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Chronotopes of the Anthropocene: Time and Space in Charlotte Weitze's *Den afskyelige* and in Christian Byskov's *Græsset*

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Abstract: This article applies Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope in a reading of two recent Danish novels that relate to the planet's transition into a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. The analysis of Charlotte Weitze's *Den afskyelige* and Christian Byskov's *Græsset* shows that, while the central chronotopical motifs in these novels differ considerably, the minor chronotopes combine in both works to form a major chronotope that is constituted by an experience of time passing at a pace beyond human control, connected to places that lack stability and permanence. However, in both texts, this experience is accompanied by recourse to the older chronotope of the idyll through retrospection into a pre-Anthropocenic past that was allegedly characterized by cyclical, slow, or stagnant time and by stable, unchanging places.

Keywords: Bakhtin; chronotope; Anthropocene; ecocriticism; Danish literature

In the year 2000, atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and biologist Eugene F. Stoermer proposed that human activity had altered the planet's ecosystems and climate so much that the Holocene had ended and a new geological epoch had begun, for which they suggested the name "Anthropocene". According to them, the transition to the Anthropocene had happened in connection with the Industrial Revolution towards the end of the 18th century. Later research (e.g. Zalasiewicz et al. 2017, 57) has instead tended to date it to the beginning of the "Great Acceleration" in the middle of the twentieth century, a period of very fast human population growth and of anthropogenic change to the Earth system that "is unprecedented in its rate and magnitude" (Steffen et al. 2015, 91).

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Although it has not been formally adopted by the International Union of Geological Sciences as a geological unit, the Anthropocene has received attention far beyond the natural sciences. This includes the humanities, where the ongoing rapid changes – which according to Earth-system scientists amount to a transition of the planet "into a state without analog in human history" (Richardson et al. 2023, 1) – are often seen as raising questions regarding the human relationship to space and to time.[1] How can one, for example, imagine the connection between seemingly insignificant, individual human actions on a local level and rapid environmental and climatic change on an entirely different, planetary scale? What does it mean that humanity itself has evolved into a force whose impact on the Earth system is as extensive as that of the nonhuman geological forces of the past? And how does the human perception of time change when geological processes that previously were perceived as happening imperceptibly slowly, over millions of years, now happen within the biological lifetime of human individuals? In the context of literary studies, one can ask in what ways the Anthropocene's altered human relations to space and time are reflected in literary texts.

In this article, I use the Russian literary scholar Mikail Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope, which he defined as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin 1981, 84), as a point of departure to explore space-time relations in literary texts that reflect a consciousness of human-induced environmental change on a geological scale. Bakhtin's theory is well suited to that purpose not only because it allows for the consideration of how literary time and space are interconnected, but also because of Bakhtin's claim that there is a "mutual interaction" (254) – however indirect – between the external world and chronotopes in literature: "Out of the actual chronotopes of our world (which serve as the source of representation) emerge the reflected and *created* chronotopes in the world represented in the text" (253; emphasis in original).

Bakhtin makes clear that new chronotopes historically emerged in literature when human perceptions of time and space changed. The development of agriculture was thus, according to him, the precondition for the emergence of chronotopic thinking in general and resulted in a "folkloric" chronotope, in which time is cyclical and "sunk deeply in the earth, implanted in it and ripening in it" (208) – a type that the "idyllic chronotope" in the literature of subsequent agricultural societies also came to be based on. Much later, the transition to a new, expanded world view in the early modern period enabled, according to Bakhtin, the emergence of the "Rabelaisian chronotope", which – even though it integrates the folkloric chronotope

1 For an overview of Anthropocene-related research in the humanities, see Horn and Bergthaller 2020.

to some extent – is characterized by "extraordinary *spatial and temporal expanses*" (167, emphasis in original). Even existing chronotopes undergo changes in accordance with real-world developments. Thus, for example, "destruction of the idyll […] becomes one of the fundamental themes of literature toward the end of the eighteenth century and in the first half of the nineteenth" (233) – obviously reflecting the real-world changes in both society and the nonhuman environment that industrialization and the rise of modern capitalism brought about. Chronotopes thus reflect societal and cultural changes from their time of origin, even though they may still figure prominently in much later literary texts that are produced under different social, cultural, and environmental conditions.

Although Bakhtin emphasizes that such connections between chronotopes *in literature* and the real, extra-literary world do not imply a simple realistic mimesis of and thus identity with the external world, this connection logically means, then, that out of the reality of the Anthropocene, chronotopes may emerge that had not existed in the Holocene – but also that older chronotopes can develop further in new ways. The importance of literary chronotopes in the Anthropocene may thus, on the one hand, lie in their potential to question earlier perceptions of the relation between time and space, or, on the other hand, in the ways that new chronotopes are developed and established that reflect the changed (and changing) conditions of the Anthropocene. In this article, I explore the extent to which this is the case in two recent Danish novels, Charlotte Weitze's *Den afskyelige* (*The Abominable*, 2016) and Christian Byskov's *Grœsset* (*The Grass*, 2020).[2]

1 Time and Space in Narrative

Bakhtin remains rather vague concerning the methodological implications of his theory for the study of literary chronotopes. The study of time and space in literature has been considerably refined in narratological theory as it has developed since the end of the 1960s, usually without recourse to Bakhtin. However, narratology has tended to focus mostly on time-related elements of narrative form, such as the chronological order, duration, and frequency of narrated events, and to somewhat neglect the study of "description", which according to Gérard Genette, "seems to suspend the flow of time and to contribute to spreading out the narrative in space" (1976, 7). Yet David Herman, adopting Bakhtin's term chronotope, points out that "the chronotopic profile of stories requires a rethinking of approaches that divide NARRATIVE and DESCRIPTION into two distinct text types" (2002, 266; emphasis in original).

2 These novels have not yet been translated into English. All translations from Danish in this article are my own.

In a similar vein, Marie-Laure Ryan states that description is "an integral dimension of narrativity" (2019, 64). "Postclassical" narratologists such as Herman and Ryan therefore prefer to use the term *storyworld* to denote "totalities that encompass space, time, and individuated existents that undergo transformations as the result of events" (Ryan 2019, 63).

While there is a certain overlap between this use of the term storyworld and Bakhtin's chronotope, the two terms are not entirely congruent. Bakhtin differentiates, for example, between "major" chronotopes that "provide the basis for distinguishing generic types" (1981, 250–251), and "minor" chronotopic motifs, such as "the motif of meeting" (97) or encounter, the road, the castle, the salon, the provincial town, or the threshold, and emphasizes that each of the major chronotopes can "include within itself an unlimited number of minor chronotopes" (252). The storyworld is a rather all-encompassing concept, such that it makes sense to, for example, talk of the storyworld of a particular novel. Bakhtin's minor chronotopes, on the other hand, do not constitute an entire storyworld by themselves, but rather function as parts of such storyworlds. But even his major, generic chronotopes (such as the idyll) are limited to storyworlds' spatiotemporal dimension and do not also comprise what Ryan calls "individuated existents that undergo transformations as the result of events", although chronotopes constitute a necessary precondition for the unfolding of the narrated events and transformations.

While the term storyworld thus seems somewhat too large-meshed to identify chronotopes within a narrative, the detailed conceptual framework developed for the analysis of narrative time and space in classical and postclassical narratology can appear as too fine-grained and too fixated on the formal side of narrative to capture what Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope covers. Herman, for example, despite his emphasis on the connectedness of narrative and description, suggests and discusses in his influential book *Story Logic* (2002) concepts for the study of time and space in narrative separately from each other, not in interconnection as in Bakhtin's chronotope. Even the postclassical narratologist Erin James, who in her book *Narrative in the Anthropocene* takes the current anthropogenic changes to the Earth system as her point of departure and argues "that narrative scholars require a new set of conceptual tools to identify, articulate, and track these changes" (James 2022, 14), keeps the study of time and space separate and suggests different "conceptual tools" for the study of each.

Compared with narratological approaches, Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope has the advantage that it does not separate space and time as analytical categories but considers them as inseparably interconnected. It also regards time and space not as objective, but as relative phenomena, that can be experienced in various ways – for example, by different characters in the same novel – which can make it difficult to study chronotopes by using narratological concepts that presume an

underlying order which makes it possible to assess the relation between discourse and story. This means that, unlike narratological approaches, Bakhtin's theory emphasizes the content of a narrative more than the form, as it is mainly interested in the *feeling* or *experience* conveyed by spatiotemporal constellations in literature rather than the specific form in and through which these constellations are narrated. While formal aspects such as narrative voice, focalization, or frequency play an important role in generating these experiences of chronotopes, Bakhtin's theory does not connect individual chronotopes to particular narrative forms, but rather suggests that chronotopes – and the experience of time-space interrelations they convey – can be narrated in many different ways.

In my analysis of Weitze's and Byskov's novels, I give weight to their content by focusing on the various chronotopical motifs contained in these novels' storyworlds, but I also draw on narratological concepts to consider the forms in which an experience of these chronotopes is conveyed. The questions I focus on are, first, to what extent these "Anthropocenic" novels, which are clearly inspired by a consciousness of planetary change on a geological scale, make use of and rework older chronotopes such as those mentioned in Bakhtin's essay, and second, to what extent the various chronotopical motifs in them can be seen as combining to form a new, 'major' chronotope that reflects the conditions of the Anthropocene.

2 State of Research

In ecocriticism, which is the field within literary studies most likely to address issues related to the Anthropocene, Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope has, so far, only been used occasionally. In a 1996 essay titled "The Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight", Michael J. McDowell recommended Bakhtin's work as a "starting point for an ecological analysis of landscape writing" (372), with the latter term here apparently implying much the same as the more common genre denomination "nature writing". While criticizing Bakhtin for devoting more attention to the temporal aspect of the chronotope than to place, McDowell still finds the chronotope useful for exploring "how landscapes are tied to narrative in literature" (376). According to him, the chronotope "binds together […] elements of story, geography and self, reminding us of the local, vernacular, folk elements of literature, which are rooted in place" (378). His hope is that the analysis of chronotopes will throw light not only upon "how we have viewed the relationship of humans and nature", but also on "some of the meanings of a narrative" (378). McDowell especially emphasizes Bakhtin's treatment of the "idyllic chronotope" (379) as relevant for ecocritical studies. The idyll is, according to Bakhtin, characterized by an inseparable connection between a delimited place and the life and events happening at that place. Human life and

nonhuman nature are here not separate from each other: the idyll is typically characterized by a "conjoining of human life with the life of nature, the unity of their rhythm" (Bakhtin 1981, 226). Time in this chronotope is marked by "an organic fastening-down", where generations follow each other but things essentially remain unchanged. The idyll thus creates a feeling of a "cyclic rhythmicalness of time" (225) connected to well-known and "unchanging natural surroundings" (232).

Fourteen years after the publication of McDowell's essay, Timo Müller argued in a similar way that, since chronotopic motifs connect "the human and non-human dimensions of the fictive world", they constitute "a particularly instructive object for ecological literary studies" (Müller 2010, 98). Müller expanded this argument later, proposing that chronotopical motifs such as the road are particularly interesting for a comparative analysis due to their appearances "across different cultures and historical periods" and due to their potential environmental implications (2016, 596). Like McDowell, Müller suggests a revalorization of "alternative chronotopes like the idyll, which preserve older conceptions of human (cultural) life and its relation to its spatiotemporal environment" (599). According to him, analysis of "nature-derived chronotopes and of texts that preserve and disseminate these chronotopes" (600) is important, especially considering the threats facing the natural environment today, and the same applies to the cyclical conception of time that, according to Bakhtin, characterizes the idyllic chronotope.

Bakhtin mentions the pastoral as the basic form of the "love idyll", along with other types of the idyll, such as "the idyll with a focus on agricultural labor; the idyll dealing with craft-work; and the family-idyll" (1981, 224). There has been huge interest in the pastoral within ecocriticism since the field's emergence in the 1990s, and McDowell's and Müller's commitment to a revaluation of Bakhtin's idyllic chronotope is therefore not surprising.[3] McDowell's essay was published before the notion of the Anthropocene gained prominence, and Müller does not directly engage with the Anthropocene's implications for literature and (ecocritical) literary studies. The first scholar to explicitly suggest connecting the Anthropocene with Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope therefore seems to be Mary Louise Pratt in a short essay titled "Concept and Chronotope". Here, Pratt argues that the Anthropocene itself is (or generates) a chronotope "with a multipolar time-space configuration" (2017, G170), through – if I understand her correctly – on the one hand, remnants of earlier times being still spatially present, and, on the other hand, an imagined look backward from a distant future in which the Anthropocene will appear as a distinct geological epoch in the sedimentary record. Pratt also claims that "[i]n the Anthropogenic [sic] chronotope, human and nonhuman agency are no longer distinguished, visually or analytically" (G171). However, what exactly characterizes

3 For an overview of ecocritical research on the pastoral, see Gifford (2020).

the specific connection and experience of time and space in such an Anthropocene chronotope, does not become clear in her essay.

Recently, researchers in Scandinavian studies have begun to draw connections between theories of the Anthropocene and the chronotope. Philipp Wagner, in a book on "chronotopic insularities" in Scandinavian literature covering works from the late 19th to the early 21st century, thus discusses Danish writer Hanne Marie Svendsen's novel *Guldkuglen* (*The Gold Ball*) from 1985 as a precursor to later "Anthropocene novels" (Wagner 2022, 186–191). Wagner finds that *Guldkuglen* applies several narrative strategies, such as time travel and time leaps, that ecocritical scholar Ursula Heise has suggested as variants of a "deep-time storytelling" (Heise 2019, 283) and that are apt to narrate the Anthropocene's huge timescales. Wagner thus combines Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope with narratological analysis.

In a recent article that also takes the Anthropocene as a point of departure, Judith Meurer-Bongardt analyses Finland Swedish writer Maria Turtschaninoff's young adult trilogy *Röda klostret* (*The Red Monastery*, 2014–2018). She merges Bakhtin's chronotope with Michel Foucault's terms heterotopia and heterochrony, coining the new term "heterochronotopy", which according to her means "meshes of spatial, temporal, and personal characteristics that structure the narrative" (2024, 103).[4] Meurer-Bongardt puts special emphasis on how such heterochronotopies "challenge normative (time) structures"[5] (102) that, for example, can be characterized as anthropocentric or androcentric. It remains somewhat unclear what Meurer-Bongardt means by "personal characteristics", but it seems to involve "agency"[6] (121) of some kind. This appears to move heterochronotopies conceptually closer to storyworlds in Ryan's sense than to Bakhtin's chronotope, which also lacks the norm-critical perspective that forms an integral part of Meurer-Bongardt's approach.

Regarding Weitze's *Den afskyelige* and Byskov's *Græsset*, no previous research connecting Bakhtin's concept with the notion of the Anthropocene exists. While some earlier studies of these novels relate to the Anthropocene, none of them uses Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope. Furuseth (2021) discusses representations of the loss of snow and ice in *Den afskyelige* against theories of ecological mourning. In an econarratological reading of the same novel, Flinker (2022) focuses on how the text's narrative features facilitate the reader's mental construction of its storyworld. Bruhn and Salmose (2024, 66–71) provide a brief analysis of how climate science is represented and transformed in this novel's fictional storyworld. *Græsset* has so far only been analysed by Flinker (2021, 137–146) based on variants of postclassical

4 "flätverk av rumsliga, tidsliga och personliga egenskaper som strukturerar berättelsen".

5 "utmanar normativa (tids)strukturer".

6 "aktörskap".

narratology (cognitive narratology and econarratology) and with a focus on narrative traits that can enable or impede the reader's immersion into the novel's storyworld.

The analysis provided in the following sections is thus the first to apply Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope in a reading of these two novels. My main criterion for selecting these works was that both are recent texts from Scandinavian literature that are obviously written against a background of environmental and climatic change on a geological scale and thus can be said to reflect the new conditions of the Anthropocene. In doing so, *Den afskyelige* draws on traditions from the gothic novel, while *Grœsset* can be said to be more indebted to the science fiction genre. Thus, neither novel can be categorized as realist fiction. However, genre was not a criterion for selection, since the question of which genres or literary traditions are best suited for the Anthropocene has already been debated extensively and without a consensus emerging.[7] Also, even though major chronotopes, according to Bakhtin, can be defining for entire genres, my aim is not to posit a new "Anthropocene genre" in literature and thus to repeat the slightly older debate about whether climate change fiction or "cli-fi" constitutes a new genre or rather comprises texts from a huge variety of genres.[8] Instead, my focus is on the spatiotemporal experiences that are connected to the specific chronotopical motifs in these two novels, and the extent to which these can be seen to combine into major chronotopes to reflect the changing conditions of the Earth system in the Anthropocene.

3 Den afskyelige

Charlotte Weitze's novel *Den afskyelige* has a first-person narrator, a twenty-one-year-old woman called Heidi. Heidi's narration begins seven years after her sister Angelica, who is two years older than her, was seriously injured in an accident at a skiing resort on the mountain Klaftafjeld. This was "the country's last skiing accident" (2016, 8),[9] since, as Heidi explains, skiing has come to an end due to accelerating global warming. It is not possible to pinpoint the geographical location of the place where Heidi lives. It is north of the Alps (13) and has cultural and geographical features typical of Nordic countries (such as a strong welfare system, certain types of food, a glacier, and fjords), but can be identified neither with Denmark nor with Norway. Heidi works as a cleaner at the hospital where her sister Angelica still lies without a chance of recovery. One day, Heidi meets another patient there, the

7 For a recent overview of this discussion, see Hennig (2021).

8 On this question, see Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2019.

9 "landets sidste skisportsulykke".

environmental activist Kenneth, who suffers from excessive sweating. Kenneth and Heidi fall in love and move to a drained fjord, a productive agricultural area where Heidi grew up and where her parents still live. Kenneth and Heidi start building an eco-house there and try to live as environmentally friendly a life as possible to try and slow down climate change. However, one day, the dam protecting the drained fjord collapses and the area is flooded, followed shortly thereafter by another flood, caused by the melting polar ice sheet. Heidi escapes to Klaftafjeld and discovers Kenneth's dark secret: that he is partly descended from a group of yetis who have sought refuge from global warming on the mountain.

Which chronotopes, then, are present in *Den afskyelige*? It is significant that even in the novel's first sentences, Heidi introduces three of its most important places: "Her fra sygdomsbjerget, det hvide hospital, som rager op over byen, er der udsigt ned til husene, vejene og ud over havet. Til den anden side kan man se helt til den inddæmmede fjords brune marker og de grå Klaftafjeldtinder" (5). It is fair to say that each of these three places – the hospital in its urban setting, the agricultural area inside the drained fjord, and Klaftafjeld – functions as a chronotopical motif, but in different ways.

The drained fjord, with its gardens and agricultural fields and "where the soil is unbelievably nutritious"[10] (90), creates associations with the pastoral and with georgics, which both are comprised by what Bakhtin calls the "idyllic chronotope", where life is intimately bound to natural rhythms and essentially remains unchanged.[11] However, there is a strong sense in the novel that this idyll is under permanent threat. As Heidi explains, her ancestors who moved into the drained fjord many generations ago as the very first farmers there, already had a boat on their roof in case of a breach of the dam, and Heidi thinks: "De stivnede nok, hver gang de hørte noget, der bare kunne minde om en brusen i det fjerne" (93). In a similar way, anticipating catastrophic flooding, Kenneth builds their new house inside the drained fjord in such a way that it can float (136). "Hvornår kommer vandet?" (33), Heidi asks as a child. Later, as a grown-up, Heidi experiences during a walk how the fjord's prehuman past still is present in the form of material traces of maritime species, and this serves for her as an uncanny reminder of the fragility and riskfulness of the human presence there: "Fjordens gamle skaller knaser under sandalfødderne. Nogle er pivåbne, og andre er lukkede, som om de stadig håber på, at havet kommer tilbage. Jeg gyser i varmen" (93). The "idyll" we see here is thus,

10 "hvor jordbunden er utrolig næringsrig".

11 Flinker considers the drained fjord an example of the "wilderness trope" (2022, 98). However, due to it being an agricultural area completely adapted to human needs, this place cannot be read as wilderness in the sense of a place with no permanent human inhabitation and that is little or not at all shaped by humans.

contrary to Bakhtin's classical idyll, not characterized by an imagined permanence and unchangeability, but rather by its fragility: by the expectation that this place will not remain hospitable for humans (or human-yeti hybrids), and that horticulture and agriculture there constitute only an interlude before the water returns. It is important to note that while risk here, as in sociologist Ulrich Beck's definition, is the anticipation of a potential *future* catastrophe (Beck 2009, 292), in the novel, it is always also connected to the past. This obviously applies to Heidi's past CO_2 emissions, which give her nightmares due to their negative consequences for the future climate (140). Another central, recurrent motif in which past, present, and future collide is that of a willow in Heidi's parents' garden. According to Heidi, this tree had been planted by one of her ancestors, who also was the first settler in the drained fjord, and Heidi has pleasant childhood memories of climbing and hiding in the tree. Accelerating warming, however, made the tree sick and it was felled by Heidi's father (31–32), with the stump remaining in the ground where it stood (174), which functions as a reminder both of the pre-climate-changed past and of the impermanence of the "idyll" humans have tried to establish for themselves. It is thus possible to read the drained fjord as an allegory of the Holocene, the geological epoch that allowed humans to develop agriculture and to – at times – feel idyllic permanence, but where conditions now, due to anthropogenic changes to the climate and environment, escape human control to such an extent that the continuation of human life as it was in the Holocene seems imperilled.

The novel's other central place, Klaftafjeld, appears in part as a contrast to both the drained fjord and the urban hospital. It constitutes a kind of wilderness that – despite the touristic infrastructure built on it – is not as massively transformed by human activity as the drained fjord. As Heidi recounts, the mountain was previously used as a recreational area for humans, but now it has been reclaimed by "nature" after the end of skiing there. Its association with traditional notions of wilderness is also strengthened by Klaftafjeld serving as a refuge for nonhuman species fleeing from climate change, such as the yetis. Heidi's father repeatedly utters the belief that as long as there still is white ice on such mountains, there is hope for the future (16; 94), a belief that Heidi adopts (157) and that even the yetis seem to adhere to (300). The owners of the ski resort on the mountain promise that "there will always be snow on Klaftafjeld"[12] (20), and they sell snow crystals encapsulated in plastic that are supposed to keep for an "endlessly long" time (17).[13] However, it is clear that Klaftafjeld too is subject to continuous deterioration and decline, with the glacier withdrawing rapidly and the yeti population shrinking. That this is not an untouched, sublime wilderness but rather a decaying place becomes apparent for

12 "Der vil altid være sne på Klaftafjeld".

13 "uendeligt længe".

Heidi during her refuge there: "Naturen er stille, Klaftafjeld er et ensomt sted. Der er kun vinden i trærne, kun regndråberne, der hænger fra grenene, en doven flue og mit eget åndedrag" (243). Klaftafjeld is thus, through the ongoing, clearly detrimental changes, connected not to the timelessness associated with Bakhtin's idyll, but rather to a feeling of time remorselessly advancing towards an inevitable end that bears clear associations with death.

This is different in the third important chronotopical motif in *Den afkyelige*, namely the hospital. Located on a higher elevation inside the city, it not only represents human civilization in general, but also the modern welfare state, and with it, the human attempt to, so to speak, stop time and make life as safe as possible. Interestingly, Heidi describes the hospital's internal arrangement as circular: "Når man går gennem hudafdelingen, kommer man forbi intensive og plejeafdelingen. Herfra kan man se ned til fødeafdelingen. Sådan går det i ring" (68). It is a place where life is preserved and death prevented, or at least postponed: "På hospitalet sørger de for, at folk ikke dør. Om de så skal tvinge dem til at holde sig i live" (278). For Angelica, who is kept alive by the hospital's medical technology, time indeed stands still. In her mind, she remains in a happy moment from before the accident happened – but she dies the day she realizes that time actually has progressed (27). The connection between place and time at the hospital thus matches the circularity and unchangeability of space characteristic of Bakthin's idyllic chronotope – yet not in the form of the pastoral or georgics, but as a modern, advanced welfare system. However, with accelerating climatic and environmental change impairing human health more and more, the hospital also needs to be extended all the time; Heidi describes how one or two new floors are added to it every single year (11). Thus, while it may seem as if time has stopped, it still progresses here, and in the catastrophic flooding towards the novel's end, even the hill that the hospital is on ends up under water. This outcome can be read as a demonstration of the futility of human attempts to make time stand still and to provide 'idyllic' permanence under the conditions of the Anthropocene.

Taken together, the three chronotopical motives of the drained fjord, the mountain, and the hospital convey an experience of perpetual and accelerating change and of the impossibility of reaching some form of stable state. This does not prevent the main characters from desiring precisely this stability. Heidi wishes "that one could restore it all"[14] (46) as it was before the most dramatic changes set in, and Kenneth thinks it would be best to "restore nature, as it looked 20 years ago,"[15] since "back then, there was harmony"[16] (68). This imagination of a past idyll also motivates

14 "at man kunne genoprette det hele".

15 "genoprette naturen, som den så ud for tyve år siden".

16 "Den gang var der harmoni".

Kenneth's and Heidi's project of living ecologically and climate-neutrally, which constitutes an attempt to gain control and to slow down or even stop the accelerating changes. However, as Heidi realizes early in the story, "*the gap between what one wishes to do and what one actually can do is too large*" (51, italics in original).[17] Later, after the flood catastrophe has set in, she seems to accept that she cannot really mitigate the ongoing changes: "Det, jeg har gjort, betyder så lidt i forhold til det store billede" (301). The idyllic chronotope thus is still present in this novel, although only in the characters' imagination and desires, since the actual progression of time and the changes it wreaks on all the central places in the novel turn out to be unstoppable.

At the end of the story, Heidi, apparently the sole human survivor of the flood, is on the top of Klaftafjeld, which now is the only piece of land still protruding from the sea. Interestingly, she has a paradoxical experience of time here: "Det er, som om tiden på én gang står helt stille og samtidig går utrolig hurtigt" (318). That time "stands entirely still" can here be read as if, with the devastating flood bringing to an inevitable end all attempts to prevent catastrophic climate change, the feeling of time running too fast has also ceased and Heidi can finally come to rest. The way that time simultaneously appears to run "unbelievably fast" may imply that with the transition to an entirely different, non-hospitable, post-Holocene environment towards the novel's end, a new, geological time takes over and supersedes human-biological time – a time in which nonhuman forces create entirely new conditions, including the erasure of the places that enabled human thriving in the Holocene.

4 Græsset

The idyllic chronotope also shines through in Christian Byskov's *Græsset*, albeit in slightly different ways. This is a rather complex work, and it is hard to summarize it in a satisfying way. The novel is narrated in the third person, but mostly focalized through three characters named Karen, Kirk, and Keel, who all work at Ancion, an agricultural-industrial research centre specializing in the genetic modification of crops, but where experiments involving the genetic modification of animals are also conducted. Another central character through whom parts of the narration are focalized is a squid named Io, whose genes have been modified in such a way that, instead of losing memories as she gets older, she should be able to recollect more and more memories, even from the earliest stages of her life (49). The novel is set in a world of increasing anthropogenic environmental and climatic change on a planetary scale, which becomes clear through, amongst other things, the narrator's comments that it has been raining all the time during the past years (13), Kirk's

17 "*der er for stor afstand mellom det, man ønsker at gøre, og det, man rent faktisk kan gøre*".

knowledge about the global scarcity of phosphorus as a resource for agriculture (93), and the fact that bees seem to be extinct (40 and 173).

The novel's most central place, the Ancion centre, is located underground and intended to constitute a kind of utopia, as its founder makes clear in a promotional video:

> Ancions bygning har alt i sig. Den er et gnidningsfrit rum, her findes ingen forhindringer. Vores medarbejdere behøver aldrig at gå ud, de kan få alt hvad de behøver her og mere til. Alt fra tilfredsstillelsen af deres basale behov til hjælp med mere komplekse, eksistentielle problemer. […] Ancion er derfor selvforsynende, bygningens produktion og de omkringliggende landarealer danner en biotop i landskabet. (15)

The founder also compares the building to "an organism that transports matter through itself" (15).[18] Despite this alleged organic closedness, which could link Ancion to the idyllic chronotope, it is also a place that is constantly and automatically changing, based on algorithms, as the founder explains: "Rummene ommøbleres og redesignes automatisk døgnet rundt. […] Dette sker for konstant at holde Ancions medarbejdere skarpe, inspirerede og fulde af sanseindtryk til deres arbejde" (15).

However, this perpetual change seems to have detrimental effects on the employees, including by causing an increasing feeling of disorientation. Kirk in particular is often seen meandering around the corridors of Ancion, struggling to recognize where he is, since the colour of the walls, the furniture, and the lighting are all changing so often: "Han kan ikke fordrage den intuitive omskiftelighed. Den flimrende atmosfære får hans nerver til at føles porøse" (30). But the other human characters also experience the shifting environment of Ancion as disorientating, especially when they are moving through its corridors.

A considerable part of the story takes place in these corridors, and the chronotopical motif of the "road" – on which characters move from one place to another – can thus be said to be strongly present in *Græsset*. As is typical for this motif, according to Bakthin, it often appears in combination with another chronotopical motif, that of the meeting. When Kirk, Keel, and Karen occasionally encounter each other inside Ancion, for them, these meetings appear as unplanned and thus as a "coincidence"[19] (56 and 64). However, it seems these encounters in truth are steered by the algorithms that read the employees' minds, and thus not coincidental at all – even though their meaning is not directly apparent to the humans, for whom these meetings do not diminish, but rather increase, their sense of disorientation. It is important to note that this disorientation is related not only to space, but also to time. One meeting between Kirk and Karen appears, to Kirk, to

18 "en organisme der transporterer stoffer igennem sig".

19 "tilfælde".

have only lasted a few hours, but it turns out to actually have been two days (69). Karen also feels that "time has run away from us" (77).[20] Connected to this spatial and temporal disorientation, the human characters also suffer from, as Keel calls it, "failing memory" (97).[21] Unlike Io, whose remembrance increases, the humans gradually lose their ability to recollect even the most recent things, until only memories of childhood remain, as the narrator makes clear: "I takt med at menneskene glemmer, synker de længere og længere tilbage i deres minder, til da de var unge eller børn" (159).

For its employees, Ancion thus does not appear as an "idyll with a focus on agricultural labour" (Bakhtin 1981, 224), in Bakhtin's words. Instead, it seems that it is not only the humans who are suffering, but also the nonhuman surroundings of Ancion. Kirk, for example, perceives the grass on the croplands as "a huge living body that in pain tries to shake something off itself" (17).[22] This suffering indicates that there can be no idyllic permanence at such a place. While the genetic modification of the nonhuman lifeworld provides short-term advantages for agricultural production, the long-term success of these modifications appears in *Græsset* as far from certain. The risk of losing control over the genetically modified organisms requires, therefore, "that people like Kirk sit in small, closed offices and stare into microscopes all day and night to find solutions to potential, not yet existing catastrophes" (33).[23] However, due to his disorientation and loss of memory, Kirk is not able to take action when he does indeed discover a detrimental mutation of the grass species that constitutes Ancion's most important crop. The grass starts to become "sticky", with this effect also spreading to the inside of Ancion's building, making everything "sticky" and, at the novel's end, leading to a complete collapse of the algorithms and thus of the system Ancion is based on. Ancion can therefore be read as an allegory of the Anthropocene, where stability has become impossible due to anthropogenic changes to the nonhuman environment that spiral further and further out of human control. As Kirk states quite clearly: "Der er bare så meget der er uden for vores kontrol" (41).

Interestingly, even though the permanence of the idyllic chronotope appears impossible to achieve in *Græsset*, the human characters feel a growing desire for precisely such an essentially unchanging state of being, in which both space and time remain stable. Kirk thus explains: "jeg savner at kunne sove og stå op og stole på at verden stadig er som før jeg faldt i søvn. […] Noget ægte, noget man ved hvad er. At

20 "Tiden erløbet fra os".

21 "svigt i hukommelsen".

22 "en stor levende krop der i smerte forsøger at ryste noget af sig".

23 "at folk som Kirk sidder i små lukkede kontorer og stirrer i mikroskoper hele dage og nætter for at finde løsninger på mulige, endnu ikke eksisterende katastrofer".

alting ikke ændrer sig hele tiden rundt om én, at tiden føles stabil" (40). Karen also experiences a profound loss of control and "only wishes that it all would stop" (107).[24] The aim of the experiment with Io is, according to her, to "show how one can get time to stand still" (125).[25]

Connected to this wish for time to stagnate is a desire to unite with nonhuman "nature". Kirk feels this desire strongly in view of the grass outside of Ancion's building: "Han vil være i dets favn, han vil mærke det som sin mors lyse stemme når hun synger godnatsang for ham. Krammes af alle stråene på en gang" (114). For Keel and Karen, the prospect of entering complete unity with this grass appears likewise as both highly attractive and associated with childhood memories (141–142) – it seems to convey to them an experience that is very similar to being in the womb. When, towards the story's end, Karen is completely entangled in the grass, she feels that she has reached the desired state where "time stands still"[26] (175) – and it is only now that she can relax completely. Even Io has a similar experience in the novel's very last chapter, where she moves through a garden with lots of plants and insects and into a cosy little house where no humans are present and where time seems to have been standing still for quite a while. Since Io "never has been in a house like this" (178),[27] the experience can be read as a dream, or – more likely – as a "memory" that Io "recovers" due to her changed genes. Since this memory cannot originally belong to the squid, this would mean that the humans who genetically altered Io have transferred their own memory of and strong desire for such an idyll to her in the process.

At the novel's end, a seemingly complete unity of humans and "nature", as well as of place and time, in an unchanging, non-progressing state is achieved through the slowdown enforced by the stickiness that spreads from the grass. As the narrator explains: "Og sådan er det i hele domicilet, alt går imod et stillestående liv, uden fremskreden udvikling, bare kørende ind i sig selv i spiralformede bevægelser" (172). This resembles quite closely the nondifferentiation and lack of change that, according to Bakhtin, characterized the ancient folkloric chronotope, that in turn strongly influenced the later idyllic chronotope. One could thus argue that the end of *Græsset* sees the re-establishment of the folkloric or the idyllic chronotope. This allows humans and nonhumans alike to evade the feeling that time is remorselessly progressing and places are perpetually changing, and to recover an (imagined) earlier, idyllic state characterized by stasis of place and cyclicity of time. However, the folkloric or idyllic chronotope is here re-established by a "nature" that is now

24 "bare ønsker at det hele skal stoppe".
25 "vise hvordan man kan få tiden til at gå i stå".
26 "Tiden står stille".
27 "har aldrig været i et hus som dette".

beyond human control and without leaving any prospects for future human development. While for the novel's characters, this is experienced as a return to a sort of prenatal, undifferentiated, and desirable state, in its stasis and lack of any future, it arguably resembles death.

5 Conclusions

The analysis of *Den afskyelige* and *Græsset* shows how, in these two novels from the Anthropocene, a variety of chronotopes function as "the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events" (Bakhtin 1981, 250). While in *Den afskyelige*, meaning is created through the juxtaposition of the three chronotopical motifs of the drained fjord, the mountain, and the hospital, in *Græsset*, the chronotopes of the road and the meeting form the basic framework of the narrated story. The central chronotopical motifs in the two novels thus differ a lot, as does their narrative structure. In *Den afksyelige*, chronotopical experience is mostly conveyed through the narrative voice that is simultaneously that of the story's main character, even though at times other characters, such as Kenneth, express their spatiotemporal experiences in the form of direct discourse. *Græsset* instead makes heavy use of shifting focalization, which provides insights into the feelings and thoughts not only of the novel's human characters, but also of a nonhuman. Whereas through the use of internal focalisation, these characters' chronotopical experiences appear as subjective, the few passages where external focalisation is applied create a more objective impression, as chronotopical constellations here are conveyed by the third-person narrator's voice, who functions as an apparently non-involved observer. Even the order of narrative discourse is rather dissimilar in the two novels. *Den afksyelige* is characterized by many analepses that gradually reveal the story's internal causal relations, especially regarding Heidi's and Kenneth's past and its effects on their present and future. This also entails that Heidi's perception and experience of the novel's central chronotopical places are revealed to the reader only bit by bit. At the same time, frequent prolepses indicate the coming catastrophe, and thus contribute to the feeling of impermanence that in varying degrees is connected to these places. In *Græsset*, anisochronies are not nearly as prominent as in *Den afskyelige*, and they do not contribute much to conveying the novel's chronotopic experiences. Instead, the human characters' increasing loss of memory creates what Herman calls "fuzzy temporality", which makes it "difficult or even impossible to assign narrated events a fixed or even fixable position along a timeline in the storyworld" (2002, 212). This fuzzy temporality also impedes the application of other narratological 'tools' for the analysis of time, such as frequency and duration, as the novel's characters (and with them the reader) become increasingly disoriented in both time and space.

Despite these significant differences regarding chronotopical motifs and narrative structure, the overall experience of the connection between time and space conveyed by the two novels is very similar. In both, time seems to run extremely fast, manifested through rapid and undesirable changes that are beyond human control in the places where the characters are situated. The feeling of time remorselessly progressing towards catastrophe, combined with an almost traumatic experience of the instability of places, can thus be said to form a major chronotope that connects the various minor chronotopical motifs in both novels.

The analysis above also demonstrates how an old chronotope – that of the idyll, with its organic unity of humans and nonhuman nature and its lack of any real progression of time – is effective in both novels. However, the idyllic chronotope does not figure as a lived experience in the storyworlds' respective realities, but only in their characters' imaginations and desires. Their longing for stability, for place to remain constant and for time to stand still, finds expression in different ways: through activism in *Den afskyelige*, and through regression to an infantile state of mind in *Græsset*. However, in both novels, such a stability of time and place appears as something that, if it is attainable at all, can only be achieved after full-scale catastrophe due to material agencies that are beyond human control and at the cost of any human cultural and social development. In this way, the characters' longing for the stability (or even stasis) of time and place that is characteristic of Bakhtin's idyllic chronotope appears in both *Den afskyelige* and *Græsset* as an important yet distant echo of a pre-Anthropocenic past. The major chronotope arising in both novels can thus be said to be shaped not only by the connection between a time that is speeding by at a pace beyond human control and places that lack stability and permanence, but also by retrospection into a pre-Anthropocenic past that, allegedly, was characterized by a feeling of cyclical, slow, or even stagnant time and by stable places.

It is legitimate to ask how far the Holocene, as the epoch preceding the Anthropocene, was really ever characterized by the spatiotemporal conditions that Weitze's and Byskov's characters imagine and desire, or whether Bakhtin's folkloric and idyllic chronotopes, instead of being based on an actual reality experienced by humans in the past, have instead only ever reflected human longing for such conditions, and thus from the outset had a utopian character. However, even contemporary Earth-system scientists use the "preindustrial Holocene conditions" as a "reference state for a stable and resilient planet" (Richardson et al. 2023, 2) in comparison with the current conditions, where most "planetary boundaries" – the limits within which Earth can continue to function in its Holocene state – have been transgressed. The way in which the idyllic chronotope refigures in *Den afskyelige* and *Græsset* therefore does not necessarily constitute an idealizing, backward-looking

nostalgia, but can be seen as reflecting an actual, significant contrast between the earlier and the current state of the Earth system.

What maybe should be more disquieting than the recourse to a bygone idyll, then, is that the chronotopes that are effective in these two novels do not leave open any course of action whereby humans might be able to stop, or at least mitigate, the undesirable changes depicted, or prevent the ascendancy of forces beyond any human control. Even though this may seem like an accurate reflection of the current planetary situation, it is to be hoped that it is not an entirely adequate diagnosis. In any case, if literature is to play any role in reversing the transgression of planetary boundaries and bringing about a return to a "safe operating space" (Richardson et al. 2023, 4) for humanity, it would arguably need to develop chronotopes that at least provide some sort of possibility to change the course of events for the better for both humans and nonhumans.

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