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Book Review

Philipp Wagner: *Chronotopische Insularitäten. Zur Inseldarstellung in den skandinavischsprachigen Literaturen um 1900 und der Gegenwart.* Wien, 2022.

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In literary and cultural studies islands often are depicted as places of isolation, solitude and captivity, while they in other cases may function as quintessential representations of liberty, authenticity and utopianism. Furthermore, the word island itself does not exclusively refer to a landmass surrounded by water, as the expression also has metaphorical potential, e.g. in linguistics, in order to describe minority languages ('linguistic islands'), or in modern urban planning ('traffic islands') to refer to pedestrian safe havens. The island metaphor seems to be most frequently used in order to describe a discrepancy between two separate, but closely related, mutually dependent spaces, with a liminal, contested, or intangible zone of demarcation between them. Through the ages, this evasive and metaphoric character of islands has attracted uncountable artists, because islands and insularity seem to question everyday notions of space, place, time, culture and identity, and trigger the imagination. In the domain of literature there are hardly any pure dystopian or utopian islands, but rather combinations of both, mixing competing visions of insularity. Islands can be part of more concrete (historical) narratives, e.g. when islands are envisaged as peripheral, backward or even retarded, in relationship to the rest of a particular culture or nation. Notably in the colonial past this has been a dominant frame in political and cultural discourse. Nevertheless, the opposite also holds true, i.e. that islands are sometimes assigned to represent the very essence or stereotype of a region, a nation or an entire culture. In other words: it is hard to define exactly what an island is, and therefore, studying islands and insularity comprehensively, calls for multi- or cross-disciplinary approaches.

In the present literary study, Philipp Wagner tweaks the theoretical scope of his investigation into a handful of Scandinavian novels featuring islands, by adopting a slightly more cultural studies-inspired theoretical framework, understanding islands as textual representations of symbolic codes. Still, the main feature of Wagner's hermeneutic methodology rests on the technique of close reading of the texts of his choice, five modern Scandinavian novels, each thematically dealing with islands and insularity. Wagner's choice of the literary corpus though, seems to be a bit random, all are prose narratives, mainly novels, written in Danish, Norwegian

and Swedish, but curiously enough none of the authors have a personal insular background.

In the opening chapter, Wagner doesn't beat about the bush and swiftly introduces his theoretical position vis-à-vis his subject matter; literary islands are linguistic and discursive, symbolic constructions, which are not primarily characterized by the fact that they are encircled by water, but distinguish themselves through different, often disrupted temporalities in comparison with the 'mainland'. The combination of – and interaction between – temporal and spatial features are the core of Philipp Wagner's theoretical frame of reference, which is inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope. This theoretical notion, which considers the interconnectedness of time and space, is the crucial building block in this study and is reflected in Wagner's overarching concept of 'chronotopic insularities'.

Philipp Wagner offers a well-documented, scholarly solid, introduction to Bakhtin and the historical reception of the concept of the chronotope, especially in literary criticism. This study's hypothesis is that literary texts which deal with islands and insularity transcend and explore the differences between islands and their 'mainland', and are expressed in contrasting temporal and spatial forms of representation. Why exactly Wagner limits himself to the concept of the chronotope and refrains from other Bakhtinian concepts, such as heteroglossia and polyphony is left uncommented.

After introducing Bakhtin's chronotope, Wagner proposes four scenarios in order to be able to demonstrate the multiplicity and complexity of the ways in which time and space interact in a handful of relatively modern Scandinavian literary texts, two in Swedish, two in Danish and one in Norwegian. The line-up is: Anne Charlotte Leffler's *Aurora Bunge* (1883), August Strindberg's *I havsbandet* (1890), Vagn Lundbye's *Tilbage til Anholt* (1978), Hanne Marie Svendsen's *Guldkuglen* (1985) and Ida Hegazi Høyer's *Fortellingen om øde* (2015). This selection is quite limited if one aspires to cover more than a century and a half of Scandinavian literature. Of course, this small corpus is hand-picked in order to effectuate Wagner's critical agenda and, in that respect, it is an acceptable selection. Still the question remains, why this study neglects the substantial historical period between the first bunch of texts, by Leffler and Strindberg in the final decades of the 19th century, and Lundbye's, Svendsen's and Høyer's novels, approximately a century later. Regrettably, Wagner does not make much of an effort to explain this lacuna. The present selection only contains two works from the era of early modernity (the late 1800s), while the rest are novels from the era of high- and postmodernism, spanning from the late 1970s till today. Five works of prose to cover more than a century inevitably means that a vast corpus of insular literature is left aside. Wagner maintains (p. 21) that his analyses will clarify the exemplary characteristics of his case studies, but the choice of corpus remains

fuzzy. Why are authors with insular backgrounds left out, as well as genres like travelogues, autobiographies and expedition reports? And why is this exclusion not discussed, so that their absence could be explained properly?

The term 'chronotopic insularities' presupposes and focuses on the ways in which the intrinsic links between temporality and spatiality are represented in the literary texts that explicitly thematize islands and/or insularity. This term proves to be a surprisingly agile and flexible analytical tool in the close readings that make up most of this book. In order to categorize islands and their temporal and spatial features, Wagner introduces four scenarios or analytical models: 1) mythic, 2) utopian, 3) Robinsonade and 4) Odyssean islands. As a mere example, in narratives set on mythical islands, these islands seem to be out of sync with the rest of the surrounding world, they tend to be relics of the past, and at the same time their temporal stasis is accompanied by spatial instability. In other cases, e.g. in Robinsonades, islands often have clear spatial boundaries, while their temporal chronology is retarded, brought to a standstill or even rolled back in time. These four scenarios are no absolute nor exclusive categories, which, for example, is obvious in Wagner's analysis of Leffler's short novel *Aurore Bunge*, where two contrasting temporalities, from two diverging scenarios are present, mixing the mythical and the Robinsonade scenarios. In the case of *Aurore Bunge*, the remaining question is why the protagonist finally discards the experience of (insular) liberty, freedom and personal agency, and instead returns to her curtailed and dependent bourgeois city life on the mainland.

After Leffler and August Strindberg, the second cluster of texts starts with Vagn Lundbye's *Tilbage til Anholt*, a novel that has the island of Anholt as its backdrop. According to Wagner's reading of the text, this island is a synecdoche, representing nature in the widest, universal, sense of the word. Thus, *Tilbage til Anholt* becomes a proto-ecocritical novel, suggesting a different and more equal relationship between the natural world and humanity. In this sense, *Tilbage til Anholt* is an early literary experiment, rethinking the culturally endorsed dichotomy between nature and mankind, which fitted seamlessly with the esoteric philosophy and growing ecological awareness in the 1970s. Thus, Anholt becomes a 'spiritual' island, which both contains aspects of the past (as a kind of romantic 'retro-topos'), but also opens vistas into a more eco-critical or metaphysical future.

Similar experimental ambitions also fuel the last two novels that Philipp Wagner exposes to his scenarios of chronotopic insularity: Svendsen's *Guldkuglen* and Høyer's *Fortellingen om øde*. In the analysis of *Guldkuglen* – a notoriously complex and self-reflexive novel – Wagner fittingly introduces the idea of the Anthropocene, suggesting that the novel has been a kind of trailblazer for Scandinavian authors who are committed to thinking about the future of the planet. Wagner offers a solid and nuanced reading of *Guldkuglen* and he also includes a fine discussion on confusing analytical terms, e.g. 'metanarrative' and 'metafiction'.

The final chapter of this study deals with one of Svendsen's successors, the Norwegian author Ida Hegazi Høyer and her remarkable futuristic novel *Fortellingen om øde*, which appeared 30 years after *Guldkuglen*. In Høyer's novel, the island where the story is set, is a previously uninhabited island, which during the narrated time of the novel becomes populated by three people who, for various reasons, renounce civilization and settle on the island. Instead of merely functioning as a backdrop, the island has the surprising ability to respond and react on its own behalf. In other words, the island possesses agency, behaves like a subject and can communicate. Høyer's island is no longer a stable spatial and temporal entity, but rather a space subject to the rules of nature, i.e., not the 'natural' laws defined by humans. In this novel the island possesses autonomy and takes on the role previously performed by humans. The island is in charge and the three human inhabitants have to subjugate themselves to the rules of the island, i.e. the rules of nature and, in that respect, Høyer's island is following and intensifying Lundbye's and Svendsen's earlier eco-critically informed prose, combining and exceeding two of Wagner's chronotopic insularities: the mythic and the Robinsonade. Lundbye introduced the island as a sensory, free floating non-place, while Svendsen and Høyer each went a step further and in the final case, the novel presents a radical disentanglement between space and time, and thereby opens up for new relationships between humans and the natural world.

Finally, one may ask what the benefits of the notion of chronotopic insularities are. Hasn't some kind of proto eco-consciousness always been a part of literary imagination, long before the term was coined and became fashionable? Isn't it true that 'nature' has been calling – metaphorically speaking – from the beginning of time? Nevertheless, this study demonstrates convincingly the multiple roles of islands and insularity in modern Scandinavian literature and Philipp Wagner offers a solid set of Bakhtinian inspired analytical tools, that make it possible to identify thematic similarities and differences.

Apart from the overall positive scholarly results of this study, a critical remark needs to be made about the recurrent impression of punctiliousness, repetition and over-cautious way of phrasing things. Although undoubtedly prompted by the desire to help his readers to navigate this highly learned and thorough academic work, the result is unnecessarily slowing down the reading process. Frequent summarizing, rephrasing previous points and arguments, and taking the reader so insistently by the hand, that it may well cause some irritation. Another issue concerns the disturbing anomalies in the orthography and typography (like missing italics in book titles, e.g., p. 13), and inconsistencies in the bibliography (e.g., p. 248). Worse though, is the fact that many of the Danish quotations are deficient (p. 128; 145 [2×]; 168; 173; 174; 175; 177 [2×]; 180 [4×]; 182; 185 [3×]; 190). Proper proofreading would have solved this tedious problem easily.

This study presents itself emphatically as a scholarly thesis, discussing five Scandinavian works of fiction deploying an impressive toolbox of theoretical notions. Although the fundamental philosophical discussions about the epistemology of time, space and borders are valuable and informative contributions, they demand so much space, that the division between the amount of energy invested in the detailed theoretical discussions on the one hand, and the empirical textual analyses on the other, appear a bit skewed. Nevertheless, Philipp Wagner certainly knows his way about, even in fields as ecocriticism, postcolonial theory, and contemporary developments in human-geography. Especially these sections are a pleasure to read and they will help many (young) scholars to successfully navigate these theoretical domains. This book's five case studies also show some literary historical trends in insular narratives, and therefore one of Philipp Wagner's final remarks comes a bit as a surprise: "es (liegt) mir fern zu behaupten, dass in meinem Material eine Art Entwicklungslinie im literarischen Umgang mit chronotopischen Insularitäten zu erkennen ist." (p. 237). A rather discouraging final note, in an otherwise helpful and good-natured study.