

# No Future, No Past?

## How Consciousness of the Anthropocene Changes Environmentalist Narratives

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### Introduction

How we relate to environmental questions depends on the narratives we use to describe them: on the narrative connections that we establish, for example, between the causes and effects of what we perceive as environmental problems, and in turn on how we narrate possible solutions and alternative pathways. What we could call our ‘environmental consciousness’ is therefore very much shaped by such narratives. The narratives used to frame environmental issues are also likely to have an influence on human action – on what we do in order to deal with what we regard as environmental problems.<sup>1</sup>

It may therefore not be surprising that narrative texts and media of all kinds have long played an important role in environmental activism.

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<sup>1</sup> Some parts of this essay are based on chapters from my book *Umwelt-engagierte Literatur aus Island und Norwegen* (Hennig 2014).

The sheer number of works of both fiction and non-fiction that deal with environmental questions provides evidence for two assumptions made by writers, filmmakers, artists and many others: that such contributions can evoke and change environmental consciousness by influencing people's values, attitudes and worldviews, and, even more importantly, that they can contribute to environmental action and change human behavior.<sup>2</sup>

This raises the question of whether any features characteristic of many, if not all, environmentalist narratives can be identified. While an almost limitless variety of environmental problems exists, there is generally a consensus that these do not originate from the natural (in the meaning of non-human) but rather from the social and cultural sphere: environmental problems do not emerge by themselves, but are caused by humans. Consequently, environmentalist narratives may frame environmental questions in ways similar to how other problems more limited to the social and cultural sphere are usually framed.

Georg Bollenbeck (2007), in a comprehensive analysis of works of cultural criticism (German *Kulturkritik*) from the past three centuries, asserts that texts considered to belong to this genre typically display a relatively simple, triadic narrative structure that relates to three different temporalities: They usually refer to an idealized period in the past, which then is used as a counter-image to a rejected present. Returning to this past period is, however, generally not the aim and usually held to be impossible. The central characteristic of cultural critical texts according to Bollenbeck is that they instead highlight possible ways into a different and better future. A conception of time in which the future is open and shapeable, Bollenbeck states, is a necessary precondition distinguishing cultural criticism from e.g. cultural pessimism.

Bollenbeck considers Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1755) to be the prototype of the

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<sup>2</sup> There is, however, not necessarily a direct relation between environmental consciousness and environmental action; see e.g. Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002.

triadic narrative structure of cultural criticism. After Rousseau, this structure became a central feature of most cultural criticism and is still widely used today. As such, it would also be characteristic of environmentalist critiques of culture and society, and play a central role in shaping environmental consciousness and activism. The question that I want to consider in this essay is, however, whether this triadic narrative structure is challenged by the new conditions created by the Anthropocene – by the consciousness that through anthropogenic environmental change, the planet has entered a new geological epoch with entirely different preconditions than the Holocene. Does consciousness of mostly irreversible change on a planetary scale also change the narrative structure of contemporary environmentalist criticism?

In order to answer this question, it is first necessary to illustrate in more detail how the triadic narrative structure manifests itself in Rousseau's work as the prototype of cultural criticism. I will then try to show that this structure has even been characteristic of environmentalist texts, using as an example what is probably the most influential environmentalist work ever published: Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). Finally, I will analyze two works dealing with Anthropocenic environmental change, Magnús Viðar Sigurðsson's documentary movie *Last Days of the Arctic* (2011) and Jostein Gaarder's novel *Anna* (2013), in order to assess how far the triadic narrative structure of cultural criticism is still discernible in these works, and in what ways it may have been changed by consciousness of the Anthropocene and its implications.

## Rousseau's Cultural Criticism

In his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*, Rousseau describes his own era in very negative terms. According to him, modern civilization is the outcome of a long process of alienation from the state of nature. This process brought with it all kinds of evils, such as a huge variety of diseases, never-ending hard work, permanently

increasing oppression and a social inequality which is “obviously contrary to the law of nature” (Rousseau 2012, 91).

Rousseau contrasts the disliked civilization of his own present with the original condition of ‘man’: the state of nature. In this state, humans were “naturally as equal among themselves as were the animals of each species” (Rousseau 2012, 40). They were physically robust and knew of no diseases. They had almost no needs except for food, water and shelter, all of which they could easily find in the vast woods covering the earth. Since humans at first did not live together in groups, but individually, and met only occasionally for reproduction, they were completely independent from each other and required neither language nor culture. Their lack of needs made them generally happy, and greed, violence and war were unknown in that time. Rousseau concludes that “since the state of nature is the state in which the concern for our self-preservation is the least prejudicial to that of others, that state was consequently the most appropriate for peace and the best suited for the human race” (Rousseau 2012, 62).

According to Rousseau, the state of nature was left behind when humans began to develop ties to each other. First families, then small groups evolved. This, however, did not automatically bring forth the evils of modern civilization. Indeed, what Rousseau regards as the best period in the history of humankind is not the state of nature itself, but that of the hunter-gatherers, in which the ‘savages’ of his own time still dwelt. These people have already undergone a certain degree of social development, but are not yet characterized by the egocentrism of civilization. Rousseau calls this “the happiest and most durable epoch” and “the veritable youth of the world” and notes that it was the one which was “the best for man, and that he must have left it only by virtue of some fatal chance happening that, for the common good, ought never have happened” (Rousseau 2012, 74). Everything that followed after this state did not lead to further improvement, but rather “toward the decay of the species” (Rousseau 2012, 74).

What ended this 'golden age' was the division of labor, which made humans dependent on each other, and subsequently brought with it everything else that increased inequality between individuals: the establishment of private property led to the development of agriculture and metallurgy, which in turn brought about hard labor and slavery. Greed, competition, fraud and other vices emerged and accompanied the increase of inequality. Through the invention of laws and property rights, the rich then made their privileges inviolable and managed to preserve them even for their descendants. The unnatural inequality among humans is thus perpetuated.

Rousseau's contemporaries criticized him for wanting to go 'back to nature', a false assertion which is still frequently repeated, even in recent ecocriticism (e.g. Rigby 2014, 63). Rousseau had in truth never voiced such a desire (Durand 2007, 22). He actually asserts right in the beginning of the *Discourse on Inequality* that the state of nature is "a state that no longer exists, that perhaps never existed, that probably never will exist, and yet about which it is necessary to have accurate notions in order to judge properly our own present state" (Rousseau 2012, 40). The state of nature is thus primarily a counter-image to a rejected present: a thought experiment that provides the basis for a critique of modernity. Even if the state of nature had once existed, the process of civilization was irreversible, from Rousseau's point of view: going 'back to nature' would not be possible even if one wanted to. Therefore, Rousseau did not limit his cultural criticism to a critique of the present, and a nostalgic construction of an idealized past, but argued in his later works *Emile, or On Education* (1762) and *The Social Contract* (1762) that a different future is possible. He had, in the *Discourse on Inequality*, stated that what distinguishes humans from animals is their free will and hence freedom of action, as well as their 'perfectibility' (*perfectibilité*), which allows them to develop new skills. This perfectibility had on the one hand enabled them to leave behind the state of nature and to enter the detrimental process of civilization. On the other hand, the same capa-

bility could also help improve conditions in the present. Humans already live in civilized modernity without the possibility of returning to a previous state, and private property and laws already exist. Yet the latter can, according to Rousseau, be transformed from evils into the means for a more just social organization (Durand 2007, 47). For Rousseau, education aiming at the creation of free, self-determined individuals, and on the societal level the 'social contract', represent the possibility of an alternative development pathway that could lead individuals and society as a whole into a better future (Bollenbeck 2007, 70–71).

Rousseau's cultural criticism is thus characterized by the triadic narrative structure that according to Bollenbeck became characteristic of most subsequent modern cultural criticism: It is directed against its own present, which it diagnoses to be the worst of all times. It idealizes a distant past that represents the utopian opposite of the present. And it drafts alternatives for the future (Bollenbeck 2007, 20). Of course, critiques of the present had been uttered by many and long before Rousseau. There are many other examples of a normative contrasting of a rejected present with an idealized past. This contrasting comparison of different eras is indeed the essence of the often-used topos of the golden age, which can be traced back in written sources at least as far as to Hesiod's *Works and Days* (ca. 700 BC). Yet cultural criticism in a strict sense could, according to Bollenbeck, only evolve in interrelation with the Enlightenment's idea of progress and its open conception of the future. For while Rousseau questions the belief in permanent progress and in a rational, linear perfecting of the world, he also takes seriously the emancipatory promises connected with Enlightenment philosophy. It is therefore exactly the open conception of the future that constitutes a crucial distinction from earlier critiques of conditions in the author's respective present. Unlike these critiques, Rousseau neither aims at a return to an earlier state of human history, nor does he advocate cultural pessimism. In a cyclical conception of time, the golden age would return sooner or later after a period of decline and collapse. In the pre-modern

Christian, eschatological view of time, history runs inevitably towards the Last Judgement. Yet through the open conception of the future that emerges with the Enlightenment, humans themselves become responsible for what the future will be like (Bollenbeck 2007, 37). Progress and civilization can thus potentially be directed towards an alternative future that is better than the present.

## Silent Spring

Rousseau's writings have – directly and indirectly – influenced not only cultural criticism in general, but also environmentalism as it developed from the 1960s onwards (Durand 2007, 13). Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* (1962), for example – which is credited with having initiated or at least considerably influenced many contemporary environmental movements (Guha 2000, 69) – is clearly based on the triadic narrative structure outlined above.

Carson offers a radical critique of her own present and frequently describes it in dystopian terms. She calls the large-scale application of chemical pesticides in contemporary agriculture “man's war against nature” (Carson 2002, 7), which brings sickness and death to all living beings. *Silent Spring* thus criticizes a modern industrialized present that creates unacceptable conditions for humans and other species alike, a present that will result in an even more catastrophic future if the course she describes is maintained.

However, *Silent Spring* also presents a counter-image to this dystopian present. In a short fictional tale, preceding the otherwise essayistic text and titled “A Fable for Tomorrow”, Carson describes a town “where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings”, a place of “prosperous farms, with fields of grains and hillsides of orchards” (Carson 2002, 1). The town and its surroundings are characterized both by natural beauty and by an abundance of food resources, which together create perfect living conditions for all species. This is not the de-

scription of a ‘state of nature’ in the meaning of a wilderness unaltered by human beings. Rather, this ‘golden age’ of harmony, natural beauty and abundance began, as is explicitly stated, “many years ago when the first settlers raised their houses, sank their wells, and built their barns” (Carson 2002, 2), and thus represents a traditional form of rural life. In the ‘fable’, this happy period ends when chemical pesticides are introduced for the first time, bringing sickness and death to plants, farm animals, wild creatures, and humans themselves. Thus, *Silent Spring*, just as Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality* does, uses an idealized past as a point of departure for a radical critique of the present.

It seems, however, that Carson does not wish to return to an idealized pre-industrial age when no chemical pesticides had yet been produced, and that it moreover would not be possible from her point of view. Even on the first pages of *Silent Spring*, she stresses that the chemical pollution of the air, earth, rivers and sea “is for the most part irrecoverable” and that its negative consequences on living beings are “irreversible” (Carson 2002, 7). Yet instead of indulging in pessimism, in light of the impossibility of a return to the ‘golden age’, she makes various suggestions for how a different future could be created through, for example, the development of biological methods for pest control. Like Rousseau, Carson thus uses an imaginative description of an ideal past not in order to promote a return to it, but as a necessary counter-image to the evils of modernity which she criticizes, and as a point of departure for the development of “new, imaginative, and creative approaches” (Carson 2002, 296) that can lead the world into a better future.

Carson’s work has been called the “Bible” of modern environmentalism (Guha 2000, 3). Therefore it may not be surprising that the triadic structure of *Silent Spring*’s ecologically informed cultural criticism is also characteristic of many subsequent environmentalist texts from the 1960s onwards.<sup>3</sup> Yet today, the use of this widespread narrative struc-

<sup>3</sup> There is no room here for a comprehensive overview. For detailed analyses of more examples, see e.g. Hennig 2014.



ture may change through consciousness of the Anthropocene and its implications.

## The Anthropocene and its Implications

In 2000, Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer claimed that the planet had entered a new geological epoch, for which they proposed the name *Anthropocene*. To explain this choice of name, they stated that today, humans have used most of the planet's resources of, among other things, fossil fuels, arable land and drinking water, multiplied the rate of species extinction many times over, and changed the composition of the planet's atmosphere and thus the global climate through the massive release of greenhouse gasses (Crutzen & Stoermer 2000, 17). It has since been confirmed that human-caused species extinction and the anthropogenic warming of earth's climate indicate "that we have entered a distinctive phase of Earth's evolution that satisfies geologists' criteria for its recognition as a distinctive stratigraphic unit" (Zalasiewicz et al. 2008, 6). Sufficient evidence seems to be available that through human activities, the Holocene has indeed come to an end (Zalasiewicz et al. 2008, 7).

This raises the question of whether the Anthropocene also changes the triadic structure of environmentally motivated cultural criticism, or, rather, if consciousness of the Anthropocene has such an effect. For while opinions on when exactly the Anthropocene began differ – with the Industrial Revolution in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, for example, or with the first use of the nuclear bomb at the end of the Second World War – one thing is clear: the entirety of today's environmental movements, starting in the 1960s, have already taken place in the new geological epoch. Yet consciousness that these changes are occurring on a geological scale and were brought about by humans probably only began to spread around the year 2000.

What then does consciousness of environmental change on a geological scale imply for environmentalist narratives? Can they continue to

be based on the triadic structure of cultural criticism? Can a past from a bygone geological era still serve as an ideal in the Anthropocene? Moreover, can the future still be regarded as open and shapeable in a time in which global warming is already happening, and political emphasis is put more and more on adaptation instead of mitigation?

The fact that the transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene makes the return to an allegedly ideal past no longer possible has no implication for most environmentalist narratives, since those that exist in the cultural critical tradition beginning with Rousseau, at least, did not advocate such a return anyway. Going ‘back to nature’ or an imagined bygone golden age had never been the aim. Yet an imagined ideal past had served as a counter-image to the present that was being critiqued, and as an inspiration for finding solutions to perceived problems and thus ways into a better future. It is this function that is brought into question by a consciousness of the Anthropocene. For with atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide higher than at any point during the last 800,000 years (Alexander et al. 2013, 11), and thus different from any conditions that *homo sapiens* has ever experienced since the beginnings of the species, the value of a retrospection into an idealized past becomes doubtful: what kind of guidance can be derived from the past, when future environmental conditions are unlike anything that humans ever have been confronted with?

The Enlightenment’s open conception of the future, which implies that what lies ahead can be shaped by humans themselves, is also fundamentally brought into question through consciousness of the Anthropocene. There are some optimistic voices, such as Christian Schwägerl (2013) and Diane Ackerman (2014), who argue that the “Human Age” offers unprecedented chances to shape the planet according to human desires. Yet most or all of the changes that Crutzen and Stoermer name as indications of the Anthropocene were not intended by humanity: global warming has not been the conscious goal of burning fossil fuels, and species extinction has not been the aim behind cutting down forests

and taking land into use for agriculture. The planetary-scale environmental change that justifies the naming of the new geological epoch as Anthropocene has been anthropogenic, but it was an unintended consequence of human action. Geo-engineering – the conscious, large-scale alteration of the planet’s ecological systems by technological means in order to mitigate climate change – is usually regarded by environmentalists as fraught with enormous risks, and therefore rejected. And while it may seem unlikely at present that a global climate protection agreement will substantially reduce anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions any time soon, self-reinforcing climate change as a result of passing of global ecological tipping points (such as the thawing of permafrost soils and the massive release of methane from these) would not leave any options for effective mitigation. The future would then no longer be open and shapeable, but determined by forces on which humans probably could have no considerable influence.

Finally, the seeming inevitability of detrimental environmental change may even cast doubts on the usefulness of an environmentally motivated critique of the present in general and suggest that pessimism might be a more adequate or ‘realistic’ position today. The marked increase in novels, movies and computer games based on apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic scenarios in recent years might be an indication of such a response to the Anthropocene’s possible implications for the future (Almond 2014).

### Last Days of the Arctic

Considering the above, consciousness of the Anthropocene might therefore render all three conventional structural elements of an ecologically motivated cultural criticism irrelevant. Environmentalist narratives that are unaware of or consciously ignore the Anthropocene and its implications, and that are thus able to follow the conventional triadic structure, are certainly still conceivable. Examples of these would be

texts which focus on single environmental issues on a local, regional or national level and which do not connect these issues to global ecological change. In order to answer the question of whether the Anthropocene changes environmentalist narratives, it is therefore necessary to look at works which deal with global environmental issues and which demonstrate consciousness of the Anthropocene and its implications.

Works dealing with environmental change in the Arctic meet these criteria particularly well, not only because the Arctic has been called the place with “the world’s most severe toxic contamination” (Cone 2005, 2), affecting mammals such as polar bears and also human beings who depend on Arctic animals as food. The Arctic is also warming much faster than the rest of the planet, something that is measurable and indeed very visible through the rapid decline in the amount of polar sea ice, the receding of glaciers and the thawing of permafrost soils. The Arctic has therefore been represented in the media in recent years as being iconic of global environmental change and “as an illustration of Earth having moved into a new geological era that has been called the Anthropocene” (Christensen et al. 2013, 164).

The work of Icelandic photographer Ragnar Axelsson (born 1958) can serve as an example of environmentalist narratives that focus on the Arctic while being conscious of the Anthropocene and its implications. Over the last three decades, Axelsson has taken photographs in Iceland, Greenland and other parts of the Arctic. In 2011, a documentary movie about Axelsson’s work, directed by Magnús Viðar Sigurðsson, was released. Its Icelandic title, *Andlit norðursins*, means “faces of the north” and refers to a 2004 photo exhibition by Axelsson with the same title. In the English version, however, the movie is called *Last Days of the Arctic*, a title that already hints at the ongoing socioecological change that forms the movie’s background. In the movie, many of Axelsson’s photographs are featured in between film sequences showing Axelsson performing his work as a photographer. Axelsson himself functions as a narrator, commenting on the visual material from the background and

talking about his professional work in both the past and the present. The movie follows traditional farmers and hunters in Iceland and Greenland from the mid-1970s to the late 2000s, with a focus on landscapes and ongoing environmental and social changes in both countries.

A critique of the present becomes clear both from the movie's visual material and in the spoken text. Axelsson is shown talking to old farmers who complain that there is almost no difference between the seasons any longer and only very little snow, while Axelsson tells them that it has never been warmer since records began. Concerning Greenland, Axelsson as narrator explains that "the ice is getting thinner" (Sigurðsson 2011, 37:00), creating difficult conditions for hunters, and that many of the small Greenlandic villages he had visited in earlier years are now deserted. He states that "each time, I return [to Greenland] I can see that this lifestyle of the hunters is closer to vanishing" (Sigurðsson 2011, 1:09:44). Axelsson repeatedly emphasizes that these ongoing changes make him sad. Yet, while it is clear that global warming forms the background of the developments depicted, the question of what is causing climate change, and who is responsible for it, is not raised in the movie. A kind of responsibility is indicated in Axelsson's critique of bureaucracy, which according to him impedes both traditional farming in Iceland and hunting in Greenland through "rules and regulations from the outside world" (Sigurðsson 2011, 1:09:22), making farmers and hunters alike "confused" (Sigurðsson 2011, 1:09:24) and "frustrated" (Sigurðsson 2011, 59:01) and forcing many to abandon their traditional way of life.

Yet it is precisely the traditional life of Icelandic farmers and fishermen and of Greenlandic hunters that constitutes an idealized past in *Last Days of the Arctic*. According to Axelsson, these people had found "a way to live in harmony with the Arctic nature" (Sigurðsson 2011, 1:37), characterized by "a freedom that you can't really describe" (Sigurðsson 2011, 4:39). In a scene that shows an Icelandic glacier, Axelsson states that "I don't know what the Garden of Eden looked like, but to

me, this was Paradise” (Sigurðsson 2011, 8:33) and thus makes use of the topos of the golden age. Much could be said about the stereotypical way in which both Icelanders and Greenlanders are depicted in the movie. Here it suffices to note that even in the narrator’s present, this idealized way of life – with the exception of a few remnants – no longer exists: the farmers Axelsson portrays are almost without exception old people living as recluses who will not have any successors. While some Greenlandic hunters struggle to maintain the old way of life, Axelsson makes clear that they are “the human faces of climate change” (Sigurðsson 2011, 1:43) and that these “are possibly the last days of the Arctic” (Sigurðsson 2011, 1:57). Axelsson’s preference for monochrome pictures only adds to the sense that they create the impression of a bygone time.

While *Last Days of the Arctic* clearly refers to an idealized past, its critique of the present remains rather vague. Moreover, despite Axelsson’s explicitly expressed anxiety concerning the ongoing changes, the third usual narrative element of cultural criticism, the search for ways into an alternative future, is entirely missing in the movie. Although Axelsson states that “we have only one planet and we must be respectful of it” (Sigurðsson 2011, 1:20:18), there are no hints of what this ‘respect’ could or should consist of and how it could be implemented. In addition, while Axelsson calls his photographs “my contribution to the debate on what is going on right now” (Sigurðsson 2011, 1:24:30), this contribution seems to be more one of documenting the last remnants of an idealized past than of drafting alternatives for the future. The pessimism indicated by the movie’s English title finds its equivalent in the way Axelsson’s limits himself to “collecting photographs for posterity” (Sigurðsson 2011, 10:08). This appears as a way of archiving images of the past without any prospect of this “legacy” (Sigurðsson 2011, 47:37 and 1:26:30), as Axelsson repeatedly calls it, gaining any relevance for the future. And if these are indeed the “last days” of the region, it has no future anyway.

The only one of the three standard elements of cultural criticism that has become even stronger in the movie is thus the retrospection into an

idealized past, while the other two elements are only vaguely developed or entirely missing. A nostalgic view back is the dominant response towards the immense environmental and social changes taking place. *Last Days of the Arctic* is thus a good example of how consciousness of the Anthropocene and its implications can alter contemporary environmentalist narratives.

### Anna. A Fable about the Planet's Climate and Environment

Does consciousness of the Anthropocene, then, mean the end of ecologically motivated cultural criticism and of environmentalist narratives as they have commonly been structured, at least since *Silent Spring*? Many environmentalists seem not to have given up yet, not even in view of the immense changes taking place in the Arctic, as for example Greenpeace's global *Save the Arctic* campaign demonstrates. It started in 2012 and aims to create a sanctuary in the Arctic and thus at protecting the region from fossil fuel extraction and industrial fishery.

Another example is a young adult novel by Norwegian writer Jostein Gaarder. In *Anna. A Fable about the Planet's Climate and Environment* (*Anna. En fabel om klodens klima og miljø*, 2013) ethical questions relating to anthropogenic climate change and species extinction are discussed via a female adolescent protagonist.<sup>4</sup> Anna Nygård, a 16-year old teenager living in a rural region in southern Norway, frequently has dreams in which she is incarnated as her own great-granddaughter Nova, who is likewise 16 years old, but lives in the year 2082. In Nova's time, catastrophic climate change has happened. Huge parts of the world are uninhabitable, the global population has collapsed and biodiversity is drastically reduced. In a key scene, Nova accuses her great-grandmother – and thus the 86-year old Anna – of having been part of the generation responsible for the catastrophe and not having done enough

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<sup>4</sup> The novel has been translated into English under the title *The World According to Anna*. However, in the following, I will refer only to the Norwegian original version.

to prevent it. Yet the great-grandmother suggests that there might still be a chance to change the course of history and implies that she can send Nova back in time and into the Anna of the year 2012. As young Anna awakes, she feels that she now bears responsibility for creating a different future. She starts to commit herself to climate protection and species conservation and founds an environmental group at her school.

It is obvious that *Anna* contains a radical critique of the present. The devastation of ecosystems, species extinction and climate change are denounced as manifestations of international and especially inter-generational injustice. The protagonist complains about the continuing waste of resources and about widespread ignorance, greed and egoism. She states for example that “we are an egoistic generation. We are a brutal generation”<sup>5</sup> (Gaarder 2013, 197). The Anthropocene is explicitly mentioned as a sign of a problematic development: “We are altering the environment to such a large extent that it has become common to talk about our time as an entirely new geological epoch, namely the *Anthropocene*”<sup>6</sup> (Gaarder 2013, 61). The critique expressed in the novel is particularly aimed at Norway’s fossil fuel industry, which has made Norwegians extraordinarily wealthy and also contributes considerably to global warming.

In this context, it is not only alienation from nature, but also from the Norwegian rural life of the past that is criticized. It is this national past that in *Anna* functions as a bygone golden age. In the novel, traditional rural life is represented through old chalets on a mountain plateau that Anna frequently visits. In Norwegian literature, these chalets usually symbolize former ideals of modesty and a simple life characterized by the responsible use of resources (Rees 2011, 23–36) – a sustainable way of life which in *Anna* is contrasted with the perceived irresponsibility and

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<sup>5</sup> “Vi er en egoistisk generasjon. Vi er en brutal generasjon.” All translations from Norwegian in this article are my own.

<sup>6</sup> “Vi forandrer omgivelsene i den grad at det er blitt vanlig å omtale tiden vi lever i som en helt ny geologisk epoke, nemlig *antropocen*.” Emphasis in the original.



egoism of present-day Norwegians. The rural past is, however, not the only golden age in the novel. From Nova's perspective in the year 2082, Anna's own present is such an idealized past: a time in which many of the planet's natural ecosystems still remain intact and are characterized by beauty, diversity and harmony.

The use of not only two different levels of time – one in the present, the other one in the future – but also two idealized pasts, one of which still exists, allows the novel to depict the future as open and shapeable, despite the catastrophic scenario prevailing in the year 2082. Instead of indulging in pessimism, given that global warming is already happening and that millions of species are in danger of extinction, Anna is therefore characterized by hope and by a belief in the possibility of creating a different future. When she wakes up from her dream about Nova, she feels that “it was still not too late to save the Earth's biological diversity. The world had got one more chance”<sup>7</sup> (Gaarder 2013, 55). Based on an imagined former Norwegian society with modesty as a guiding principle, Anna advocates an ethics of intergenerational responsibility following the principle that “you should act towards the next *generation* the way you had wished that the previous generation had acted towards you”<sup>8</sup> (Gaarder 2013, 57).

Gaarder's novel is an example of an environmentalist text that is conscious of the Anthropocene but nevertheless keeps to the triadic narrative structure of cultural criticism. This structure is, however, modified in a creative way in view of the enormous changes that already have taken place. Through referring not to one but to two idealized pasts, the dystopian future scenario is depicted as preventable. Thus, the future still appears to be open and shapeable, and pessimism is avoided.

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<sup>7</sup> “[D]et var ennå ikke for sent å berge Jordens biologiske mangfold. Verden hadde fått en sjanse til!”

<sup>8</sup> “Du skal gjøre mot neste *generasjon* slik du hadde ønsket at forrige generasjon hadde gjort mot deg.” Emphasis in the original.

## Conclusion

The triadic structure of cultural criticism common since Rousseau's time has been characteristic of environmentalist narratives irrespective of media and genres since the beginnings of environmentalism itself. Yet consciousness of the Anthropocene clearly has an influence on contemporary environmentalist narratives, as the examples analyzed above demonstrate. There are cases which, like *Last Days of the Arctic*, abandon parts of the conventional triadic structure altogether and confine themselves to nostalgic retrospection into an idealized past. Yet other examples, such as *Anna*, not only maintain the triadic structure, but even augment some of its conventional elements in order to depict the future as still being open, and thus to encourage action and the search for better alternatives.

These are only two examples, and they may not be particularly representative of the way in which consciousness of the Anthropocene changes contemporary environmentalist narratives. As Alexa Weik von Mossner observes, many writers and filmmakers are currently experimenting with new ways of making environmental change on a geological scale imaginable, as conventional narrative patterns are increasingly perceived as being inadequate for representing the many ongoing changes that constitute the Anthropocene and their implications (Weik von Mossner 2016). Yet as the examples of *Last Days of the Arctic* and *Anna* show, the conventional triadic structure of cultural criticism – although modified in various ways – still figures prominently at least in some contemporary environmentalist narratives displaying consciousness of the Anthropocene. This may not be surprising, considering the omnipresence of this narrative structure in most works of cultural criticism since Rousseau's time. It has shaped critical thinking about both social and environmental problems for such a long time that it may be unlikely to become obsolescent altogether.

It can be asked, however, whether its persistence is a good thing. After all, representing perceived social and/or environmental problems through imagining an idealized past, contrasting it with a rejected present, and

then drafting possible alternative future pathways, is an enormous simplification of highly complex issues. In recent decades, knowledge about the immense complexity of ecological interrelationships and of global environmental change has grown considerably. Why does it then still seem to be so important to look back on a simplified picture of an assumed ideal past state? As the example of *Last Days of the Arctic* shows, this retrospection involves a risk of indulging in pure nostalgia and pessimism, and can lead to an implicit denial of the need for environmental and social activism in light of the Anthropocene's manifold and enormous threats to both human societies and ecosystems. The narrative simplicity of the triadic structure may, on the other hand, explain its success and widespread use in environmental and social activism. Would more, and more complex, narratives possess a similar potential to motivate people to take action?

One could also ask whether the largely fictional nature of all reconstructed ideal pasts makes their use generally questionable. As Rousseau admitted, the 'state of nature', like any other imagined golden age where perfect harmony reigned between humans and the environment, most likely never existed. Nevertheless, we find this element in works of both fiction and nonfiction. Still, as the example of Gaarder's novel shows, an overtly fictional framing of an environmentalist work offers narrative possibilities that non-fiction cannot. In *Anna*, the fictional plot does not lead to a complete abandonment of the triadic structure of cultural criticism, but it facilitates its creative extension and transformation in an attempt to make it applicable to the new conditions of the Anthropocene. It is likely that, in the years to come, we will see much more of this kind of narrative innovation, and it may well be that works of fiction will play a special role in the development of a new, Anthropocenic environmental consciousness.

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