Menacing Environments

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INTRODUCTION

1. In his recent book on the influence of the Nordic model abroad, legal scholar Michael A. Livingston dedicates a whole chapter to the marketing strategies that have been used to “sell” a particular set of supposedly distinctively Nordic values to the outside world, including—drawing directly from a branding document released by the Nordic council—“trust in each other and also, because of proximity to power, trust in leaders in society”; “new ways of thinking, focusing on creativity and innovations”; “sustainable management of the environment and development of natural resources”; “compassion, tolerance, and conviction about the equal value of all people”; and “openness and a belief in everyone’s right to express their opinions.” Livingston, Dreamworld or Dystopia?, 25–26.

2. See the World Happiness Report (WHR) website for more details on the methodologies used and for an archive of reports from recent years. Although there is nuance to the findings of these reports, the most widely publicized annual marker of the WHR is its yearly Happiness Index rankings, which are most often topped by a Nordic country. On March 19, 2021, the WHR published a press release that highlighted this, titled “In a Lamentable Year, Finland Again Is the Happiest Country in the World.” The rankings, then, serve as a kind of digest that simplifies the report for easy public consumption, a distillation that reinforces the utopian Nordic happiness narrative every spring when the WHR is released.

through the Power of Sisu. For a pan-Nordic approach to happiness, see Partanen, The Nordic Theory of Everything: In Search of a Better Life.


5. Brodén, Folkhemmets skuggbilder, 12.


7. The first two seasons of The Kingdom aired on the Danish public television service (DR) between 1994 and 1997. A planned third season was derailed due to the death of two of the lead actors of the series. More than twenty-five years after the series premiere, a third season, titled The Kingdom: Exodus, was announced by the production company Zentropa. The new season will again be directed by Lars von Trier and cowritten by von Trier and Niels Vørsel.

8. “Nordic ecohorror” is a term of convenience that I use to refer to media created by or dealing with the concerns of nonindigenous inhabitants of the Nordic region. Not only is horror a genre that is difficult to find examples of in Nordic indigenous cinema, but the nature mythologies and notions of individualism and community that prevail in the indigenous communities of the region are so distinct from those that prevail in nonindigenous communities—which bear the cultural imprint of modern Western anthropocentrism and humanism—that including indigenous media from the Nordic or circumpolar Arctic region would make it difficult to construct a coherent argument about the works discussed.

9. Meshwork is drawn from the eco-materialist theory of anthropologist Tim Ingold, who proposes the term as a descriptive designator for the complex web of ever-emergent, dynamic relationships of correspondence between living organisms, material environments, and tangible things. He proposes this term as a more vital and coresponsive image than the comparatively static imagery employed by the various “assemblage theories” adopted by eco-materialist theorists in the wake of Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory (Ingold, “Toward an Ecology of Materials,” 437). It also coincidentally resonates with the term mesh, which ecocritic Timothy Morton uses to describe the vast web of ecological interconnectedness that runs between things (Morton, The Ecological Thought, 15).

10. Alaimo, Bodily Natures.

11. The term natureculture was coined by Donna Haraway in The Companion Species Manifesto in 2003, in which Haraway shows how the joint lives of dogs and people effectively collapse the dichotomy between “nature” and “culture.” As Latimer and Miele write (“Naturecultures?,” 11), the term suggests “that nature and culture are not two different things, but a matrix of contrasts.” Thus, an “individual human body is not the
product of the interaction of nature (body, biology, genes) and culture (nature, education, technology),” but is instead a site of “natureculture.”

16. Sustainable development as a concept was popularized by the seminal 1987 UN environmental publication *Our Common Future*, a report on the environment headed by the former Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland that became a foundational text of modern multilateral environmental efforts. The report attempted to build on the emerging spirit of environmental diplomacy that was inaugurated with the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in July 1972. The prominence of both the Stockholm Conference and the Brundtland Commission Report in the history of multilateral environmentalism has effectively reinforced the Nordic region’s reputation for exceptional leadership in issues of the environment and sustainability.


22. This notion is borne out in a study of recent development patterns in Denmark, which that have chipped away at tracts of previously undeveloped land, leading Hojring to suggest that the vaunted tradition of Everyman’s Rights has been significantly curtailed, a situation that poses real-life impediments to accessing nature and runs counter to the Nordic environmental ideal of “sustainable development.”
26. Tidwell and Soles, *Fear and Nature*, 3; see also Williams, “Melodrama Revised.”
29. See the Klimabrolet website, https://klimabrolet.no/.
30. For the original manuscript version of the prose poem in the original Norwegian, see Munch, MM T 2367, https://www.emunch.no/HYBRIDNo-MM_T2367.xhtml.
31. Other young Scandinavian climate activists have taken similar inspiration from Munch’s expressions of angst and dread in confronting the image of a natural environment in pain. In response to the painting, the fifteen-year-old Norwegian climate activist Penelope Lea recently penned a text attributing her own concern for the environment to her first confrontation with the painting: “Now I stood with my eyes closed in front of *The Scream*. I opened them again. For a little while I felt like I was inside the painting. At the same beaches, tracks, stones, under the same pines, the sky. But now, everything I knew, everything I loved, screamed. It was at that exact time I first became a climateactivist [sic].” See Munchmuseet, “Environmentalist Penelope Lea Interprets The Scream,” https://www.munchmuseet.no/en/The-Scream/environmentalist-penelope-lea-interprets-the-scream/.
32. On the connections between Greta Thunberg’s panic-based appeal and the concepts of eco-fear and ecophobia, see Tidwell and Soles, *Fear and Nature*, 5. See also Alex and Deborah, “Ecophobia,” on the productive potential of eco-fear in indigenous worldviews.
33. Estok, “Painful Material Realities,” 130, emphasis added.
38. See Haeckel, *Generelle Morphologie*.
42. Clover, “Her Body, Himself,” 189. See also Williams, “Film Bodies.”
44. Ingold, “On Human Correspondence,” 11.
50. Gustafsson and Kääpä, *Nordic Genre Film*, 4; Soila, “Introduction,” 3; Iversen, “Between Art and Genre.”
52. One notable exception to this tendency is Alexis Luko’s analysis of the acoustics of horror in *Persona* and *Hour of the Wolf*. Luko, “Listening to Ingmar Bergman’s Monsters.”
56. Joyce, “Re-enchanting the Nordic Everyday.”

**One The Plague is Here**

5. Chen, *Animacies*, 2. Building on the notion of “animacy hierarchies” in the linguistic anthropology of Michael Silverstein, Chen has used the concept of animacy to “interrogate how the fragile division between animate and inanimate—that is, beyond human and animal—is relentlessly produced and policed and maps important political consequences of that distinction.” Chen points out that categories such as race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, disability status, and animality have been used in the service of an uneven distribution of biopolitical capital, forming a hierarchy that situates the healthy white male at the top as the most animate and “alive” form of life.
6. Stephen A. Rust and Carter Soles ("Ecohorror Special Cluster," 509) have argued against defining ecohorror narrowly as “those instances in texts when nature strikes back against humans as punishment for environmental disruption.”

20. As an aside, Claes seems to be anticipating the production reforms that would take shape in Denmark and the other Nordic countries with the introduction of the 50/50 production schemes and the restructuring of the national film institutes, changes that paved the way for a more genre-forward, commercially oriented—and often more gorily material—form of filmmaking in the region, as elaborated in Iversen, “Between Art and Genre”; and Gustafsson and Kääpä, *Nordic Genre Film*.

21. Moreover, the paracinematic discourse around *Epidemic* emphasizes the authenticity and documentary-like quality of *Epidemic*, as von Trier claims that the final shots depict an actor actually being hypnotized and becoming terrified for her life. See Bigelow, “Authorised Viewing.”

**Two Abject Ecologies**

3. Robinson, “Thelma’s Director.”
4. Carol J. Clover and Linda Williams have both described horror as a “body genre,” since it appeals directly to the bodily responses of its viewers, which it often does by violating the integrity of bodies on screen and bringing bodily fluids—particularly blood—to the surface. See Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws*; and Williams, “Film Bodies.”

**Three Men, Women, and Harpoons**

2. One recent indicator of the popular currency of the final girl trope was the publication of Grady Hendrix’s *The Final Girl Support Group*, a New York Times best-selling horror novel that imagines the kinds of lingering psychological aftereffects final girls would suffer in their lives after escaping massacre.
3. Nordfjörd, *Dagur Kári’s “Nói the Albino,”* 34.
4. Nordfjörd, *Dagur Kári’s “Nói the Albino,”* 34.
6. As Pietari Kääpä notes in *Ecology and Contemporary Nordic Cinemas* (11), “The connection between nature and national identity is not a ‘natural’ one or in any sense economically or environmentally sustainable. By this I mean that national identity—especially when it comes to nature—is a constructed notion that depends on a range of factors to do with the global economy, geopolitics, transnational cultural flow and domestic consideration.” In this sense, ecocritical approaches can play the crucial role of “denaturalizing” the connection between identity and landscape constructed by nationalist discourse.
8. See Mee, *The Pulse in Cinema*.
24. Iversen, “Between Art and Genre.”
25. Iversen, “Between Art and Genre.”
32. The film’s fixation on meat production industries and the implication of canni- 
    balism are just two of many references *Reykjavik* makes to *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* 
    and other low-budget American rural slasher films of the 1970s. On the environmental 
    politics of American rural slasher films, see Soles, “Sympathy for the Devil.”
34. Alaimo, *Exposed*, 3; Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 3; Barclay and Tidwell, 
    “Introduction,” 276.

Four Migrant Labors

1. According to the film’s credits, *Shelley* was shot on location in Copenhagen and 
    Villands-Vånga, a rural municipality in southern Sweden. The film never identifies the 
    fictional setting with place names, instead opting to establish a vaguely transnational 
    Scandinavian setting, with local characters using English while speaking to Elena and 
    a blend of Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish among themselves, a mixture that allows 
    the film to take advantage of Nordic coproduction financing models. Though he was 
    raised in Iran, Abassi has lived much of his adult life in Europe and is a graduate 
    of the Danish Film School who speaks fluent Danish. In interviews about the film, 
    he has spoken of having broadly Scandinavian cultural ideas in mind when making
Shelley and comparing his own Iranian frame of reference with his experiences as an outsider living in Scandinavia. See Hjort, “Debutanten.”


3. In a recent study, a group of social scientists studying recreation habits and spiritual beliefs in Denmark, Sweden, and Estonia argued that in these famously secular societies (supposedly among the least religious in the world), the experience of transcendence has not gone away but rather has been “relocated” from sites of organized worship to individual recreation in nature. The study also argues that these quasi-religious “experiences of transcendence” are no longer “confined to settings that we generally recognize as religious.” Instead, settings that are generally regarded as secular, such as undeveloped “natural” spaces like the forest or the seaside, “are permeated by transcendence in a way that we and our interlocutors easily recognize as like religion.” Thurfjell et al., “The Relocation of Transcendence,” 191–92.

4. According to Midttun and Olsson (“Eco-Modernity Nordic Style,” 205), when “realities are seen as not permitting pursuit of one without undermining the other,” in contemporary Nordic societies, “short-term socio-economic, rather than long-term ecological, sustainability prevails.” Though they acknowledge the difficult environmental realities that are obscured by the rhetoric of “sustainable development”—which has been central to Nordic environmentalism since the publication of the Brundtland report in 1987—Midttun and Olsson argue that “reconcil[ing] socio-economic and ecological sustainability in a pragmatic reorientation toward eco-modernity” may be aided by reorienting national climate efforts toward transnational Nordic environmental cooperation.

5. Just as environmental activists have critiqued the utopian rhetoric of eco-modernity and sustainable development as not being radical enough to meet the urgency of global climate change, ecohorror narratives such as Shelley have uncovered the hypocrisies of Nordic approaches to nature that are built on a paradoxical alignment of eco-sustainability and material privilege. One recent example of this critique of eco-modernity came after the UN Climate Conference (COP 26) in Glasgow, where newly elected Norwegian prime minister Jonas Gahr Støre argued that Norwegian natural gas reserves were not part of the problem but in fact could be part of the climate solution, especially when paired with the carbon-capture technologies now being developed. In response to Støre’s speech before the assembly, in which he shared his business-friendly, sustainable development approach to climate change, the Climate Action Network named Norway “Fossil of the Day” for November 2, 2021, writing that “Norway likes to play the climate champion but behind closed doors, new prime minister Jonas Gahr Støre is gaining a reputation as a fossil fuel cheerleader.” Climate Action Network, “Fossil of the Day 02 November 2021—Norway, Japan and Australia,” https://climatenetwork.org/resource/fossil-of-the-day-02-november-2021/.

7. Phil Zuckerman’s book *Society without God* is one example of this line of reasoning.


10. This culturally specific critique of Nordic privilege and its relationship to nature discourses in the region is what makes *Shelley* a more radically ecocritical film than Lars von Trier’s infamous and influential *Antichrist* (2009)—a film that *Shelley* bears some superficial resemblance to, with its lingering shots of menacing-looking trees and its emphasis on the psychological horror of rural isolation. Like many of von Trier’s films, the setting of *Antichrist* has an abstract, placeless quality. Though it was shot in southern Sweden, just like *Shelley*, its setting is meant to signify an ironically malevolent, cursed version of Eden. In *Antichrist*, it is precisely the emergence of “nature,” whether in the form of a talking fox or a matrilineal female connection to witchcraft that poses the threat, whereas in *Shelley* the malign quality perceivable in nature ultimately has more to do with human attitudes toward the natural world.

11. To cite just a few recent examples: the Swedish supernatural crime–horror television series *Jordskott* (2015–17), the British-Norwegian folk horror film *Sacrifice* (2020), and American director Ari Aster’s Swedish folk horror film *Midsommar*.

12. Livingston, *Dreamworld or Dystopia*, 93.


15. In vitalist body discourses, the robust, idealized Nordic body was defined with reference to the supposedly decadent or degenerate bodies of racialized others, including linguistic, religious, and cultural minorities with a long history in the region, such as Jews, the Sami, and the Finnish people. As a cult of health and physical/cultural rejuvenation, vitalism was informed by the moralizing, reactionary voices that sought to diagnose the cultural “sicknesses” of the decadent fin de siècle, including the Jewish-Hungarian physician and cultural critic Max Nordau, whose two-volume treatise *Entartung* (*Degeneration*, 1892–93) diagnosed a range of social and cultural ills of the age through moralizing case studies examining the “degenerate art” of figures like Friedrich Nietzsche, Oscar Wilde, and Henrik Ibsen.


21. Over the last two decades, the intersection of systemic environmental and racial inequality has been framed as “environmental racism” by scholars in many disciplines studying how pollution and industrial contamination affects communities of color, with most of the literature focusing on conditions in the United States. For representative examples see Waldron, There’s Something in the Water; Zimring, Clean and White; and Checker, Polluted Promises. More recently, scholars have turned their attention to examples in other contexts, such as Eastern Europe. Dunajeva and Kostka, “Racialized Politics of Garbage.”

22. See Kjellman, “A Whiter Shade of Pale.”


25. This sense that environmentalism is equated with Nordic identity also manifests itself in public attitudes toward migrant (and perceived migrant) communities in the Nordic region, with polls showing that a majority assume migrant communities to be less environmentally conscious than ethnically Nordic communities.

26. The domestic and international success of Norwegian Lars Mytting’s best-selling book Hel ved (translated into English as Norwegian Wood: Chopping, Stacking, and Drying Wood the Scandinavian Way) is one indicator of the association between Scandinavian identity and cultivation of outdoor skills like wood chopping and stacking. After the English translation received the British Book Industry Award for Non-Fiction Book of the Year, Mytting remarked that he was delighted and surprised at the success of the book outside Scandinavia: “In the beginning we said: ‘Well, it’s a book that could only have happened in Norway.’ But now the interest is all over.” Caroline Sanderson, “Mytting Emerges Chop of the Pile,” The Bookseller, May 31, 2016, https://www.thebookseller.com/profile/mytting-emerges-chop-pile-330723.

27. Alaimo, Exposed, 94.


32. Scovell, Folk Horror, 18.

**Five Folk Horror and Folkhemmet**

1. Discussing the recent popularity of folk and rural horror in such films as Midsommar, The Witch (dir. Robert Eggers, 2015), Antlers (dir. Scott Cooper, 2021), and the Icelandic production Lamb (dir. Valdimar Jóhansson, 2021), Erik Piepenburg writes that the genre has proven to be an enduring one: “As long as humans mess with Mother
Nature and keep regenerating old hatreds, horror will hold up its mirror.” Piepenberg, “Modern Times Call for Folk Horror.”


6. Still, as Erik Piepenburg writes in “Modern Times Call for Folk Horror,” there is a good reason why folk horror may lend itself more readily to being co-opted by conservative commentators: “Although there are rich folk horror cinema traditions around the globe, folk horror films have been mostly made by white men, often about white people’s anxieties.”


18. On the concept of blind space and how it has been utilized in cinematic horror—using Carl Th. Dreyer’s seminal horror film Vampyr as an example—see Bigelow, “Lurking in the Blind Space”; and Peirse, “The Impossibility of Vision.”

19. Scovell has described isolation as one of the key links in the “folk horror chain,” writing that isolation is a necessary precursor to the “skewed belief systems” that folk horror is preoccupied with. Scovell, Folk Horror, 18.

20. For representative examples of internet sources that seek to educate viewers on how to spot these “Easter eggs” in Midsommar, see Cameron, “Midsommar”; Harkness, “Things You OnlyNotice the Second Time.” The prevalence of such community-based decoding practices around Midsommar suggests that part of the spectatorial pleasure of watching the film is that its complexity could give rise to the type of interactive, internet-based fan discourse that Jason Mittell has called “forensic fandom” in connection with narrative complexity in contemporary American television. Mittell, Complex TV.
21. See Rydgren, “Radical Right-Wing Populism.”
26. This is similar to the way the setting in northern Norway justifies the blinding white light of the neo-noir *Insomnia* (dir. Erik Skjoldbjærg, 1997), a surprising stylistic choice given the typical preference for low lighting and expressive shadows in film noir.
27. As Ulrika Kjellman has written in an article appropriately titled “A Whiter Shade of Pale,” the Swedish State Institute for Race Biology (Statens Institut för Raskologi, SIRB) in Uppsala played a central role in visually constructing a white Nordic racial identity in the 1920s and 30s, an identity that was given scientific legitimacy by SIRB’s photographic publications.
28. For a detailed discussion of blackness in horror films, see Coleman, *Horror Noire*.
29. On the concept of implicit whiteness and its place in ethno-separatist movements in contemporary Scandinavia, see Teitelbaum, “Implicitly White.”
30. The English translations of the speech given here are taken from the subtitles included in the film. Much of the Swedish in other scenes is purposely untranslated, putting audience members who do not understand Swedish in the shoes of the American and British outsiders, who are frequently purposely excluded by the group members as they speak to each other in Swedish. That this speech—along with a few other ritual speech acts in the film—is translated indicates that all viewers are meant to learn some of the mythology of the commune, including this folk tale of the evil figure known as “the Black One.” The dance is thus meant to signify a life-affirming rejection not only of a particular figure, but more broadly, of darkness itself. The slippage between darkness and Blackness evident in the English translation indicates that white supremacy and folk religion are seamlessly woven together in the commune’s belief system.
31. As we have already seen in chapter 4, however, the life-affirming rhetoric of vitalism implicit in the elder’s speech has cultural-historical connections to protofascist ideologies of racial biology.
32. This connection to a gynophobic/ecophobic approach to landscape in folk horror helps account for some of the praise of *Midsommar* in conservative political circles. The connection between gynophobia and ecophobia is particularly evident in Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist*, which is something of an outlier in Nordic ecohorror in its depiction of the environment as truly malevolent. For an ecocritical reading of *Antichrist*, see Thomsen, “Foggy Signs.”
CONCLUSION

7. In Landscapes of Fear, cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has described the woods as one of the archetypal “landscapes of fear.” Fairy tales scholar Sara Maitland has drawn attention to the persistence of irrational fears of the forest into adulthood in Gossip from the Forest. And cultural historian Elizabeth Parker has approached the forest through the lens of the eco-gothic and dark ecology in The Forest and the Ecogothic.
10. For ecocritical readings of Jordskott, see Bruhn, “Ecology as Pre-Text?”; Souch, “Transformations of the Evil Forest.”
11. There has indeed been a recent scholarly interest in the intersection of privilege and guilt in the Nordic cultures, the most notable expression of which is the interdisciplinary research project Scandinavian Narratives of Guilt and Privilege in an Age of Globalization, headed by Elisabeth Oxfeldt at the University of Oslo. For one outcome of that project that speaks specifically to Norwegian environmental guilt, see Rees, “Privilege, Innocence, and ‘Petro-Guilt.’”
12. In her ecstatic communion with the woodlands, Tina’s approach brings to mind a newly en vogue Nordic nature ritual known as a skogsbad (forest bath), a term that has recently made its way into the Swedish lexicon and has become part of the strategies of Nordic self-branding abroad. See Visit Sweden, “Immerse Yourself in the Swedish Forest,” October 12, 2021, https://visitsweden.com/what-to-do/nature-outdoors/forest-bathing/.

37. Morton, Humankind, 103.
38. Morton, Humankind, 102.
40. Morton, Humankind, 103.
41. Morton, Humankind, 103.