The Personal and the Planetary: Gendering Ecology in Theis Ørntoft’s Solar

Sherilyn Nicolette Hellberg
PhD candidate in Comparative Literature, University of California, Berkeley
hellberg@berkeley.edu

Abstract
This paper considers the environmental and gender politics of Theis Ørntoft’s Solar (2018). Much criticism of Solar has focused on its depiction of consumer capitalism in the Anthropocene. As the novel deconstructs its first person narrator—evoking theories of romanticism and poststructuralism—it seems to forward an ecologically progressive, posthumanist politics. I argue, however, that the novel’s preoccupation with structure and surface is underpinned by a regressive, binary conception of gender and an autonomous, masculine subject, which undermines its potential anti-anthropocentric thrust. This reading contributes to existing perspectives on Solar and explores key intersections between gender and ecocriticism.

Keywords
contemporary Danish literature, gender studies, ecocriticism, critical theory

The personal isn’t political.
The personal is planetary.1
–Theis Ørntoft, Solar (2018)

The most emphatic and frequently cited lines of Theis Ørntoft’s Solar (2018), quoted above, express concern for the environment while rebuking second-wave and intersectional feminism. “Then the personal as political can begin to illuminate all our choices,” Audre Lorde famously concluded her 1979 lecture, echoing voices past and to come, which underline the importance of situated experiences of gender, race, and class in reforming sociopolitical structures (1983, 101). This famous coupling of the personal and the political, however, dragged into the Danish language through soggy layers of time, has little relevance for the novel’s young male narrator as he wanders through the Danish countryside. Imagining himself the subject of romantic paintings and poems, writing himself into a lineage of European literature amid sprawling forests, open skies, and hilltops, the political is not enough. It’s too small scale. He needs something bigger: something planetary.

Solar is a novel told in three parts by Theis, a first-person narrator who bears various resemblances to the author besides the name. The first part follows Theis on a hiking trip along Jutland’s Hærvejen. Hoping to escape the city, find solitude or something else (it’s

1. In the original: “Det private er ikke politisk. / Det private er planetarisk.” Unless otherwise indicated, translations from Danish sources are mine.
never made clear precisely what), he plods through trafficked paths, peopled campsites, and rural towns, indulging in what Tue Andersen Nexø (2018), approximating the narrator’s sometimes shallow stupor, terms “thinking deep thoughts.” Mimicking romantic wanderers from previous centuries, Theis-the-eco-poet goes into nature, laying the figurative groundwork for the development narrative that the novel will unravel. The second part finds Theis back in Copenhagen, where he continues his search for escape or authenticity, for the planetary. He exchanges the forest for the city, the flask of whiskey for technicolor nightclub drugs, romantic interlocutors for poststructuralist ones. Leaving behind the Danish literary scene, he lifts weights at the gym, meets a girl, moves into her suburban apartment, and wastes the days playing Grand Theft Auto 5 and masturbating. After their break-up, Theis abandons Copenhagen and, fulfilling a prophesy from the first part, travels “south” (Ørntoft 2018a, 28). In Portugal, he befriends an eccentric young man named Diago and lives alone in a shack on an abandoned beach. In the third part, Diago finds him and the two play croquet, eat canned food in the back of a truck, smoke crack, and murder Diago’s parents. In the discontinuous final pages, Theis and Diago flee into a haze of road, rain, and forest, ending up in eastern Europe or maybe, off the grid.

In Denmark, Solar has been praised for its ecological undertones and its illustration of the apathy and alienation bred by consumer capitalism. Dubbed a work of “cosmic vandalism” (Nexø 2018), the novel has been praised for its discursively slapdash style—which Nexø likens to an “uncut film”—, the acuity of its social and political observations, and its relevance to past and current discussions of ecology (Rösing 2018; Thomsen 2018; Nexø 2018). In the following pages, however, I explore the tension, exemplified by the epigraph, between the novel’s ecocritical potential and its gender politics. As I aim to demonstrate, the narrator’s ecologically motivated attempt to inhabit entropy, “experience reality”, and make immanent “the spectacular swamp of mediocrity and privilege” around him, is drawn out of and perpetuates a masculine ethos which excludes and overwrites gendered identities (Ørntoft 2018a, 13). Emphasizing the planetary rather than political aspect of the personal, in other words, not only excludes gender and identity-based hegemonies, but potentially undermines the ecological thrust of the novel.

In the first half of this article, I consider how Solar has been and might be read “through the prism of ecocriticism,” outlining its affinities to the recent genre of climate fiction as well as to German and Scandinavian romanticism and French poststructuralism, which have been vital to the development of ecocriticism (Rugg 2012, 89). In the latter half, I explore the gendered implications of these planetary leanings, looking at the novel’s representation of women, its critique of forms of labor that have historically been gendered feminine, and its ambivalent reliance on the masculine subject embodied by the first-person narrator. In conclusion, I wonder whether the novel’s representation of the personal, political, and planetary is merely troubling, or may be fruitful for rethinking the relationship between gender and ecology in Scandinavian literature and broader theoretical debates.

2. In the original: “tænker dybe tanker”
3. See Handesten (2018) on the novel’s use of literary cliche. Handesten is critical of these (“Ørntoft indeed shakes things up, but more and newer things need to be added to the bag to get bingo. A more original story would have done wonders”). I agree, however, with Thomsen (2018) that these clichés are essential to Solar’s poststructuralist style.
4. In the original: “kosmisk hærværk”
5. Some critics have expressed concern about the novel’s nihilism and the carelessness of its conclusion (Rösing 2018). Others have pointed to the novel’s failure to move beyond “literary clichés” (Handesten 2018).
6. In the original: “at opleve virkeligheden”; “den spektakulært middelmådige privilegesump”
Climate Fictions

In her account of the burgeoning genre of climate fiction, Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow cites Robert Macfarlane’s plea to sketch its parameters: “[A]n imaginative repertoire is urgently needed by which the causes and consequences of climate change can be debated, sensed, and communicated” (2013, 59). In the fifteen years since, an outpouring of books has filled this gap, “translating graphs and scientific jargon into experience and emotion” (Tuhus-Dubrow 2013, 59). Should Solar be included this recent crop of fiction that conveys the gravity of global warming?

Its paratext would suggest as much. The title and scorched, hazy orange landscape on the cover echo the visual rhetoric of other seminal works of climate fiction, not least Ian McEwan’s 2010 novel of the same name. The synopsis on the back cover reveals, moreover, that the narrator is an “økodigter” or ecopoet, an epithet that has often been attached to Ørntoft since the publication of his post-apocalyptic Poems 2014 [Digte 2014]. Many critics have extended the “eco” label to Solar, tying the novel’s thematic content—romantic wanderings in nature, urban ennui, sunset hitchhiking—to a critical stance. Solar has been read, if not explicitly as cli-fi, then as a book of the Anthropocene, or one that takes place in that “geological time marked by the decisive ‘terraforming’ of Earth as such” (Morton 2013, 4). Torsten Bøgh Thomsen, among these lines, suggests Solar falls into step with “a current literary predilection for the anti-anthropocentric” (2018, 11). Tue Andersen Nexø (2018), meanwhile, credits Ørntoft with bringing a high-modernist trope of masculine destruction into “age of the climate crisis and the sixth mass extinction.”

It is tempting, given Solar’s apparent attunement to current discussions of climate change, to ascribe an ecocritical purpose to the text. As I address in the next two sections, this densely intertextual novel engages not only the conditions of climate change, but a varied array of literature and theoretical discourse that has coalesced around it. Put differently, Solar is not merely a book “by which” one gains access to climate change and its “causes and consequences,” or out of which one might develop a theory of climate change. Rather, this discourse is woven into its narrative universe. While attuned to these ecocritical discourses, however, Solar relates ambivalently, at times ironically, to the appropriation of the novel to ecocritical ends. I suggest, in fact, that Solar may be more interested in discursively tantalizing the ecocritical reader than any explicitly ecological project.

Romantic Excursions

One of the key ways that Solar tempts this ecocritical reader is through its references to canonical works of romanticism. As Thomsen (2018) observes, the first part of Solar echoes a number of romantic writers in its style and imagery, including Johannes Ewald, Adam

---

7. See Tuhus-Dubrow (2013) for a helpful summary of the genre, which she dates to the start of the 21st century.
10. In the original: “en aktuel litterær forkærlighed for det anti-antropocentriske”
11. In the original: ”i klimakrisens og den sjette masseudrydelses tid”
12. Solar’s allusive slipperiness has been linked to a lack of imagination on the author’s part (Handesten 2018) and a dangerous nihilism on the novel’s (Rösing 2018). I read it, however, as a symptom of the lingering anthropocentrism rooted in the masculine, first person narrator.
13. To be fair, both Thomsen and Nexø address this problem of irony. Thomsen, however, reads Solar’s irony as inherited from the romantics and therefore not at odds with an ecocritical reading, as I suggest it may be.
Oehlenschläger, Friedrich Schiller, and Friedrich Schlegel, and American nature writers such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. For Thomsen, these allusions suggest an interest in the natural world and in a set of theoretical questions, which, first raised by the romantics, help the contemporary reader to critically approach the climate crisis. Similar to the romantics, he argues, Ørntoft probes “the relationship between ‘culture’ and ‘nature’” and “humans and their surroundings” (Thomsen 2018, 203). These romantic binaries, brought into Solar’s present, signal a challenge to the anthropocentric primacy of the human, to which many ecocritics attribute climate change.

The connection between romanticism and ecocriticism is by no means new. Particularly in the field of English literature, romanticism has proved an important source of inspiration for the branch of study called ecocriticism, defined by Cheryll Glotfelty as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (1996, xviii). Lawrence Buell, in fact, pinpoints British romanticism, alongside U.S. nature writing, as one of two “epicenters” of ecocriticism (Buell 2011, 89). For romantically inclined ecocritics, such as Timothy Morton, this is because romantic literature’s earlier meditations on nature provide helpful ways for thinking critically about our current relationship to the planet. The romantics, therefore, offer thematic fodder for environmental thought with their majestic descriptions of greenery, as well as theoretical tools to approach, and deconstruct, ingrained notions of subjectivity and the human which have proven so detrimental to the planet.

In his brief history of the field, Buell suggests the affinity between ecocriticism and romanticism is partially “contingent rather than inherent, a matter of seizing low-hanging fruit” (Buell 2011, 89–90). Given the historical collapse that enables the connection between the two, one might wonder whether these romantic works are being taken out of context and instrumentalized, or whether the mere presence of a natural environment in a literary work automatically portends ecological potential. Solar is perhaps more concerned with this tension than the environment. Its romantic references signal an ecological awareness but also illuminate the potential vacuousness of such signaling.

This tension is particularly prominent in the first part of Solar, which uses intertextuality to pull at the reader’s ecocritical heartstrings. At one point, Theis writes himself into what resembles a Caspar David Friedrich painting; meditation becomes solipsistic parody:

Like a romantic from the 1800s, I emerged from the forest and I could see everything. The green hills spread underneath the blue sky full of heather, grass, and insects…I sat down and lit a cigarette. The last few hours in the company of my brain had been surprisingly pleasant, I had put the encounter with the two women behind me and thought about other things. Among other things, I had considered just how long I would keep hiking, and was struck by a sudden urge to keep going when I, in ten days time, would arrive in Padborg; to quite simply keep going towards Germany, south until my provisions ran out and my clothes began to hang off me in threads and my friends and family slowly became farther and farther away, hazy phenomena—until they finally disappeared altogether, and a new and foreign personality
would slide into my life, changing everything like a slow and merciless glacier. Where would I end up? Would I disappear entirely at the end, down a rabbit hole somewhere on the map over old Europe? I had thought about it, which had led me to a more structured reflection on liberation in general. Liberating myself from the material things I carried with me on this hiking trip… what would that mean? Obviously the central element in my inventory was my Visa card. It was itself the heart of the cultural circus that was hiking here, in any case a vital organ. Should I throw away my Visa card? I thought to myself. It was a sudden impulse. I had no idea where the thought had come from (2018, 28–29).18

As he indulges this vision of himself as a romantic, or romantic-inspired, “wanderer,” Theis imagines—foreshadowing the novel’s third part—sloughing off various attachments, his clothing, his friends and family, even his debit card, and “going…south.” Writing himself through romantic narratives of men going into nature, his search for meaning and authenticity becomes increasingly empty. His desire to connect morphs into a desire to detach. People (the two women) and objects (the cigarette, provisions, clothing), society and its instruments (the Visa card), are posited as obstacles to authenticity, to a more genuine connection with nature and himself. By going into the depths of Europe, letting his clothes wear out and provisions run low, cutting off connections to family and friends, Theis hopes to escape the commodity-saturated welfare state which obstructs his contact to nature. But “culture” reasserts itself, as much in the debit card as in Theis’s satirically “structured reflection on liberation.” Theis’s fictional foray into nature, via the trodden paths of the romantics, turns out to be merely a foray into his own self, an ironized solipsism into which he intertextually drags his interlocutors. Theis plays the “økodigter” at the same time as he renders ecological interest merely performative.

Poststructural Proclivities

Put differently, Solar’s representation of nature and the climate crisis bears the mark not only of German and Scandinavian romanticism but also of the late twentieth-century field of French thought called poststructuralism. Challenging the stability that structuralists such as Claude Levi-Strauss and Ferdinand Saussure ascribed to language, thinkers labelled poststructuralist—such as Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Baudrillard—problematic systems of knowledge production. As Terry Eagleton helpfully explains: “Instead of being a well-defined, demarcated structure containing symmetrical units of signifiers and signifieds, [language] begins to look much more like a sprawling limitless web where there is a constant interchange and circulation of elements, where none of the elements is absolutely definable and where everything is caught up and traced through

by everything else” (Eagleton 2010, 112). Poststructuralism, in other words, destabilizes words from their meanings and turns them into sites of experimentation, “play,” or “deconstruction” (Derrida 2002).

Poststructuralism, similar to romanticism, has had a major influence on the development of ecocritical thought, not least the work of Arne Næss, Timothy Morton, and Jane Bennett. With its “sprawling” and destabilized notion of language, it offers a vocabulary and methodology to challenge the givenness of weighty concepts such as “nature” and “culture” as well as the binaries erected between them. Poststructuralism’s ecocritical descendants, including those above, have used this as foundation to challenge the primacy of human consciousness over that of surrounding objects and the environment. Their work informs Theis’s many semiotic, ecologically-attuned digressions, such as this:

What is this object I’m looking at?
Maybe the question isn’t even whether the tree is nature or culture.
The question is whether it’s even a tree.
So stop talking about nature like it’s separate from everything else. That also includes myself. Stop it. Stop talking about culture like it’s separate from everything else. Stop talking about untouched nature like it exists out there, separate from everything else. Stop talking about polluted nature like it exists out there, separate from everything else. Stop talking about utopia like it exists separate from everything else. Stop talking about dystopia like it exists separate from everything else. Stop talking about the climate crisis like it exists separate from everything else. Stop talking about the financial crisis as separate from everything else. Stop talking about the refugee crisis as separate from everything else. Stop talking about anything as if you have the slightest idea of what’s actually going on. We have no idea what’s going on. Everything is intertwined and interconnected. Everything has causes, everything has effects that comprise an incomprehensible, multidimensional web.

Humans have no language to describe what’s happening.
My life takes places within this incomprehensibility.
The personal isn’t political.
The personal is planetary. (2018a, 67–68)

Along Hærvejen, Theis deconstructs various objects, concepts, and systems of meaning as he encounters them on the trail and in his stream of consciousness. In the first part, a dip
into the register of stoned teenager is underscored by a theoretical point. In the tradition of Derrida, a binary—“nature” and “culture”—is briefly considered only to be dismissed, turned on its head. Ørntoft’s cocktail cliché mixes high theory with high kid, resulting in a humorous tone that seems ironic, but also a little sincere. This levity is abruptly traded for irritation in the more environmentally focused plea that follows, which comes to a head with the epigraph with which this essay begins. Still, despite the frankness and the fervor, there is a slippage in this second paragraph between political sincerity and linguistic performativity. A message seems intended, but is cloaked in the words and rhetorical moves of others, and rejects the ability of language to convey such messages.

I am interested here in the intersection of politics and form, which Solar seems to inherit from its poststructural interlocutors. Similar to romanticism, the discourse of poststructuralism seems self-consciously woven into Solar, and particularly its more ecologically attuned passages such as the above. Often, as above, the narrator’s “deep thoughts” mimic the style, syntax, and thematic concerns of key works of poststructuralism and deconstructively inclined ecocritics, such as Morton (whose Ecology Without Nature is barely under the surface here). But I wonder, again, whether these examples of intertextuality perhaps play on the political ambivalence central to these fields and their intellectual-historical legacies. Like the “wanderer from the 1800s,” the playful poststructuralist behind the scenes creates trouble for the reader in discerning the text’s politics. When Theis attempts to describe what’s happening by proclaiming that “[h]umans have no language to describe what’s happening,” I wonder how far this irony goes, whether he is only mimicking; what his rhetorical prowess—the repetition, brief, emphatic sentences, and vacillation between the singular and plural perspective—implies for the content of his words. I wonder, in other words, whether the seeming ecological awareness of this passage (the novel’s most overtly political) is merely a matter of signaling—like the hazy orange cover art—or contingency, of “seizing low-hanging fruit.”

Det smukke kvindedyr
I would suggest that this environmental slipperiness is bound up with Solar’s problematic gender politics. As I have outlined so far, Solar intertextually dangles the carrot of ecology in front of the reader, whose eager grasp may close the gap between political ambivalence and potential. As the rest of this article explores, Solar’s gender politics reside in this occluded space.

Many critics have noted a bias toward the masculine in Solar’s fictional universe, both in its engagement with a lineage of literature’s despairing men—from Johannes Ewald to Niels Lyhne, Raskolnikov to Ole Jastrau—and its repertoire of clichés—from solitary hiking to weight-lifting and violent video games. But few, if any, have addressed the novel’s representation of women, or the role of gender in the anti-anthropocentric worldview it seems to espouse. Indeed, Solar’s representation of women is unsettling. The narrator repeatedly

---


23. While she doesn’t cite them by name, Lilian Munk Rösing’s (2018) additive and decentralized style in her precis of Solar performatively links the novel to Deleuze and Guattari’s poststructuralist tome, A Thousand Plateaus. For example: “Here, everything has become lines, windings, branchings, unfoldings, and expanses, which interweave to form a common threadwork, in which mind, body, human, plant, animal, language, time, sight, and sound come into being as one and the same material” [Her bliver alt til linjer, slyngninger, forgrenninger, udfoldninger, udstrekninger, der fletter sig ind i en fælles vævning, hvor sind, krop, menneske, plante, dyr, sprog, tid, syn, lyd materialises til et og samme stof.]
refers to the women around him in demeaning or exoticizing terms, grumbling over the intrusion of attractive women into his physical surroundings and the novel’s narrative space. At the gym, he admires the “tight ass” of his future girlfriend, Nadja, but is also irritated by her presence (2018a, 104).24 “Let me have some fucking peace,” he groans to himself (2018a, 104).25 Later, when Theis and Nadja are living together, he calls her a “beautiful woman-animal” (2018a, 157).26 In another part of the novel, Theis renders a teenage crush similarly animal and foreign: “a mystical organism, a nameless biological system” (2018a, 18).27 A woman sunbathing along Hærvejen is reduced to the “large breasts” partially covered by her bikini top, which are indirectly admonished for provoking Theis’s descent into “the most trivial” of thoughts (2018a, 27).

This misogyny might be read as a byproduct of the cultural clichés and literary interlocutors Solar engages, caught like seaweed in the novel’s intertextual fishing net. As one might be tempted to read the novel as self-aware in its relationship to ecocriticism, Solar might also be said to relate ironically and “metadiscursively” to its gender politics, exaggerating them for effect (Thomsen 2018, 205).28 At the same time, these serve a more fundamental, structural role in the novel. Gender difference is repeatedly posited as an obstacle, an impediment to Theis’s anti-anthropocentric project, but simultaneously it provides the occasion for his ecologically deconstructive exercises.29

Coding, De-coding, Re-coding
In fact, gender is present in the parts of the novel most imbued with ecocritical import, not least the Hærvejen passage quoted above, whose planetary point rejects a landmark feminist credo. Often, Solar’s critique of global capitalism and the Scandinavian welfare state takes place via a critique of industrialized forms of labor that have been historically understood as feminine, such as food production and care work. In the first and third parts of the novel, Theis exists almost solely off highly processed non-perishables and canned goods. An anti-establishment cliche, associated with survivalists and Doomsday foreseers, each tin can, enjoyed alone or in the company of Theis’s eccentric companion Diago, indicates a break from the society’s constraints. These forms of nourishment, which merely satisfy basic needs, are seen as distinct from the oft-feminized realms of domesticity and care.

24. In the original: “hendes røv struttede lige ud i luften.”
25. In the original: “Lad mig nu bare fucking være i fred.” Class is also interestingly at play here. Nadja’s suntanned appearance, clothing, and suburban place of residence suggest she comes from a lower class than Theis.
26. In the original: “Det smukke kvindedyr”
27. In the original: “en mystisk organis, et navnløst biologisk system”
28. "Solar is full of…self-aware, metadiscursive, and dramatically self-ironizing passages, which can be difficult to piece together into a cohesive reading” [Solar er fyldt med…selvkommentererende, metadiskuterende og dramatisk selvironiske passage, som kan være vanskelige at få til at hænge sammen i et overordnet udsagn].
29. In his landmark study of queer-of-color art and culture, Disidentifications, José Muñoz cautions against the uncritical use of the term masculinity in academic discourse. So doing, he argues, risks perpetuating the reductive, binary, and “normative rubric that has policed the sex/gender system” (Muñoz 1999, 57–8). Jack Halberstam, in Female Masculinity, similarly asserts that “masculinity must not and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects” (Halberstam 1998, 1). And yet, as both authors recognize, a vocabulary is necessary to address the pervasive power evinced and perpetuated by the use of gendered designations such as “masculine” and “feminine.” Along these lines, it is difficult to unravel Solar’s gender politics—as well as their potential intertwinement in the book’s ontological project—without gendering adjectives. What I am interested in, however, is not pinning these adjectives to characters or habits. Rather, I aim to outline the ways in which Solar—keeping with the vocabulary of Deleuze and Guattari—engages in a process of gendered decoding and recoding, which is entangled with its ecological import.
This distinction is elaborated in the novel’s second part, in which Theis languishes in Nadja’s suburban apartment, watching reruns of Wimbledon and playing *Grand Theft Auto*, while running through his unemployment benefits from the state. Nadja, meanwhile, works as a caretaker in a public institution. Thus a dividing line is gradually drawn. On one side, coded feminine, is Nadja, the domestic comforts in which she lives, and the welfare care that she provides. One the other, coded masculine, is the anti-social Theis, living at the suburban margins of a system from which he nevertheless reaps benefits. When the relationship ends and Theis heads south through Europe, he appears to untether himself from the feminine once and for all. His dearth of earthly possessions as he boards a train into the European continent without a ticket signify a move of deterritorialization, a rejection of the dehumanizing systems of capitalism and the welfare state. But everything he leaves behind (the welfare state, his romantic relationship, Nadja) is re-coded feminine, while his asocial dive into pleasure is re-coded masculine.

This gendered coding offers a structure to the novel, even as the coherence of the narrative and first-person narrator starts to fray. On a beach in Portugal, for instance, Theis attempts a deconstructionist exercise in the sand:

Then I got up, grabbed a half-charred stick from the fire and drew a line in the sand. Then I wrote the following, one row to the left of the line, the other to the right:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voyeur</th>
<th>Exhibitionist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sadist</td>
<td>Masochist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light</td>
<td>Darkness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Theis literally draws a line between the masculine and the feminine. He progresses through a cursory questioning of each binary, which seems to blur the line in the sand between them. But his perfunctory dissection of the final pair stops short:

Man…Yes, I was a man. I knew that. I had always been a man. But how did I know that, really? I closed my eyes and tried to feel it, but I felt nothing. No man-feeling. I felt a sense of fatigue and slight confusion. Was that manly? I stuck my head between my legs, a firm grasp with one hand.

Yeah, okay. (2018a, 206)

Written in sand, these concepts and oppositions are posited as impermanent, unstable, examples of social, transient human interventions on the planet. Following an affirmative statement (“I was a man. I knew that.”), Theis starts to question his knowledge. There is potential for decoding, for the deterritorialization of the body at hand. However, with a brief grasp of a sex organ, the deconstructive project stops in its tracks. With a resigned affirmative (“Ja, ja”), the body is recoded as masculine. Light and dark, voyeurism and exhibitionism.

---

30. In the original: “Så rejste jeg mig, greb en halvt udbrændt pind i bålet og tegnedes en linje op i sandet. Så skrev jeg følgende, den ene række ord på venstre side af stregen, den anden på højre side:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voyeur</th>
<th>Exhibitionist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sadist</td>
<td>Masochist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lys</td>
<td>Mørke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manden</td>
<td>Kvinden</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Ja, ja”
bitionism, sadism and masochism run into each other. But not man and woman. This binary, even when exhausted and ironized, appears to hold.

This passage illustrates the novel’s dependence on a binary and biological conception of gender. It also, however, demonstrates the intersection of these gender politics with the novel’s simultaneously ecological and philosophical bent. The novel writes away the narrator’s autonomy,32 underlining the permeability of boundaries between the narrator and his textual universe, between the work of literature, the language in which it is written and the world it represents. Gender asserts itself as an obstacle to this project of dissolution. Gender difference is seen both socially and biologically—Danish, notably has only one word to describe what is split into sex and gender in English—as a pest, continuously buzzing in the ear of, clinging to, the first-person narrator. But gender is also an extraordinarily useful organizing rubric which helps Theis trace the parameters of the welfare prison he longs to escape. Following his male interlocutors, Solar posits gender difference, and the feminine in particular, as both a hindrance and impetus to the artistic and intellectual (anti)development of the author, something that must be overcome for the sake of the narrator’s (de)realization as author and artist.

**Desire and Domination**

The novel’s gender politics, in other words, underpin one of the tensions central to its environmental politics: between a dialectical worldview which privileges the subject and an idealized notion of nature, and a more poststructuralist ontology which privileges the dispersion of desire over the coherency of the individual subject. The gradual shift of Theis’s interlocutors through the novel—from German and Scandinavian romantics to Hollywood films such as *The Neon Demon* (81–87), video games such as *Grand Theft Auto* (139–142), and internet porn (157–161)—parallels a shift in the paradigmatic contours of the novel from an idealist, subject-oriented metaphysics concerned with nature to a poststructuralist ontology steeped in virtual reality. The novel’s first-person narrator reaches towards the latter as he attempts to deconstruct himself in prose, but finds himself drawn back into the former as he fails to move beyond simplistic and binary gender clichés.

Put differently, Theis becomes increasingly invested in what Deleuze and Guattari call “desiring-production,” a fog of affect and sensation, capable of blurring lines, in the sand or otherwise:

> Desire constantly couples continuous flow and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented. Desire causes the current to flow, itself flows in turn, and breaks the flows. [...] Doubtless each organ-machine interprets the entire world from the perspective of its own flux, from the point of view of the energy that flows from it. (1983, 5–6)

As Theis leaves the literary world, his friends and acquaintances behind, he detaches from dated binaries, normative categories, and an idealist conception of himself as an autonomous subject, plummeting into the polychromatic, digital world. The first-person narrator continues to assert itself through to the novel’s final page. But awash amid sex and drugs, splatters of blood, mud, and rain, the “I” functions less as a distinct character or subject than an “organ-machine,” an interpretative, driving force of desire. This turn toward desire and

---

32. I mean “autonomy” in the Kantian sense, which refers to the individual’s capability to reason. In many works of poststructuralism and posthumanism (Deleuze and Guattari 1983; 1987; Lyotard 2015; Morton 2009), this term is taken to imply the givenness and primacy of the individual human subject, which these authors reject.
away from dialectics could suggest a move of deterritorialization and thus, a more progressive stance towards gender, sexuality, and ecology. However, as the narrator’s pursuit of desire becomes increasingly incoherent—as “the novel becomes too trippy, too flat, too flappy, too nihilistic”33 (Rösing 2018)—this possibility seems to fall away.

In Portugal, Theis languishes, living off the bare minimum of stolen provisions while he plunges into more “deep thoughts.” Again, he is conflicted. Again, the text wavers between the affirmation and deconstruction of the subjective autonomy of its narrator:

Admittedly, I often enjoyed dominating. I knew this from various circumstances. However, my sense of enjoyment was typically interrupted by exactly the opposite feeling a second later: a longing to release my power over the other person, an instinctive feeling of shame at having exercised my authority, a longing to escape it, to seek a condition of complete submission, to submit to a single, simple and unquestionable authority, no matter its values. I could care less about its values, or at least they were of secondary importance. It was purely a question of authority and submission. I mean: not surrendering to anyone…but also not wanting power or authority…It was all very murky, ambivalent…And what did any of this have to do with sexuality? It was making less and less sense. Maybe it didn’t have anything to do with sex. Maybe all I really wanted was to be…invisible. Yes, actually, that was probably it. I wanted to experience the world without being physically present in it. I wanted to see without being seen.

But at the same time, I also wanted to drink from the juices of the world. Yes, for fuck’s sake! I was a human being full of desire. It wasn’t enough for me to contemplate the world. I also wanted to be inside it, to touch it, to move around the world. (2018a, 204–5)34

Again, the narrative’s ambivalence vis-à-vis his own subjective autonomy is reflected in his ambivalence to his power over an implied, feminized other. The passage begins with an admission of enjoying domination, and the example of heterosexual intercourse stands out. Sexual domination strengthens his sense of self, but this affirmative pleasure is only temporary, followed by an impulse to be subjected rather than subject, to be reduced to nothing, invisible. But then, again, the narrator reverts, unabashedly exclaims—combining the aqueous language of poststructuralism with a vaguely pornographic image—his longing to drink the juices of the world. In the colloquial, self-satisfied lines that follow (“Yes, for fuck’s sake!”), the potential fluidity of desire is collected and recoded by repetition of the first-person pronoun. In his attempt to deconstruct himself, he instead reifies heteronormative masculinity, failing to detach from gendered, essentialist norms in his ecologically tinged pursuit of desire.

A deterritorializing impulse reverts to a dialectical formulation and a will to domination. Theis asserts, doubts, and then finally reasserts his impulse to dominate. The product seems a modified—or merely solidified—version of the masculine subject position with which he begins. By the end of the passage, Theis expresses the desire to dominate not only

---

33. In the original: “for syret, for fladt, for flagrende, for nihilistisk.”
34. In the original: “Ganske vist havde jeg ofte nydt at dominere, det vidste jeg fra adskillige sammenhænge, men som regel blev denne nydelse altid afbrudt af det stik modsatte oøjeblikket efter; en længsel efter at slippe ud af magten over andre, en instinktiv skam ved at udøve autoritet, en længsel efter at ville væk fra det, søge ind i den totale underkastelse, efter at underlægge sig en total, simpel og ubetvivlelig autoritet, uanset hvilke værdier den autoritet havde. Værdierne var jeg grunden ligeglad med, i hvert fald var de sekundære, det var det rene spørgsmål om autoritet og underkastelse. Altså: ikke underlægge sig nogen … men heller ikke ønske sig magten eller autoriteten … Det her var grumset, ambivalent … Og hvad havde det med seksualitet at gøre? Det gav mindre og mindre mening. Måske havde det slet intet med sex at gøre. Måske ønskede jeg bare at være … usynlig! Ja, faktisk var det nok bare det. Jeg ønskede at opleve verden uden at være fysisk til stede i den. Jeg ønskede at se uden at blive set. Men samtidig ønskede jeg jo at drikke af verdens safter!
Ja, for helvede. Jeg var et begærligt menneske, at betragte verden var ikke nok for mig, jeg ville også ind i den, røre ved den, flytte rundt på verden.”
women, but also an anthropomorphized version of the world, whose insides he wants to touch, get inside, and move around. Yet again, a gendered line is drawn between Theis and his social and natural surroundings. This line offers Theis the opportunity for deconstructive play, but also becomes the means to the reassertion of his masculine subjecthood. As he flirts with the possibility of invisibility and deterritorialization, the ecocritical reader might discern hints of an ecological consciousness. But these too, like our protagonist, are the product of a worldview which is not only anthropocentric, but also skewed towards the masculine.

Coda: Eyes closed

The last pages of Solar find Theis on a riverbank. Losing contact with everything, finally in touch with “reality”—or, more likely, stoned—the “I” floats into nothingness:

Eyes closed. I closed them before I swam away. Maybe that was good. There’s a body in the grass now. Maybe this experience isn’t me. The sun is burning. The insects are buzzing. A river is flowing here. And I know I will sit here for eternity, looking into it. Looking into the river. Its path is certain. (2018a, 299)35

Eyes closed and reclining, Theis, for a final time, visualizes his complete, evolutionarily determined integration into the world around him. Losing himself first in doubt (“Maybe this experience isn’t me”), then in time and the river, the subjectless penultimate sentence directs attention away from the narrating voice to the running water that doesn’t care about Theis or any human, which flows into the blank space on the page at the novel’s close.

If Solar “fall[s] into step with a current predilection for the anti-anthropocentric” then this progressive deconstruction of the first-person narrator would seem key. Solar, through its meandering prose, vanishes its narrator into the dense prose of its narrative universe. And yet, something lingers, a crust in the wake of this vision. The disappearance or liberation that Theis aims toward is not achieved. Something, to the novel’s close, undermines his project. Though the novel may feel formless, “flabby,” (Rösing 2018) or like “an uncut film” (Nexo 2018), it is propelled by an inerasable structure, a fundamental ambivalence which can’t be let go. It is this reification of a masculine subject position which sustains a problematic gender politics and ultimately undermines the narrator’s ecological quest to erase himself as a subject.

Solar is deeply ironic. The novel tempts theoretical interpretation as it frustrates the reader who too haphazardly assigns it political import or places it in a defined theoretical context. Theis appears to have little attachment to the literary, theoretical, and cultural masks he dons. In this light, the “eco-poet” too may be merely another trick in Ørntoft’s “bag of literary clichés” alongside the romantic wanderer, the substance-abusing modernist, the gym rat, and the urban hitchhiker (Handesten 2018). It may be possible to trace an ecological consciousness through Solar, but this is undermined by the novel’s ironizing preoccupation with surface and structure, by its hazy, subterranean pleasurescape of affect.

My intention, along these lines, has not been to determine whether the novel or author is ecocritical or feminist as such. Such claims of a novel’s essential character or an author’s intentions are impossible to prove. Rather, I have been interested in how this novel casts the intersection of gender and ecology in the literature and critical thought it engages, includ-

ing works that, like itself, aim to trouble the privileged place of the human in the Anthropo-
cene. As such, Solar might shed light on the gender politics embedded not only within
romanticism and poststructuralism, but also within their ecologically attuned successors in
theory and literature. Whether, however, I would agree with Rösing (2018) that “I like the
wanderer,”36 I’m not so sure.37

Literature
York: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1983. Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Translated by
Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen Lane. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Lyotard, Jean-François. 2015. Libidinal Economy. Translated by Iain Hamilton Grant. London: Bloomsbury Academic an imprint of Bloomsbury.

36. In the original: ”Jeg holder af vandringsmanden.”
37. A fellowship from the American-Scandinavian Foundation made the writing of this article possible. I am grateful to Karin Sanders and Tue Andersen Nexø for their ongoing feedback. I thank Alex Brostoff, Macon Holt, Alexander Buk-Swienty, and Emilie Bang-Jensen for the countless conversations which have shaped this article.