde / og er ved at genopstå under stor smerte. (115)

Mens coronavirusen påvirker menneskets åndedræt, tillader den naturen at ånde frit. Mennesket er virussen, som har drænet Jordan, der nu slår igen. På metaforisk vis er Jordan blevet resistent overfor menneskets udnyttelse, som her bliver nedbrudt i form af coronavirusen. Konsekvenserne af krisen anerkendes, men de positive værdier fremhæves, når apokalypsen som indgangen til denne nye, bedre tidsalder bliver modtaget med respekt og til en vis grad lettelse. Dette er ikke et nyt tema inden for den klimakritiske litteratur, hvor coronakrisen bliver et centralt punkt i denne klimabevidsthed. ”Verdens vendepunkt” er ikke

science fiction, men den kan i stedet kategoriseres som Dan Blooms begreb cli-fi (Wright: 99). Dette er en genre, der udvikler sig i takt med den nuværende klimakrise, og som derved omfavner Covid-19 inden for samme problematik. Coronakrisen er ikke en isoleret krise, men kobles til en større politisk debat, som den danske litteratur i høj grad har bearbejdet det seneste årti (Larsen: 9). Cli-fi læner sig op ad science fiction som spekulativ litteratur og udvikles konstant som følge af klimakrisens konsekvenser, som nu indebærer pandemien. Med denne klimabevidste kritik er det ikke virussen, men menneskets samfund og levevis i den antropocæne tidsalder, der bringer den uundgåelige destruktion i Brøgers værk.

De levende døde i H.C. Andersens *Quarantaine-Dagbog*

Mindre destruktivt er epideminarrativen i Harald Voetmanns *H.C. Andersens Quarantaine-Dagbog* (2020), som ikke indeholder apokalyptiske skildringer eller en menneskeskabt virus. Derimod er romanen en beskrivelse af livet i København under nedlukningen, dog med det spekulative element at den ellers afdøde forfatter H.C. Andersen er bragt tilbage til livet i det herrens år 2020. Verden er ikke kun fremmedgjort for H.C. Andersen på grund af den senmoderne udvikling, men ligeledes i form af den nedlukning, som både forvirrer og forundrer digteren, når han må tilpasse sig sin nye tid.

Der er tale om et såkaldt ”hyper-hypertekstuel” (Rösing: 171) værk, når Voetmann aktivt bruger og transformerer H.C. Andersens *Fodreise fra Holmens Canal til Østpynten af Amager i Aarene 1828 og 1829* til en satirisk, nutidig fodrejse midt i krisens tid. Voetmann formår at bringe H.C. Andersen til live gennem det digteriske sprog, og humoren tager form af digterens opmærksomme bemærkninger i mødet mellem det gamle og det senmoderne: ”Haanzprit er blevet mig et femte Element i disse Tieder, dyrebar som Vandet og som Luften” (19). Ligesom danskerne pludselig måtte vænne sig til nye regler, normer og kendskab til genstande som mundbind, håndsprit og næsetest, må H.C. Andersen affinde sig med nedlukningens dagligdag. På trods af de 150 år mellem H.C. Andersen og bogens læser er refleksionerne genkendelige, når den afdøde digter prøver at finde sig til rette i nedlukningen og den medfølgende ensomhed: ”Først da jeg tydeligen saa en Sprekke af Lys trengte gennem Skotterne for mit Vindve imod Nyhaven og syntes at høre Stemmer – men var det en Indbildning blot, en nerveomtumlet Phantasie?” (9). Idéen om gæster i nedlukningens tid forekommer uvirkelig, og på samme vis er selve historien om H.C. Andersens eventyr i karantæneland en såkaldt *Phantasie*.

H.C. Andersen tilstedeværelse i 2020 er en umulighed, og eftersom idéen om et nedlukket samfund engang syntes utænkelig i Danmark, er begge narrati-

ver karakteriseret af en grad af absurditet. H.C. Andersens rejse gennem det nedlukkede København og mødet med håndsprit, engangshandsker og tomme gader er illustreret med redigerede fotografier af digteren i krisens nutid. Billeder af H.C. Andersen iført mundbind eller med en flaske håndsprit på hovedet fremstår som et lige så kaotisk møde med krisen, som et moderne menneske ville opleve det. Det bliver en absurd kommentar til den nu uvirkelige virkelighed, der i teksten ikke har brug for træk fra science fiction eller apokalyptiske beskrivelser, eftersom den mimetiske dagligdag under krisen er fremmedgjort nok i sig selv. Som H.C. Andersen selv beskriver det gennem en finurlig sammenligning: ”Men nu var Pølsemanden lige saa forsvunden som den Tids Drosker” (47). Fortid og nutiden mødes på forunderlig vis, og vi er vidne til et sammenstød mellem to forskellige verdener – om fortiden så er for hundrede år siden eller ”blot” tiden inden coronavirussens komme.

Ligesom man ville kende det fra H.C. Andersens originale værker, er sproget fyldt med besjælinger, hvor døde genstande kommer til live. Mannequinerne i Magasin du Nord sladrer om kunderne, og statuerne ved det Kongelige Teater hilser på digteren, på nær den uheldige Oehlschlägers tildækkede statue, hvis ”Quarantaine fra Verden total. End ikke et lille Glughul havde man skjænket ham i hans Kasse” (65). Romanens sprog bærer historien lige så meget som selve handlingen, når det formår at bringe humor ind i coronalitteraturen. Det eksemplificerer den afdøde digters møde med nutiden og bringer liv i en mennesketom situation. H.C. Andersens rejse bliver en historie om at overvinde tidens problematikker med gåpåmod, når han trodser karantænen for at sprede kunst og glæde i form af papirklip til kongefamiliens børn.

Romanen både handler om og bliver et eksempel på kunsten i isolationens tid, hvilket er med til at redegøre for H.C. Andersens umulige tilstedeværelse i år 2020. Det er i mødet med sin muse fra ungdommens tid, at H.C. Andersen bliver forklaret, hvordan hun har bragt ham tilbage til livet for kunstens skyld:

Det har aldrig staaet værre til, Andersen! Det er derfor, jeg har hidkaldt Dem til Jorden. Ja, ikke blot Dem, forstaaes. Da disse Quarantaine-Dage begynte blev jeg saa piint og plaget af hjemmegaende Digtere og Sangsmeede af den moderne Slags, at jeg længtes mig tilbage til bedre Tider. [...] Mit Haab var, at I dog kunde skabe nogen Trøst og udgøre en Modvægt til den skrækkelige moderne Lyrik, som hele Folket søger at skrive, men ingen gider læse. I skulle være et godt Exempel og vise, hvorledes man digter uden helt at gjøre Vold paa den lyriske Muse. (101-102)

Dette giver ligeledes svaret på romanens eksistens i form af denne såkaldte modvægt til moderne digtning. Forklaringen på H.C. Andersens genopstandelse er ikke et teknologisk novum fra science fiction-genren, og i stedet for en mekanisk tidsmaskine er der tale om uforklarlig magi, der tilhører de eventyr, som H. C. Andersens universer er bygget op om. Forklaringen gør ikke H.C. Andersens genopstanden mindre umulig, men er i stedet med til at forme et eventyr om digteren selv. Digteren udfører musens opgave – og dog. Efter dette møde skriver digteren et poetisk, men også modsigende digt om musens ord og sin egen pligt:

Da Stak min Muse mig en Flad. H.C., jeg har gjenoplivet Dem ikke for at høre Klynk og Graad. Været ikke pivet! Gak hjem og skriv, og gør det kjønt og lystigt, ikke klage om Børn der døer og Fat-tiggaarde. Den slags er en Plage. Skjønt Verden er en Skidthob, er den Poesien nødig, blot man gjøre den nydselig og ikke underlødig. (115)

På trods af at H.C. Andersen følger musens ordre ved netop at digte om sine oplevelser, er det ikke til punkt og prikke. Romanen bliver en humoristisk og poetisk beskrivelse af krisen, men selv i H.C. Andersens legende sprog er der plads til kritik. Den klimakritiske strømning er at finde i romanen, når digteren udskammer mennesket for at misbruge naturen: ”Barbarer! I ødelægge alt smukt for at opdyngte Dollarer. Det glæder mig, at jeg skal dø her, som de Fisk og Fuule jeg ser, I har forgjiftet med jert Bras!” (114). På samme vis indeholder fortællingen om H.C. Andersen i virussens land også et døende barn. I Dødens omnibus er H.C. Andersen villig til at følge et ensomt barn ind i døden, hvor digteren må efterlade sin elskede Kolumbine hos barnet for at trøste hende til Dødens store frustration. H.C. Andersen er, nu i flere henseender, villig til at trodse Døden med et nyfundet mod: ”I hans Græb havde jeg været før. Nu var jeg ikke bange” (128). Døden mister sin magt gennem H.C. Andersens genopstandelse, men mest af alt gennem digterens sympati og næstekærlighed.

Disse er relevante værdier i virkelighedens krise, og derfor er *H.C. Andersens Quarantaine-Dagbog* absurd i både sprog og handling, men ikke uigenkendelig. Det er netop absurditeten, der er med til at kendetegne den bristede normalitet, som ledte til en søgen mod genkendelse i den spekulative litteratur. På denne vis fungerer romanen som den nævnte trøst, både i form af humor og poesi, men også i den genkendelighed, den præsenterer i mødet med krisen – og i sidste ende accepten af døden som en del af livet.

Den velkomne krise

Et fokus på sygdom, bakterier og vira er ikke nyt inden for dansk litteratur som en måde at behandle menneskets forhold til omverdenen (Jørgensen: 136), og coronavirussen og den efterfølgende litteratur bringer en kritik i forlængelse af de politiske og klimabevidste problematikker, der har haft en voksende rolle det sidste årti. De tre analyserede værker præsenterer fortællinger om coronakrisen uden nødvendigvis at nævne den eksplicit. I tilfældet med *Coronamonologerne* er coronavirussens indflydelse synliggjort via parateksten, som er med til at sammenkoble de forskellige værker i antologien, når eksempelvis ”Sidste rapport fra Europa” lægger op til den metaforiske læsning af fortællingen om Sort Syn, mens ”Verdens vendepunkt” fokuserer på det både nuværende og fremtidige klimakollaps. Dansk coronalitteratur spænder over vidt forskellige repræsentationer af krisen, fra umiddelbar kresedigtning til logbog over nedlukningen og science fiction-fortællinger. Fællesnævneren for de tre udvalgte værker er inddragelsen af den spekulative fiktion, da der i deres brud med virkeligheden opstår forskellige tilgange til oplevelsen af et nedlukket Danmark. Genkendelse i temaer, problematikker, refleksioner og følelser forbinder værkerne med coronakrisen, selv når verden adskiller sig fra læserens virkelighed. Metaforiske sygdomme, hypotetiske fremtidsudsigter og bruddet med dødens eksistentielle vilkår er spekulative elementer, der både distancerer og knytter værkerne til den virkelige krise.

Bruddet med læserens forståelse af ’ordinary reality’ er med til at bearbejde krisen, hvor de spekulative elementer er med til at diskutere den omvæltning, krisen forårsagede. Der bliver sat spørgsmålstejn ved vores normale hverdag, vores levevis og fremtid, og ved at inddrage det hypotetiske, det absurde og det science fiction-agtige italesætter de analyserede værker den fremmedgjorthed, som medfulgte krisen. Der er, som Morgan påpeger, således mere på spil end selve sygdommen i form af vores reaktion på og skyld i krisen. Hvad enten vi har at gøre med pest, rynkekneppesyge, Sort Syn eller corona, er der tale om læsninger, der er bundet til coronakrisens perspektiv. Nedlukningen skabte et nyt behov for læsning, som den spekulative genre var med til at opfylde, og som coronalitteraturen blev en reaktion på. Den brudte normalitet bidrager til genkendelsen, og når virkeligheden pludselig formede sig efter det epideminarrativ, vi kender fra fiktionen, kunne den sammenlignes med den spekulative fiktion.

Hvad der ydermere forbinder de tre analyserede værker, foruden skellet med virkeligheden, er den positive holdning til krisen. Dette forekommer i brugen af humor i ”Sidste rapport fra Europa” og *H.C. Andersens Quarantaine-Dagbog*, der er en mærkbar kontrast til den angstfyldte og paranoide affekt, som findes i størstedelen af coronalitteraturens værker. Endnu tydeligere fremgår

det i virussens manglende rolle som antagonist. I Rohdes fortælling om den menneskabte sygdom er det ikke virussen, men mennesket, der er skyld i destruktionen, uanset om de er blinde eller ej. På samme vis kan apokalypsen nydes i ”Verdens vendepunkt”, når den fremstiller et opgør med det kapitalistiske samfund og den antropocæne tidsalder. Friheden, muligheden for refleksion og klimaets fremgang er alle positive elementer i, hvad der bliver beskrevet som både en altødelæggende og ønsket krise. Når Danmark er blevet til et uvirkeligt eventyrland i *H.C. Andersens Quarantaine-Dagbog*, kommenterer digteren stadig på plastik-øer og den smeltede is på Grønland. Den trøst, som Andersen blev bragt tilbage til livet for at give, er ikke uden kritik.

Tilbage står mennesket som den skyldige i krisen. Hvad enten de har skabt virussen i et laboratorium, presset naturen til at blive en fjende eller glemt at værdsætte deres liv på Jorden, så er det mennesket selv, der fremstår som den største trussel. Det er mennesket, der i den sidste ende bliver en virus – uanset om der er tale om corona eller ej.

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Svend Åge Madsens spejlfiktion

Anker Gemzøe

Spekulativ fiktion

Næppe nogen anden dansk forfatter passer bedre ind i kategorien ”spekulativ fiktion” end Svend Åge Madsen. I ”The Uses of Genre and the Classification of Speculative Fiction” afgrænser R.B. Gill kategorien til værker, der ”conjecture about matters that in the normal course of things could not be” (Gill 2013, 72) – og forestiller sig ”a systemically different world” (73). Spekulativ fiktion er nært beslægtet med ”Science fiction, utopian and dystopian fiction, magic realism, fantastic voyages, ghost stories, and the Gothic with supernatural elements”. Den er samfundskritisk i sin tendens og udtrykker sig i forskudte billeder. I det følgende vil jeg søge at udfolde en begrebshistorisk udredning som ramme for en efterfølgende læsning af romanen *Fremtidsspejl* (2020). I sammenhæng med et rids af bogens hidtidige reception vil den ydermere blive profileret som et af mange gode eksempler på arten af spekulativ fiktion i Svend Åge Madsens forfatterskab.

Svend Åge Madsens forfatterskab har en intellektuel og filosofisk karakter, som dækkes godt af den mindre prætentiose betegnelse spekulativ fiktion. I alle sine værker har han markeret en – undertiden rekordagtigt voldsom, undertiden umærkelig – distance til realismen. Forfatterskabet kan placeres i periode og faseinddeles i relation til strømningbegreber som modernisme, postmodernisme og grotesk realisme. Det kan karakteriseres som en udforskning af en lang række genrer inden for storgenrerne (registrene) epik og drama, med forkærlighed for blandingsgenrer (hybrider) og med en opfindsom lancering af egne ’genresignaturer’: uroman, globusroman, dobbeltroman, mikroman mv. Endvidere er (vigtige) dele af forfatterskabet blevet set som former for science fiction. Det har Niels Dalgaard gjort i to versioner af en bog, den seneste *Verdensjogløren. Svend Åge Madsen og science fiction* (Dalgaard 2007).

Begrebsudredningen omkring science fiction i min doktorafhandling *Meta-morfoser i Mellemtiden* er ligeledes relevant i denne sammenhæng. Her tages der udgangspunkt i Umberto Ecos banebrydende artikel ”Science fiction-litteraturens verdener” (oprindeligt et foredrag fra 1984). Han betegner lidt løst science fiction som en moderne udgave af romancen, ridder- eller eventyrromanen og henregner den mere præcist til ”Den fantastiske fortællekunst”, der adskiller sig fra den realistiske derved, ”at den mulige verden er strukturelt anderledes end

den virkelige” (Eco 1989, 145). Han skelner mellem fire hovedkategorier, som jeg vil betegne som genrer:

1. Allotopi: le merveilleux, fantasy
2. Utopi (herunder dystopi)
3. Ukroni: 'Hvad ville være sket, hvis Cæsar ikke blev myrdet'...
4. Metatopi og metakroni: dette er science fiction som en vision af fremtidig fase af den nuværende tilstand.

Han tilføjer med særligt henblik på den sidste kategori, men med perspektiv på dem alle, at “denne foregribelse har altid karakter af en *formodning* formuleret på grundlag af virkelige tendenser i den virkelige verden” (148). Science fiction-litteraturen er “med andre ord en hypotesens, formodningens eller abduktionens fortællekunst” (149).

I sin bog *Natur / videnskab / fortælling. Om science fiction som civilisationskritik* (1993) fastslår Søren Baggesen, der er velorienteret i tidligere litteratur om emnet (Eco, Suvin, Delany m.fl.), at science fiction ikke betegner en genre, men en “fortælle-modus”. Med Samuel R. Delany regner han både science fiction og fantasy til de *fantastiske fortælleformer*. På den baggrund definerer han science fiction som “en allegorisk fortælle-modus som har sækulariseringen som sin metafysik” og “spekulativ fantastisk” (Baggesen 1993, 37f.).

Videre inddrages David Porush’s bog *The Soft Machine. Cybernetic Fiction* (Porush 1985). På den ene side er *cybernetic fiction* en snævrere kategori end science fiction, på den anden side glider den umærkeligt over i *postmodernist fiction* og *avant-garde* ved at være “self-reflexive and draw attention to its materials and forms of their construction” (Porush 1985, 18).

De litterære fænomener, der kan siges at falde ind under begrebet *spekulativ fiktion*, er således hidtil mest blevet omhandlet i tilknytning til science fiction og afarter af det fantastiske. De begrebsudredende diskussioner i disse sammenhænge, der skelner frugtbart mellem modi og mere eller mindre fast definerede genrer (herunder kommercielt bestemte *pulp genres*), er relevante for en tilsvarende begrebslig og definatorisk indkredsning af denne term. Kategorien spekulativ fiktion er nyttig som et heuristisk begreb, der nærmere kan betegnes som en fortællemodus. Imidlertid har Gills indkredsning af begrebet (foruden flere kvaliteter) en grundskavank: han gør “speculative fiction” til en genre og behandler yderligere genrebegrebet meget uklart.

“*Animal Farm* is of a piece with *1984*”, hævder Gill (79). Det er både rigtigt og forkert: de tilhører den samme modus, spekulativ fiktion, men forskellige genrer. Den ene bog er en skarpt satirisk *dyrefabel*, der positionerer sig sikkert i fablens genretradition som forskudt kritik af aktuelle forhold. Den anden en *dys-*

topi, en kritisk foregribelse af en mulig fremtid, der med samme selvfølgelighed placerer sig blandt det 20. århundredes store dystopier (Samjatin, Boye, Huxley, Bradbury). Svend Åge Madsens seneste udgivelse, *Vortsted*, der er udkommet i 2023 og indgår i serien *Tænkepauser*, er et fremragende eksempel på spekulativ fiktion som fortællemodus og science fiction-genren metatopi/metakroni. Med Niels Dalgaard's billede viser den Svend Åge Madsen som *verdensjonglør*.

En spejlhistorie

“Speculum” betyder spejl og er ligesom “spekulativ” afledt af “specere”: se. At være et spejl af virkeligheden er en gængs formulering af litteraturens mimetiske formål i almindelighed og af realismens forpligtelse i særdeleshed. I Svend Åge Madsens litterære kosmos under stadig udvidelse er der fyldt med spejle; det er et rent spejlkabinet: spejlscenen i *Lystbilleder*; spejlene i *Liget og Lysten*; spejlplanet Mnemosyne, der spejler jordens historie med et par tusinde års forsinkelse i novellen “Mnemosynes børn” (Madsen 1990) og igen i romanen *Mange sære ting for* (2009); den mesterlige roman *Genspejlet* (1999) med mere. Men skønt Svend Åge Madsen næppe vil unddrage litteraturen en mimetisk funktion, fremhæver han altid det ombrudte, spejlvendte, refleksive ved spejlinger. En bevidsthed om relativitet blandes sært med helhedsambitionen i encyklopædiske genremetaforer som *Fyrstespejl* (fx Machiavellis fra midten af 1500-tallet), nogle af de første forsøg på håndbøger i magtudøvelse og samfundsforskrifter, og Friedrich Schlegels idé (i et af sine *Athenäum*-fragmenter) om, at i den moderne verden kan kun den store roman “blive et spejl for hele den omgivende verden, et billede af tidsalderen. [...] og potensere denne refleksion igen og igen og mangfoldiggøre den som i en endeløs række af spejle” (Schlegel 2000, 106). Denne betydning betones yderligere gennem de selvrefleksive titler ”Summa” og ”Summarum” på romanens to sidste kapitler. *Summa* er “en gammel genrebetegnelse for teologiske/filosofiske værker af sammenfattende, encyklopædisk karakter” (Gemzøe 1997, 138).

Sverre Juns naturvidenskabelige projekt

Fremtidsspejl mangfoldiggør refleksionerne gennem et flerstrengt forløb med tre hovedstrengte. Den første er et naturvidenskabeligt projekt ved den unge forsker, kronofysikeren Sverre Jun. Han er en begavet, men hæmmet ung mand. Med en dansk mor og en norsk far er han vokset op i et Teheran med strenge normer for forholdet mellem kønnene, og hvor de fleste talte et for ham uforståeligt sprog, farsi. Først som tiårig kom han til Aarhus. Han er en Kaspar Hauser-agtig skikkelse med så ringe selvfølelse, at han staver sit navn – dog også andres – med småt. Det og flere egenskaber har han fælles med junes fra Svend Åge Madsens

roman *Sæt verden er til* (1971). Fornavnet Sverre har hans mor Katri givet ham til minde om den Sverre, hun havde et kærlighedsforhold til – en kronofysiker, der spiller hovedroller i *Lad tiden gå* (1986) og *Det syvende bånd* (2007).³

Så distraet er han, at han ikke kan se forskel på bilmærker og jakker, han betegner sig selv som “bilblind” og “jakkeblind”. Trods en generthed og hæmmethed, som han tilskriver sin opvækst i det autoritære og tabuprægede Teheran,⁴ forelsker han sig i hele to ret forskellige piger. Både hæmningerne og ubesluttsomheden plager ham stærkt – han “kunne ikke blive i denne dobbelthed, udspændt mellem irenes tavse, næsten bedrøvede smil og juannas gnistrende øjne, der måtte findes en løsning” (16).

For lettere at vælge mellem de to lige tiltrækkende piger, den lyse, livlige Juana og den mørke, sensuelle Irene, udtænker han da et ambitiøst projekt med det mål radikalt at forbedre forudsigelser af fremtiden. Det har vide perspektiver – globalt er eksempelvis klimakamp og forebyggelse af sociale katastrofer jo afhængige af pålidelige prognoser – men i første omgang optager det ham mindre.

Projektet fører ham til den socialt-eksperimentelle enklave Nøjrup, et utopisk fristed og et reservat af halvskøre originaler. Her ligger også den forladte, halvtomme biokemiske virksomhed *Generos*, hvis skæbnesvangre, genmanipulerende produkter har spillet en rolle i en række tidligere værker (herunder *Edens gave*, 1993, og *Den usynlige myre*, 1995). I de faciliteter lejer Sverre Jun sig ind med sit mere forhåbningsfulde projekt. Som udgangspunkt bruger han Meteorologisk Instituts algoritmer for vejrprognoser. Via Sverre (som nævnt den, han er opkaldt efter) får han kontakt med det kronofysiske miljø i Aarhus.⁵ Med dna-prøver fra pigerne, matematiske modeller og avancerede teknikker lykkes det ham efterhånden at udvikle en teknik, hvormed han kan beregne pigernes udseende stadigt længere frem i tiden og frembringe billeder af dem.

Efterhånden bliver projektet imidlertid både udviklet i tværvideenskabelig retning og anfægtet i selve sine præmisser. Pigerne passer ikke ind som passive objekter. Gennem dem får han udvidet sin kulturelle horisont. Begge indvier ham i de farverige slægtsfortællinger, de har som baggrund. Med Irene oplever han Bachs *H-mol messe* med den bevægende sats *Qui tollit peccata mundi* [’Som bærer verdens synder’], gennem Juana sættes han på sporet af de forbløffende mange dramatiske værker, der har fuglenavne som titler.

3 Med en typisk Madsen’sk kringlet navnelogik angiver navnet således, at han dels er reinkarneret (brøkdelt af) junes, dels en Sverre Junior.

4 Men som også er et ironisk spejl af den aktuelle me too-frygt.

5 Som nævnt skildret i *Lad tiden gå* (1986) og fulgt op i en række senere værker, herunder *Genspejlet* (1999).

Endnu mere fundamentalt bliver det eksklusive valg mellem pigerne, som er udgangspunktet for hans projekt, modsagt af en drøm om samvær med dem begge (der altså forudsiger fremtiden nok så godt som hans videnskabelige apparat) og ikke mindst af pigernes aktive modstand. De flytter begge ind til ham i Generos og bliver stadigt mere tiltrukket af hinanden. Hans forsøg på at skille dem ad ser de som udtryk for, at han endnu er ”følelsesdum”, og de straffer ham ved for en tid at forlade ham.

Endelig udvikles og kompliceres hans projekt ved kontakt og sammentænkning med to andre projekter.

Mithyas litterært-humanistiske projekt

Mithya, hvis eget navn betyder myte, løgn eller skrøne, er en forfatter, der udtrykker sig i jegform. Hans planer om at finde en formel for *autopoiesis*,⁶ en selvgenererende litteratur, en ”historiesmitte”, der gør op med en lineær tidsopfattelse og traditionel stedsbundethed, finder næring og retning gennem mødet med en tysk ”specialist i fodnotebøger” (18). Tilsammen kommer de på forgængere som Vladimir Nabokovs *Pale Fire* (1962); Milorad Pavić’ *Vindens insida eller Romanen om Hero och Leander* (kan læses både forfra og bagfra, svensk udgave 1995); samme Pavić’ leksikonroman *Khazarernes bog* (1989), der er i tre spor; og Mark Z. Danielewskis *House of Leaves* (2000).

Mithya afprøver straks teknikken selv. Han indfører først fod- og siden slutnoter og gør dermed hele det værk, hans projekt indgår i, til en note- og leksikonroman. Noterne skaber en uendelig kontekst; dels af gamle og nye kendinge fra verdenslitteraturen, der er fælles om et opgør med den lineære fortælling; dels af selvreferencer til et forfatterskab, der jo for længst er etableret som enormt litterært kosmos under stadig udvidelse. Referencer og noter placerer bogen i Madsens univers og leverer forhistorier for langt de fleste af de nævnte og optrædende personer i alle strengene.

Mithya er vokset op i Nøjrup. Han er søn af Annalene Asgersen/Allandsen, hvis historie blev fortalt i *Blodet på mine hænder* (1973).⁷ Efter lukningen af Generos, der stod for over halvdelen af Nøjrups omsætning, måtte byen indstille sig på en mere nøjsom levevis. Da Mithya under sin mors sygdom og påfølgende død vender tilbage til Nøjrup, står det ham snart klart, at den fra et sted af originaler har udviklet sig til en utopisk enklave. Penge er stort set afskaffet, hvad der har nødvendiggjort en vis aflukning fra omverdenen; arbejde er omdefinert, og

6 Med et begreb fra den systemteoretiske sociolog Niklas Luhman.

7 Første bind af en krimitrilogi af Marianne Kainsdatter, pseudonym for Lise og Svend Åge Madsen.

for mange er det blevet så erotiseret, at det “har medført at den erotiske omgang mellem kønnene stort set er forsvundet” (74).

Nøjrup skildres i høj grad gennem Mithyas oplevelse af gensesynet. Utopien har været inspireret af myren, hvis sociale mønstre og avancerede duftsprog man læser om i Minonas bog *Jeg mødte myren*. Der er tillige indmonteret et faktisk opslag fra *Den Store Danske Encyklopædi om “Argentinamyre”*, en myreart, hvis kæmpemæssige superkolonier strækker sig over tusindvis af kilometer gennem store dele af Europa. Skellet mellem dyr og mennesker er i det hele taget mindre skarpt i Nøjrup, hvor Jørgen Fraser søger at oplære hunde til at gå på bagbenene, blive endnu bedre til at hjælpe mennesker og vise følelser. Sam- og modstillingen af samfundsmodeller giver anledning til megen satire over forhold i Gammel-Danmark og en del mild ironi omkring det trods alt lovende forsøg med en menneskelig, hypersocial myrekoloni.

I Nøjrup genser Mithya også sin ungdoms kærlighed Malene. Hun er mor til Irene, der som nævnt er vendt tilbage til Nøjrup. Hun ligner slående sin mor og ser for Mithya ud som “Malene for femogtyve år siden” (176). Den begyndende genforelskelse i hans gamle flamme blusser yderligere op.

Oplevelsen influerer hans projekt ved at give ham et nyt blik for tiden – dialektikken mellem fortid og fremtid i en dobbelt, nutidig personificering som mor og datter. Han udvider sit litterære synsfelt fra værket selv til læsninger af det og dermed dets mange mulige læsere, spredt mangfoldigt i tid og sted. Hos sin gamle regnelærer Gunner, der lærte ham at sætte parenteser, finder han bogen *De tusind læsninger* af Victor H. Kyrge.⁸ Hans teori er, at et litterært værk egentlig først bliver skabt, når det bliver læst, og at der derfor er lige så mange

8 Et af Svend Åge Madsens skæmtsomme pseudonymer, der sjovt nok ikke er note-forklaret. I det “Forord”, der indleder romanen *Jakkels vandring* (1974), bliver Victor H. Kyrge af Alian Sandme (et andet ofte anvendt pseudonym) præsenteret som en excentrisk, dødeligt syg forfatter. Han har udgivet kendte bøger under pseudonym og i eget navn et værk med titlen “7.455 stilistiske variationer over udsagnet “Han gik hen ad vejen” af højest én linies længde”. Til Alian Sandme giver Kyrge en meget ophakket udgave af syv ”skroller”, som Sandme derefter samler og bearbejder til bogen i syv sammenhængende, men meget forskellige skroller. I novellen ”Kyrge’s nål” fra *Mellem himmel og jord* står der, at ”hans navn var sammensat af fire navne på bøger eller forfattere som havde haft stor betydning for ham. Hans fødselsår, 1889, var endda gennemsnittet af de pågældende fire forfatters fødselsår – der havde altid stukket en systematiker i Victor” (Madsen 1990: 155). I mail til mig af 8.3.2023 har han identificeret dem som ”Victor(ia) (Hamsun) / H. (H benyttede Herman Hesse som signatur flere steder) / Kyr(klund) / (Bor)ges”. Gennemsnittet af fødselsårene for Knut Hamsun (1859), Hermann Hesse (1877), Willy Kyrklund (1921) og Jorge Luis Borges (1899) er virkelig 1889.

udgaver af det, som der er læsere. For at illustrere sin pointe har han skabt det fiktive værk *Fremtidsspejl*. Foruden reale læsere forestiller Kyrges sig også fiktive personer som læsere, der igen har læsere. Hvordan vil Robinson Crusoe, Emma og andre kendte hovedpersoner reagere på bogen? Kyrges er således skaber af “den paranarratologiske læsning” – der som tankevækkende parodi både placerer metafiktion og receptionsteori i en uendelig regres.

Mithyas projekt tager imidlertid også nye drejninger, da han får nærmere kontakt med de to andre.

Psykologen Annets terapeutiske eksperiment

“Personlighedsomstilling havde været i centrum i hele hendes karriere” (58), fortælles det om Annet.⁹ I “Blendværk” fra den forrige roman *Enden på tragedie* (2019) blev hun inspireret til at give sin terapi en ny drejning. Sygeplejersken Fia-Mette (gift med en yngre bror til Annets eksmand) havde med held forsøgt en ny fortælleterapi på sin mand, kunstmaleren Jens Gustav, der led af depressioner. Når han vågnede blank efter behandling med elektrochok, kunne hun give en fordelagtig omskrivning af hans fortid og dermed give ham en ny fremtid med en mere fungibel personlighed.

Da Annet præsenterer den nye metode, bliver hun smidt ud af psykologforbundet. Overbevist om, at den kan blive et stort spring frem, flytter hun til sin fars gamle hus i Nøjrup, hvor hun vil kunne have frihed til at videreudvikle den eksperimentelt. Hun kontakter sin gamle ven George,¹⁰ der har udviklet en bestråling, der kan nulstille bevidstheden. Ligesom sine nærmeste kolleger, Gary Stotle og Zeyno Midhat, der har stået for ret tvivlsomme forsøg, har han været i offentlighedens søgelys. Men han giver en anden forklaring på, at han, som hun, har været ramt af problemer i arbejdssammenhæng: “Hvorfor lukkede de egentlig din afdeling? [...] Instituttet skulle jo spare to procent hvert år og fik øje på at afdelingen netop udgjorde to procent” (61).

På grund af risikoen påtager Annet sig selv rollen som forsøgsperson. George, der står for bestrålingen, indprenter sig, at han som led i hendes personlighed-sændring vil afhjælpe hendes største svaghed som forsker. Allerede som børn

9 Det fremgår ikke mindst af romanen *Finder sted* (1998), som der også notehenvises til, men også af kortromanen *De gode mennesker i Århus* (udgivet sammen med *Læselysten*, Madsen 2003) og af fortællingen ”Blendværk”.

10 George Jo-Nielsen, som hun indledte en affære med i *De gode mennesker i Århus*, har indgået i det førnævnte kronofysiske miljø, som også Sverre Jun tog forbindelse med, og som har specialiseret sig i retning af “ændstransformation”. George har samarbejdet med kendte skikkelser (i Svend Åge Madsens univers) som Gary Stotle og Zeyno Midhat.

har hun og hendes tvillingsøster Tenna fordelt deres evner mellem hinanden: Tenna var god til alt med tal og beregning, Annet stod for det sproglige og humanistiske, og de var afhængige af at kunne søge hjælp hos hinanden. Da Tenna begik selvmord, mistede Annet sin adgang til denne dimension. Ved Annets opvågningen indprenter George hende derfor, at hun er god til at regne.

Det viser sig at være en farlig vej at gå. Sammen med evnen til at regne overtager Annet andre træk fra tvillingsøsteren. Hun bliver aggressiv og ønsker at dø. Snart stikker hun af og bliver i sidste øjeblik fundet bevidstløs ved havet af George. Faktisk har hun selv – ved flere tidligere lejligheder – advaret mod den fare, der her rammer hende selv som forsøgsperson: “Det *kan* lade sig gøre at skifte personlighed, men kun som et samlet hele” (“Blendværk”, Madsen 2019, 324; tilsvarende formulering i *Finder sted*, Madsen 1998, 139). Det ene ’rene’ tvillingejeg erstatter det andet. Hun bliver indlagt og kommer under opsyn af sin svigerinde, sygeplejersken Fia-Mette, der jo har den fornødne erfaring. Og George står med “følelsen af at være deltager i en gal mands tankespind” (97).

Under medvirken af Fia-Mette forsøger George at programmere Annet tilbage til hendes gamle jeg. Med en mere gradvis gendannelse af hendes fortid og egenskaber lykkes det. Tenna rumsterer dog stadig i hende. Hun røber det ikke for andre, men bliver sig snart bevidst, at denne indre dobbeltheden er en ressource, da hendes behandlingssystem udvikler sig gennem nye påvirkninger.

Tværfaglighed

Da Annet får kontakt med sin datterdatter Juanna, der jo af andre grunde er flyttet til Nøjrup, lykkes en af Annets behandlinger for første gang med hendes hjælp. Lisabet Taaning-Jensen, der har lidt af overdreven optagethed af sit hjem, af boligsnobberi og *firmseæstetik*, bliver af Juanna omfortalt til en passende a-æstetisk holdning. Selv om terapien i dette tilfælde virker, er det en forenklet model. Desuden er det et problem for Annets ”sindsløftningsklinik”, at depressioner er en mangelvare i Nøjrup.

Et afgørende skred sker, da Juanna får rekrutteret en prominent Nøjrup-beboer til behandlingen, Minona, forfatteren til *Jeg mødte myren*. Hun beder ikke om at få én personlighed udskiftet med en anden, men om noget mere kompliceret: at få etableret et tvesind, en mulighed for at kunne skifte mellem letsind og tungsind. Juanna forsyner hende med et kodeord (Klik-pjåtstøvl / Klik-Orcus¹¹). Det skaber dog nye problemer. Hvis udenforstående kender det, kan de manipulere hende i den tilstand, de ønsker. Annet griber dramatisk ind, da kodeordet er ved at blive røbet i et interview.

11 Romersk døds gud.

Mens Juanna er en forbindende skikkelse for Annet, forbinder Irene med Mithya og sin mor Malene – og begge med Sverre Jun. Løsningen på problemerne i hendes behandling sker på et møde – foregrebet gennem tilnærmelser ad mange små skridt – hvor hendes, Mithyas og Sverre Juns indsigter og metoder kombineres med hjælp også fra kronofysikerne George, Sverre og Johanne. Sverre Jun foreslår, at Minona selv bringes i stand til at vælge mellem tilstanden 'åbne' eller 'lukke', "hvorefter hun forhindrer at nogen udenforstående kan gribe ind i hendes sindvalg. Sådan at valget til hver en tid er op til hende, om hun vil lade sig vælge eller ej" (238).

Ligesom Annets "sindsudvidelse" kan nyde godt af fremtidsspejlet, kan det kombineres med Mithyas litterære fiktionsunivers med dets væld af læsemuligheder, "som kun fremtidsspejlet kunne fremkalde, Borges-figur aflæser *Gilgamesh*" (241). Mithya har tidligere foreslået og også forsøgt at vende programmet og se tilbage, som "at vende et spejl på højkant, så håret vender nedad, halsen op, mens venstre og højre stadig er venstre og højre" (231). Med sit litterære input bringer han også Annet videre. Han fortæller hende om et spansk forlag, formentlig ejet af feminister, der udgiver "anerkendte værker omskrevet til hun-køn. For eksempel *La Principesa*, bygget på *Den lille prins*. [...] Nu er udgivesrækken nået til *Jesuine*" (243). Ironien er til at tage og føle på, men Svend Åge Madsen har selv omskrevet Jesu historie i adskillige værker, herunder *Jakkels vandring* (1974).

De omvendende omskrivninger, der er en del af litteraturens dynamik, inspirerer til løsninger på nogle alvorlige personlige problemer – der også, som tidligere nævnt, er tilbageværende problemer i Nøjrup: Erotiseringen af arbejdet, der mindsker konflikter, men også truer erotik og forplantning. Gordon, som var betaget af sin skovl, har kastet sin kærlighed på Tamara, en ret så fiktiv sex-gudinde, som han har fundet på nettet. I fortvivlelse over hendes uopnåelighed har han forsøgt selvmord. Med hele den kombinerede metode omstemmes han, så hans følelser overføres til den faktisk eksisterende Mette, en lidt tung, stammende pige, der kan lide ham: "Gradvis, i takt med at det virtuelle sind letter, vil Gordon indse at det ikke er Tamara men Mette han elsker" (250).

Også Sverre Jun hjælpes afgørende på vej af Mithyas indsigt i den følelseskompleksitet og særlige tidsdynamik, som litteraturen rummer. I det fortættede kapitel "Mithyas drøm" formidler han en vision af et *ekkoliv*, hvor vores forgængere taler umiddelbart til os. De udveksler gaver: Sverre Jun leverer et fremtidsbillede og får *De hundrede læsninger*, der vil kunne forbedre fremtidsspejlet "ved at levere de historier der kan gøre det muligt for brugeren at foretage et mere kvalificeret valg af sin personlige fremtid" (256f.). Det hjælper tilsyneladende på hans fastlåste forestillinger om et eksklusivt valg mellem de to piger, letter ad-

gangen til at forestille sig andre muligheder. Da han har fulgt Mithya og Malene på vej og vender hjem til Generos, lister han ind for ikke at forstyrre, da en uventet (men dog i drømme foregribet) hændelse, der ophæver selve præmisserne for hans projekt, finder sted:

på den store madras, midt på gulvet, ligger pigerne. varmt, derfor ikke noget tæppe der skjuler dem, derfor ingen tvivl om hvad de foretager sig. med hinanden. [...] "sverre jun, har du ikke lyst til at slutte dig til os. der er plads til én til." "på betingelse af at du ikke tror du skal bestemme det hele." (257)

Summernes sum i Nøjrup

I kapitlet "Summa" slentrer Mithya hjem med Malene og Irene – der jo samtidig skulle befinde sig et andet sted. Han fortæller om et "narrativt greb", han har overværet, da han passerede Jydekrogen: en kvinde og en mand identificerer sig med litterære personer og søger en fortælling at mødes i. Kvinderne gør Mithya opmærksom på, at det er hans egne historier, han er omgivet af, og opfordrer ham: "Så få det dog overstået, slip den løs" (259). Animeret af Sverre Juns app, der slående kan tilnærme mor og datter i alder og udseende, udvikler der sig endnu en erotisk trekant. Med et narrativt greb angives to trekanter således kontrafaktisk at foregå på samme tid. Det er en paradoksal pointe i sig selv. Men trods de drømmeagtige signaler omkring Sverre Juns forløsning kan der dog argumenteres for, at Mithyas oplevelse – inden for fiktionen – overvejende kan læses som udtryk for hans eksplosive genforelskelse i sin ungdomskæreste Malene; der får ham til at opleve en sammensmeltning af hendes fremtræden som ung og moden.

I en tale på torvet søger den før så talehæmmede Mette at sammenfatte alle de hypersociale udviklinger, der netop er sket med Nøjrup, fristedet, hvis samfundsform først blev skildret i Minonas myrebog. Takket være Sverre Jun er det nu muligt at se ind i fremtiden "og dermed tage ansvaret for vores fremtid, vores egen og vores fælles" (261). Hjulpet af litteraten og psykologen er folk i Nøjrup også blevet "de første mennesker i verden der rummer flere sind, eller historier, som folk er begyndt at kalde dem. [...] Vi har opnået den indre rigdom at kunne leve et dobbelt, eller endda et tredobbelt liv, på skuldrene af de største fortællinger, eller de mest charmerende, eller tankevækkende... alle står jo til rådighed for os" (ibid.). Hun praktiserer denne fortælleterapi, da hun beder Gordon om tale sig som Jesuine, hvad han reagerer på ved at antage navnet Magdalu.

Hvis denne skæmtsomme omvending af det nye testamente skulle rumme et element af evangelisk autoritet, så fratager det sidste kapitel "Summarum" den

enhver absolutthed. Det rummer om ikke tusind så dog 24 forskellige udlægnin-
ger af det vigtigste ved det utopiske fristed Nøjrup - og indirekte det utopiske
værk *Fremtidsspejlet*. Det hypersociale fællesskab er sammensat af vidt forskel-
lige individer, stemmer, synsvinkler og vurderinger. Nogle lægger vægt på Mi-
nonas indsigter. Andre fremhæver Mettes forvandling til den åbne og tolerante
Jesuine gennem Gordons kærlige blik. Atter andre ser det vigtigste perspektiv i
Sverre Juns forløsning, da han åbner sig for en større, mere favnende seksualitet.
Én fokuserer på “Mithyas værk, det interaktive spil [...] Verdens første selvge-
nererende tekst [...] det åbne værk der giver plads til vores ideer, vores vildeste
fantasier” (269). En anden på, at “Annet er den der har sluppet os ud af iden-
titsfælden” (ibid.). Og så vil en vis Hardy Bimpel lige trække tingene ned på
jorden, hvor de hører hjemme: “Det hele er jo egentlig bare Allandsens ulykkes
[Mithyas] liderlige drøm om at parre sig, for at sige det pænt, med mor og datter
på samme tid. Fortid og fremtid, når det skal lyde fint” (ibid.).

Fremtidsspejl rummer en myldrende mangfoldighed, der dog hovedsageligt
samler sig om tre handlingsstrenger og tre projekter. Overvejende tre genera-
tioner agerer, og erotiske trekanter, faktiske eller forestillede, spiller en frem-
trædende rolle. I fremtidsorienteringen og vægten på valg er der træk fra ek-
sistentialismen som en bred filosofisk strømning. Men bogen tager på mange
planer opgør med en binær, enten-eller-logik (trukket op i titlen med Søren
Kierkegaards *Enten – Eller, 1843*). I en diskussion om Mithyas forestillinger om
det selvgenererende værk og mangfoldigheden af mulige læsninger bemærker den
avancerede fysiker George:

Kan lyde som en løsning på trelegeme-problemet. Vi, i fysikken,
astronomien, kan med lethed beskrive hvordan sol og jord påvirker
hinanden, og hvordan jord og måne griber ind i hinanden. Så snart
vi har tre legemer kan vi imidlertid ikke beskrive det eksakt. (241f.)

Trelegeme-opbygningen er således en elegant, metafiktiv og spekulativ struk-
turel spejling af det opgør med enkle alternativer til fordel for en anderledes
kompleks mangfoldighed, der er et hovedanliggende i *Fremtidsspejl*. Et opgør
med den eksklusive binaritet, der kommer udtryk i grunddogmet *tertium non
datur* – og en modsvarende optagethed af en non-binær matematik, logik og
etik – er et hovedtema i forfatterskabet, hvis enorme spejlkabinet med denne
bog får endnu flere facetter.

Spejlinger og læsninger

Fremtidsspejl er blandt Svend Åge Madsens mere filosofisk-konstruktive værker med et utopisk-socialt anliggende, en kompleks konstruktion og en særlig intellektuel appel. Den er en *hybrid* af genrer, herunder noteroman, utopi og anatomi.¹² Disse genrer er beslægtede ved deres spekulative og encyklopædiske karakter, og endog ved selve sin hybriditet er *Fremtidsspejl* repræsentativ for *spekulativ fiktion* som fortællemodus. Tidligere eksempler på denne tendens er *Tilføjelser* (1967), *Sæt verden er til* (1971) og ikke mindst *At fortælle menneskene* (1989) med dens omvendinger og demonstrative ophævelse af dualismer, tillige med overbuddet af slægtsforbindelser og selvreferencer. Det er værker, som kræver en særlig intellektuel åbenhed, en filosofisk læsers omhu – og som lægger op til og sikkert nok vinder ved flere læsninger.

Det gælder alt sammen *Fremtidsspejl*. Mængden af historier, handlingstråde, opfindsomme ideer og henvisninger til andres og egne værker er stimulerende, hjerneknipsende – og udfordrende. Det foregående forsøg på at udrede trådene viser, hvor svært det er at holde styr på alle disse informationer og dimensioner. Den kræver vel ikke tusind læsninger, men dog indtil flere – og en ikke-lineær læsning med tid og tålmodighed til afbrydelser, ekskursioner, spring frem og tilbage. For en umiddelbar første læsning, orienteret efter *reading for the plot*, er en sådan bog så pakket, sammensat og ophakket, at det ligger i overkanten. Og det er vel en iboende begrænsning af læserappellen i ganske mange former for spekulativ fiktion?

Selv en nörd, der har læst praktisk talt alt af og langt det meste om forfatter-skabet, kunne midt i genopfriskningens glæder blive frustreret over den stadigt digressive, distraktive afledning i referencers referencer. Ganske vist kan dette grundtræk i værkets spekulative poetik ses som et højst aktuelt spejl af den digitale nutids og fremtids uendeligt ekspansive vidensmuligheder, fremmedstyrede afledninger og evigt distraherende afbrydelser. Det kan imidlertid fremkalde et ønske om en litterær modvægt, om fortællinger med sammenhængende plot og tid til indlevelse i få karakterer. Et sådant ønske fik både hovedpersonerne Elef og Maya og læserne opfyldt i den dystopiske og utopiske roman *Se dagens lys* (1980).

En beslægtet ambivalens kommer til udtryk i anmeldelserne ved udgivelsen af *Fremtidsspejl*, både i flere af dem og i de forskelle, der gør sig gældende i helhedsbilledet. En negativ anmeldelse giver Mette Høeg (*Berlingske Tidende* 7.11.2020) under overskriften “Madsen skuffer nuttet og ufarligt”. Hun finder de teknologiske opfindelser for “uplausible og fjollede” til, at man lader sig rive

12 Også kaldet menippæisk satire, jf. genrekarakteristikken i Gemzøe 1997: 249-254.

med. “Desuden roder det for meget i Madsens litterære laboratorium og hans forfatterbevidsthed, og der er for lidt sammenhæng og substans”. Overvejende negativ er også Lars Handesten med “På sporet er han blevet” (*Kristeligt Dagblad* 11.11.2020). Han savner et ordentligt plot, finder satiren tandløs og konkluderer: “Han gør hvad han har gjort en masse gange, med en anelse variation. Er det nok? Vist ikke”.

“Hvis vi afskaffer sex mellem kønnene, bliver ligestillingen nemmere” er titlen på Jes Stein Pedersens positive anmeldelse (*Politiken* 7.11.2020). Han fremhæver ligeligt det utopiske og det satiriske: “I ‘Fremtidsspejl’ ser Madsen med andre øjne på narrativ terapi, porno, krænkelsekultur, kunstig intelligens m.m.”. Og han roser romanen for selv finurligt at praktisere “den ‘historiesmitte’, Mithya taler om. Nye og gamle fortællinger vokser sammen, allerede kendte og helt nye romanfigurer og slægtskaber forbindes. / Det er litterær og spekulativ befrugtning og genbefrugtning på utallige niveauer i en roman, der som en del af spillet selvfølgelig er helt bevidst om netop denne ret enestående kvalitet”.

Mindst lige så positiv er Lars Bukdahls anmeldelse “Hypersocial udistance” (*Weekendavisen* 6.11.2020), sat ind i en forfatterskabskontekst af David Jacobsen Turners artikel “Madsens kærlighedsklinik”. Han er glad for noterne: “Som Madsen-nørd kan man omsider slappe af, for Madsen har gjort det selv med sine fodnoter.” I de små bogstaver, der anvendes af “den unge dansk-kinesiske” Sverre Jun¹³ ser han originalt, men tvivlsomt “måske en omvending af Yahya Hassan”, der har holdt sig til store bogstaver i sine digtsamlinger. Bukdahl gør udmærket rede for de tre narrative hovedspor. Deres samvirke i helheden betegner han som “en blød maskine”, genereret af forfatterskabet. Som noget særligt, der markant hæver bogen, peger han i sin let manierede stil på det vibrerende sprog i Sverre Junes karakterzone: “Sverre Junes eksakt nervøse, i forfatterskabsforstand sensationelt skrøbelige fortællerstemme, der tilfører den friktionsfrie Svend-Åge-knirken en bæveren, der er fucking rørende”. *Fremtidsspejl* blev siden nomineret til Weekendavisens Litteraturpris.

Noget mere ambivalent er Preben Rasmussens anmeldelse “I morgens utopia” (bragt i fire dagblade, herunder *Fyens Stiftstidende* og *Helsingør Dagblad* 27.11.2020): “Madsen er jo altid fiks, finurlig og legesyg, men han gør det ikke nemt for læseren. / Lad det være sagt straks: “Fremtidsspejl” er både irriterende svær at få overblik over, drilsk indviklet, alvorlig, men også momentant morsom”.

13 Den dansk-norske Sverre Jun er hverken dansk-kinesisk, som her hævdet, eller “halvt iraner”, som påstået i Jes Stein Pedersens anmeldelse.

“Svend Åge Madsens skrift kan ikke længere kan følge med hans mange påfund” er

Tue Andersen Nexøs vurdering (*Information* 5.11.2020). Svend Åge Madsen spejler og forskyder begavet: “Utopien Nøjrup er det mest spændende ved Fremtidsspejl, både fordi den er helt tilforladelig og samtidig lige har antydningen af mørke undertoner - og fordi den kaster lys tilbage på Svend Åge Madsens forfatterskab. / For har han ikke, som forfatter, lige så meget hittet på sære samfundsformer som på sære fortællinger?” Men læseren drukner, for her savnes “øjeblikkets og sprogets nærvær”: ”Denne gang er afstanden mellem tanke og sætning alligevel for stor”.

Erik Svendsen karakteriserer bogen som en “Madsen classic” (*Jyllands-Posten* 2.1.2021). Sin sammensatte læserrespons udtrykker han således:

Denne nye roman er skrevet til forfatterens mange fans, da person-netværket kræver maksimal koncentration, hvis ikke læseren skal ende begravet i de mange informationer. Men det ændrer dog ingenlunde ved forfatterens særstatus: “Ingen – ingen – har så udpræget sans for at skabe parallelsamfund, der både ligner og langt overgår den verden, vi troede, vi kendte.”

Jeg kan i mine egne reaktioner som læser genkende den ambivalens, der kommer til udtryk i modtagelsen af *Fremtidsspejl*, endog antydet i en så positiv anmeldelse som Lars Bukdahls. Jeg vil dog påpege, at Svend Åge Madsens mange fans næppe fuldt ud har de samme præferencer, og at hans spekulative værker trods alt er ret forskellige i genreorientering, plotstyrke og karakterskildringer. Dermed appellerer de også til forskellige læsestrategier og læsertyper.

Fremtidsspejl kan noget andet end de værker, der mere uforbeholdent jonglerer med fortællingens tryllestav – og bør ikke læses og vurderes helt som dem. Når man er kommet lidt nærmere de tusind læsninger, kan man blive fascineret af bogens intellektuelle arkitektur, dens trelegeme-struktur, hvor de forskellige projekter under gensidige påvirkninger og mange andre impulser efterhånden smelter sammen i en form for ordnet kaos. Denne alt andet end ensporede proces kræver en særlig læsestrategi. En *spekulativ læser* har blik for at samle glimtene i et billede af en forskning, hvor forsøg veksler mellem succes og fiasko, og hvor dialog med andre fagområder er en forudsætning for nye og bedre metoder og indsigter. Spejlkabinettet er også en form for metafiktiv mimesis af en mangestemmig demokratisk proces, et forhåbningsfuldt utopisk billede af, at et frit og mangfoldigt samvirke kan føre til fælles forandringer, til løsningsmuligheder på de store problemer, verden tydeligvis står over for i en ganske nær fremtid.

Som *nutidsspejl* glimter bogen jo også af satire, undertiden lynende træffere. Det løfter fortællingen, når omprogrammering af tid og psyke pludselig bliver sat i relief af hverdagsfænomener: "Hvorfor lukkede de egentlig din afdeling?" [...] "Instituttet skulle jo spare to procent hvert år og fik øje på at afdelingen netop udgjorde to procent" (61). Stilen får liv af vilde fremmedord som "paranarratologisk" og "prosopoprognosis" ('ansigts-forudsigelse') og af nye sammensatte ord som "hulkeromantik", "coronaskrækken", "pernittenæstetik", "jakkeblind" og "bilblind".

De sidstnævnte ord indgår i romanens mest nuancerede bud på karaktertegnning, med rette fremhævet også af Lars Bukdahl: det indføjte og nuancerede portræt af den forsagte og samtidig stædigt insisterende unge mand Sverre Jun. Skildringen af hans kringlede vej mellem to piger er også det plotmæssigt mest pulserende og drivende i bogen. Juanna og Irene, de to piger, er komplementære udspaltninger, en kærlig parodi på romantikkens stereotyp polariserede kvindebillede. Gennem Sverre Juns sensible sansninger får de dog mere eget liv, vokser med små træk fra typer til karakterer. Det giver liv til den spekulative forfatters nye nuancering og ombrydning af sin måske vigtigste, mest engagerede kritiske og utopiske vision: at anskueliggøre den afgørende betydning af, at vi formår at se os i fremtidens spejl.

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“It's not about the bunny!” – David Lynch og spekulativ fiktion

Claus Krogholm

There is a becoming of continuity,
but no continuity of becoming.
(A.N. Whitehead)

Der er masser af huller i David Lynch' værk - huller, døre, mørke korridorer og andre tærskelsymboler.¹⁴ Overgange mellem rum, passager fra et sted til et andet, portaler mellem dimensioner. Men først og fremmest huller, der er med til at destabilisere den ontologiske sikkerhed, som almindeligvis følger af at vide, hvor vi befinder os såvel eksistentielt som i tid og rum. Som oftest er det uklart om hullerne er en passage fra det indre til det ydre eller omvendt; eller om det er ormehuller, der skaber interdimensionelle forbindelser på tværs af tid og rum; eller om det er passager, hvor drømme flyder ind i virkeligheden – og vice versa. Ikke overraskende leder det ofte til sammenligninger med Lewis Carroll: at se en film eller tv-serie af David Lynch er - som Alice - at følge den hvide kanin ned gennem kaninhullet til et bizart *wonderland*. Eller pludseligt at opdage, vi befinder os bag spejlet i en surreel verden, hvor alt er vendt op og ned.¹⁵

Skal vi se David Lynch' værk som spekulativ fiktion, er det ikke så meget i betydningen science-fiction eller fantasy, men nærmere som en form for spekulativ ontologi, der betragter vores egen verden og egen tid, men gør det fra en særegen synsvinkel, hvor vores verden gradvis ophører med at ligne noget, vi

14 Se f.eks. Mark Fisher: “Curtains and Holes: David Lynch”, in *The Weird and the Eerie*, London: Repeater Books, 2016, s. 53-59

15 Se bl.a. Amy Taubin (2001), der beskriver *Mulholland Drive* som ”a bifurcated, through-the-looking-glass narrative”, hvor ”we fall, as through a rabbit-hole, into Diane Selwyn's apartment” (Taubin 2001, s. 51, 54). Jay Weissberg (2006) refererer i sin anmeldelse af *INLAND EMPIRE* til kaninerne (i den indlagte, bizarre sit-com) som ”reminders of the White Rabbit in “Alice in Wonderland,” taking Alice down the hole into bizarre lands. With the strange and terrifying occurrences, the low ceilings and the non sequiturs, there's more than a whiff of a threatening Wonderland.” Og endelig skriver Ronnie Hackston (2017) om *Twin Peaks* ”The Black Lodge is a sinister, Lewis Carroll-esque mirror world, where people speak backwards and nothing is quite what it seems.” (Hackston 2017, s. 24)

kender. Vi kan følge Sophie Wennerscheid i hendes beskrivelse af dansk spekulativ litteratur:

Så i stedet for at forklare det fremmedartede ved spekulativ litteratur med dens formodede placering i fremtiden giver det mere mening at forstå det fremmedartede på en spekulativ ontologisk måde, dvs. en måde, der er rettet mod virkelighedens formodede væsen. Spekulativ litteratur giver os en verden at se, som vi ellers ikke kan eller vil se. Den åbner for et syn på virkeligheden, der ikke er antropocentrisk begrænset. (Wennerscheid 2021, 111)¹⁶

Der kræves en særegen – spekulativ? – æstetik for at se vores egen virkelighed fra en ikke-antropocentrisk synsvinkel. Det handler derfor om at følge kaninen ned gennem kaninhullet til David Lynch' bizarre *wonderland*, hvor uglerner ikke er, hvad de giver sig ud for at være og verden er radikalt anderledes – og dog stadig den virkelighed, vi selv bebor.

Huller kan defineres som enten *ingenting* med *noget* omkring, eller som *noget* med *ingenting* i midten. Spørgsmålet er derfor, hvornår *noget* holder op med at *være* noget og bliver til *ingenting*? Og omvendt: hvad skal der til, før *ingenting* bliver til *noget*?

Der er en genklang af det Heidegger – med Leibniz - i *Hvad er metafysik?* kalder metafysikkens grundspørgsmål: "Hvorfor er der overhovedet noget værende og ikke intet?" (Heidegger 1994, 77). For at kunne besvare det spørgsmål må man som bekendt først spørge: Hvad er Intet? Men dermed forudsætter vi, at *Intet er noget*. Vi forudsætter at *Intet er* - at det besidder en form for væren. Men *Intet* er jo præcis ikke *væren*. "Ved denne spørgen fastsætter vi på forhånd Intet som noget, der "er" sådan og sådan – som det værende" (ibid. s. 84). Ved at stille spørgsmålet: hvad er Intet? - har vi forvandlet *Intet* til det, det ikke er: *Væren*. Men *Intet* er negationen af *væren*, det er *ikke-væren*. "Thi Intet er benægtelsen af det værende i sin helhed [Allheit], det simpelthen ikke-værende." (ibid.) Det er til-*Intet*-gørelsen af *væren*. Og hvis *væren* kan tilintetgøres, så må *Intet* gå forud for *væren*.

16 "When reality is mixed, ontological and epistemological issues tend to be foregrounded, because the represented worlds cannot be assigned unambiguously either to science fiction or to ordinary reality." Hayles & Gessler 2004, s.483

Erfaringen af *Intet* er *Angst*.¹⁷ Frygt er frygten for *noget*, frygten har et objekt. Det har angsten ikke, det er angsten for *Intet*. ”Angsten for ... er altid angst over ..., men ikke over dette eller hint. For hvad og over hvad, vi ængstes, er ubestemt; men denne ubestemthed er ikke blot en manglende bestemmelse, men derimod den principielle umulighed af en bestemmelse” (ibid. 89) Der er *Intet* (ikke *noget*) at være angst for. Og det er i angsten for *Intet*, vi bliver bevidste om vores (til)væren, når vi træder ud af det sted, hvor vi ikke er. Angsten er angsten for ikke-væren, Døden, hvor væren igen bliver til *Intet*. Som det hedder hos Heidegger: vores *væren-til-døden*.

Vi vender tilbage til der, hvor vi ikke-er - til ikke-væren eller *Intet*. Det er samtidig en venden tilbage til der, hvor *væren* først viser sig. Og det, der viser sig for første gang, er det, Jacques Derrida kalder *revenant* - et spøgelse eller endnu bedre: en genganger. ”Repetition *and* first time: this is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost” (Derrida 1994, p. 10). Gengangeren er en *væren*, der ikke længere er. *Væren* er blevet *ikke-væren*, men ikke *Intet*. Gengangeren er *noget*, men er ikke helt *væren*. Gengangeren viser sig gennem et hul i *væren*. Det er en spektral *væren*. Gengangeren kan ikke bestemmes ontologisk, men som det Derrida kalder *hauntologi*.

Let us call it a hauntology. This logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being (of the “to be”, assuming that it is a matter of Being in the “to be or not to be,” but nothing is less certain). It would harbour within itself, but like circumscribed places or particular effects, eschatology and teleology themselves. It would comprehend them, but incomprehensible. (Derrida 1994, p. 10).

Der er tale om et typisk derridask ordspil. *Hauntology* er dannet af det engelske *to haunt*, *haunting* - at hjemsege, spøgeri. Det handler om spøgelse og gengangere. Udtalt på fransk med stumt ‘h’ lyder det som *ontology*. Men samtidigt er vi nødt til at udtale det på engelsk med ‘h’ for at forstå forbindelsen til spøgelse og gengangere. Så bogstavet ‘h’ er samtidigt nærværende og fraværende¹⁸ - det

17 “I denne Tilstand [uskyldighed] er der Fred og Hvile; men der er paa samme Tid noget Andet, hvilket ikke er Ufred og Strid; thi der er jo Intet at stride med. Hvad er det da? Intet. Men hvilken Virkning har Intet? Det føder Angest.” Søren Kierkegaard: *Begrebet Angest*, i *Samlede Værker*, bd. 6, København: Gyldendal, 1991, s. 136

18 Dermed fungerer ordspillet næsten bedre på engelsk end på det oprindelige franske, hvor *l'hauntologie* først og fremmest adskiller sig fra *l'ontologie* på skrift.

Derrida også har kaldt *differance*. Ontologien er hjem søgt af hauntologien. Hvor ontologien omfatter væren, så omfatter hauntologien tillige ikke-væren. Hauntologien omfatter mere end ontologien, men den viser sig inde fra ontologien. Hauntologien er *indfoldet* i ontologien, men kan vise sig gennem sprækker eller huller i *væren* og derved destabilisere den ontologiske sikkerhed.

Gengangere og huller deler den egenskab, at de hverken er *noget* eller *intet*, men befinder sig mellem de to. Ting, der ikke helt er ting (hverken *some-thing* eller *no-thing*). Gengangeren er hverken levende eller død; det er ikke et korporligt objekt, men heller ikke rent fravær. Gengangeren tilhører fortiden, men viser sig i nutiden. Det er noget, der vender tilbage fra fortiden, men som genganger viser sig for første gang. Gengangeren er ikke-væren, der viser sig som væren. En ontologisk transcendens, der oscillerer mellem væren og ikke-væren.

Mark Fisher er blandt de, der mest prægnant har anvendt hauntologien som æstetisk greb og dermed også knytter det til spekulativ fiktion (uden at det dog er eksplicit hos Fisher). Det anvendes blandt andet på en række musikere (Burial, Kode 9, Caretaker) og elektronisk musik (dubstep m.m.) fra starten af det 21. århundrede. Hvor elektronisk musik ofte har været karakteriseret som *futuristisk*, som lyden af fremtiden, så er hauntologisk musik kendetegnet ved fraværet af fremtid: "What defined this "hauntological" confluence more than anything else was its confrontation with a cultural impasse: the failure of the future" (Fisher 2012, 16). I det 21. århundrede er det blevet umuligt at forestille sig fremtiden som noget andet – og bedre – end nutiden. De utopiske forhåbninger om, at alt bliver bedre i fremtiden, er politisk og kulturelt afløst af bestræbelser på at undgå, det bliver værre end nu. Det er Fukuyamas "end of history" og Thatchers "there is no alternative" (det Fisher andetsteds har kaldt *kapitalistisk realisme* (Fisher 2009)). Hvis der ikke er noget (bedre) alternativ til tingenes nuværende tilstand, så bliver fremtiden et lukket rum for alt andet end apokalyptiske forestillinger: "[T]he disappearance of the future meant the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination: the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live" (Fisher 2012, 16).

Når den elektroniske musik bliver hauntologisk, så er det såvel fortiden som fremtiden, der hjem søger den. Det er lyden af fremtiden, men som nu lyder fortidig, fordi vi ikke længere kan forestille os fremtiden som et futuristisk utopia. "What haunts the digital cul-de-sacs of the twenty-first century, is not so much the past as all the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate" (Fisher 2012, 16). Det, vi hjem søges af, er en fortid, hvor vi troede på fremtiden. Det er forestillingen om tiden og historien som en – mere eller mindre ubrudt og lineær – progression mod en stadig bedre fremtid, der er brudt sammen. Som Derrida ynder at sige – med reference til *Hamlet* – "the time is out of joint".

Der er således to retninger i hauntologien. Det som *ikke længere* er – vores forestillinger om fremskridt og en bedre fremtid, der hjem søger os og derfor stadig som et traume – har en virkning på os. Og det som *endnu ikke* er – den truende apokalypse, som vi søger at undgå at blive konfronteret med ved at lukke af for fremtiden, men – som alt fortrængt – vender tilbage for at hjem søge os: “Hauntology itself can be thought of as fundamentally about forces which act on a distance – that which, to use Slavoj Zizek’s distinction, insist (has causal effects) without (physically) existing” (Fisher 2012, 20).

Der er heri en affinitet til den gentagelsestvang, Freud observerede i behandlingen af traumer. Målet med behandlingen er at få patienten til at erindre de hændelser, der har ført til traumet. Analysen skal overvinde de modstande, patienten – ubevidst – gør mod at lade det fortrængte blive bevidst. Men det lykkes ikke altid, fordi modstanden er for stærk:

Den syge kan ikke erindre alt det, der er blevet fortrængt i ham, måske netop ikke det væsentlige, og han bliver således ikke overbevist om rigtigheden af den konstruktion, der bliver meddelt ham. Han er tværtimod nødt til at gentage det fortrængte som en aktuel oplevelse i stedet for at erindre det som en del af fortiden, hvad lægen hellere havde set. (Freud 1983, 30)

Gentagelsestvangen er udtryk for, at noget viser sig, hvor det ikke hører til. Det fortrængte traume, som er knyttet til hændelser i fortiden, gentages i nutiden som hændelser, der igen og igen hjem søger patienten. Freud taler da også om gentagelsestvangens *dæmoniske* karakter (Freud 1983, 43).

Fredric Jameson har peget på noget tilsvarende, når han i film – blandt andet David Lynchs *Blue Velvet* – taler om en ”Nostalgia for the Present” (Jameson 1991, 279-296). Det er f.eks. film, der foregår i nutiden (1980erne), men som i visse henseender synes at påkalde sig 1950erne – Eisenhowers USA, hvor det stadig var muligt at forestille sig fremtiden som en fortsat bedre version af nutiden. Men filmens nutid er et dementi af 1950ernes utopiske forestilling om fremtiden, hjem søgt som den er af kriminalitet, narko og kernefamiliens opløsning. Nostalgien gælder således 1950ernes forestillede fremtid, sådan som man troede nutiden (1980erne) ville blive. Nutiden er hjem søgt af såvel fortid som fremtid i form af fortidens forestillinger om fremtiden, der ligger indfoldet i nutiden.

Det er ikke mindst her, hauntologien knytter an til spekulativ fiktion. Ikke så meget i form af forestillinger om andre mulige verdener; men snarere fordi vi hjem søges af *det umuligt mulige*, der ligger indfoldet i vores verden. Bruger vi

R.B. Gills tentative definition af spekulativ fiktion som ”speculative representation of what would have happened had the actual chain of causes or the matrix of reality-conditions been replaced with other conditions” (Gill 2013, 73), så er det særlige ved hauntologien, at det ikke er... ”a systemically different world in which not only events are different, but causes operate by logics other than normal ones” (Gill 2013, 73). Her er der ikke tale om science-fiction, fantasy eller eventyr, men i højere grad noget, man kunne kalde historiske, politiske eller kulturelle traumer, der fortsat er virksomme længe efter, at de forestillinger, de var knyttet til, selv er blevet uvirksomme.

Der er noget tilsvarende på spil i de former for fiktion, Mark Fisher kalder *the weird and the eerie* (Fisher 2016). *Weird* kan forholdsvis uproblematisk oversættes som det *sære*, mens den gængse danske oversættelse af *eerie* som *uhyggelig* ikke er helt dækkende. Der er ikke nødvendigvis tale om noget, der er skræmmende eller fremkalder frygt. Det er noget foruroligende eller ildevarslen, fordi der er usikkerhed om dets natur. Et fugleskrig kan være *eerie*, hvis det er usikkert, om skriget er et udtryk for fuglens natur eller er intentionelt. Fisher analyserer blandt andet *The Birds* (både Daphne du Mauriers fortælling og Hitchcocks filmatisering) som eksempel på *the eerie*. Fuglernes tilsyneladende koordinerede angreb – på tværs af arter – på mennesker forbliver uforklaret. Det peger på et centralt element i bestemmelsen af *the eerie*, nemlig spørgsmålet om agens. Noget tilsvarende kan siges at gøre sig gældende i *Twin Peaks*, hvor uglen fungerer som repræsentation af *the eerie*: ”The owls are not what they seem”, som det gentages adskillige gange. Men hvad er de så? Det forbliver usikkert, men uglernes tilstedeværelse er vedvarende ildevarslen.

Når fænomener – levende som døde – der ikke normalt tilskrives agens, begynder at agere på måder, der tilsyneladende er intentionelle og målrettede, kan man tale om spekulativ fiktion i den forstand, at det drejer sig om noget, der ligger udenfor vores normale erfaring. Det er det, der kendetegner såvel *weird* som *eerie*: at det er perceptioner og erkendelser af noget, der ligger *udenfor* det, vi opfatter som normalt og som kommer til os *udefra* (et *udefra* der vel at mærke kan være indfoldet i den verden, vi opfatter som normal). Der er tale om *ontologiske anomalier* (Fisher 2016, 24), hvor noget, der ”hører til” et andet sted og/eller i en anden tid, manifesterer sig i *vores* verden. Dermed sker der en denaturalisering af vores verden som den ontologisk sikre grund under vores forståelse af, hvad der er virkeligt – og som følge heraf også hvad der er fiktion. Man kan tale om en form for ontologisk blødning (*haemorrhage*), hvor noget siver igennem fra et niveau til et andet og derved udvirker en ontologisk afhierarkisering. Det betyder både, at noget kan sive igennem fra et ontologisk set andet niveau ind i vores verden, hvorved vores ontologiske sikkerhed destabiliseres; eller at noget kan

sive ud af vores verden og manifestere sig et andet sted, hvormed det får karakter af (anden) virkelighed.

The eerie (...) is constituted by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence. The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or there is nothing present when there should be something. (Fisher 2016, 61).

På tilsvarende vis fungerer hullerne hos David Lynch som passager eller portaler mellem det, vi normalt opfatter som ontologisk adskilte niveauer: mellem ydre, fysisk verden og en indre, psykisk; mellem drøm og vågen tilstand; mellem fortid og nutid; mellem makro- og mikrokosmos. Noget viser sig, hvor der ikke burde være noget; eller der er ikke noget, der hvor det burde vise sig. Og som oftest er det ikke muligt at etablere noget ontologisk hierarki mellem de forskellige niveauer. De to narrative hovedspor i f.eks. *Mulholland Drive* (2001) kan nok betragtes som 'virkelighed' og 'drøm', men det vanskeligt - formodentlig umuligt - at fastslå, hvilken der er 'drøm' og hvilken der er 'virkelighed'. Der etableres aldrig en sikker grund, hvorfra det er muligt at betragte helheden og fastslå, hvad der er virkeligt og hvad der er drøm. Måske er det, som en fortolkning lyder, i virkeligheden to drømme,¹⁹ hvor vi aldrig 'vågner' og får mulighed for at identificere, hvem det er, der drømmer. Som det også gør sig gældende hos Lewis Carroll: hvem drømte, Alice eller den røde konge?²⁰

Det er allerede tilfældet i Lynch' første film, *Eraserhead* (1977), hvor vi først ser et ubestemmeligt objekt, der nok har form som en hjerne, men tilsyneladende svæver som et objekt i det ydre rum. Kameraet zoomer ind og bevæger sig gennem et hul i objektet, hvorpå vi - tilsyneladende - befinder os i vores verden. Men det er uklart, om vi har bevæget os ind i objektet og nu befinder os et sted, der er indre i forhold til objektet; eller om vi er kommet ud til en ydre verden. Og sådan fortsætter det med at være umuligt at fastslå, hvor vi befinder os: i en virkelig verden eller en drøm/mareridt.

I *Blue Velvet* (1986) er det, da hovedpersonen Jeffrey finder et afskåret øre, tingene begynder skride. Kameraet zoomer ind på øret og bevæger sig tilsyneladende gennem det, hvorpå vi befinder os et andet sted end den idylliske by

19 "Double Dreams in Hollywood", *Philosophical Burogu*, <http://nihonbunka.com/blog/archives/000112.html>

20 "... *hvem* var det, der drømte alt det? (...) det må enten have været mig eller den røde konge. Han var naturligvis en del af min drøm – men så var jeg jo også en del af hans!" (Carroll 1977, s. 313)

Lumberton. I én forstand er det den kriminelle underverden, som det pæne borgerskab aldrig ser - eller vælger ikke at se; og det er en mere beskidt, perverteret seksualitet end den romantiske kærlighed, den pæne, blonde Sandy drømmer om. Men det er også muligt, at det hele er Jeffreys (sado-masochistiske) fantasi, som er mere perverteret end Sandy kan leve op til. "I can't figure out if you're a detective or a pervert", som hun siger til Jeffrey.

Øret spiller også en vigtig rolle i den helt centrale scene, hvor alfonsen Ben mimer til Roy Orbinsons sang "In Dreams." På et tidspunkt stopper han med at mime, mens sangen fortsætter. Illusionen bliver dermed brudt. Illusionen er afhængig af, at der er synkronicitet mellem sanserne: det vi ser, er det vi hører. Når der ikke længere er synkronicitet, så falder den virkelighed, sanserne formidler, fra hinanden. Vi må vælge, hvilken sans vi stoler på, for at kunne etablere en sikker grund at tolke verden fra. Her ligger det lige for at vælge høresansen, fordi vi har set, at det er et kassettebånd med Roy Orbinson, der bliver afspillet. Men tidligere har vi jo set det afskårne øre, hvor præcis høresansen er blevet afkoblet sanseapparatet.

Noget tilsvarende er på spil i *Mulholland Drive* (2001) og den ligeledes helt centrale scene i Club Silencio, hvor illusionen bliver udpenslet for os: "It's all recorded. No hay banda! It's all a tape. Il n'est pas de orchestra. It is... an illusion!" Ikke desto mindre kommer det som lidt af et chok få øjeblikke senere, hvor vi ser Rebekah del Rio synge en spansk version af Roy Orbinsons "Crying" og hun falder om, mens sangen forsætter. Stemmen bliver løsrevet fra kroppen.

Der er en variant heraf i *Lost Highway* (1997), hvor vi har den gådefulde "Mystery Man", der kan være fysisk til stede i ét rum og samtidigt svare telefonen i et andet. Her er det igen stemmen, der bliver løsrevet fra kroppen - bogstaveligt talt en *disembodied voice*. "Mystery Man" er en figur, der transcenderer det ontologisk adskilte; han er med andre ord hauntologisk. Han optræder tillige med i begge de narrative hovedspor i *Lost Highway*, og destabiliserer dermed muligheden for, at den ene fortælling er indlejret i den anden (som fantasi/drøm/mareridt).

INLAND EMPIRE (2006) er (som *Mulholland Drive*) en film om Hollywood og film. Det handler om indspilningen af en film, der i sig selv er en genindspilning af en polsk film. Der er dog den pointe, at den polske film aldrig blev lavet, da de to hovedrolleindehavere blev myrdet. Så det er en genindspilning uden original. Men også her skrider distinktionerne mellem niveauer. Den kvindelige hovedrolleindehaver, Nikki Grace, får sværere og sværere ved at skelne sig selv fra den rolle, hun spiller. Hun kan tilsyneladende ikke længere skelne film fra virkelighed. Spørgsmålet er dog, om det overhovedet er en skelnen, der giver mening i *INLAND EMPIRE*. "With *Inland Empire*, world-haemorrhaging has

become so acute that we can no longer talk about tangled hierarchies but terrain subject to chronic ontological subsidence.” (Fisher 2016, 58)

Det bliver tilsvarende vanskeligere for os, der ser *INLAND EMPIRE*, at skelne, da de ontologiske hierarkier bliver sammenfiltret og kollapser – eller måske snarere imploderer. Således ser vi tilsyneladende også scener fra den ikke-eksisterende polske film. Den amerikanske (gen)indspilning bliver hjem søgt af den polske original; væren hjem søges af ikke-væren. At de to hovedpersoner i den polske film blev myrdet, forklares med “they discovered something inside the story.” Et eller andet inde fra fortællingen har været årsag til fatale virkninger uden for fortællingen. Noget har kunnet sive igennem fra et niveau til et andet som en form for narrative eller ontologiske blødninger eller lækager.

De mange huller i David Lynch’ værk understreger muligheden for lækager og at noget kan sive igennem fra et niveau til et andet. Det er også udpræget i *Twin Peaks*, der nok er Lynch’ mest oplagte eksempel på spekulativ fiktion. I *Twin Peaks* er der portaler til andre dimensioner - The Black Lodge - og der er personer/væsner, som bevæger sig mellem dimensioner: Bob, The Giant, The Man From Another Place. Der er The Log Lady, som kommunikerer med andre verdener gennem sin trækævla. Der er major Briggs, der efterforsker interdimensionel kommunikation i skovene omkring Twin Peaks og der er Sarah Palmer, som har syner og ser ting, andre ikke ser.

I filmen *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992), der fortæller forhistorien til Twin Peaks og hvordan Laura Palmer blev myrdet, spiller billeder en vigtig rolle. Laura Palmer har et maleri på sit værelse, hvor motivet er en åben dør (hvilket får det til at minde om et maleri af Hammershøi). I noget der umiddelbart kunne være en drømmesekvens, bevæger vi os ind i billedet, gennem døren til et andet rum, hvor en kvinde viser vej til et tredje rum og en dør, der fører til The Black Lodge.

Som altid hos Lynch bør vi være forsigtige med lægge os fast på ontologisk sikre niveauer og forsøge at indlejre det ene i det andet: virkelighed og drøm, tredimensionelt rum og todimensionelt billede. Det centrale er, at det er billedet, der bliver portalen til en anden dimension. Billedet, der fremstår som en uigennemtrængelig, todimensional flade, bliver en åben passage mellem dimensioner. Ikke kun spatiale, men også temporale. Laura Palmer møder Annie Blackburn, der ellers først dukker op i *Twin Peaks* længe efter, Laura Palmer er blevet myrdet. Annie beder Laura skrive i sin dagbog, at den gode version af Dale Cooper er fanget i The Black Lodge. Annie er en genganger fra fremtiden. Her er der med andre ord tale om en temporal lækage, hvor fremtiden siver igennem til fortiden.

Den temporale lækage er selvfølgelig også muliggjort af, at filmen *Fire Walk with Me*, hvis handling foregår før tv-serien *Twin Peaks*, kommer efter vi har set tv-serien. Vi ved allerede det, Annie her fortæller Laura. Vi har allerede selv bragt det med til filmen. Det bliver dermed os, der hjem søger *Fire Walk with Me*, som gengangere fra det, der er filmens fremtid, men vores fortid. Det er imidlertid signifikant, at filmen starter med at vise en tv-skærm, som viser hvid støj. Pludselig bliver tv'et smadret med en økse. Det, vi ser herefter, er ikke det *Twin Peaks*, vi så i tv, men den usminkede "virkelighed", der var indfoldet i serien, og som prime time tv ikke tillod os at se. Vi bliver som seere selv hjem søgt af den fortid, der forblev latent i tv-serien.

Tv-skærme optræder flere steder hos Lynch, hvor der zoomes ind på skærmen, så billedet opløses i pixels. Den flade skærm begynder at få en mere taktil kvalitet, jo tættere vi kommer på. Jo mere abstrakt og kornet billedet bliver, desto mere synes det at få struktur og tekstur. Skærmen bliver porøs og opløser den ellers tilsyneladende uigennemtrængelige flade, der skiller dimensioner og verdener, som befinder sig på hver sin side af skærmen. Billedet bliver spekt-ralt og en passage til andre verdener.

Som bekendt sluttede *Twin Peaks* i 1992 med, at Dale Cooper blev fanget i The Black Lodge, mens hans onde dobbeltgænger vendte tilbage til Twin Peaks. I The Black Lodge havde Laura Palmer fortalt Cooper, at de vil mødes igen om 25 år. Og 25 år senere - i 2017 - fik vi så *Twin Peaks: The Return*.

Det er på det nærmeste umuligt at give noget meningsfuldt referat af de 18 afsnit. Men i de forløbne 25 år har den onde Cooper hærget og er eftersøgt af FBI under ledelse af Gordon Cole (spillet af Lynch selv). Imens forsøger Dale Cooper at undslippe sit fangenskab i The Black Lodge, hvilket lykkes gennem det elektriske net via hullet i en stikkontakt. Han tager ophold i Dougie Jones (den tredje version af Cooper); men må først genlære alle basale sociale funktioner - som at drikke kaffe - før han endelig bliver sig selv igen og selvsikkert kan erklære "I AM the FBI". I The Black Lodge har han oplevet de temporale lækager - tidsrejser med andre ord - og vil derfor redde Laura Palmer fra at blive myrdet. Hvilket tilsyneladende også lykkes. Han finder hende derpå i Odessa, Texas, men nu under navnet Carrie Page. Hun har ingen erindring om, at hun i et andet liv (og en anden dimension?) har været Laura Palmer, men lader sig overtale til, at Cooper tager hende med tilbage til Twin Peaks i håb om, at hun så vil huske, hvem hun i virkeligheden er.

Twin Peaks: The Return er på mange måde en odysse. Det handler om Dale Coopers vanskelige og årelange vej tilbage til Twin Peaks. Men det er mere James Joyce end det er Homer. Som Joyces *Ulysses* har 18 kapitler eller episoder, så består *Twin Peaks: The Return* af 18 episoder. Og som Joyce bruger et utal af

genrer, så bevæger Lynch sig gennem et virvar af genrer og stilarter: fra soap til horror, surrealisme og hverdagsdrama, sentimentalt og brutalt, billedpoesi og absurd teater. Genrerne er ikke stabile, men siver over i hinanden.

Der er igen masser af huller, passager og portaler, der gør, at serien hele tiden skrider fra dimension til dimension - og igen uden at der etableres nogen sikker ontologisk grund. Der er nok masser af gengangere fra den oprindelige serie, der udgør en form for genkendeligt univers. Men samtidigt er det et portræt af den lille provinsby Twin Peaks i det nordvestlige USA, som i sig selv er ved at bukke under for det 21. århundrede. De, der var unge i Twin Peaks anno 1992, er nu selv blev forældregenerationen og deres børn er mere uregerlige og langt mere fortabte end de selv var. Samtidigt er universet udvidet til hele USA - fra New York til Texas og South Dakota. Det er et USA i indre opløsning, samtidigt med at andre dimensioner bliver mere og mere nærværende, hvilket er nok så medvirkende til opløsningen af enhver sikker, ontologisk forankring.

Det mest omtalte afsnit af *Twin Peaks: The Return* var uden tvivl episode 8, der fremstår som lodret uforståelig.²¹ Men paradoksalt måske også det afsnit, der bedst forklarer, hvad der sker. Efter de første 10 minutter, der er forholdsvis normalt efter *Twin Peaks* målestok, klippes der til sort-hvid og White Sands, New Mexico, 16. juli 1945. Tid og sted for den første prøvesprængning af atombomben. Igen zoomer kameraet ind og vi bevæger os gennem paddehatteskyen ind i en anden dimension. Og der ser vi bl.a. Bob - den onde dæmon fra Twin Peaks. Dermed antydes det også, at det er sprængningen af atombomber, der har revet hul i dimensionerne, så der nu er passage mellem de ellers adskilte ontologiske niveauer. At det er her, der er opstået lækager, så vores forståelse af, hvad der er virkeligt - den ontologiske sikkerhed - er ved at forbløde. Atombomben har forårsaget et ontologisk kollaps - ikke kun i *Twin Peaks*, men også på et mere generelt plan. Bomben var en konkretisering af en ellers teoretisk fysik, der hævdede eksistensen af et subatomart univers hinsides - og radikalt forskelligt fra - vores sanseverden.

Spørgsmålet er, om det skal ses som en forfaldshistorie, hvor vi - langsomt eller stadigt hurtigere - mister grebet om virkeligheden. Eller om vor forståelse af virkelighed og ontologisk sikkerhed ikke altid har været provisorisk. Vi kan, som A.N. Whitehead, betragte det, vi opfatter som virkelighed, som en proces, der altid er i forandring. Nogle processer er langsomme - kontinenternes vandringer, bjergkæders forvitring - andre er anderledes hurtige. Alt er i forandring og

21 "Twin Peaks' Season 3 Episode 8 Recap: What the Fuuuuuuuck?" (Hawking 2017)

indgår i den samme proces, fra det mindste støvkorn til den højeste skabning: "God is an actual entity, and so is the most trivial puff of existence in far-off empty space" (Whitehead 1978, 18). Der er ikke nogen ontologisk differens mellem støvkornet og Gud - alt er del af det samme kontinuum. Det betyder ikke, at alt er det samme. Processen er ikke lineær, der er ikke tale om at alt udvikler sig brudløst fra det mindste til det største. Verden er i en tilstand, hvor den vedvarende bliver til, men der er ikke kontinuitet i dens tilbliven: "There is a becoming of continuity, but no continuity of becoming." (ibid. 35).

Det betyder tillige, at vi har at gøre med en non-hierarkisk – eller flad – ontologi. Det medfører så også, at det er en non-antropocentrisk ontologi. Der er ikke noget, der sætter mennesket – og menneskelig erfaring – i centrum for betragtningen af verden og virkeligheden (Kants *für uns*). På den anden side fører det ikke nødvendigvis til en objektorienteret filosofi (Kants *an sich*). Der er stadig subjekter, der sanser og erfarer verden, men det er ikke et subjekt, som befinder sig over eller uden for tingenes og objekternes verden. "The word 'object' then means an entity which is a potentiality for being a component in feeling; and the word 'subject' means the entity constituted by the process of feeling, and including this feeling" (ibid. 88). Objektet er en entitet, der har potentiale for at blive sanset eller berørt²², og subjektet er den entitet, der bliver konstitueret gennem sansningen eller berøringen. Subjektet kan altså ikke eksistere uafhængigt af eller forud for objektet. Det betyder endvidere, at det, vi normalt opfatter som objekt, i sig selv kan blive subjekt: en sten bliver berørt af jorden (gennem tyngdekraften). Et subjekt besidder derfor ikke nødvendigvis bevidsthed om at være berørt. Men bevidstheden om og erfaringen af at være berørt – som vi tilskriver den menneskelige erfaring – adskiller sig, ifølge Whitehead, ikke kvalitativt fra enhver anden subjektivitet. "There is always a subject, though not necessarily a human one" (Shaviro 2009, 12). Det betyder, at en lang række af de sansninger, vi erfarer som mennesker, ikke adskiller sig kvalitativt fra de sansninger, der berører ikke-menneskelige entiteter²³. Alle entiteter kan berøre og blive berørt,

22 Whitehead taler ikke om affekt, men hans begreb om *feeling* er på mange måder nært beslægtet med, hvad vi i dag omtaler som affekt. "Through his analysis of "subjective form," Whitehead privileges feeling over understanding, and offers an account of experience that is affective rather than cognitive. (...) To feel something is to be affected by that something." (Shaviro 2009, s. 57, 59. Jeg har valgt at tale om sansning og berøring frem for følelse og affekt.

23 "There is therefore no stable and essential distinction, for Whitehead, between mind and matter, or between subject and object. There is also no stable and essential distinction between human and nonhuman, or even between living and nonliving." (Shaviro 2009, s. 23)

men der er forskel på i hvilken kvantitet berøringer bliver til erfaring, der sætter subjektet i stand til selv at berøre og dermed kvalitativt påvirke andre entiteter: "These various aspects can be summed up in the statement that *experience* involves a *becoming*, that *becoming* means that *something becomes*, and that *what becomes* involves *repetition* transformed into *novel immediacy*." (ibid. 137).

Det ligger i tingenes natur, at entiteter forenes i stadig mere komplekse sammenhænge i en proces fra diversitet til enhed, men uden at processen på noget tidspunkt kan føre til én fuldendt enhed.²⁴ Det er en proces, hvor der vedvarende skabes en ny umiddelbarhed, der berøres af verden og derfor kontinuerligt befinder sig i proces. Processen er nok brudfyldt og kontingent, men et brud er ikke afbrud. Processen bliver ikke standset af et brud; tværtimod er bruddene en del af processen.

Når vi hos David Lynch bevæger os mellem dimensioner, så er der ikke tale om et ubrudt kontinuum; der er brud, men der er ikke diskontinuitet. De mange genrespring i *Twin Peaks: The Return* – fra trailerparkens socialrealisme til surrealismen i The Black Lodge – kan nok ses som brud, men de er stadig del af det samme kontinuum: Twin Peaks. De mange huller, passager og portaler understreger sammenhængen og kontinuiteten. Huller bekræfter netop, at der ikke er vandtætte skotter mellem det, vi ellers opfatter som ontologiske hierarkier (virkelighed og fiktion), men at noget vedvarende siver igennem og berører os. Vi kan ikke forblive uberørte ved at hævde, at det "kun" er fiktion eller at det "kun" er en drøm.

Det bliver radikalt understreget i den sidste scene i *Twin Peaks: The Return*. Som nævnt har Dale Cooper taget Laura Palmer/Carrie Page med tilbage til Twin Peaks og til hendes barndomshjem, familien Palmers hus, i håbet om, at det vil vække erindringen om, hvem hun i 'virkeligheden' er: Laura Palmer. Men da han ringer på og døren bliver åbnet, er det ikke, som Cooper forventede, Sarah Palmer, der åbner døren. En kvinde, der præsenterer sig som Alice (!) Tremond, forklarer at hun købte huset af en kvinde ved navn Chalfont,²⁵ men kender ikke til nogen ved navnet Palmer. "What year is this?" spørger Cooper forvirret. Laura/Carrie hører Sarah Palmers stemme inde fra huset kalde: "Laura", hvorpå hun skriger og skærmen går i sort. *Twin Peaks: The Return* er slut.

24 "Neither God, nor the World, reaches static completion. Both are in the grip of the ultimate metaphysical ground, the creative advance into novelty." (Whitehead 1978, s. 349).

25 Navnene Tremond og Chalfont har begge tidligere optrådt i *Twin Peaks* og *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*.

Det virkelig radikale i slutscenen er, at kvinden, der åbner døren, er Mary Reber, som er den *virkelige* ejer af huset (Ivie 2017). Dermed åbnes der også en dør mellem det, vi på den ene side opfatter som *fiktion* (et – lavere - ontologisk niveau) og på den anden side opfatter som *virkelighed* (et andet – højere - ontologisk niveau). Døren er åbnet for, at *Twin Peaks*' virkelighed også bliver vores virkelighed.

Kaninen viser sig måske at være en *macguffin*,²⁶ der har fået os til lede i dybden, skønt alt i virkeligheden foregår på overfladen. "It's not about the bunny!", som Deputy Hawk siger *Twin Peaks: The Return*, episode 3. Kaninhullet er snarere et ormehul, der forbinder to punkter i universet uden på noget tidspunkt at forlade overfladen.²⁷ I *Twin Peaks* er de to punkter familien Palmers hus i fiktionens verden og Mary Rebers hus i vores virkelighed. Men pointen er, at der hele tiden er tale om det samme hus og det samme univers, den samme virkelighed, den samme overflade.²⁸ Ikke for ingenting er en hyppigt anvendt figur til beskrivelse af de narrative strukturer hos Lynch möbiusbåndet, hvor der som bekendt ikke er nogen bagside: alt befinder sig på samme side af båndet.²⁹

Enhver fiktion – selv den mest spekulative – er en del af vores virkelighed (og vi er en del af enhver fiktion, når vi læser eller ser fiktions værker). Nok er der brudflader, men der er ikke nogen ontologisk diskontinuitet. Derfor er det også vigtigt, at det tilsyneladende er sprængningen af den første atombombe, der åbner universet for det bizarre og fantastiske i *Twin Peaks*. Der er, med kvantemekanikken, tale om, at der er åbnet for en dimension af virkeligheden - den

26 En *macguffin* er som bekendt et objekt el.lign., der tilsyneladende er vigtigt for plottet, men som til slut viser sig uden betydning (som f.eks. kufferten i Quentin Tarantinos *Pulp Fiction*) og dermed har afledt vores opmærksomhed fra det, der i virkeligheden var vigtigt.

27 Astrofysikkens ormehuller er ikke påvist i virkeligheden, men er teoretisk konsistente med både den generelle relativitetsteori og kvantemekanikken. Som følge af universets krumning kan to punkter forbindes på tværs af rumtiden, således at man kan rejse mellem punkterne med hastigheder, der overskrider lysets. Det er ikke en rejse, der går "gennem" universets (som hvis man skød genvej fra Danmark til New Zealand ved at rejse gennem Jorden), da universet er ren overflade. Se f.eks. Stephen Hawking 2018, s. 255ff.

28 Gilles Deleuze har påpeget, hvordan Lewis Carrolls Alice tilsvarende færdes på overfladen, selv når hun tilsyneladende falder ned gennem kaninhullet (Deleuze 2017, s. 300ff)

29 Jf. også Slavoj Žižek: "The temporal loop that structures *Lost Highway* is thus the very loop of the psychoanalytic treatment in which, after a long detour, we return to our starting point from another perspective." (Žižek 2000, s. 18)

subatomare – som er radikalt forskellig fra den (antropocentriske) virkelighed, der er tilgængelig for vores sanser. Derfor kræves der også en anden æstetik³⁰ – en spekulativ (posthuman, ikke-antropocentrisk) æstetik? – for at skildre vores virkelighed, som er langt mærkeligere end vi hidtil har troet og forestillet os.

Hos David Lynch er det en æstetik fuld af huller. Der er lækager, som underminerer fundamentet under de – skrøbelige – ontologiske hierarkier, vi støtter os til for at opretholde en forestilling om, hvad der er virkeligt. En virkelighed, der er hjem søgt af det ubevidste, historien, fiktionen – og Hollywood. *Mulholland Drive* er hjem søgt af Billy Wilders *Sunset Boulevard*, en film der i sig selv er hjem søgt af historien: Hollywood i stumfilmsæraen.

Ikke for ingenting er FBI Special Agent Dale Cooper i *Twin Peaks* det nærmeste vi kommer på en konventionel helt hos David Lynch. Men hans metoder er alt andet end konventionelle. I opklaringen på mordet på Laura Palmer finder han spor i sine drømme og det overnaturlige på lige fod med det konventionelle politiarbejde og retsmedicinske metoder.³¹ Der er ingen ontologisk diskrepans mellem det trivielle, det ubevidste og det metafysiske. Alt er del af den samme virkelighed. Det handler ikke om kaninen.

Eller gør det? Som hele citatet lyder i episode 3: "It's not about the bunny!... Is it about the bunny?... No! It's not about the bunny."

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30 Æstetik kommer som bekendt af det græske *aisthetikos* – det som angår sanserne.

31 "Agent Dale Cooper (...) pays attention to his dreams, not for the insight they provide into his own psychological being but for what they convey about external events, worldly or otherworldly. My view is that the crowning achievement of Lynch's opus must be a film [*Mulholland Drive*] that allows the possibility that the unconscious is a conduit to some legitimate alternative reality or that ontological alternatives of some sort exist." (Andrews 2004, s. 33)

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“The Fire Roared Large”: Bewildered Motherhood and the Limits of Feral Rage in Rachel Yoder’s *Nightbitch* (2021)

Marianne Kongerslev

“Rage can be crafted—it’s sort of an art form of politics.”

--Judith Butler³²

“Wildness names simultaneously a chaotic force of nature, the outside of categorization, unrestrained forms of embodiment, the refusal to submit to social regulation, loss of control, the unpredictable.”

--Jack Halberstam³³

Reviewers have referred to Rachel Yoder’s 2021 novel *Nightbitch* variously as a “bestial fairy tale” (Joughin), “Part horror-confessional, part dadaist satire” (Elgatian), “surreal” (Kelly, NYer), and “A battle hymn as novel” (Kirkus), illustrating the strange mix of genres and modes the novel bridges. As these characterizations indicate, *Nightbitch* is an indeterminately speculative, furious story, and, as these descriptions also hint at, the novel seems to speak directly to a specific *Zeitgeist* characterized by speculative genres and ugly feelings, such as anger, both feminist and otherwise. Temporally anchored in the Trump era and beyond, this anger forms part of what white actress Amber Tamblyn calls an “era of ignition.” This notion resonates with other recent feminist writings on anger as a political emotion. In books such as Soraya Chemaly’s *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women’s Anger* (2018), Rebecca Traister’s *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Anger* (2018), Brittney Cooper’s *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (2018), and Myisha Cherry’s *The Case for Rage: Why Anger Is Essential to Anti-Racist Struggle* (2021), among others,

32 Gessen, Masha. “Judith Butler Wants Us to Reshape Our Rage.” *The New Yorker*, Feb. 9, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/judith-butler-wants-us-to-reshape-our-rage>

33 *Wild Things*, 3

the authors trace fury and rage as effective and affective strategies of feminist rebellion, creativity, and care (especially for black and other minoritized women). Pointing to a temporal apex in women's rage, these authors explore how anger and fury have worked for and been mobilized by and against women and feminists, especially around the time of the 2016 US presidential election, during the Trump regime, and most recently, during the Covid-19 pandemic. As Traister notes, "[t]he contemporary reemergence of women's rage as a mass impulse comes after decades of feminist deep freeze" (*Good and Mad* 2). Rage and fury are now increasingly being mobilized as political tools by women.

Like these writers on feminist rage, in *Nightbitch*, Yoder speculates about what happens when a woman, who is a mother, unleashes pent up fury and releases—in this case literally—her inner dog, and asks, via *A Field Guide to Magical Women*, a (fictional) ethnographic text cited in the novel, "To what identities do women turn when those available to them fail? How do women expand their identities to encompass all parts of their beings?" (40) and "Who is to say what feats and follies, what absolutely not-able-to-even-be-imagined modes of existence women have accessed since the dawn of human history?" (84). In other words, the novel turns to what Jack Halberstam in *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020), calls 'the ferox' (77), an untamed figure of "pleasurable bewilderment" (10), of queer disorder and desire. The ferox submits to no rules, embraces unknowing and unbecoming, and revels in "a fantasy of life beyond the human" (8), a wild and bewildered life. In *Nightbitch*, Yoder initially turns to Halberstamian feralness as a specific critique of postfeminist motherhood, desiring instead a type of bewildered—White—motherhood that is outside of categorization, social control, and order. However, Yoder's vision of feral motherhood is a fairly tame one. Rather than offering a vision of truly bewildered motherhood separated from the constraints of heteropatriarchal capitalism, Yoder appropriates the dog-woman-monster motif to carve out a space within this system for domesticated white motherhood to disturb, but not to offer revolutionary solutions. Instead, the novel perpetuates an individualistic ideal of personal fulfillment as end goal.

Mother Rage

In the context of Trump-era US political, social, and cultural demands on women, especially during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, a focus on anger and the controlling of women's emotions becomes significant. Discussing gendered restrictions on anger and rage, Rebecca Traister notes how, "There's perhaps no neater example of how rage is an emotion that is permitted and encouraged in (some) men—and can be used to their advantage—while for women it is forbid-

den, invalidated, and treated as a path to self-defeat, than the 2016 presidential election” (*Good and Mad* 61). Traister notes how Hillary Rodham Clinton was often portrayed as an ugly, angry woman, neatly summed up in Trump’s phrase, “a nasty woman” (Diaz). Women’s emotional lives are heavily policed, and especially anger and rage are seen as the property of men (Jaggard; Traister). Summing up this complex regulation of women’s emotions, particularly as it pertains to anger, in *Rage Becomes Her* (2018), Soraya Chemaly states that,

Ageism, homophobia, and racism all play a part in how our anger is perceived. There is no time of life when our anger is acceptable. Teenage girls are spoiled, silly, or moody for standing up for themselves. Older women, fed up and saying so, are bitter castrators. Angry women are butches, lesbians, and man haters. We are called Sad Asian Girls, Hot-tempered Latinas, Crazy White Women, and Angry Black Women. It goes without saying that “angry women” are “ugly women,” the cardinal sin in a world where women’s worth, safety, and glory are reliant on their sexual and reproductive value to men around them. None of this leads us to think of anger as the moral or political property of women. (Chemaly 13-14)

Thus, ugly feelings like rage have traditionally been tied to ‘unladylike’ behaviors and bad manners. In “Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology” (1989), Alison Jaggard coins the phrase “outlaw emotion” to describe emotions that are “distinguished by their incompatibility with the dominant perceptions and values” (166). Anger is an outlaw emotion for women, and in contemporary US culture, mothers—especially—are supposed to be preternaturally patient, caring, and kind (Dubin 2020; Kahane 2021; Watson 2022). In *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (2018), Jaqueline Rose explores the ambivalent position mothers are placed in culturally—both “the ultimate scapegoat for our personal and political failings” and revered in idealized form (1). In a similar vein, in *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint* (2021), Maggie Nelson also notes how mothers must often meet “the charge of providing limitless, unconditional, self-sacrificial love and care to others, without reserve or resentment, within systems that make such a thing difficult or impossible, be they sociopolitical, economic, psychic, or all of these” (69).

In response to these social and cultural restrictions on women’s and mothers’ emotions, the last few years have seen a spike in publications centering on mothering differently (see e.g. Doyle), mother regret (Donath), or feminist mothering (Adichie), in addition to literary fiction and untold numbers of self-help books.

For instance, in *Rewilding Motherhood: Your Path to an Empowered Feminine Spirituality* (2021), Shannon K. Evans invites mothers to reflect on the usefulness of their anger: “we must then channel our potentially paralyzing rage into an active, workable, empowered outrage” (*Rewilding Motherhood*, chapter 5). Chemaly proposes a similar redeployment of anger, because, as she states, “Anger is an emotion. It is neither good nor bad. While uncomfortable, it’s not inherently undesirable” (Chemaly 260-61).

More importantly, in *The Case for Rage*, Myesha Cherry argues for a strategic mobilization of “Lordean rage”—a phrase indebted to black feminist author Audre Lorde. This type of rage is productive, and it can also be said to be valuable, if not necessary. Although Cherry is concerned with rage in response to racial oppression, her conceptualization of Lordean rage as productive resonates with broader feminist ideas. There is an “intrinsic and instrumental value of anger in response to oppression,” she states, positioning herself in relation to feminist thinkers who claim that anger “is a form of protest that may help women retain their self-respect, gain insight into their oppression, and bear witness to that oppression” (6). In short, recent feminist thinkers argue for a view of anger, rage, fury, ire as well as other ugly feelings as moral responses to injustice.

Thus, these thinkers advocate for a kind of celebration of feminist wildness. Halberstam prefaces his inconclusive conclusion to *Wild Things* with a quote from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which states: “*Wild*—Of the sea, a stream, the weather, etc. Violently agitated, rough, stormy, tempestuous, ‘raging’; hence *fig.* or *gen.* full of disturbance, or confusion, tumultuous, turbulent, disorderly” (175). This conception of the wild as “violently agitated” and “raging” (etc.) resonates with feminist concerns about ugly feelings such as rage/anger. If we approach rage as a feminist form of wildness, we can understand Halberstam’s portrayal of wildness as productive but open-ended and disruptive—a queer response to the status quo. As Halberstam states, “Wildness has no goal, no point of liberation that beckons off in the distance, no shape that must be assumed, no outcome that must be desired. Wildness, instead, disorders desire and desires disorder” (7). Wildness is non-normative and opens up possibilities; it does not prescribe solutions or paths toward change but embraces indeterminacy.

Culturally, however, female wildness/rage is (perceived as) monstrous. *Nightbitch*’s evocation of this wild rage through the trope of the angry, bewildered mother overtly echoes—or rather reverses—Barbara Creed’s vaguely defined “woman as non-human animal”—trope, a sexist horror trope expressing phallogocentric anxieties over female sexuality and reproduction, first mentioned in her 1993 book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1). In a later text, Creed expands on this trope and refers to it as a *femme animale*

(“*Ginger Snaps*”), a “terrifying monster who must be destroyed, [and a] creature who deliberately sets out to undermine the dominant norms of an anthropocentric and phallogocentric symbolic order” (180). In Yoder’s conception, the mother transforms into a doglike creature, or at least envisions herself as such, in order to access a sense of revolt and refusal of normativity for white women. In this way, she follows the logic of Creed’s recently published *The Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (2022), in which she revisits this monstrous figure, viewing it through the lens of feminist rebellion and empowerment. Now a feminist symbol of revolution and willful self-abjection, “Her monstrousness is a force for change” (*The Return* 4), and this force, represented in various cultural texts, has the potential to “evoke the power of the monstrous-feminine to upend and undermine patriarchal myths about woman as weak and ineffective” (*The Return* 5). *Nightbitch* celebrates the furious *femme animale* as a possibility for white female empowerment; however, as I will show below, Yoder limits its force and power to a weak critique, centering on the mother as a successful consumerist “art monster” (Offill 8), who seeks to disturb the system, but not to envision radically alternative modes of being.

Ignition

Part allegory of patriarchal society and part absurd neo-horror, *Nightbitch* tells the story of the initially unnamed former-artist-mother and her two-year-old son and their relationship with ‘the father,’ who leaves mother and child to fend for themselves every week all week, only to resurface in the home on weekends to criticize and minimize the mother’s concerns. In the beginning of the novel, the mother “quite suddenly [becomes] something else” (6), or rather begins to unravel and unbecome (human). This process remains ambiguous throughout the novel, never fully revealing whether the mother imagines her canine transformation or indeed becomes able to turn into a sort of dog-woman monster that goes on various (mostly nightly) rampages.

Whether psychological or supernatural, the mother’s transformation begins one night when the child refuses to sleep and the husband sleeps through the child’s tantrum. The mother’s rage ignites: “The fire roared large, larger, blistering hot, until it threatened to consume her entirely, and it was then she rose with a great howl, flung the sheets from her, reached for the bedside light, in her haste knocked the lamp to the floor and heard it shatter, moaned with rage...” (8), scaring both the husband and child. In the morning following the incident, she renames herself *Nightbitch*, self-deprecatingly, and—to her husband at least—ironically. They laugh at her rage, but the mother remembers that “*Nightbitch* had always been there, not even that far below the surface” (9). Her fury il-

illustrates a moment of rupture, what Sara Ahmed calls a “feminist snap,” when something becomes too much, or rather, when something *appears* to become too much. In her 2017 lecture “Snap! Feminist Moments, Feminist Movements,” Ahmed states,

Snap is often used to indicate a sudden break or a quick movement. Snap can be used to refer to a sharp sound. Say you hear the sound of a twig snapping. You might not have noticed the twig before; you might have not noticed the pressure on the twig, how it was bent, but when it snaps, it catches your attention. You might hear the snap as the start of something. A snap is only the start of something because of what you did not notice, the pressure on the twig. You might hear someone when she shouts, because she shouts; at that moment a voice can break through over the sound of everything else. It does not mean she starts off by shouting. (“Snap!”)

Leading up to the mother’s snap are years of disappointment, domestic tedium, and other forms of unnoticed pressures, and thus, as she continues to snap ever more violently, the novel seems to open the door to the possibility of a state of *bewilderment*, “an immersive sense of being lost or of standing outside of a system of knowing...” (*Wild Things* 66).

Rage in *Nightbitch* is most overtly ignited by the oppressive ideal of white middle-class motherhood related to a broader form of privileged women’s discontent, especially when it draws on the trope of the frustrated artist mother. To stress this point, the mother directly links her own metamorphosis with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s feminist classic, “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), a similarly monstrous tale about a mother’s transformation into something feral. *Nightbitch* speculates about delayed post-partum depression as an explanation for her strange symptoms, and after coarse hairs start sprouting from her skin in various places and her teeth turn to “ferocious points that could cut a finger with a mere prick” (4), she turns to the internet:

[She] searched *humans with dog teeth* on her phone, searched *do humans and dogs share a common ancestor*, searched *human animal hybrid* and *recessive animal genes in humans* and *research human animal genes legacy*, searched *werewolves*, searched *real werewolves in history*, searched (somewhat inexplicably) *witches*, searched (somewhat relatedly) *hysteria 19th century*, and then, because she wanted to, searched *rest cures* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*, which she

had once read in college, then stared blankly for a while at nothing in particular while sitting on the toilet, then stopped searching altogether. (4, *emphases in original*)

However, *Nightbitch* seemingly rejects a psychoanalytical understanding of the main character's motherhood-malaise. Although the mother explores a different kind of psychoanalytical problem through Betty Friedan's concern with a sense of unfulfilling domesticity, articulated in the *Feminine Mystique* (1963), the novel never unambiguously decides one way or the other. In one of her introspective moments, *Nightbitch* asks herself a rhetorical question directly linking her contemporary domesticity to Friedanesque discontent, or "the problem that has no name" (Friedan 13):

Was it her fault that she had bought into the popular societal myth that if a young woman merely secured a topnotch education she could then free herself from the historical constraints of motherhood, that if she simply *had a career* she could easily return to work after *having a baby* and sidestep the drudgery of previous generations, even though having a baby did not, in any way, represent a *departure from work* to which a woman might, theoretically, one day *return*. (28-29, *emphases in original*)

On the surface, this seems like a variation on Friedan's critique that women have traditionally been unable to choose a "full *human identity*" (Friedan 70, *my emphasis*). However, *Nightbitch* departs from this and instead reverts to a kind of ancient conception of women as inherently connected to the natural. In other words, the novel celebrates a different kind of empowerment through canine fury that untethers mothers from saintly constructs of the kindly Madonna—the "Angel in the house" (Patmore) or "true woman" (Welter), and instead re-appropriates—or perhaps even endorses—the construction of the female as linked with nature. *Nightbitch* wants to be a ferox, an undomesticated, warlike, fiery thing that invites us "to step outside of the ordinary and into a world shared with animals, oriented to predation and networked with nonhuman codes of interaction..." (*Wild Things* 77).

In a summarized definition of the ferox, Halberstam states that, "The ferox or feral names an eccentric relation to desire, to becoming and unbecoming; it frames an orientation that turns away from the human and toward the animal; it offers approximate language for a wildness that exceeds human classification; the feral, indeed, is situated beyond human language..." (*Wild Things* 79). Signaling

the transformation of the mother, the novel portrays her as periodically losing the power of speech, or occasionally refusing to speak in human language. Just before her first snap, groggy and on the verge of breaking, the mother growls at the child: “Goooooo baaaarg EEEEEeeeeeep, she gargled, sleep-drunk, only half awake. She was trying to say something—*Go back to sleep*, perhaps—but instead the words came out in an undulating sweep of grunts and squeals, sounds she’d only ever heard long before, during her girlhood, from her grandmother’s husky as it begged at the door for dinner scraps” (7). Later in the novel, the mother and son communicate ferally through yips, barks, and grunts (84); the mother reacts to “a symphonic olfactory experience,” with “A *wag!*?” of her budding tail (37); and she notices heightened sensory abilities, delighting in “yet another canine development” (51). At the grocery store, she picks up a piece of cheese, “registering a depth of smell hitherto unknown to her—hay, smoke, honey, a fungal musk, a sweet-rotten tang” (50). Her dog-like, eccentric, feral desire then turns to fresh, raw meats, and she reasons that, “Yes, vegetables were very civilized. Dogs wouldn’t buy vegetables” (52), and so she buys huge quantities of fresh beef and roasts as a tame attempt to refuse civilization and domesticity.

Ferox Feelings

In *Nightbitch*, Yoder flaunts the received notion that women are not supposed to show anger and instead constructs a world in which anger does become the political property of women—and a source of creativity. Unabashedly grotesque, violent, snarky, nasty, and gross, *Nightbitch* revels in the mother’s feral feelings and spiteful behaviors. *Nightbitch* is a ‘Crazy White Woman’ (Cherry), and Yoder’s choice of monster—a feral, angry wolflike dog—is an apt symbol of bewilderment as a mode of protest against domestic tedium. Angry women are ugly women, and ugly women are “dogs” (or “bitches”), a slur Yoder seems to gleefully appropriate. However, the dog is also one of humanity’s most domesticated animals, and its usage in the novel illustrates that Yoder does not fully subscribe to a vision of utter feralness; *Nightbitch* ultimately does not forsake her family to run rampant in the woods. Rather, *Nightbitch* uses her rage as an instrument to gain power within the system she critiques, and not as a radical revisioning of motherhood as fundamentally wild.

Petty feelings of resentment, envy, and irritation motivate the mother’s various snaps throughout the novel, and in many sections, the mother’s ire is directed at ‘the father’ and other men as symbols of phallogocentric power. *Nightbitch* deploys a number of “weapons of the weak,” to borrow a phrase from James C. Scott (*Weapons of the Weak*), such as minor symbolic acts of spiteful resistance, vandalistic deeds meant to bother and annoy. During her first transformation,

Nightbitch takes out her anger on her neighbor, Stanley, a man she dislikes for being both a Republican and a grumpy old man, who is overprotective of his lawn:

She trampled the carefully planted petunias along the house [...] His fucking grass, she thought as she crouched by the side of his house and took a monstrous shit. She clawed the grass beside the pile and ripped up clods of turf, then went to the edge of the green expanse where Stanley had thrown fresh grass seed on the patchy dirt and kicked it onto the sidewalk. (89)

The nicely manicured lawns of idealized, heteronormative, suburban American domesticity thus become a symbolic target of Nightbitch's ire, which is further directed at the ineptitude of fathers (and the separation of the traditional gender spheres), often comically exaggerated in the novel. The father is portrayed occasionally as a cartoonishly insulting mansplainer and manbaby, who takes no responsibility for their shared child, preferring instead to check his phone and watch television. When the mother first snaps, it is primarily because the father does nothing to help with the insomniac child: "At first she did nothing, waiting for her husband to wake, which he did not, because that wasn't a thing he ever did" (6), and when she tells the father she is stressed, he tells her that "happiness is a choice" and that she just needs to plan her days better (21). Thus, Yoder does not construct the father as malicious or abusive, but as comically unaware. In many ways, he is made marginal to the story Yoder wants to tell; his presence is liminal and almost spectral. He occasionally comes back to the house to annoy and bother the mother, but then vanishes again to enter the world of jobs and money, away from the mother's domestic realm.

The father as a figure of power is symbolically replaced through Nightbitch's rage. Just before Nightbitch's first nightly adventure, when the husband returns home for the weekend, in lieu of his wife, he finds his child being watched over by an "enormous" dog that "reminded the husband of a wolf, with a thick coat of silver-and-black fur" (86). When the father asks the son about the mother and walks toward the dog, it "pulled back its lips to show its teeth, then snarled, quietly, from deep in its chest" (86). The mother's fury manifests, Hulk-like, as a transformation into a protector and threat to the father, who reacts fearfully, putting his "hands in the air as if he were being robbed" (86). Nightbitch challenges the phallogocentric symbolic order, and by embracing her canine transformation, she explores new ways of being in the world. When she wakes up the next day, Nightbitch "was awake in a way she had not been since her child was

born, maybe even before..." (92), and she refuses to apologize or explain to her husband why she left their son home alone or where she had gone the night before. She gleefully considers herself "the winner of all arguments" (94), because she had been right about her gradual transformation, a "beautifully, deliciously secret" fact about her life (95).

Thus, the figure of the father becomes the target of much of *Nightbitch's* critique, which is reflected in the tone of the text, which is dominated by resentment and an attendant sarcasm. The mother is at the end of her tether, and it shows in her inner monologues, which are often snarky and full of spite. Reflecting on her initial snap and its causes, she muses, "Yes, it had been June, and, yes, her husband had been gone the entire week. In fact, it was his twenty-second weeklong absence that year, a year in which only twenty-four weeks in total had passed, *not that anyone was counting*" (6, *my emphasis*). Although she generally insists that the father is a "good, stable, reliable husband" (99), who works hard to provide for the family, the tone often turns scornful and ambiguously sarcastic, undermining what the text says explicitly. For instance, she describes the husband in terms of "his engineer's reasonableness, his common sense, his strong hold on reality" (99), juxtaposed to her own emotionality and other stereotypically feminine inadequacies. However, more venomously, she interjects spitefully sarcastic comments. For instance, early in the novel, *Nightbitch* muses, "Her husband—bless his heart—had never done well with sleep deprivation" (18). Although dependent on intonation and inflection, the phrase "Bless your heart" in Southern United States parlance most often means the exact opposite and is mostly used in contemporary times to insult someone for being stupid or to mitigate an insult (Zenkov et al). In the context of this novel, it should probably be understood as synonymous with "fuck you," a phrase the mother is often on the verge of uttering, and occasionally thinks explicitly. For example, after enduring the father's presence in the home for a weekend, "she hugged him goodbye unenthusiastically and directed a psychic *fuck you* as he pulled from the driveway" (58).

Moreover, the novel's rage is not solely directed at the father as a symbol of the patriarchy but ambiguously towards the child as a construct and idea, the epitome of innocence and vulnerability. Initially, the child is the catalyst for *Nightbitch's* rage. As she struggles to get her son to sleep, "Her child's screams fanned a flame of dark rage that flickered in her chest" (7), and later, "she imagined punching holes in the plaster walls. How satisfying to summon the strength of her body, to feel her bones jar as her fist contacted the hard wall [...] Punch, punch, punch. An hour there, beside the boy. Punch. Two hours. Still awake" (44-45).

However, she never directs these violent impulses toward the child, instead transferring her rage to other objects and beings. For instance, Nightbitch kills the family cat (while in human form) as a form of ritual sacrifice. By sacrificing the previously beloved feline family member, Nightbitch opens up to the possibility of mothering differently by displacing her mother's rage from her child to the "beautiful creature" (48). Earlier, Nightbitch describes the cat as needy and "astoundingly idiotic" (48), and she resents her for being yet another thing she needs to take care of. "I would love to punt her like a football," she tells her husband, while blaming her brain fog on the cat infecting her with toxoplasmosis (124). The fact that she feels these violent feelings fills her with shame and a strange form of apathy that occasionally leads her to entirely ignore the child's needs—until she finds a way to use her canine fury to bond with her son. Instead, after her first signs of transformation, she starts to "play doggies" with the boy (80), allowing him to drink out of a bowl on the floor, giving him a collar and leash, a crate to sleep in at night, and feeding him raw meat, which the boy delights in, while the mother finds it liberating: "She *likes* the idea of being a dog, because she can bark and snarl and not have to justify it. She can run free if she wants" (83). It reminds her of the untamed power of childbirth, which almost made her husband pass out: "She can revert to a pure, throbbing state. She had that freedom when she gave birth, had screamed and shat and sworn and would have killed had she needed to" (83-84). Her embodied experience of canine wildness echoes the birth of her son and initiates a feeling of rebirth in the mother.

Significantly, other mothers are often the recipients of much of Nightbitch's transferred contempt, illustrating the limits and weaknesses of the uses of rage for a collective feminist ethos. Thus, the feminist potential of rage is undermined textually, as the mother's rage is redirected in problematic ways. For instance, the novel never fully rejects the stereotypical notion of women's rivalry with other women. This sexist conception of women comes to the fore in various scenes that feature Nightbitch's catty internal monologue, such as when she snarkily judges one of her friends' choice of children's names. Her reaction is motivated mostly by spiteful envy of the other mother's seemingly perfect looks and well-behaved twin toddlers:

As they crawled around, one might glance at their yellow ruffled diaper covers peeking from beneath each skirt, the name of each child embroidered on the butt, *Celeste* and *Aubergine*. She was the Ur-mommy, perfected and monumental, despite the fact she had named one of her children *eggplant*, but French. She didn't even

care! Not even an amount of shame for the embarrassingly vegetal name as she smiled and laughed and chatted..." (36).

While she later hires the 'Big Blonde' Ur-mother as her PR-agent, after discovering that her life is not as perfect as she thought, *Nightbitch* reserves much of her scorn for other mothers, especially those who seem to find motherhood easy or natural. Although *Nightbitch* alludes to the power of feral motherhood in community with other mothers, as when Nightbitch is invited to a multilevel marketing-party at the Big Blonde's house, which is just an excuse to "get together and drink wine" (120), the novel never fully moves beyond the focus on Nightbitch as a singular kind of woman as mother. Even when she desires community and conjures up fantasies about the other mothers as fellow dogs who leave her "an offering. A sign. A welcome" of dead critters at her doorstep (76), she continues to distance herself from them via sardonic sarcasm.

By turning to sarcasm, Yoder could be mobilizing a form of anger that is considered "safe" for women. As Britney Cooper states about black women and anger: "Black women turn to sass when rage is too risky" (Cooper 2). Although 'sass' and sarcasm are not the same, they function similarly as safe outlets for women and other minoritized communities, as forms of "weapons of the weak." Yoder's sarcasm is a white form of Cooper's 'sass'—in some ways a tame form of rage that comes out sideways rather than head on, much like the mother's nightly escapades as a dog. Both sarcasm and nightly wanderings are indirect and murky modes of refusal that never overtly critique or challenge—they sidestep an actual critique. And more importantly, the stereotypical sniping at other women because of misguided feelings of inadequacy undermines the possibility of communal liberation and empowerment through mothers' potent, shared rage.

Similarly, the sense of rebirth and awakening Nightbitch initially experiences only lasts until she goes out with old friends from the art world—friends who are mothers, who work, and who are successful artists. The friends' successes spark profound envy in Nightbitch, who feels trapped in domestic humdrum, and she expresses these emotions via snarky spite. Seething about her own failures relative to these other mothers, she thinks, "So these other women, these successful women, of course they discussed their many successes, swapping the names of gallery curators and art-world agents with heightening excitement, screeching with joy as one announced a new show, the other a new grant..." As the night goes on, the mother becomes increasingly furious and envious, and ultimately, she flips over the table "with a great roar" (146). Panting like a dog, Nightbitch "growled at the women, then barked and barked and barked, closing

her eyes and forcing the animal sounds from herself, her ab muscles contracting violently, her pelvic floor heaving..." (146). After stealing food from other customers on her way out, violently devouring another woman's burger, she flees from the scene in the restaurant and gives in to her ferox fury:

She pointed herself toward the nature preserve, toward the dark and comforting woods tucked right into the middle of town, to cry and snarl in the darkness beneath the trees, cry and muck about in the tendrils of stream that flowed towards her neighborhood eventually, if she followed it long enough, which was what she decided to do as she stood there letting the icy water numb her sore bleeding feet. She had lost her sandals somewhere along the way, and the water felt so good she let out a little guttural howl. (147)

By wandering into the wild, Nightbitch attempts to make herself feral, which, importantly, does not signify a state of being that is always already wild and free, but rather an undoing of domestication. Feralness denotes not inherent wildness but domesticated-turned-wild, *bewildered*, as Halberstam has it.

The Feral Art Monster

Ultimately, the mother's feral rage unleashed does not just lead to small spiteful acts and thoughts, it also rekindles her sex life, and most importantly, unleashes her creative powers, giving her access to what Halberstam calls "the epistemology of the ferox" (77). As mentioned above, she believes she becomes a better mother when she starts to "play doggy" with her son, creatively reinventing their humdrum lives as fanciful and delightfully weird, gross, and gory (83), embracing the indeterminacy of wildness (see Halberstam). But most importantly, echoing Chemaly, who states that "there is creativity in anger and much anger in creativity" (Chemaly 285), her canine fury sparks artistic ideas, and she designs a wholly new art project for the first time since becoming a mother. The project is a performance piece in which she hunts rabbits onstage, attacks the audience (as a feral, snarling dog-woman), and chases terrified onlookers out of the exhibition into what some describe as an Other world of bird women, while others end up in the world of Siberian "WereMothers," mythical wolf-mothers Nightbitch reads about in *A Field Guide to Magical Women* (235-36). The performance is otherworldly and hypnotic, tricking the audience into questioning their sense of reality and sanity; Nightbitch pours all her feelings about motherhood into the show, causing the onlookers to question everything. "Some audience members will report that it was then that they were chased into an inexplicable forest

area, so thick with leaves and vines that it was hard to decipher whether this was something the artist herself had constructed or in fact a time-space anomaly that had emerged just for the performance, only to disappear after that night” (235). The performance ends with *Nightbitch* giving her son the corpse of a rabbit she has caught and killed on stage, framing mother and son as a grotesque “Madonna and Child” (di Buoninsegna), inviting the reader to look at this “feral woman and her offspring with the still-warm body of a rabbit in his hands” (238). In other words, the novel claims that, “Here was a woman who knew that life unfolded through mystery and metaphor, without explanation, who looked upon her perfect son in front of her, a person she had made with her strongest magic, standing right there in a blinding spotlight as if he weren’t a miracle, as if he weren’t the most impossible thing in the entire world” (238).

Accused by some of child abuse and others of needless brutality, *Nightbitch* explains that “her work was meant to underscore the brutality of motherhood, how a child’s first act is violence against the woman who created it” (237), a somewhat inelegant meta-comment on the novel’s guiding theme as well. *Nightbitch* uses her anger not as “an act of radical imagination” to echo Chemaly (296), but to gain notoriety and to gently disturb middle-class sensibilities. However, she stops short of an all-out challenge to the system. Her rage may be crafted as an art form, to echo Butler (above), but ultimately, the novel upholds a certain kind of celebration of white motherhood and a glorification of the child, rather than offering a vision of a radically different world.

Although the mother’s transformative fury seems to ebb once it has found expression, *Nightbitch* eschews redemptive arcs and cathartic plots, ending with an image of the performatively feral mother as “art monster” (O’fill), a superstar with a ‘dazzling’ PR campaign that keeps her in the spotlight, keeps the spotlight on her contagious anger: “Her most devout fans wear pins that ask WHERE DO YOU GO AT NIGHT? with an image of a ferocious dog, mouth open, about to attack” (237). *Nightbitch* has become a success within the existing capitalist-consumerist art world, signified by the pins as commodities to be purchased by fans, but her world otherwise remains intact.

This lack of true transformation is linked to the way that feralness is constructed as Otherness in *Nightbitch*. Trying to make sense of her own feralness and transformation, she searches “the Internet as she listened to her husband and son move about the house. She started with *werewolf facts* and *real monsters*, then moved into *shapeshifting* and *shapeshifting Native American*, then *skinwalkers* and *Navajo witches* [...] she kept on, with *mother myth* and *madre perro* (thinking somehow the Spanish would produce more desired results)...” (100). Her own Anglo-American culture and heritage cannot explain her transforma-

tion, so she looks to other cultures and contexts, engaging in a subtle form of “eating the other” (hooks). Although writing about white desire for black bodies, bell hook’s discussion of wildness and primitivity resonates with *Nightbitch* as well. For *Nightbitch*, the primitive, decontextualized Native Other offers the “promise of wildness, of unlimited physical prowess and unbridled eroticism” (hooks 34), illustrated by the mother’s rediscovery of her sexual appetite coinciding with her transformative bewilderment. Thus, *Nightbitch* ties wildness and bewilderment to something Othered that is both portrayed as repulsive and desired—and as “primitive.” This other, importantly, is absorbed into *Nightbitch*’s own body, without outwardly changing it. After a nightly escapade, *Nightbitch* showers and washes off the infecting otherness: “She warmed her skin beneath the hot water and watched coarse hair and fur rinsed [sic] down the drain. Mud from her hands and feet. Bits of leaves and sticks from her hair. Even what she assumed were the points on her canine teeth chipped off, and she spat them into the murky water” (93). In this way, bewilderment is nothing more than an instrument, the transformation is mostly mental or spiritual, giving her personal empowerment through consuming feralness linked with the Indigenous Other. To borrow hooks’ words:

The point is to be changed by this convergence of pleasure and Otherness. One dares—acts—on the assumption that the exploration into the world of difference, into the body of the Other, will provide a greater, more intense pleasure than any that exists in the ordinary world of one’s familiar racial group. And even though the conviction is that the familiar world will remain intact even as one ventures outside it, the hope is that they will reenter that world no longer the same. (Black Looks 24-25)

Through her appropriation of the ferox Other, *Nightbitch*’s wildness attempts to offer “a way of being in the world differently,” as Halberstam states, and *Nightbitch*’s feral rage is, like wildness, “a provocation, a retreat from the conventional, an affront to the normal and the expected...” (*Wild Things* 11), but the provocation remains squarely within the realm of the imaginary. The commodified slogan from the fans’ pins, “Where do you go at night?” evokes a desire for willful bewilderment, which is more than just getting lost or wandering. As Fanny Howe states, “Bewilderment is an enchantment that follows a complete collapse of reference and reconcilability” (qtd in *Wild Things* 67)—a collapse the novel fails to fully accomplish, although it seems to desire it.

Conclusion

As both a historical and contemporary trend, rage works ambiguously. In *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (2018), Sarah Banet-Weiser explains these ambiguities, stating: “The most conventional definition of ‘rage’ is powerful, extreme, sometimes violent anger. But ‘rage’ is also used as a verb: one can rage *against* something one hates; or it can refer to something out of control, like a raging fire. And ‘rage’ can also mean something very popular, the latest trend: it’s *all the rage*” (Banet-Weiser 171, *emphasis in original*). In contemporary writings centered on motherhood and its attendant struggles and concerns, women express this ambivalent rage, and many turn to the speculative to recoup the monstrous mother trope, to find creativity and care in rage turned to outrage—or simply just to rage against the system.

Yoder’s novel seems to fit into a burgeoning feminist cultural *Zeitgeist*, and even before the novel—the author’s debut—was published, it was optioned for the screen (Vlessing), and, at the time of this writing, it is being made into a movie (directed by Marielle Heller). The ferocious rage in *Nightbitch* speaks directly to diverse American mothers, who—though for disparate reasons—like Yoder, are not in the mood, to borrow Ahmed’s phrase. They are ready to burst, seemingly on the verge of revolution. Mothers’ rage is all the rage.

To be sure, feminists’ and women’s anger is an old phenomenon, and as Ahmed states, “We could think of feminist history as a history of snappy women, a history of women who have leaked all over the place. What comes out of our own mouths might come out of a history; we have, as it were, other snaps behind us” (“Snap!”). The history of feminisms in the United States is in many ways the history of feminists snapping, of angry women fighting back (Traister; Chemaly). Rebecca Traister discusses the contemporary, post-Trump displays of women’s rage as a reemergence that has followed after a “feminist deep freeze” arising in the 1980s (2), a period marked by acquiescence, for which the Obama campaign motto of “when they go low, we go high” would be perfectly apt. Anger and rage were discouraged as useless and futile for change, whereas the 2010s and onward, as Chemaly argues, “is an era of angry women and women willing to make noise” (Chemaly 255). In *Nightbitch*, the mother finds a new epistemological frame for motherhood through art that transgresses and disturbs established boundaries, and although her rage is less than revolutionary, it reflects this larger social and cultural phenomenon. Despite the novel’s somewhat old-fashioned revival of second-wave feminist concerns about ensnaring motherhood, by reinvigorating these debates 21st century US-American society, Yoder does point to a flaw in postfeminist thinking: that we (feminists, women, and society) have moved beyond the need for a critique of the constraints of motherhood and

domesticity, that gender equality need not be fought for, as it has been achieved (McRobbie; Faludi). Specifically in the context of the detrimental effects of the Covid-19 pandemic's forced return to the domestic sphere for many working mothers in the United States, and elsewhere (Carli; Watson; Alon et al), Yoder's novel issues a warning: Mothers are furious, and they are snapping.

Thus, *Nightbitch's* critique is leveled against a vaguely felt oppressive, tedious domesticity and Yoder's heroine, aptly named simply 'the mother' throughout most of the novel, becomes a kind of 21st-century postfeminist individualist Everywoman, who embraces anger as a means of self-determination. However, ultimately, rather than invite us to think about women who are mothers in broader social terms, Yoder's critique of ensnaring motherhood is limited to the individual white woman as "art monster". Although the mother embraces the idea of the ferox and its liberating bewilderment, it is a self-centered liberation that perpetuates the idea of the sole artist as creator of her own happiness and personal success, and it is an instrumentalized wildness that relies, unwittingly perhaps, on the consumption of Otherness for its realization.

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Teaching Sylvia Likens (A Lesson)

Anne Bettina Pedersen

Author Statement

In “Teaching Sylvia Likens (A Lesson),” I combine research I have done on the 1965 torture murder of sixteen-year-old Sylvia Marie Likens in Indianapolis, Indiana, and narratives based on or inspired by the case with research I have done on needlework. The result is a short story that exemplifies Fiction-Based Research, a form of Arts-Based Research (ABR). ABR bridges the realms of art and academia and allows the artist/researcher to examine their subject in a practical and often sensuous manner, for instance through painting, embroidery, or music. In Fiction-Based Research, the artist/researcher merges their research with the writing of fiction, often for the purpose of making audiences feel empathy and to provoke them to think about a topic differently. My short story combines specific recurring elements and motifs I have noticed in other Sylvia Likens narratives, such as references to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*, thus creating an intertextual alliance with these texts. However, whereas these other texts tend to include graphic scenes of torture, my text is meant to be grounded in care and actively avoids recounting the real-life scenes of torture. Instead, I have chosen to focus on how the torturers’ use of a sewing needle to brand Sylvia Likens’s abdomen with the words “I’M A PROSTITUTE AND PROUD OF IT!” comments on the historical use of needlework, and embroidery samplers in particular, to socially condition girls and women. For that purpose, I have invented a grandmother who has fed Sylvia Likens information on needlework, has taught her how to sew, and has imparted moral lessons on femininity and sexual purity, thus echoing the tenets of Sylvia’s prime tormentor, thirty-seven-year-old Gertrude Baniszewski. The story shows how girls and women internalize misogyny and often pass it on to other girls and women. The short story appears as an interlude in my dissertation, along with a prelude, a postlude, and several other interludes, for the purpose of challenging traditional forms of scholarship, creating a varied reading experience, and commenting on my research.

Teaching Sylvia Likens (A Lesson)

Sylvia's in the basement now, lying on a pile of rags on the cold hard floor. She's naked, but they've given her one of the dogs' blankets (o o O the wooly blanket and the dog hairs scratch but she's able to cover her chest now no longer so naked naked naked for them to see for them to laugh at).

(She's in a world of water now the drip drip drip of the faucet drowns out all other sounds the stench of the singed newspapers still lingers from when they heated up the branding iron they left a 3 on her was supposed to have been an S for slave or scarlet woman she doesn't know there's no method to their madness)

She's been forgetting things, simple things, such as old nursery rhymes, and the alphabet, so she makes use of the rhythm of the droplets to practice her ABCDs. ABCD ABCD, over and over again, until her eyes close.

She finds herself at her grandmother's house. It's Saturday afternoon, and Grandmother's teaching her how to embroider. Cross-stitching is the easiest, Cookie, so we'll start with that and then move on to chain stitches, Grandmother explains. On the living room wall hang two schoolgirl samplers. Family heirlooms from the nineteenth century. Grandmother tells her that the one with the alphabet, cross-stitched in red embroidery yarn, the one that looks the oldest, the one where the cloth has turned brownish, is a marking sampler.

Girls were taught the alphabet so that they could sew initials onto clothes, Grandmother says. So, they learned how to sew *and* how to read and write. Isn't that clever, Cookie? Two lessons in one. Lessons in femininity. (Why can't she remember past D?)

Sylvia imagines a group of girls (a circle, a sewing circle), white middle or upper class girls, dressed in mid-nineteenth century garb (so elegant, so clean), sitting still and sewing in a parlor, their stitching following the rhythm of a grandfather clock (the sound dominating the room, sounding almost like drops of water drip drip drip falling into the sink at evenly spaced intervals how time passes how long has she been here how long till she gets to leave what's gonna happen to her).

Through the window of the parlor, she can hear boys, playing outside. The girls don't seem to notice; they appear to be deep in thought, each one lost in her own private space, an inner world of who knows what. Sylvia remembers concentrating on getting her stitches even (Don't be sloppy Cookie 'cause I'll make you do them stitches over), while listening to her grandmother talk.

(pick a color thread the needle tie a knot at the end poke the needle through the fabric sew a diagonal stitch left to right and then sew one right to left and then one just like it underneath and you just keep stitching little crosses and you get really tired 'cause it's just the same over and over again follow the pattern

Grandmother has copied from the sampler on the wall until you've made an A the first letter of the alphabet A as in animal A as in ... A as in that letter the woman wears in the novel the one she sewed real pretty and they don't like it say it's too pretty for a punishment)

Sometimes, she and Grandmother sew in silence, merely existing in the same room (together but cut off from each other's thoughts), but, mostly, Grandmother gives Sylvia lectures. She talks about the infamous Whore of Babylon and how she rode on a giant beast (a scarlet woman on a scarlet beast where did one end and the other begin) and was clothed in luxurious garments (purple and scarlet) and displayed her riches (gold gemstones pearls that name Pearl rings a bell and Sylvia sees an impish child playing in the woods the brook whispering watery melodies to her like drip drip drip).

She paraded herself like a slattern, says Grandmother, who only wears her single strand of pearls on special occasions – weddings, funerals, and the like (will she wear them at my funeral will she blame me for my death say I was a bad girl) – and frowns at women who make themselves up to catch a man. All they'll catch is disease. From spreading their legs, she says.

Sylvia nods in agreement, like a good girl, but inside her head, she imagines the Great Whore's dress, made of rich, thick purple and deep red velvet, soft to the touch, so soft (she's on the cold floor of the basement the rags underneath her papery now that they've dried soon she'll soil herself again). She imagines running her hands over the fabric, so gently, taking her time to feel the softness of the material, taking care not to leave her mark (she's so filthy) on it.

She wonders what games boys played back then and realizes it's the afternoon, and she can hear a group of kids yelling and kicking a ball outside. The basement is still dark, but a sliver of light is coming through the dirty windows. She looks at her hands (how filthy filthy filthy they are). Wash your hands, like a proper lady, before you sit down and sew, Grandmother always says.

She remembers her grandmother's papery, dry hands, and the sound they make (how can she describe that sound the sound of dry skin rubbing against dry skin like sandpaper kisses). During the winter, the hands crack and bleed from the cold weather and because Grandmother washes her hands so often (Cleanliness is next to godliness remember that Cookie no one likes a dirty girl).

Tiny cuts cover Grandmother's hands, and they open up and bleed when she sews. Sometimes, she leaves tiny drops of blood on the fabric. Grandmother, who is usually squeamish about these things (these sickening leaky human bodies) and once eyed a small period stain on Sylvia's light blue day dress with abject horror, has stopped noticing after her eyes have gone bad (her mind goes in circles and circles and circles again always coming back to ABC ... D ... and what

comes next). Don't slouch. Straighten your back while you sew, Cookie. Men like women with good posture, Grandmother admonishes her.

She's all in her head now, can't bear to feel her body, all bent out of shape now, but her mind feels slow, like wading through molasses (what comes after D she's drawing closer to the big black nothing she'll be swallowed up). The words on her stomach seem to glow red in the dark (it's dark now completely dark when did the sun go down how long has she been here), like in that story they read in school. With the impish child. Her mother was a sinner, and the child was her punishment.

Sewing is like storytelling, Grandmother explains. The needle is your pen. Your stitches tell a story about you – how good you are at sewing, which colors you prefer. Sylvia traces the letters on her stomach with her fingers. I AM A PROSTITUTE AND PROUD OF IT! (She remembers Grandmother telling her that the Great Whore's name was written on her forehead and it said MYSTERY BABYLON THE GREAT THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH)

With a needle, they stole her story, replaced her with this other girl, this filthy whore, and they stuffed her in the stinking basement, with the dogs, and left her to rot. She can smell herself. The sweet, sickly stench from between her legs. She has to empty herself right here, right where she's lying, because she has no strength left to move, to drag her body into the corner, away from the soiled rags. Not even the dogs shit where they sleep. She is more animal than the dogs.

Grandmother would be so ashamed of her. She always tells Sylvia to wash her hands before she sits down with her needlework. Cleanliness is next to godliness, Grandmother says, and she tells Sylvia to embroider these words below the alphabet she'd stitched on her sampler. Another lesson in femininity. How Grandmother would loathe this thing she's become. She feels the need to pee, but she can't hold it in. The warm liquid just pours out of her and onto the rags, making them damp again.

They have made a sampler out of her, of the skin on her stomach, made her dirty and sinful. They did what the Puritans didn't do to the sinner in that novel, the lady who embroidered her sin onto her clothes instead of her skin. The woman (what was her name she was a scarlet woman) could remove her mark of sin (there's a scene in the forest where she does this just removes the mark and then she's less sad and she's pretty again oh to be able to do that), but Sylvia can't ever get rid of her brand.

She wishes she'd sinned, like they say she did, and gone all the way with that boy in California. She's being punished for having opened her thighs and for letting him do things to her, but it never happened (but she'd wanted to she wanted

to feel his hands on her body his hands on her breasts his hands down there where it hurts so much now after the Coke bottle o o O). Now she'll never know what it feels like to make love. To him.

The boy in California (what was his name she's forgotten now but how can she forget something like that when he gave her her first kiss). The one who took her to the roller rink (she always feels so free when skating both outside with the wind in her hair and at the roller rink her body moving to the rhythm of the music oh how she misses music).

When she concentrates, she remembers putting on skates at the roller rink in California (she had to borrow some skates she left her own skates in Indy she remembers Rollerland on North Pennsylvania Street how she used to skate there such a long time ago now).

The skates are a tight fit (she's between two sizes) and smell of other people's feet. As she tightens the laces, she looks up and sees him smiling at her. She smiles back, with her mouth closed, the way she always smiles because of that darn missing tooth. He takes her hand, and they circle around the rink. Circles and circles and circles again. She's floating. He's her anchor, keeping her grounded.

Shirley Bassey's "Reach for the Stars" is playing (her favorite song did this happen or is she imagining it). I reach for the stars / When I reach for your hand / But stars tumble down / From the clouds to the land. They skate around and around and around. His hand is sweaty, and he holds on too tightly, but she doesn't care.

She wants time to stop, to freeze everyone else, so that it's just the two of them there, skating around the roller rink. He makes her slow down, come to a halt. He lets go of her hand and places his hands on her hips, draws her close to him. His warm body (she's so cold). He kisses her, gently, and his breath smells like peppermint (even though they just had hotdogs with mustard lots of mustard but this is her fantasy so his breath is fresh and not stale with mustard).

She feels his lips against her lips (and her lips are soft and not torn bitten almost in half as they are now her mouth a gaping bloody hole an o o O) and opens her mouth, and he does the same. She puts her tongue in his mouth, and he isn't shocked, and he doesn't call her a slut, like he did when they did kiss on the beach (her first kiss and he called her a slut maybe she's a slut maybe she deserves to be down here in the dark covered in her own filth).

What would he say if he saw the writing on her stomach? He will never marry her now. No one will. Just like Gertie says. She traces the letters on her stomach over and over again with her finger (circling the o o O in PROUD). She wishes she could erase the words or transform them into something else. But what

would she write instead? There's nothing she's proud of, except maybe having protected Jenny. Oh, but she hasn't done enough, and she hasn't gotten her out of the house, away from Gertie, and now it's too late. She's about to fall over the edge and into darkness.

The other sampler is a mourning sampler. You make those for loved ones after they've died, Grandmother says. Sylvia remembers the urn on the sampler and the writing (when this you see remember me) and the weeping willow with its exquisite rows of bright green leaves (what was that stitch she'd never gotten good enough to sew like that).

Weeping willow, will you weep for me? Or will I be forgotten down here (it's getting so dark now), unable to see the stars, reach for them, ever again? How will love find me here, how will his lips and his peppermint breath find me down here in the black hole (swallows me swallows me). Down here in the filth?

Contributors

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