CHAPTER 2

Changing Atmospheres: The Proto-Ecological Landscapes of Nikolai Astrup

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Abstract: The innovative artist and smallholder Nikolai Astrup (1880–1928) spent most of his career devoted to portraying variations of his home village of Jølster. The early reception and framing of Astrup's work as 'national' was, by large, a result of the budding national art institutions' efforts towards unifying the diverse regional cultures into a single national identity. This chapter questions to what degree Nikolai Astrup's artistic project adhered to a national agenda. Through the lens of ecocritical art history, Astrup's art can be seen as an expression of proto-ecological sensibilities and a reaction to the environmental changes of his time. His landscape paintings often include humans working on the land, and appear to represent an opposition to the nature-culture dichotomy and the increasing separation between humans and their environment that occurred during Astrup's lifetime. His representation of his surroundings was that of the place-specific, cyclical and particular. In this chapter, these characteristics of Astrup's artistic project are discussed in light of Arne Næss' notion of deep ecology.

Keywords: ecocritical art history, literary ecocriticism, deep ecology, national landscape painting

Introduction

Henie Onstad Kunstsenter (Art Centre), 2016. On the floor, a group of school children are sitting in a circle with pieces of paper, drawing pictures of wild bonfires. Now and then they stop to tilt their heads and gaze at the intense swirls of yellow, orange and green in the painting in front of them. Hanging on the white wall is one of Norway's quintessential national treasures, *Midsummer Eve Bonfire* [figure 1], by Nikolai

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Figure 1. Nikolai Astrup. (1915). *Midsummer Eve Bonfire*. Collection: Sparebankstiftelsen DnB. Photo: Dag Fosse/KODE. Reproduced with the permission of KODE. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

Astrup (1881–1928). The innovative artist and smallholder spent most of his career devoted to portraying variations of his home village of Jølster. *Midsummer Eve Bonfire* depicts an emerald green valley with women and men dancing around a smoky, crackling bonfire under clouded white mountains and the hue of the northern summer night sky. All but one woman, who is standing near the edge of the frame, observing the dance and resting her hands on her belly.

As the children at the Henie Onstad focus on drawing a circle of flames on the floor, the occasional art connoisseur or group of spectators step around the small brush fires to catch a closer look at the painting, sighing, 'How marvellous, *how completely Norwegian*!' Yet, as Tove Haugsbø's research shows, Astrup's influences stretch far beyond national borders (Haugsbø, 2015). The early reception and framing of Astrup's work as 'national' was largely a result of the budding national art institutions' efforts towards unifying the diverse regional cultures into a single national identity.

Ecocritical Art History is a recent development within the field of Environmental Humanities, rooted in literary ecocriticism from the 1990s. In much the same way as feminist or postcolonial critique uses an artwork or literary work to shed light on gender/racial power structures within a

culture or society's historical context, ecocriticism uses cultural legacies to discuss historical environmental consciousness and the power structure within nature/culture. As Professor Alan C. Braddock explains in an interview for the podcast *Edge Effects*, ecocritical art history 'in many ways expands the meaning of historical context to include not just human social institutions and conditions but the larger environmental context in which these human activities have unfolded over time.' (Slaby, 2019). Furthermore, the enclosed biographical self can transform into a materially entangled self, where the specific environmental conditions can co-narrate the aesthetic and literary form. In a sense, philosopher Roland Barthes' notion of author is now brought back from the dead, albeit this time with worms, mud and all. So, let us step back in time to search for the larger environmental context in which Astrup's life and work in Jølster took shape.

A Collective Uniformed Time

Oslo Central Station, July 1922. The painter Ludvig Ravensberg and the writer Hans E. Kinck step aboard the Bergen train heading to Western Norway to visit their friend Nikolai Astrup. After a restless night's sleep, the two friends get off at Myrdal and hike through the landscape made of deep valleys and purple heathered highland. Kinck scoffs at the farmers' replacements of their old sod roofs with corrugated iron, and complains about the decline of traditional culture in Norway. The conversation leads to the ironic remark that while local cultures are slowly disintegrating, the reconstructed folk costume *bunad* is gaining in popularity. The next day, Ravensberg and Kinck arrive at the fjord village of Balestrand, a popular travel destination for the German Emperor Wilhelm II. They pass the 'dragon style' villa of painter Hans Dahl, whose grand landscape paintings are populated by young women in *bunads* to appeal to the taste of his German benefactor. They soon head for Jølster, to get away from 'all the fakeness'.

Steeped in harsh statements, the diary entry of Ludvig Ravensberg's trip to Jølster in July 1922 points out that the abstract idea of Norway as a unified nation, combined with industrial development, was replacing regional independence and local identity. The National Gallery, established in 1836, played an important role in the construction of this national narrative. As

the pictures of traditional country life made their way onto the walls of the national museums, and the vernacular building traditions of Norway were collected in open air museums, the reality was that this form of life was rapidly dying out. In the period between 1860 to 1960, the percentage of Norwegians engaged in primary production fell from 90% to 10% of the population. Farming and fishing went from being a collective project—in which one generation taught the next—to become marginalised, mechanised and school-taught professions. After WWII, a significant amount of people no longer produced their own food (Sandvik, 2015). Today a mere 3% of Norwegian soil is farmed land (Norwegian Government, 2018).

Amid agricultural change, disintegration of place, change from cyclical time to mechanical time, and vanishing superstitions and folklore—where trolls and goblins were chased out of the forests and mountains and put into illustrated storybooks for children—Nikolai Astrup built a unique farmstead in Jølster [figure 2]. Here, he painted lush landscapes of mountains, birch trees and meadows. In his pictures we find the presence of humans engaged in contemplative and habitual activities on the land, such as harvesting, planting or picking berries. The almost ritualistic and spiritual emphasis on the repetitive bodily motions echoes the cyclical

Figure 2. Two of the cabins at Astruptunet, Jølster. Photo: Siri Katinka Valdez.

Figure 3. View from the top of Astruptunet, Jølster. Photo: Siri Katinka Valdez. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

and mystical atmosphere in his repetitive, yet varied, landscapes—often infused with mythical creature-like shapes. In a sense, the viewer is visually narrated by a form of oral storytelling of the relationship between humans and place over time.

When Ravensberg and Kinck arrived at their final destination on 12 July 1922, they were bewildered at the all-encompassing devotion that Astrup had towards painting, shaping, cultivating, and building in the environment [figure 3]. In Ravensberg's words:

> Astrup, this peculiar man, has put spirit into everything in this place, built the houses, fertilized and crossed the plants, shaped the terracing landscape, fought the harsh nature and built stone grottos and ledges. Here he is alternating between being a carpenter, a farmer, a man of nature and a man of culture. Kinck and I are walking around completely bewildered … To think that something so original and strangely personal exists in our collective uniformed time … In all

> areas, Astrup is at home. In chemistry, [making natural paint] color, plants—Astrup is a philosopher of nature that has observed everything … To understand Astrup, one must go to his farm Sandal … (Gløersen, 1958, pp. 82–89)

'I actually saw it when I painted it'

Sandalstrand, Jølster – November 1917. Nikolai Astrup is sitting in his cabin at his farmstead in Sandalstrand, writing a letter to shipbroker Hans Jacob Meyer. The shipbroker had requested that Astrup remove some cows from one of the paintings he had bought from him (*Stardalstøylene* (1917)). Astrup, being financially burdened, gives in to the request, but finds it necessary to explain why the cows are central to the work. Thus, he replies:

> Nikolai Astrup to Hans Jacob Meyer – Sandalstrand 28/11/1917
>
> Mr. Meyer
> Yes, I will indeed remove the cows—after your request—however, I will not refrain from mentioning that these cows were to a degree the point of—and a necessary part of—the mood, which made me choose to paint the motif at precisely that time of day. It is, in fact, characteristic of the mood on a mountain grazing farm; when the creatures return home after sunset they most often stay in a single line on ridges and hilltops. Why, you may ask, well, probably because they are easy to spot, so that their friends—the other creatures—can see that they are on their way home and can join them. That the creatures do this is, hence, almost for the same reason that one puts bells on cows; I have often seen this and noticed this in particular at Bakkestöilen this summer. When one does not see this more often, it is perhaps because the cows do not always have such easy access to heights or ridges that can be spotted from all angles of the valley, but then, as mentioned, the cowbells do the same service (to gather the animals home at night). When I mention this, it is to explain that it was not a 'contrived' whim of mine—this thing with the cows—I actually saw it when I painted it. (Astrup, 1917a)

Astrup's letter reveals a distinct environmental awareness and sensibility. Firstly, Astrup draws similarities between humans and animals – devaluating the human/nature dichotomy. Both cows and humans use tricks to

gather the herd at dusk; while humans use cowbells, the cows themselves form a line on top of ridges and hilltops to draw attention to their wandering 'friends', so they will not get lost in the dark. Also, Astrup uses the nouns 'creatures' and 'friends' when speaking of the cows, as a way to emphasise their significance; not objectifying them as 'cattle' that could easily be removed from the motive. Lastly, Astrup explains that the choice to paint the scenery at dusk was because of the behaviour of the cows at precisely this time of day, something he had experienced and seen himself. He emphasises that the formation of the animals on the ridgeline is a direct response to the sun's movement across the sky. Removing the cows from the work would remove the 'mood' or the 'feeling' that Astrup was trying to convey, that is, the interrelations between animals and their environment.

The narrative that Astrup reveals in this letter shows ties to an environmental attitude Arne Næss later developed as *deep ecology*. According to Næss, all life has inherent value, and the symbiotic relationship between organisms is crucial (Næss, 1973, pp. 95–100). In other words, deep ecology is systemically and ethically oriented, meaning that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It is only through maintaining this symbiosis between organisms that ecology can exist. A deep ecological approach that emphasises place-specificness, diversity and symbiosis within the ecosystem at large seems applicable to Astrup's place-specific and particular landscapes. In nearly all of Astrup's paintings, there is a definite emphasis and fascination with *place*: a fascination that coincided with the disintegration of place in society at large. While the Norwegian art discourse was preoccupied with classifying his landscape paintings as representing the whole of Norway, Astrup was more concerned with tending the ten types of rhubarb he grew in his garden.

Returning to the Source

In light of this, let us return to the primal fire at the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter. The giant fire ignites the whole room. But ignites it with what? An atmosphere of abstract nationalism or an atmosphere of humans in connection with their environment? The latter is exemplified in the ritualistic celebration of fire, a vital source of nourishment and life. The children on

the floor certainly seemed to be focused on this vitality. The fire is indeed the central 'character' of *Midsummer Eve Bonfire*, while the humans circle the flames in devotion and celebration. The steep mountains and the lake create the atmospheric mood in the painting, typical to Western Norway, specifically the mountain valley of Jølster. It is not the flat and open landscape of Eastern Norway that is portrayed, not the salted, crusty seascape of Lofoten, but a specific location in Jølster. The exploration of humans in place, as well as the emphasis on cyclical and seasonal rhythms, were central in Astrup's body of work. Instead of defining Astrup's motives from a nationally oriented perspective, the artist's landscapes can be seen as a proto-ecological contemplation of the environmental changes of his time.

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