

Halldór Laxness: Modernity as Promise and Betrayal

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For Heiða and Magnús Kolbjörn

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**Abstract**

## Halldór Laxness: Modernity as Promise and Betrayal

The contradictions embedded in the cognitive potentials of Enlightenment ideals come to the fore when, during moments of catastrophe, these potentialities become terrifying actualities, shattering optimism and the belief in reason and rationalization. Modernity is thus always balanced between a utopian moment and disaster. Throughout his career, Halldór Laxness grappled with the conflicting logics at work in this picture, and running through his work, in a curious dialectic of certainty and doubt, is the struggle with the pressing social questions of modernity. How modernization's promise of equality came into conflict with the reach of globalized capitalism; how a world in transition, regulated by the hope of the future, still required an anchoring in the past. Prominent in Laxness' later works, furthermore, is the need to address the role of art in the period of emancipation's failure and the problem of social justice when technology and progress stand revealed as intimately linked to the death drive.

It must have been cold there in my shadow,  
 to never have sunlight on your face.  
 You were content to let me shine, that's your way.  
 You always walked a step behind.  
 So I was the one with all the glory

Jeff Silbar and Larry Henley,  
 "The Wind Beneath My Wings"

## ***Introduction***

### ***1. The Transformation of the World***

Halldór Laxness (1902–1998) is the preeminent Icelandic author of the twentieth century. Indeed, his claim to eminence is so authoritative and unquestioned, the way in which he came to overshadow his contemporaries so clear, that speaking of other writers (as well as entire generations) as being in Laxness' "shadow" has established itself firmly. That is, the image employed above ("overshadow") is by no means original to the present text but rather indicative of a refrain that is commonly heard when engaging with the Icelandic literary tradition. And to be sure, the fact that Laxness received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1955 makes for a shadow both long and of impressive size in the cultural environs of Iceland.

However, being in somebody's shadow is not a particularly desirable position, most would agree, and the metaphor of the shadow indicates by way of its dark and gloomy connotations that admiration for Laxness' achievements has through the years been combined with an awareness of the possible negative effects of a single figure achieving such stature within a relatively enclosed and small literary system.<sup>1</sup> The result could be a mismatch or an imbalance involving

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of a literary system will be used on occasion in what follows. The concept is used to refer to a collection of texts that are understood to be literature by members of a culture during a particular historical period. Encompassing the literary system is a *literary order*, which includes

skewed perceptions and monopolistic propensities in the cultural economy as capital, cultural and practical, as well as power, symbolic and pragmatic, accrued to that single figure, and then continued accruing ... and accruing. Involved therefore are complex power dynamics and cultural politics.

To illustrate Laxness' unique position, Ástráður Eysteinnsson engaged in a sort of thought experiment and "translated" Jurij Tynjanov's famous example of outmoded literary historiography — presenting it as simply a roll call of generals — into the Icelandic literary context by shifting things around so they fit the new context. No column of generals came trotting forth to be admired but, rather, a single figure emerged, "a dictator" as Eysteinnsson puts it, and his name was Halldór Laxness.<sup>2</sup> A battery of generals indicates a significant number of literary heavy-weights who are more or less operating on an equal plane while the image of the lone dictator suggests a very different environment; one is supreme, the rest are lackeys.

That is not to say that things came easy to Laxness. As he struggled for prominence and acknowledgment in the 1930s he took part in the establishment of an alliance, eventually quite powerful, of like-minded, left wing intellectuals, artists and politicians. Initially coming together under the name *Rauðir pennar* (The Red Pens), the group found a more lasting home shortly thereafter with publishing house *Mál og menning*, which would become the institutional

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many literary systems. There are the literary systems of the past and then there are also the different literary systems of cultures removed from each other (the literary system of Iceland is very different from that of Dubai, to give a random example), as well as national literary systems, and so on. The point of departure here, it should be noted, is the work of the Russian formalists in the 1920s and 1930s.

<sup>2</sup> Ástráður Eysteinnsson. "Laxness og aðrir höfundar. Skáldsagan og bókmenntasagan." *Umbrot. Bókmenntir og nútími*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1999, p. 18. See also Jurij Tynjanov. "On Literary Evolution." *Twentieth Century Literary Theory. An Introductory Anthology*. Ed. by Vassilis Lambropoulos and David Neal Miller. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987, pp. 152–162.

framework for their work and the battlement from where they fought in the class war and, later, the Cold War.<sup>3</sup> Its quarterly literary magazine, *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, became in short order *the* venue for cultured debate in Iceland and is still going (relatively) strong.

At this point, Iceland was a modern society, but only recently so. Indeed, the arrival of modernity in Iceland was not so much a “breakthrough” as it resembled the continually delayed arrival of an unusually slow-gaited visitor whose outline was discernable against the twilight horizon. Around the turn of the twentieth century, people traveling in Iceland from abroad would voice feelings of sympathy (disdain is also a possibility) at the at the tumble-down and dilapidated housing situation that was the norm in the country. They would also ask questions, being understandably taken aback by the lack of transport routes and the fact that transit infrastructure of any sort, that is, roads, bridges, railways, coastal ship lanes, lighthouses, a postal network, a telegraph, and other markers of mechanized mobility, were simply absent. Historians point to 1890 as a pivotal year in economic terms as it was then that it started slowly to dawn on the merchant and ruling class that “business methods and market rates” tended to “influence the state of the domestic economy to a substantial degree.”<sup>4</sup> Business practices improved, in the sense of becoming more efficient and

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<sup>3</sup> The most substantial work on *Rauðir pennar* remains Örn Ólafsson's *Rauðu pennarnir: Bókmenntahreyfing á 2. fjórðungi 20. aldar*. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Magnús S. Magnússon. “Efnahagsþróun á Íslandi 1880–1990.” *Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun 1880–1990. Ritgerðir*. Ed. by Guðmundur Hálfánarson and Svanur Kristjánsson. Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun og Sagnfræðistofnun. Háskóli Íslands, 1993, p. 117. In the original: “Þó má greina afgerandi breytingu á hugarfari og þankagangi landsmanna kringum 1890 þegar þeir fóru að veita því eftirtekt að viðskiptahættir og viðskiptakjör máttu sín mikils til að útskýra það sem gerðist í efnahagslífinu.”

organized and shortly thereafter, industrialization arrived and Iceland's prospects grew brighter.<sup>5</sup>

As the class struggle took shape in the cultural sphere, there was the ideologically unified coterie centered around *Mál og menning* and then there were the “enemies”: the more prosperous of the bourgeoisie as well as the remnants of the old farming elite, determined to safeguard what remained of their economic interests while the Reykjavík business and fishing elite protected its increasingly sizable economic holdings diligently as well as supporting the modernization efforts that had brought the current social structure into being. All of which happened in the first decades of the twentieth-century, and created a moneyed urban class of a significant size for the first time in the nation's history.<sup>6</sup> As noted, the struggle extended to the cultural sphere, where both sides eventually had rival publishing houses and writers and artists tended to be pigeon-holed depending on their political position, with a variety of exclusionary mechanisms coming into existence on both sides.<sup>7</sup>

As the Cold War gained momentum, support by the competing super-powers became more and more important, one side being supported by the United States while the other had the Soviet Union as its backer.<sup>8</sup> It didn't take

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<sup>5</sup> Gunnar Karlsson. *Iceland's 1100 Years. The History of a Marginal Society*. London: Hurst & Company, 2000, pp. 239–280.

<sup>6</sup> Ingólfur V. Gíslason. *Enter the Bourgeoisie. Aspects of the Formation and Organization of Icelandic Employers 1894–1934*. Lund: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> The one indispensable book on this segment of Icelandic cultural history is *Enginn er eyland: Tímar rauðra penna* (No Man is an Island: The Times of the Red Pens, 1971), an autobiography with a strong cultural focus by Kristinn E. Andrésson, founder and chief executive of *Mál og menning* and Laxness' close personal friend. We will as a matter of fact have more than one occasion to return to Andrésson in what follows. *Mynd af Ragnari í Smára* (Reykjavík: Bjartur, 2009) by Jón Karl Helgason also offers interesting insights into the cultural field in the 1950s.

<sup>8</sup> For more on this see, Jón Ólafsson. *Kæru félagar. Íslenskir sósíalistar og Sovétríkin 1920–1960*. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1999; Arnór Hannibalsson. *Moskvulínan. Kommúnistaflokkur Íslands*

long, either, for the realization to break through that should the generous and supportive donors of these, in the end, entirely insignificant local cliques, ever get into a direct scuffle, the world was likely to end.

The stakes were also real in a somewhat different way, perhaps more so than modern readers can easily conceptualize, what with Francis Fukuyama having informed us that the Hegelian dream has finally come to fruition and that the “end of history” has arrived as the world-wide victory of capitalism in the guise of “liberal democracy,” rather than the perfection of Spirit (although to some this might indeed be the same thing).<sup>9</sup> Admittedly, buoyed by the fall of the Soviet Empire, Fukuyama may have been a tad too enthusiastic in his proclamations,<sup>10</sup> but the fact remains that in the West, unlike the first half of the twentieth century and the entirety of the nineteenth, few seem interested or capable of forming an alternative to capitalism. The managed Scandinavian economy may as a matter of fact stand as the most radical leftist form of democratic government the West has seen in about a century; there the modern socialist, environmentally sensitive, stands firm when it comes to having only one Volvo rather than two.

Back in the interwar years, however, as Frederic Jameson puts it quite elegantly, there was a widespread sensation that change was in the air and the various artistic and cultural practices that rejected the authority of tradition should be understood, Jameson argues, as “allegorical of the transformation of

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*og Komintern. Halldór Laxness og Sovétríkin.* Reykjavík: Nýja bókafélagið, 1999; Donald Edwin Nuechterlein. *Iceland, Reluctant Ally.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961.

<sup>9</sup> Francis Fukuyama. *The End of History and the Last Man.* New York: Free Press, 1992.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Michael Ignatieff. “Are the Authoritarians Winning?” *The New York Review of Books*, 10 July, 2014.

the world itself, and therefore of what is called revolution.”<sup>11</sup> Perry Anderson can be called upon at this point to expand upon and give some background to the sentiment expressed by Jameson:

The European Belle Époque [could be] best understood as the outcome of a field of force triangulated by three coordinates: an economy and society still only semi-industrial, in which the ruling order remained to a significant extent agrarian or aristocratic; a technology of dramatic inventions, whose impact was still fresh or incipient; and an open political horizon, in which revolutionary upheavals of one kind or another against the prevailing order were widely expected or feared. In the space so bounded, a wide variety of artistic innovations could explode — symbolism, imagism, expressionism, cubism, futurism, constructivism: some quarrying classical memory or patrician styles, others drawn to a poetics of the new machinery, yet others fired by visions of social upheaval; but none at peace with the market as the organizing principle of a modern culture — in that sense, virtually without exception anti-bourgeois [...] The caesura came with the Second World War, whose outcome smashed the old agrarian elites and their way of life across most of the Continent, installed stable capitalist democracy and standardized consumer durables in the West, and gutted the ideals of revolution in the East.<sup>12</sup>

All the historical forces that had spurred movements, ideals and revolutions into existence and action were now gone and thus the *élan* of the political hopes of modernity gave out. In other words, the ideological battles taking place in the streets of Reykjavík, the harbor and out in the countryside in the 1920s and 1930s did not revolve simply around higher wages or worker’s rights; the contest was also over the shape of the modernity that was to come. The future was seen as malleable and capitalism only one answer among several to the questions posed by history.

One may prove incredibly diligent when motivated by stock shares and golden parachutes and other contraptions invented to make life interesting for financial bigwigs, but monetary gain, something that after a certain point

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<sup>11</sup> Frederic Jameson. *A Singular Modernity. Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. London & New York: Verso, 2002, p. 138.

<sup>12</sup> Perry Anderson. *The Origins of Postmodernity*. London and New York: Verso, 2006, pp. 81–82.

becomes like collecting digital books on a hard drive of infinite size — what is being accumulated are strings of numbers — seems unlikely to harness quite the same range of libidinal forces or to match the emotional energy derived from the hope of actually changing the world, and doing so in the name of justice and emancipation.

### *1.1 Laxness' Shadow*

Retreating from world revolution to the safer environs of the literary world, however, and to the issue of Laxness' "shadow," another way of addressing its effects and ramifications, with a nod to his most famous novel, *Sjálfstætt fólk* (Independent People, 1934–1935), would be to note that becoming an "independent author" while sharing space with Laxness in a literary system could prove something of a crisis-ridden process. That Laxness' achievements should appear intimidating to those emerging after him, would only be normal as said achievements were historically unprecedented and so was his status in Icelandic culture; there was literally no historical figure to whom he could be compared — reaching back almost a millennium is always a forced gesture, even desperate, but eventually Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) would be mentioned. Later still Laxness would even make the comparison come alive, relieve it of its vacuity, as it were, by engaging in what Ástráður Eysteinnsson has called "cultural engineering."<sup>13</sup> The object of the architectonic enterprise, quite naturally, was

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<sup>13</sup> Ástráður Eysteinnsson. "Halldór Laxness and the Narrative of the Icelandic Novel." *Scandinavica* 1/2003, p. 23.



the Saga heritage and the internal workings of the Icelandic literary canon. We will return to this cultural dynamic shortly.

The anxiety of influence as conceived of by Harold Bloom allowed for a breathing space of a century and a half, at least in his paradigmatic example of Milton and the Romantics, giving the latter a chance to shake off the dust, gain their bearings and devise a strategy whereby a nefarious but ever so absorbing and gifted nemesis could be brought low.<sup>14</sup> No such luck, however, for a young author whose first book might end up in the window of a bookshop next to Laxness' latest bestseller, or who might come into direct contact with his eminent literary elder during a gathering of writers at some retreat, reading or festival.

As T.S. Eliot has pointed out, tradition always functions in this way, at least to an extent; the newcomer must wrestle with his predecessors in order to gain a place in an elite but fluid company of great (European) minds, stretching back to the Ancient Greeks.<sup>15</sup> There are however shades of difference when looking at the tradition in this way, dogs do come in different breeds. Having to come to terms with George Gissing, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Rudyard Kipling, Oscar Wilde, H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett and Anthony Trollope is surely a different experience than having to find one's feet while reading James Joyce, Eliot himself, Virginia Woolf, Djuna Barnes, Jean Rhys, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Marcel Proust, Samuel Beckett, and Thomas Mann. In other words, the relation of the "individual talent" to "tradition" can be oppressive and it can

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<sup>14</sup> Harold Bloom. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> T.S. Eliot. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *Selected Essays*. London: Faber and Faber, 1999, pp. 3-12.

be less so (think of all those lucky playwrights who grew to maturity believing Shakespeare was a failure). Being Icelandic, and planning to be a writer, and emerging after Laxness is a definite loss in this one-time-only literary roulette; again, this has much more to do with the Icelandic literary system than the quality of Laxness' work or his particular "genius."

While literary theories tend to reflect the personal peccadillos of their creators much more accurately than they do literary history or realities about language (Eliot's are a case in point), they are metaphoric gestures and a metaphoric gesture can at times be better than nothing, and coming after Laxness, well, that was something. Laxness' contemporaries can also be assumed to have noticed how the shade, perhaps comfortable at first, quickly became less so as Laxness' time in the sun did not seem to be coming to a close.

Even his predecessors were affected. The example of Gunnar Gunnarsson is illustrative in this context. Gunnarsson left Iceland when young and lived in Denmark from 1907–1939, where his literary career reached considerable heights in the interwar period. His breakthrough novel, the four volume *Af Borgslægtens Historie* (The History of the Borg Family, 1912–1914), was an immense success; the last volumes sold in the tens of thousands and the work, as a whole or a part, was translated into English, Dutch and Swedish.<sup>16</sup> It was followed by a series of more mature and artistically ambitious novels such as *Salige er de enfoldige* (Blessed Are the Simple, 1920). For a time, Gunnarsson was among the preeminent Nordic writers, a giant in the Icelandic context, and his

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<sup>16</sup> Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson. "Realism and Revolt: Between the World Wars." *A History of Icelandic Literature*. Ed. by Daisy Neijmann. Lincoln and London: The University of Nebraska Press, 2006, p. 360.

route to success — emigration and writing in a language other than Icelandic — was one taken by several authors (Jón Sveinsson, Kristmann Guðmundsson) and was most certainly an option that Laxness had to consider for himself.

Laxness traveled by a different route in the end but as he sought to establish himself as a novelist with ambitions that reached beyond Iceland, it is doubtful that any figure was more significant for Laxness than Gunnar Gunnarsson and the younger author did his utmost to get in touch with, network with and, essentially, “recruit” Gunnarsson to his cause.<sup>17</sup> He was successful, Gunnarsson took a liking to Laxness, he was impressed by *Salka Valka* (1931–1932) and agreed to translate the work into Danish, which was a major coup for Laxness. Later, he would in a sense repay Gunnarsson when in the early 1940s he translated Gunnarsson’s masterpiece, the epic *Kirken paa Bjerget* (The Church on the Mountain, 1921–1925), a five volume autobiographical volume, into Icelandic.

As noted above, when success came, it came in earnest and Gunnarsson’s name was associated with the Nobel Prize as early as 1918, and he would remain one of the figures continually mentioned in conjunction with the prize, supposedly always “on the list,” but, like the man from the country in Kafka’s parable, never making the all-important move from the outside to the inside, from the list to the podium.<sup>18</sup> For some, the Nobel “snub” was Laxness’ fault.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jón Yngvi Jóhannson. *Landnám. Ævisaga Gunnars Gunnarssonar*. Reykjavík: Forlagið, 2011, pp. 301–303.

<sup>18</sup> Halldór Guðmundsson. *Skáldalíf. Ofvitinn úr Suðursveit og skáldið á Skriðuklaustri*. Reykjavík: JPV útgáfa, 2006, pp. 380–387. See also Halldór Guðmundsson. “Hefði Gunnar fengið Nóbélinn ...”. *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, 10 October, 2005, pp. 4–5.

<sup>19</sup> Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson. “Hvers vegna hlaut Gunnar Gunnarsson ekki Nóbelsverðlaunin 1955?” *Þjóðmál*, 3/2006, pp. 24–29; Hannes Hólmsteinn Gunnarsson. “Gunnar kom vissulega til greina.” *Morgunblaðið*, 3 January, 2006, p. 4; Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson

While it is unfortunate that Gunnarsson's memory should be associated time and time again with the notion that he "lost" the prize to Laxness, a narrative that is doubly regrettable as the latter's supposedly underhanded shenanigans are always the pivotal aspect of the tale, or those of his friends, it is also indicative of the canonical (and "shadowy") logic discussed above, one that is nicely summarized in a newspaper headline from the centenary of Gunnarsson's literary career in 2006: "A great novelist in the shadow of Laxness".<sup>20</sup> The author of the article that afforded us the nice headline quote turns out to be, *pace* Bloom, racked by unease over the way in which Laxness many, many decades ago pushed Gunnarsson, once in possession of a reputation that Laxness could only dream of, to the margins of Icelandic literary culture and history, and thus ominously notes that "Laxness' shadow engulfs everything and everyone."<sup>21</sup>

### 1.2 "Invisible Walls Made of Texts"

As a representative of the generation that started publishing around the turn of the millennium, novelist and noted environmentalist Andri Snær Magnason, when asked about the influence of Laxness, said that, "one pretends to be a free person but then realizes that all around are invisible walls made of texts that one

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and Halldór Guðmundsson. "Jóhanna Ingvarsdóttir í samræðum við Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson og Halldór Guðmundsson. Gunnar kom miklu sterkar til greina en áður hefur verið talið." *Morgunblaðið*, 22 September, 2006, p. 50. Guðrún Guðmundsdóttir in conversation with Sólveig Jónsdóttir. "Við förum heim þegar handritin fara heim!" *Morgunblaðið*, 19 November, 2006, pp. 30–33.

<sup>20</sup> "ottar@dv.is." "Stórskáld í skugga Laxness." *DV*, 20 October, 2006, p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> "ottar@dv.is." "Stórskáld í skugga Laxness," p. 34. In the original: "Skuggi Laxness gleypir allt og alla." One of the scholars interviewed in the article is Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson, who went on to write Gunnarsson's biography. There he discusses in detail the many factors that had an impact on Gunnarsson's reputation in Iceland, including the complicated status of an Icelandic author who wrote in Danish and whose texts were then translated into Icelandic. See Jóhannsson, *Landnám*.

cannot simply go through as well as textual roads that one follows because they were made by Laxness”.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, novelist and poet Sigurbjörg Þrastardóttir notes that “Laxness is big, almost as substantial a figure as Chaplin in the eyes of the generation that is now approaching thirty and whose referential context is almost entirely made up of movies and television.”<sup>23</sup> The comparison with Chaplin is an interesting one. Laxness did not have many good things to say about Hollywood but when it came to Chaplin, there was no end to the praise.<sup>24</sup>

In historical terms Chaplin was among the first to demonstrate that the concept of fame was going to be utterly transformed in the twentieth century, that the advent of new communication media had not so much rewritten the rules as invented a whole new game. Chaplin’s figure — seen from the back as he walks along a dust road, away from the camera and towards the sunset, twirling his walking stick — is so iconic that it can be taken to represent cinema itself. This may have been Þrastardóttir’s point, or one of them, suggesting that Laxness is not only omnipresent in the Icelandic literary landscape but that he has also taken on a symbolic role, standing in for Icelandic literature. Chaplin, it should be noted however, belongs quite firmly to the past in the sense that his art form, the silent film, is dead. The epic realist novel, Laxness’ signature form, has not been transcended and discarded quite as decisively but there may still be

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<sup>22</sup> Andri Snær Magnason. “Lengstur skuggi í kvöldsól.” *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, 4 May, 2002, p. 5. In the original: “Maður þykist vera frjáls maður en áttar sig á því að allt í kring eru ósýnilegir textaveggir sem maður kemst ekki gegnum og textavegir sem maður fylgir vegna þess að Laxness lagði þá”.

<sup>23</sup> Sigurbjörg Þrastardóttir. “Að ganga á mála hjá lyginni’ — Laxness in a new century.” *Morgunblaðið*, 17 April, 2002. In the original, the quotes read: ““Laxness er stór, næstum jafnstór og Chaplin í augum kynslóðar sem fæddist fyrir þremur áratugum og miðar allt sitt við bíó og sjónvarp.”

<sup>24</sup> Halldór Laxness. “The American Film in 1928.” Trans. by Björn Þór Vilhjálmsson. *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*, 2/2010.

a grain of truth in the comparison. Laxness had his own “mode” of writing and one might say that it passed away along with him.

However, if we pause for a moment and reflect on Þrastardóttir’s comparison between Laxness and Chaplin and the link to iconicity, a number of possibilities would seem to present themselves. Laxness’ voice is known to several generations of Icelanders and the same goes for his visage, particularly the figure of the elder statesman, always impeccably dressed and with a large cigar clamped between two fingers. One might even venture the guess that for a period at least the author’s name would have registered on a young and malleable Icelandic mind around the same time as Jesus, Coke and the Beatles.

However, the way in which it can be argued that Laxness signifies “literariness” and more specifically, “Icelandic literariness” is through the tactile reality of the printed editions of his works. In the mid 1940s Helgafell started publishing Laxness’ works in a highly distinctive and uniform black and white striped band, with a gilded spine featuring a row of elegant flowery squares and two conspicuously unadorned spaces near the top and bottom for the author’s name and the book’s title, respectively.<sup>25</sup> This design has long been the visual marker of Laxness’ works — recognizable and immediately associated with his name and myriad associations that spring to mind regarding the oeuvre — and has thus come to take on considerable symbolic freight. The April to May 2011

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<sup>25</sup> “AÐ.” “Forleggjarinn og skáldið.” *Vísir*, 24 April, 1977, pp. 10–11; “ESJ.” “Það er alltaf verulegur viðburður þegar ný bók eftir Halldór kemur út.” *Vísir*, 24 April, 1977, pp. 10–11.

issue of *The Reykjavík Grapevine* would seem to suggest that the cover design has indeed become a signifier for literariness in Icelandic culture (see figure 1).<sup>26</sup>

The cover article by novelist and poet Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl maps what he terms the crisis in Icelandic literature in the wake of the economic collapse in 2008. The cover depicts a gigantic book inserted into a hazily pictured pastoral setting. Had the aliens in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) been bookish, or fans of Laxness, the mysterious black slabs left in various places in the universe have looked like this. Although it is not possible

to ascertain the title of the book from the given aspect, the distinctive black and white design unmistakably identifies it as a work by Laxness. On the left side, the equally distinctive book spine is featured, bearing the article's title ("Independent People?"; the question mark playfully riffs on the name of Laxness' most famous novel) where Laxness' name would

normally have been, while the article's subtitle, located in the square below, separated by two squares of equal size, is where the title of the work would appear on a regular Laxness volume. The pictorial logic invoked by the book spine seems to transform the entire cover into a book jacket (a Laxness book



Fig. 1  
*The Reykjavík Grapevine*,  
April–May,  
2011.  
Photography:  
Marinó  
Thorlacius.  
Art Direction:  
Hristbjörnsson

<sup>26</sup> When it comes to the manner in which a symbolic economy of representations, icons, indices and signs in general functions to generate, maintain, repair and revise cultural meaning within the social structure, the work of Jón Karl Helgason is unparalleled in the Icelandic context. See for example *Hetjan og höfundurinn. Brot úr íslenskri menningarsögu*. Reykjavík: Heimskringla, Háskólaforlag Máls og menningar, 1998; *The Rewriting of Njáls saga. Translation, Ideology, and Icelandic Sagas*. Clevedon, Buffalo & Toronto: Multilingual Matters, St. Jerome Publishing, 1999; *Ferðalok. Skýrsla handa akademíu*. Reykjavík: Bjartur, 2003; *Ódáinsakur. Helgifesta þjóðardýrlinga*. Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2013.

featuring the picture of a Laxness book as cover art). Keeping in mind that the dominant meaning generation and signifying logic of the magazine cover occurs through metonymic play where the abstraction of Laxness' literary career, as encapsulated in conspicuous design and, partly, in the title of his single best known work, functions as a sign for Icelandic literature as a whole, the cover suggests that not only does Laxness "frame" Icelandic literature in some sense but that he also functions as the center of the system.<sup>27</sup>

In the aforementioned interview, Andri Snær Magnason goes on to address precisely how one might conceptualize Laxness' "shadow" in a contemporary and even more all-encompassing fashion, "Where Laxness' figure touches the skyline, his shadow is not of the sort that a contemporary author might shed. He is no longer of this earth, he has joined his precursors in a literary afterlife where beauty reigns. Laxness is underneath and above and all around, much like Jónas [Hallgrímsson] and *Njála* [short for *Njáls Saga*] and he is not a shadow but a light and he still speaks to us".<sup>28</sup> This is a beautiful, spiritual description of a literary precursor. However, and despite the talk of light and the assumed comfort to be gleaned from the fact that Laxness still "speaks to us," Magnason does wonder how to carve out a Laxness-free space. And baffled, much like a twenty-first century, wi-fi savvy, smart-phone operating, fair trade coffee-drinking urban hipster, should be — a figure about as far removed from

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<sup>27</sup> For more on Laxness, the Icelandic literary system and him as its center, see Eysteinnsson, "Laxness og aðrir höfundar."

<sup>28</sup> Magnason, "Lengstur skuggi í kvöldsól," p. 5. In the original: "Þar sem Laxness ber við loft varpar hann ekki yfir okkur skugga samtímahöfundar, hann er ekki lengur jarðneskur heldur hefur hann safnast til forfeðranna í sínu bókmenntalega framhaldslífi og þar ríkir feegurðin ein. Laxness er undir og yfir og allt um kring eins Jónas og Njála og hann er ekki skuggi heldur ljós og ennþá talar hann til okkar."



the primal totem worshipping horde as it is humanly and historically possible to get — Magnason asks: “How does one go about killing the father?”<sup>29</sup>

In Freud’s hypothetical historical narrative, the killing of the primal father was supposed to represent the gateway to liberty and, more precisely, untrammelled libidinal euphoria. Once the act had been carried out, however, what happened was the opposite; on the other side of the primal father was not freedom but the panopticon; civilization and its discontents.<sup>30</sup> Magnason’s fantasy of killing his (or *the*) primal literary father evidences a similar trajectory, strangely enough, that is, the attempt concludes with a guilt ridden subject and the whole enterprise turning into a complete failure. He has tried, Magnason tells us, to “reject” Laxness by “avoiding his books completely” and maintaining an icy distance, not to mention the obverse tactic, reading them “with complete attention for the most miniscule detail” in the hope perhaps of finding a flaw.<sup>31</sup> And he’s tried the old “too cool for school” routine where one simply explains Laxness’ successes away as being the result of a fortunate set of historical circumstances. Still, Laxness’ shadow, or perhaps in this case, light, continues to shine down on the young author who, to conclude, admits to feeling guilty

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<sup>29</sup> Magnason, “Lengstur skuggi í kvöldsól,” p. 5. In the original: “Hvernig á maður að drepa föðurinn?,” p. 5. In the original: “Maður hefur reynt að afneita honum, ýmist forðast bækur hans eða þaulleisð, sett í kuldalega fjarlægð, reynt að gera minnst úr honum, reynt að vera svalur og segja að Laxness hafi bara verið réttur maður á réttum tíma [...] Og nú er ég með samviskubit. Ég er enn að reyna að drepa föðurinn og það á 100 ára afmæli skáldsins”.

<sup>30</sup> Sigmund Freud. *Totem and Taboo*. The Standard Edition. Trans. and ed. by James Strachey. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989.

<sup>31</sup> Magnason, “Lengstur skuggi í kvöldsól,” p. 5. In the original: “Maður hefur reynt að afneita honum, ýmist forðast bækur hans eða þaulleisð, sett í kuldalega fjarlægð, reynt að gera minnst úr honum”.

because still, at Laxness' centenary, he is "still looking for ways of killing the father."<sup>32</sup>

### 1.3 Cinematic Laxness

Laxness' presence in Icelandic culture can be felt in many ways. One of the most prominent may in fact be how many of the names of the characters in his books that he invented or "coined" have subsequently entered what Habermas would call the life-world, that is, become part of people's everyday lives. Diljá, Snæfríður, Salka, Sóllilja, Úa, and Álfrímur are cases in point, as all are central characters in Laxness' novels whose names have since become popular. The diverse manifestations of Laxness' cultural influence can also be loud. In 2003, Icelandic hard-rock group Mínus released their third and most successful album up to that point, entitled *Halldór Laxness*. Tracks like "My Name Is Cocaine" and "Flophouse Nightmares" may in an uncharacteristically coy fashion be concealing a textual affinity to the author (out of character for the band, that is, which is known to be quite up-front, if not in fact "in your face") but it must be considered more likely that the intertextual gamesmanship takes place on a largely extra-textual level. Four years earlier, in 1999, the most recent full-length feature film adapted from a work by Laxness opened.

The film, *Úngfrúin góða og Húsið* (The Honour of the House), is directed by Guðný Halldórsdóttir, Laxness' daughter and veteran Icelandic filmmaker, and stands as one of only four such films made to date, a remarkably low number

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<sup>32</sup> Magnason, "Lengstur skuggi í kvöldsól," p. 5. In the original: "reynt að vera svalur og segja að Laxness hafi bara verið réttur maður á réttum tíma [...] Og nú er ég með samviskubit. Ég er enn að reyna að drepa föðurinn og það á 100 ára afmæli skáldsins".

given Laxness' eminence and fame, the multifarious and vast oeuvre from which to choose and the relative frequency of film adaptations of literary works in Iceland. *Úngfrúin góða og Húsið* is however the second Laxness adaption made by Halldórsdóttir, the first was *Kristnihald undir Jökli* (Under the Glacier, 1989), which followed upon the heels of the first Icelandic attempt to make a full length film based on one of Laxness' literary works, the 1984 *Atómstöðin* (The Atom Station) by Þorsteinn Jónsson. There have been additional films for television, shorts and mini-series, but as noted only four filmic adaptations have seen the light of day — the first one, *Salka Valka* (Arne Mattsson, 1954), being Swedish.<sup>33</sup>

One wonders why Icelandic filmmakers have been so circumspect when it comes to Laxness' work, and Björn Ægir Norðfjörð, who has written on the history of Icelandic cinema and Icelandic cinema as a national cinema, asks the same question. One of the problems that he tackles is the complicated relationship between the two media, literature and film, the latter traditionally being viewed as inferior when it comes to respectability and cultural capital. In Iceland, a nation that rests its national identity to a unique degree on a literary tradition, one might expect this power dynamic to be exacerbated — which it may well be. Icelandic filmmakers have with only one exception left the Saga heritage alone.<sup>34</sup> It is telling in the context of our present discussion of Laxness'

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<sup>33</sup> As mentioned above, the first attempt to film Laxness was a Swedish production of *Salka Valka* in 1954. A fairly substantially budgeted German mini-series followed based on *Brekkukotsannáll* (The Fish Can Sing, 1972), shot on location in Iceland by Rolf Hädrich. At the end of the decade, another German mini-series was produced, this time based on Laxness' 1960 novel *Paradísarheimt* (Paradise Reclaimed). For more on Arne Mattsson's film adaptation of *Salka Valka*, see Neil McMahon. "Salka Valka. Að færa skáldsögu í myndform." *Heimur kvikmyndanna*. Ed. by Guðni Elísson. Reykjavík: Forlagið and art.is, 1999.

<sup>34</sup> That would be Ágúst Guðmundsson's 1983 film *Útlaginn* (The Outlaw), which was based on *Gísli saga Súrssonar* (The Saga of Gísli Súrsson, 13th century). One might also mention Friðrik Þór Friðriksson's *Brennu Njáls saga* (The Saga of Burnt Njál, 1980), an experimental short film wherein the text of the Saga is lit on fire.

cultural status that Norðfjörð addresses Laxness and the Saga heritage in the same chapter.<sup>35</sup>

Norðfjörð mentions that the most famous of Laxness' novels, the social realist epics of the 1930s and 1940s, *Salka Valka*, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, *Heimsljós* (World's Light, 1937–1940) and *Íslandsklukkan* (Iceland's Bell, 1943–1946), are all period pieces, huge in scope and the complexities involved in a full scale production would have been, and still probably are, enormous, especially if the films were to be shot on location.<sup>36</sup> Norðfjörð also notes that the adaptations that have been produced have tended towards, if not exactly the margins of the Laxness canon (although the novella *Úngfrúin góða og Húsið* might count as marginal), then at least works that fall outside the parameters of epic realism mentioned above and thus the canon's center.

*Atómstöðin* and *Kristnihald undir Jökli* both feature a narrative setting that is limited in scale. In *Atómstöðin* there are two houses that are of central importance, the replication of their interiors being the most important aspect of the production design, although aspects of Reykjavík in the aftermath of the Second World War also had to be recreated. In the case of *Kristnihald undir Jökli*,

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<sup>35</sup> Björn Ægir Norðfjörð. *Icelandic Cinema: A National Practice in a Global Context*. Unpublished Ph.d dissertation from the University of Iowa, 2005, pp. 242–253.

<sup>36</sup> In addition to a large budget, there would be a variety of technological demands as well as the need for a substantial and highly experienced and trained technical crew. These requirements would historically speaking have fit badly with the fledgling Icelandic film industry in the decade after its emergence, its first stirrings usually dated to around 1980. Even today, these “practical” aspects of the production of a Laxness film would prove a huge difficulty for the Icelandic film industry. Filmmaking in Iceland is uniquely fragile — even allowing for the fact that nowhere is it an easy or safe enterprise — companies have a hard time establishing themselves and only a handful of films are produced every year. None of these are expensive by international standards, let alone US standards and few have managed to get distribution outside of Iceland. Norðfjörð raises most of these points and they do play into the problematic of Laxness' seeming lack of *photogénie*.

the central locales are an abandoned church and a debilitated house out in the middle of nowhere.

This does not suffice, however, to explain the scarcity of Laxness films. The path forged by Jónsson with *Atómstöðin* and Halldórsdóttir in her two film adaptations could have been followed. There are dozens of short stories, plays and novels that do not require the Hollywood treatment. Norðfjörð recognizes this and, almost exasperated, comes to the following conclusion:

I think the reason why these key-works have not been adapted and why generally there have been few Laxness adaptations is found in the extreme reverence and the high regard in which his works are held. The novels are not only daunting tasks in and of themselves for any filmmaker, but the notably difficult reception context hardly offers much incentive.<sup>37</sup>

Laxness' "shadow" is clearly making its presence felt in a new medium, that is, the "extreme reverence" that makes approaching these texts a "daunting task" is as good a description as any of the effects the aforementioned "shadow" has on the generation that came into its own when Laxness had essentially left the cultural field. When discussing the Saga heritage, Norðfjörð registers the same logic at work.

It is however on the stage that Laxness' texts have had their most popular and visible existence off the page, a domain that will be touched on below and dealt with in detail in chapter three. And although it is interesting to investigate, even if only briefly, the cultural guises an author may don depending on the media platform, a few additional remarks on Laxness' "shadow" in the literary realm are in order, specifically how the concept of the shadow relates to the figure that Laxness cuts in literary history.

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<sup>37</sup> Norðfjörð, *Icelandic Cinema*, p. 248.

## 2. Laxness and Literary History

How does Laxness' "shadow" appear, what shape does it take, when the historical and cultural contexts that are its very ingredients are narrativized and rendered "coherent" by the scholarly and academic apparatus? In his chapter on Laxness in *Íslenzkar nútímabókmenntir. 1918–1948* (Modern Icelandic Literature. 1918–1948, 1949), Kristinn Andr sson writes:

As should be clear by now, Halld r renews himself with each work. He is a rebellious spirit who cannot for a moment tolerate stagnant form. Within him is a force of nature that at times is reminiscent of a river that breaks through a wall of ice, or fire that ruptures a mountain. But it is sensitivity that makes the author's mutability possible. It is as if he intuits with every nerve of his being the rumbling changes of the current moment. Each new temporal shift and each new sentiment that come into being endow his works with a new tone and style. He is himself as originary as time.<sup>38</sup>

According to Andr sson, Laxness' ferocious artistic talent ruptures mountains and breaks through glaciers; indicating perhaps that obstacles, limits and the constrictions of convention mean nothing to him. He will refute, refuse, reject and reinvent until, through sheer will power and force of genius, he has created a new cultural environment for writing, even a new form of writing. As if to underline how Laxness is an unstoppable force, Andr sson then raises the stakes; not content to present Laxness merely as the manifestation of unruly natural forces, he concludes by comparing him to one of the fundamental laws of the universe and the governing logic of our understanding of reality, time itself.

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<sup>38</sup> Kristinn Andr sson. *Íslenzkar nútímabókmenntir. 1918–1948*. Reykjav k: M l og menning, 1949, pp. 341–342. In the original: "Eins og lj st  tti a  vera or i , er Halld r n r me  hverri b k sinni. Hann er uppreisnarandi, er hvergi  olir sta na  form. Hann     s r n tt rukraft, getur minnt   flj t, er sprengir  sa, e a eld, sem r fur fjall. En  st a an til breytileika verka hans er  o fram  llu n mleiki sk ldsins.  a  er sem hann skynji umr t samt  arinnar me  hverri taug sinni. Hver n  hr ring t mans, hvert n tt vi horf, sem myndast, gefur verkum hans n jan t n og st l. Hann er sj lfur n skapandi eins og t minn."

The hyperbole beggars belief. Of course, Andr sson and Laxness were close friends and there is also no doubt whatsoever about Andr sson’s belief in Laxness as a novelist and writer. One might however also note that together they represented the core of the publishing house and eventual cultural powerhouse, *Ml og menning*; Andr sson the founder and CEO and Laxness a board member for decades in addition to being the most prestigious name to be associated with the firm and its journal, *T marit Mls og menningar*, to which he was a regular contributor.<sup>39</sup> They were, in other words, allies in the culture and political wars and the class struggle.<sup>40</sup>

The metaphoric profusion quoted above is therefore no mere error of judgment nor is it the result of an unfortunate escape of a pride of hyperboles, quickly enough returned to their cages. Rather, this in miniature is how Laxness’ “shadow” was constructed; it was through cultural intervention much like this one, rigorous and persistent, but initially on a smaller, more modest scale, with more modest language. In the beginning, there would for example not have been the slightest chance of producing an “official” history of modern Icelandic literature, to give what may be an obvious example, as the group that would become *Rau ir pennar* and later the *Ml og menning* clique simply didn’t have the cultural capital or the pragmatic wherewithal to engender large scale projects of cultural engineering, to employ Eysteinnsson’s concept. And as noted above, the adjectives were more modest in the beginning; a very favorable

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<sup>39</sup> Sigf s Da ason. “Kristinn E. Andr sson.” *T marit Mls og menningar*, 3–4/1973, pp. 223–226; Halld r Gu mundsson. “Brot  r langri s gu.” *T marit Mls og menningar*, 2/1997, pp. 3–7 [aukahefti].

<sup>40</sup> Laxness was also deeply involved in the diplomatic and cultural exchanges between Iceland and the Soviet Union, helping for instance to found a long lasting friendship society between the countries.

review in a newspaper might well have sufficed to make everyone happy; the same goes for a laudatory article in a journal.

At any rate, it is important to stress the hermeneutical and political fact that the quite unrestrained passage quoted above did serve a concrete function and, furthermore, it was not expected to engender a raised eyebrow, let alone incredulous laughter (as it risks doing today), which would precisely have destabilized its function, which was credibility building. And that the smart people running *Mál og menning* were pretty certain that it would accomplish its goal, and not become a laughingstock and take on whatever handwritten form a “meme” in the 1940s might have had, which however would have been the response had similar language been employed to describe literally anyone else at the time. At his point, Laxness could bear such hyperbole, that is the simple fact. His size, stature and shadow were all verging on the gigantic by the close of the 1940s and the transformative power emanating from such a cultural powerhouse changed ridiculous hyperbole into respectable cultural discourse.<sup>41</sup>

We can even measure the ambit of the “shadow” by examining just how space is divided between different authors in Andrésón’s historiography, it being a truism that nothing is as precious a commodity in a literary history as space on the page. Leafing through Andrésón’s volume, we note that Þórbergur Þórðarson gets 18 pages, which is nothing to be ashamed of, indeed, it constitutes a substantial chapter. Guðmundur Hagalín gets 13 pages; Gunnar Benediktsson proves a mere interjection with 2 pages. Gunnar Gunnarsson is

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<sup>41</sup> In other words, the fact that Andrésón could allow himself the language quoted above is a perfect barometer of just how successful the construction of Laxness’ reputation had been in that period — PR work that was surely helped by the immense, indeed, spectacular quality of Laxness’ literary production, but then, that is never enough. Many a genius has gone unsung to his grave.



afforded a surprisingly meager 9 pages, while Halldór Stefánsson gets 10 pages. What of Laxness? The chapter on Halldór Laxness stands at 65 pages, considerably more than all the others combined.<sup>42</sup> Laxness' shadow covers the book and all the other authors in gloomy twilight.

And this situation would remain unchanged and unchallenged for quite some time. Ástráður Eysteinnsson has pointed out that in the most widely distributed textbook on literary history for the upper classes of elementary school and right up to the first one or two of what would count as high school in the US, *Straumar og stefnur í íslenskum bókmenntum frá 1550* (Trends and Movements in Icelandic Literature from 1550, 1978 — the most recent, revised, edition is from 1990) by Heimir Pálsson, about half of the total space given over for discussion of the Icelandic novel from 1920 to 1965, just under half a century, belongs to Laxness.<sup>43</sup>

An undeniable presence therefore and, somewhat like Joyce, Einstein or Elvis; if you happen to be a fellow practitioner, it doesn't matter whether you "like" what would later be called the modernist aesthetic; if you bought into the frizzly haired émigré Princeton professor's rejection of quantum mechanics; or if your pelvis was not your second most important instrument — simply by moving in the field either founded or decisively shaped by figures of such historical importance, your position is more and less defined by them. Today, one can visit any popular tourist site in Iceland and the gift shop is sure to have

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<sup>42</sup> Four female novelists make it into sub-chapter headings — which all the men discussed above did — Theodora Thoroddsen, Kristín Sigfúsdóttir, Elínborg Lárusdóttir and Þórunn Magnúsdóttir. Their combined coverage comes to about four pages.

<sup>43</sup> Eysteinnsson, "Laxness og aðrir höfundar," pp. 16–17.

at least two types of books on offer, the more popular editions of the Sagas (*Egil's Saga*, *Njal's Saga*, *Grettis Saga*) and novels by Laxness.<sup>44</sup>

## 2.1 Beginnings

Laxness published his first novel in 1919 when he was seventeen, *Barn náttúrunnar* (Child of Nature). A neo-romantic tale of love lost and regained and spiritual fulfillment achieved through toil in soil. Five years passed until his next novel, *Undir Helgahnúk* (Under the Holy Mountain, 1924) appeared but in the meantime he published a collection of short stories, *Nokkrar sögur* (A Few Stories, 1923). Twenty novels would follow, the last being *Guðsgjafaþula* (The Rhyme of God's Bounty) published in 1972, half a century after Laxness' first.<sup>45</sup>

Laxness' third novel, *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (The Great Weaver of Kashmir, 1927), is a key work in assessments of Laxness' literary career as well as in the twentieth-century history of Icelandic literature, as it can lay claim to being the first modernist novel in a somewhat insular literary system.<sup>46</sup> *Vefarinn*

<sup>44</sup> "Scandinavian noir" writer Arnaldur Indriðason has recently joined this exclusive company.

<sup>45</sup> Counted here are novels that would later be combined to form an epic whole, somewhat like Lawrence Durrell's *Justine* (1957), *Balthazar* (1958), *Mountolive* (1958) and *Clea* (1960), would be combined in later publications to form the *The Alexandria Quartet*. In Laxness' case, the novels in question are *Þú vínveiður hreini* (Thou pure vine, 1931) and *Fuglinn í fjörinni* (Bird on the beach, 1932), which together would soon come to be known as *Salka Valka*, named after its lead character. *Sjálfstætt fólk* (Independent People, 1934–1935) was published in two parts, albeit under the name *Sjálfstætt fólk*. Then there is *Ljós heimsins* (Light of the World, 1937), *Höll sumarlandsins* (Palace of the Land of Summer, 1938), *Hús skáldsins* (The Poet's Abode, 1939) and *Fegurð himinsins* (The Beauty of the Heavens, 1940), combined into *Heimsljós* (World's Light) in subsequent editions.

<sup>46</sup> Halldór Guðmundsson has argued that *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* represents the beginning of modern literature in Iceland. See his 'Loksins, loksins'. In a response to Guðmundsson's monograph, Ástráður Eysteinnsson asks however why Þórbergur Þórðarson's *Bréf til Láru*, published four years earlier than *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* and, Eysteinnsson argues, a likely influence on the form and structure of Laxness' novel, should not be given that mantle? See Ástráður Eysteinnsson. "Fyrsta nútímaskáldsagan og móðernisminn." *Umbrot*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan 1999, pp. 81–91.

*mikli frá Kasmír*, along with Laxness' earlier poetry, including most famously the controversial "Unglingurinn í skóginum" (The Youth in the Forest), positioned the young author as the harbinger of literary modernism in Iceland, a figuration that Laxness himself did nothing to dispel.<sup>47</sup>

In a career that was extremely prolific and wide ranging, such disparate works would follow as a religious tract, a poetry collection, and two travelogues to the Soviet Union, the first published in 1933 and the latter in 1938, the existence of these quite accurately suggesting Laxness' political views.<sup>48</sup> In addition, there are five collections of short stories, seventeen collections of articles and occasional pieces, five original plays and three theatrical adaptations of his novels. A four-volume autobiography, published between 1975 and 1980, proved to be Laxness' final literary achievement. The autobiography depicts the author's childhood and youth up until early maturity at around twenty, and combined the volumes represent a work that is held in great esteem by many of Laxness' readers.<sup>49</sup> His last publication, *Dagar hjá múnkum* (Days with Monks) was published in 1987, at which point Laxness' health had started to deteriorate and, in point of fact, this was not an "original" work but the publication of a

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<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of the importance of Halldór Laxness to Icelandic modernism, see Eysteinnsson, "Fyrsta nútímaskáldsagan og móðernisminn," pp. 56-92; Örn Ólafsson. *Kóralforspil hafsins*. Reykjavík: Skjaldborg 1992, pp. 213-219, and Halldór Guðmundsson. "Loksins, loksins": *Vefarinn mikli og uphaf íslenskra nútímabókmennta*. Reykjavík: Mál og menning 1987, pp. 131-195. Moving in a somewhat different direction from his precursors when it comes to Laxness' late works, Haukur Ingvarsson, has discussed Laxness last three novels, *Kristnihald undir Jökli* (Under the Glacier, 1968), *Innansveitarkrónika* (Chronicle of a County, 1970) and *Guðsgjafaþula* (The Rhyme of God's Bounty, 1972), in conjunction with theories of postmodernism and the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. See *Andlitsdrættir samtíðarinnar. Síðustu skáldsögur Halldórs Laxness*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag and ReykjavíkurAkademían, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> These are *Í Austurvegi* (Travels in the East, 1933) and *Gerska ævintýrið* (The Russian Adventure, 1938).

<sup>49</sup> The four volume autobiography is made up of *Í túninu heima* (In My Home Hayfield, 1975), *Úngur ég var* (Young I Was, 1976), *Sjömeistarásagan* (The Tale of the Seven Masters, 1978), and *Grikklandsárið* (The Greek Year, 1980).

newly rediscovered diary that Laxness had kept while an apprentice monk in a monastery in the early 1920s.

## *2.2 The Monastery*

The reference to a monastery may seem to come a little bit out of the blue but it also serves as an indicator that Laxness led what in many respects amounts to an unusual life. Traveling in Europe in the early 1920s, Halldór Laxness witnessed at first hand the devastation that war brought on the continent. Indeed, his withdrawal to a monastery in 1923 could be read as a deeply personal response to the trauma of civilization's collapse. In the monastery, we might then assume, Laxness was offered the requisite space and spiritual respite to grapple with and reflect on the existential repercussions of an event that amounted to a rift in history. That Laxness worked hard to familiarize himself with the major avant-garde movements of the period, expressionism and surrealism, as well as the philosophy of Nietzsche and Freud's dismantling of the rational subject, might furthermore be interpreted as a response to the historical upheavals surrounding the young author and it was under the aegis of such movements and figures that his own unorthodox and progressive early poetry was written. In addition, Laxness spoke several languages, advocated for modernization, and had, despite strained economic means, maintained a cosmopolitan existence since his late teens.

This is how, at any rate, Laxness came across in the 1920s, partly because of his self-figuration in the public sphere, enacted and constituted through a

variety of textual practices, performative gestures, behavioral patterns, cultural activities and political interventions; these ranging from his creative output to the frequent profiles and interviews that were conducted with him in the fledgling Icelandic media.<sup>50</sup> At stake are writings that include semi-private personal correspondence, polemical and widely read essays in journals and newspapers, and, of course, the three novels that had appeared by 1927, in addition to the poetry Laxness published in newspapers and journals ranging from conservative daily newspaper *Morgunblaðið* to renowned cultural journal *Eimreiðin*, as prominent venues as could be hoped for at the time.

Thus, while critically assessing Icelandic culture from the perspective of continental sophistication, Laxness aligned himself closely and strategically with many of the emblematic features of modernity, the aforementioned *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* being pivotal in terms of the symbolic expression of cultural allegiances.<sup>51</sup> In addition to the maneuvers already mentioned, Laxness became an outspoken opponent of national romanticism and, in the eyes of some, traditional rural mores and ways of life. When one takes into consideration the extent and bluntness of Laxness' polemical writings on modernization and his association with Hollywood and the filmmaking industry, it is perhaps not surprising that he came to be identified closely with the modern and modernity in the 1920s.

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<sup>50</sup> Halldór Guðmundsson has pointed out that by 1926, *Morgunblaðið*, long the most widely read newspaper in Iceland, found Laxness newsworthy enough to report regularly on his movements and events in his life. *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*. Reykjavík: JPV Forlag, 2004, p. 326.

<sup>51</sup> That Laxness infused contemporary and experimental currents into a relatively static literary system, one that was far removed from the aesthetic work marking the moment in the urban capitals of Europe, as well as the fainter but still palpable examples of modernist practice in neighboring Nordic countries, is unquestioned. Indeed, Laxness' role as a breakthrough modernist in Icelandic literature has been extensively documented. Only more recently, however, has it been recognized that cultural discourse that identifies particular instances of writing as the "first" of anything invariably depends on a very unstable conception of literary history.

### 2.3 The Conversions

One might say that Laxness experienced at least three “conversions” during his lifetime, all of them significant enough to require all his energy and linguistic prowess for a time. Of these, the first would be the religious conversion to Catholicism that led to the monastery in Luxemburg; the second was his taking up the handle of a social progressive and a proselytizer for modernity, modernism and modernization, and the third and most significant was a political conversion. From the early 1930s and until, roughly, the early to mid 1950s Laxness was a fervent communist. To this last conversion, we might also, if only for convenience sake, ascribe Laxness’ move away from modernist aesthetic and towards realism and the socially conscious novel.

In between the asceticism of the cloister and the rigors of the communist political vision, Laxness also found time to spend two years in sunny California trying to break into the movie business, as mentioned briefly above. Although he was ultimately unsuccessful, there was a faint whiff of dalliance between him and the Hollywood studios. They were interested, something was going to happen or was supposed to happen; there were plans for a crew to leave for Iceland. The name Garbo may even have been whispered. But it all came to nothing and Laxness spent the remainder of his time in the United States assisting a friend with an English language translation of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, so Laxness had essentially switched from hopes of success in the movie business to hopes of success in the novel business, enjoying in the latter pursuit

the assistance of Upton Sinclair, one of several illustrious and quite famous people Laxness became friendly with during his stay.<sup>52</sup>

It is tempting to imagine a news-reel montage depicting Laxness' first three or four decades as a professional writer, something along the lines of the "News on the March" segment in *Citizen Kane* (1941), where a lifetime is traversed in perhaps twenty minutes and choice images and sequences are edited together with verve and imagination, enough to transform the patchwork of confusion and chaos that constitutes our lives into a stylized and coherent whole (precisely the entity one always intended to make out of time and opportunity and all those other things that seemed plentiful for a brief moment). In our short newsreel however the remarkably unauthoritative and shrill voice that Welles gives the running commentary over to in *Kane* is replaced by someone better suited to transform a gaggle of happenings into serious events through the modulation and manipulation of the vertebral column.

The montage starts with images of a dirty, poverty stricken and somehow abandoned capital (abandoned by history, hope, modernity). Laxness was born Halldór Guðjónsson in a ramshackle building in the center of this township, Reykjavík, but then in a fortunate turn of events moves as young child to Laxnes in Mosfellsdalur, a place in the countryside but within shouting distance of the capital. When older, Halldór would take the name of this peaceful valley, in the genitive, as his last name, Laxness.

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<sup>52</sup> Magnús Á. Árnason. "Kiljan í Kaliforníu." *Gamanþættir af vinum mínum*. Reykjavík: Helgafell 1967, pp. 51-65.

We however — having become the famously sentient Nabokovian camera<sup>53</sup> — are still slowly ambulating through the muddy streets of Reykjavík, with the avenues being populated by drunks, sailors, a hurried clerk or two, ragged farmers, packhorses, and a chicken. A handful of stores line the main street with large glass windows whereupon obscure names are printed — the only surprise being how few of these there are. The weather is dark, wet and windy and electric lighting is scarce. One particular and isolated aspect is always shown, however, when a human figure is glimpsed cutting through the thickness and lingering pale mistiness of the morning air and this is that nobody has good shoes, torn clothing often doing the job. Panning then to the bay, Faxaflói, where the ocean is unruly and waves hit the harbor with immense force, we have gotten what we need to create a sense of Reykjavík as primitive, isolated, poor and in thrall to nature like few capitals would be at this time in the prosperous modern world.

Mosfellsdalur on the other hand is sunny, a child is playing in a meadow, holding hands with a girl from a nearby farm; the contrast is striking if also a tad too obvious. Then there is another cut and the camera is now part of the hustle and bustle of a central avenue in Copenhagen. Laxness' first journey outside of Iceland, as for so many of his countrymen, was to Denmark. From here however the montage quickly shifts to the monumentalist folly that is the Vatican; the gaudy extravagance and riches amassed by the most devious and intricate money making enterprise ever devised by man are then made to contrast starkly

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<sup>53</sup> In the script that Vladimir Nabokov wrote for Stanley Kubrick and his 1962 adaptation of *Lolita* (1955), the camera famously comes to life, frequently and spectacularly, as Nabokov is seemingly unable to contain his exuberance when suggesting shot angles, camera movements and POV structures. See Vladimir Nabokov. *Lolita: A Screenplay*. New York: Doubleday, 2011.



with the modest means, verging on the ascetic, that hold sway in the Catholic monastery in Luxembourg where Laxness stayed. The juxtaposition of the images suggests that Laxness might be letting himself be fooled.

Staying at high altitudes and drawing attention discreetly to how notions of the sacred have changed in modernity — the associations once affixed to the Virgin Mary now emanate from huge advertising billboards — and there, off in the distance and about midway up the modest mountain side, is the Hollywood sign; a quick slide and we see the gates of a studio, someone exists, a crowd goes wild. But as we have already touched on Laxness' sojourn to California, this portion is abbreviated. Politics are now an all-consuming passion, the class struggle, the journey from the Finland Station and onwards to the Russian Revolution. Laxness is in Moscow, he visits the Red Square and we join him for the show trials where Bakunin and all the rest admit to being traitors to the Revolution. Laxness was present at the trials and the voiceover, relatively quiet until now, might mention that he wrote a book where, among other things, the show trials were defended. At this moment in time, Laxness is a Stalinist, his commitment to Communism is absolute. To render the ideological purity and the surety of the reality of the emancipation that waits in the near future — that is, how these and other similar images criss-cross Laxness' mind and his world view is grounded, secured, justified and made comprehensible by this one sure fact: he is on the side of history — cinematic techniques borrowed from Eisenstein or Vertov are necessary, indeed the “kino-fist” is what might just do the trick. Harking back to the inaugural moment of the cinematic medium, the train arriving at the station in the Lumière actuality, we need the images on the

screen to show history as a train but now moving through time, from the past and heading into the future — moments of brutality and barbarity, indeed, seemingly nothing but, are glimpsed through the car windows. Then the modern period, factory pollution clouds our vision, but the train is heading in the right direction, it is on track, the dictatorship of the proletariat is the next stop, or if not the next then the one after that. Inexplicably, however, the train comes to a halt in Wrangellag, what turns out to be the northernmost outpost of the gulag archipelago. Suddenly we see Lavrentiy Beria in a Moscow dungeon; and, finally, the mask is torn off of Stalin, to reveal not the great liberator but rather horror, nothing but. For Laxness, conversions stopped at that point, indeed, so did serious talk of politics, ideals and ideologies.

### **3. An International Figure**

Laxness published a novel and left Iceland. He was seventeen. From then onwards he maintained a cosmopolitan existence where periods of staying in Iceland were interspersed with extended periods spent abroad. This modern sense of mobility, associated by Dean MacCannell with a “nomadic, placeless” subjectivity, is reflected in Laxness’ third novel, mentioned above, *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, a work that explored cosmopolitan themes and loci, as well as taking part in the modernist project of renewing literary expression in response to political and social crises.<sup>54</sup> In the remote backwoods of Europe, Laxness did cut a marvelously imposing and intriguing figure. And he was vocal about almost

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<sup>54</sup> Dean MacCannell. *The Tourist. A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1999, p. xvi.

everything, completely unafraid it seemed. When, in his early twenties, he started writing highly polemical articles in widely read journals and newspapers advocating for modernization, he was not only taken seriously, his interlocutors were professors at the one university that then existed in Iceland and other figures of national renown, as well as the most powerful politicians, who also happened to be the functionaries of the center of economic power in the country at the time.

In the span of only a few years, Laxness would write about the need for artists to become professionals, not attend to their artistic vocation in their off-hours, as was invariably the case. His plan, one that he carried out, was of course to become a professional writer, to live off his craft. Sigurður Nordal has argued that Laxness was the first Icelander, who lived in Iceland, to do so in the modern period.<sup>55</sup> He wrote about the desperate need for the electrification of the provinces and for Reykjavík to shape up; having a cinema was a good beginning but more was needed, housing for the poor, for instance, and indoor toilets. Laxness wrote about youth culture as a separate experiential sphere. He wrote an article about poetry where he judged all artistic expression not transformed by the events of 1914 as worthless and he produced the best feminist article of the period written by a man, “Drengjakollurinn og íslenska konan” (The Bobbed Cut and the Icelandic Woman), published in *Morgunblaðið* in 1925. We will return to this particular essay in what follows. The volume and scope of Laxness’ writings on political and social issues is particularly impressive when one

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<sup>55</sup> Sigurður Nordal. “Tvær miklar skáldsögur.” *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, 24 November, 1940, p. 370. Nordal is ignoring Torfhildur Hólm.

considers that it is essentially a side–line to his substantial novelistic career and other fictional writings.

By the late 1930s and early 1940s, Laxness’ presence had become such that, in effect, no cultural figure in Iceland was of comparable stature. This statement however needs to be qualified somewhat. Up until the middle of the twentieth century, poetry was the privileged mode of literary expression in Iceland and all “þjóðskáld” — national poets or poets of the nation — an immense honorific, primarily wrote poetry. It is as a matter of fact Laxness that shifts and alters this fairly central aspect of Icelandic literary culture — as Ástráður Eysteinnsson has discussed — but that would not happen until around 1950 and after.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, Sigurður Nordal can write that “Halldór has been writing novels since he was a child and has become a genuine force in that regard,” but he then continues and compares Laxness to Davíð Stefánsson, “the most beloved of all Icelandic poets now living. His poems are known to everybody, young and old, and people of all stripes read them, memorize them and then sing them.”<sup>57</sup> When it comes to Laxness and his presence in the literary landscape, Nordal makes a somewhat startling claim:

One would think that an author who in terms of energy and talent has made his presence unmistakably felt in our little literary world, one who also keeps surprising his readers by going in absolutely unpredictable directions, would be a favorite subject for Icelandic literary reviewers. But nothing could be further from the truth. For years, or thereabouts, it can be said that absolute silence has reigned regarding his books in newspapers and journals. There is a virtual downpour of articles on books, which everyone knows are hardly alive or

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<sup>56</sup> Eysteinnsson, “Laxness og aðrir höfundar. Skáldsagan og bókmenntasagan.”

<sup>57</sup> Sigurður Nordal, “Tvær miklar skáldsögur,” p. 370. In the original: “Halldór hefur frá því hann var á barnsaldri ritað skáldsögur og verið stórvirkur á því sviði” and the second quote “Davíð er ástsælastur allra núlifandi íslenskra skálda. Ljóð hans eru á hvers manns vörum og fólk af öllu tagi, ungir jafnt sem gamlir, les þau, nemur og syngur.”

completely dead on arrival. But when it comes to the work of Halldór, they all remain silent.<sup>58</sup>

As Nordal himself mentions, it is politics that provide the defining line between Halldór and Davíð. It would have been extremely difficult, if not downright impossible, for any poet with a strong political bent to his work, Jóhannes úr Kötlum for example, to achieve the aforementioned status since a prerequisite is that everybody should be able to like the poet — a bit like the marketing strategy of contemporary Hollywood films. But even if not every child, man and woman went around reciting Laxness' fiction, his public and national profile was immense and, if not as "beloved" as Davíð Stefánsson, he jolted many out of their daily cognitive routines. He rarely seemed to do anything that did not warrant a response.

With *Salka Valka*, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, *Heimsljós* and *Íslandsklukkan*, Laxness had proven himself not only the nation's foremost novelist but had also raised the novel as a form to a previously unknown level of respect and cultural centrality in Iceland, indeed, because of him, the novel replaced poetry as the central mode of literary expression in the Icelandic literary system of the second half of the twentieth century. In Laxness' case, international success was not entirely unexpected. *Sjálfstætt fólk* was published by The Book of the Month Club in the United States in the late 1940s and the hundreds of thousands of printed

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<sup>58</sup> Nordal, "Tvær miklar skáldsögur," p. 370. In the original: "Það mætti nú ætla, að höfundur, sem bæði að starfsorku og gáfum skipar slíkt rúm í okkar litlu bóikmenntum og að auki kemur lesendum sínum sífellt á óvart með torræðum viðbrigðum, væri íslenskum ritdómurum eftirlætisviðfangsni. En því fer fjarri. Árum saman má heita að almenn þögn hafi ríkt um bækur hans í blöðum og tímaritum. Það rignir niður greinum um bækur, sem allir vita, að fæddar eru með litlu lífsmarki eða gersamlega andvana. En um verk Halldórs þegja hin þrungnu goð."

copies such an endeavor involved easily catapulted Laxness into being the most widely published author in Icelandic history.<sup>59</sup>

The news of Laxness' achievement in the United States did not meet with delight everywhere; indeed, in the highest offices of the government, displeasure seems to have greeted the news. The Icelandic government, which then, as throughout most of the twentieth century, was right wing, was hostile to Laxness who, in the 1930s, literary scholar Árni Bergmann maintains, can count as among the "most persecuted" artists of the period.<sup>60</sup> The concerted effort of right wing media to ignore Laxness in the hope that silence and lack of media attention would injure his career is presumably among the things Bergmann has in mind here. Laxness was a highly capable, extremely fluent, incredibly influential and respected spokesperson for an ideology that posed an existential threat to Iceland and the world, according to leading conservative figures. For Laxness to achieve world fame — which at that moment certainly seemed within reach — was thus a catastrophe. In the late 1940s the highest-ranking members of the Icelandic government, including the prime minister, conspired in an attempt to have American tax authorities and police agencies investigate Laxness and hand over confidential information that was to be used to undermine his reputation and defame him at home.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Halldór Guðmundsson. *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*. Reykjavík: JPV útgáfa, 2004, pp. 499–521.

<sup>60</sup> Árni Bergmann. "Hversu kalt var stríðið? Ekki er allt sem sýnist." *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*. 1 July, 2006, p. 3. In the original: "Ög 'ofsóknir' höfðu í reynd bitnað mest bitnað á mönnum einsog Halldóri Laxness. Á fjórða áratugnum beindist að honum mikil pólitísk heift".

<sup>61</sup> Attention centered on the proceeds from the sales of *Sjálfstætt fólk* in the United States as there were at least two distinct areas where Laxness could be snared, taxes (should he fail to properly account for his profits) and currency manipulation (as there were strict laws in place regarding how citizens could handle foreign currency, i.e. they had to give it up to the government). This included the limited co-operation of US officials but eventually all came to naught as Laxness had things in order.

Laxness' relationship to those holding the reins of political power had virtually from the first been tense and antagonistic. His articles on modernization were in large part a critique of the social structure of the agrarian society of the time and once the class struggle came to the fore in the 1930s, his unwavering support for the radical left made him into a national political figure, although he never ran for office. His 1948 novel *Atómstöðin*, is described by Jón Viðar Jónsson as Laxness' by far "most political work," a comment that in a sense expresses a widely and long held consensus but also functions to remind contemporary readers of the "scandalous" dimension of a text whose social consciousness functioned on two levels; on the one hand by constructing a narrative that produced one of the very first "Reykjavík"-novels and, on the other, by having such a powerful extra-textual connotations that a network of references to contemporary politics and social issues, even famous personages, was immediately brought to bear on the text, which became a literary "scandal," resulting in Laxness being summoned to appear in a court and answer questions regarding a controversial abortion scene in the novel.<sup>62</sup>

All this changed with the Nobel Prize in literature, which Laxness received in 1955. Jón Karl Helgason has argued that around this point Halldór Laxness replaces the heroes of the Sagas as the main protagonist of the narrative of

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<sup>62</sup> Halldór Guðmundsson. *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*. Reykjavík: JPV útgáfa, 2004, pp. 528–531. It is interesting in this context that when the front page of the daily conservative paper *Morgunblaðið* was dedicated to the news of the Nobel Prize, Friday October 28th 1955, the lead article bluntly states that the honor that has thus been bestowed upon the nation, not Laxness on his own, "would have been still more potent had the author not written as tasteless and deceptive a novel about contemporary Iceland as *Atómstöðin*." When Laxness receives the Nobel Prize, it is closing in on a decade since the publication of *Atómstöðin*. However, the rage and bile produced by the novel is still strong enough to "interrupt" the lead story on the front page of the nation's most widely distributed daily, as it is recounting the biggest news story of the decade. Kristján Albertsson. "Halldóri Laxness veitt bókmenntaverðlaun Nóbels." *Morgunblaðið*, 28 October, 1955, p. 1. In the original: "Því miður mun mörgum þykja sá heiður hefði verið enn vafalausari ef skáldið hefði ekki skrifað jafn-smekklusa og rangindafulla sögu um Ísland nútímans og Atómstöðina."

Icelandic culture.<sup>63</sup> Taking on such a role, however, is no small matter. And Laxness, much like the Nobel Prize, now belonged to the nation,<sup>64</sup> perhaps as a character “belongs” to an author — a tantalizing notion in the context of the speech that Laxness gave from shipboard to a harbor absolutely crowded with people welcoming the author when he arrived from Sweden on November 4<sup>th</sup>. The portion of the speech most frequently cited is a brief quote that Laxness describes as having been the response of a poet upon being thanked by his fiancée for a love letter he had sent her: “Thou should not thank me for these poems; it was you who earlier gave them all to me.”<sup>65</sup>

It was as if a promise that had lain below the pedosphere, embedded under the national soil, sometimes trodden on with unusual desperation, and thus sinking lower — this during the hard times — but connected through the organic matter of the earth to history, reaching through stones and minerals back to the foundation of the country, the first parliament, the great chieftains and the writing of the Sagas, and, as if Andr sson’s metaphors of Laxness rupturing the earth was coming true, the long unfulfilled promise was brought to light by Laxness and the Nobel Prize and history was thus redeemed.

From now on the author was celebrated, his stature was beyond the reach of any of his countrymen, or enemies — for a time, Laxness was a world figure, revered at home and sought after abroad. He published five novels after

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<sup>63</sup> J n Karl Helgason, *Hetjan og h fundurinn. Brot  r  slenskri menningars gu*. Reykjav k: Heimskringla, H sk laforslag M ls og menningar, 1998.

<sup>64</sup> As to the Nobel Prize belonging to the “nation,” special events and celebrations were held where Laxness’ prize was symbolically given to various groups and collectives. See P tur Gunnarsson. “  n darfa mi N bels.” *Morgunblaði *, 10 December, 2005.

<sup>65</sup>  lafur Ragnarsson and Valger ur Benediktsd ttir. *L fsmyndir sk lds.  viferill Halld rs Laxness   myndum og m li*. Reykjav k: Vaka-Helgafell, 1992, p. 99. In the original: “ akka þ  m r eigi fyrir þessi lj  ; þa  varst þ  sem gafst m r þau  ll saman   ur.”



receiving the prize, *Brekkukotsannáll* (The Fish Can Sing, 1957), *Paradísarheimt* (Paradise Reclaimed, 1960), *Kristnihald undir Jökli, Innansveitarkróníka* (Chronicle of a County, 1970) and the aforementioned *Guðsgjafaþula*. In the early 1960s, Laxness wrote three plays, *Strompleikurinn* (The Chimney Play, 1961), *Prjónastofan Sólin* (Sun Knitting, 1962) and *Dúfnaveislan* (The Dove Party, 1966). These, in a sense, came as an addition to Laxness' prior two plays, *Silfurtúnglið* (The Silver Moon, 1954) and *Straumrof* (Short Circuit, 1934). Laxness was also involved with hugely successful theatrical adaptations of his novels, the stage adaptation of *Íslandsklukkan* in 1950 remaining among the most popular plays ever staged by Þjóðleikhúsið (The National Theater) and frequently performed since.<sup>66</sup>

### 3.1 A Cultural Saint

In 2002 the government bought the house Laxness had built for his family in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Gljúfrasteinn, which is located a mere stone's throw from what was his childhood home. Jón Karl Helgason has argued that the state acquiring Gljúfrasteinn represents the final proof of Laxness having become a “cultural ‘saint’,” a relic (or perhaps something more in the register of concept) that references in particular the vital role certain individuals play “in the formation of the national identity of [his] countrymen.”<sup>67</sup> While Helgason is correct, the belatedness of the “symbolic” gesture raises questions and is in fact

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<sup>66</sup> Sveinn Einarsson. “Vorið geingur í lið með kálfum. Um Laxness og leiklistina.” *Þar ríkir fegurðin ein. Öld með Halldóri Laxness*. Ed. by Einar Sigurðsson. Reykjavík: Landsbókasafn Íslands – Háskólabókasafn, 2002, pp. 26–28.

<sup>67</sup> Jón Karl Helgason. “Relics and Rituals: The Canonization of Cultural ‘Saints’ From a Social Perspective.” *Primerjalna književnost*, 1/2011, p. 165.

symptomatic of an important lack when it comes to figuring Laxness in historical and cultural terms, both of which inflects the symbolic register. Admittedly, a prerequisite for sainthood is the demise of the saint-to-be — the same however does not apply to an entire network of cultural activity that would essentially have made the same point. In the museum game, to give an example, a collection of phalluses of various mammals, The Icelandic Phallogical Museum, enjoyed a head start of about a decade on Laxness and Gljúfrasteinn.<sup>68</sup> There was a disconnect between his stature in Icelandic culture and the relatively meager steps that had been taken to “institutionalize” Laxness in material terms.

In the leaflet presenting story ideas for foreign journalists prepared by the Icelandic government for the Reykjavík Summit in 1986, when Reagan and Gorbachev met on the issue of nuclear disarmament, Halldór Laxness was offered up as an attraction, side by side with Jón Páll, the world’s strongest man, “Hófi” [Hólmfríður Karlsdóttir], Mrs. World in 1986, elves and the famous doorknob at Höfði.<sup>69</sup> Visiting a man in his mid-eighties can surely be a tremendously rich and giving experience and so, I am sure, was visiting with Laxness. A museum would however have been slightly more efficient and perhaps less taxing on the author.

A museum, according to Tony Bennett, is a “cultural technology” designed for “social management,” much like other institutions endowed with a “rational

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<sup>68</sup> The Icelandic Phallogical Museum opened in 1997. Their website: <http://www.phallus.is/en/>. Gljúfrasteinn opened in 2004; their website is: <http://www.gljufasteinn.is/>.

<sup>69</sup> As nothing happened for days on end and Iceland proved less than full of exciting events for American TV audiences, it became a running joke how intently the global media filmed the door knob on the entrance to Höfði, the meeting place of the two world leaders. For more on this, see Heiða Jóhannsdóttir. “Staging a Nation: Performing Icelandic Nationality.” *Iceland and Images of the North*. Ed. by Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson in association with Daniel Chartier. Quebec: Presses de l’Université du Québec og The Reykjavik Academy, 2011, pp. 435–460.

and improving orientation” — such as libraries and, one could argue, the academy.<sup>70</sup> It is thus perhaps not a big step to move from the “museulization” of Laxness to his presence within the academy and the manner in which he has been figured in the writings of scholars. Indeed, when we noted Laxness’ presence in literary history above, we were already moving within this particular sphere but it would nevertheless be useful to take a closer and more holistic look because Laxness studies were in bad shape as late as the turn of the millennium. Taking a look at the Icelandic academic community at that time provokes questions similar to those that the field of cinema gave rise to earlier; why the indifference? Why was so little being published?

### *3.2 Laxness Studies*

It is revealing, for instance, that a biography of Laxness had yet to see the light of day when the new millennium arrived.<sup>71</sup> It is important to note that the biography is not mentioned to privilege the author as some ultimate reference point or transcendental signified for the meaning of the literary work; quite the opposite, the weakest aspect of most literary biographies is the analysis of the literature. What such work does, however, is collate information, organize sources and provide context that is useful to anyone interested in the subject, be it a professional academic or a lay-reader.

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<sup>70</sup> Tony Bennett. *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 6.

<sup>71</sup> Leaving aside *Lífsmýndir skálds* by Ólafur Ragnarsson and Valgerður Benediktsdóttir, which was published in 1992. While biographical in nature, it’s largely a collection of annotated pictures, newspaper clippings and other such material.

In the passages above, there have been brief references to Laxness being brought to trial for writing about abortion in *Atómstöðin*. We have also mentioned that he stayed in California for two years, attempting to break into the movie business. Somebody's curiosity might be raised and should that someone be contemplating a meta-analysis of Laxness' analysis of the economic logic of Hollywood, to give one example, information about his fortunes in the movie colony is, to put it mildly, useful; on the other hand, a researcher interested in gender issues might find the aforementioned trial to be of considerable interest. The biography, then, rather than representing a fulfillment of the scholarly enterprise would usually be considered an initial step, a way to begin to come to terms with an author and his or her legacy.

However, the general feeling was, it seemed, that most of the important work had already been done by a Swedish literary scholar, Peter Hallberg, who published two sizable volumes on Laxness in the mid 1950s. In the 1980s an MA thesis was published in the form of a monograph, *"Loksins, loksins": Vefarinn mikli og upphaf íslenskra nútímabókmennta* ("Finally, Finally": The Great Weaver and the Origins of Modern Icelandic Literature, 1987) by Halldór Guðmundsson, and a doctoral dissertation by Árni Sigurjónsson was published in two parts as *Laxness og þjóðlífið I and II* (Laxness and Social Life, 1986). A seventy-page essay on *Sjálfstætt fólk* by Vésteinn Ólason was published in 1983 under the category of "kver" (booklet). Another volume was published on Laxness' politics and his writings on the Soviet Union, *"Eina jörð veit ég eystra": Halldór Laxness og Sovétríkin* ("I Know of a Land in the East": Halldór Laxness and the Soviet Union,

1986) by Sigurður Hróarsson.<sup>72</sup> At the start of the decade, Eiríkur Jónsson published *Rætur Íslandsklukkunnar* (The Roots of Iceland's Bell, 1981), an examination of the sources employed by Laxness in the writing of his epic novel. Jónsson submitted the book for a doctoral degree at the Department of Icelandic at the University of Iceland, where it did not pass.<sup>73</sup>

There are certain institutional factors in the academic environment in Iceland that make the production of articles more strategic, financially as well as career-wise, than monographs. Those that have Laxness as one of their areas of expertise still have a very modest list of articles on the subject to their name. A career spanning for example forty or fifty years rarely, if ever, yields work that exceeds the single digit, often not coming close.

Meanwhile Hallberg continued producing articles and books on Laxness at a steady pace, with his last published piece on Laxness appearing in 1993.<sup>74</sup> The way that Hallberg had both opened Laxness up to serious scholarly work and largely provided that work himself did not go unnoticed. This is how an magazine article in 1961 approaches the issue:

It is unfortunately doubtful that the creation of a work about Halldór Laxness here in Iceland that compares to Hallberg's compositions would have been possible. The circumstances simply aren't conducive for such an objective and generous evaluation of the Nobel-writer in his home country. In addition, we could not name but a handful of Icelanders that could be expected to perform at

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<sup>72</sup> There have not been many studies of Laxness by academics who are not Icelandic, aside from those by Peter Hallberg. Erik Sønnerholm's monograph on Laxness, *Halldór Laxness*, published in 1982, should however be mentioned, as well as Günter Kötz' *Das Problem Dichter und Gesellschaft im Werke von Halldór Kiljan Laxness* (1966).

<sup>73</sup> Örn Ólafsson's *Rauðu pennarnir. Bókmenntahreyfing á öðrum fjórðungi 20. aldar* (The Red Pens. A Literary Movement in the Second Quarter of the Twentieth Century, 1990) touches on an aspect of Icelandic cultural life that was of central importance to Laxness. In the 1990s, Jón Karl Helgason published a monograph that is relevant to Laxness studies, *Hetjan og höfundurinn* (The Hero and the Author, 1998), although the main bearings of the work are the Sagas and the heritage.

<sup>74</sup> Peter Hallberg. "Hálf öld með Halldóri Laxness." *Halldórsstefna*. Ed. Elín Bára Magnúsdóttir og Úlfar Bragason. Reykjavík: Stofnun Sigurðar Nordals, 1993.

the level Hallberg does, and it is uncertain that they could get around to it. There is nothing for it, therefore, except to thank Hallberg profusely for the great favor he has done Icelandic literary culture. It is easier for us to receive this kindness as it is known that this fine Swede is connected to Iceland through close family relations, and thus more generally positive towards us than most foreigners.<sup>75</sup>

What little we can do is thank Hallberg for his service to Icelandic literature.

These are the concluding sentiments of the article, which follow upon the openly expressed sentiment that the cultural infrastructure for learned academic work on a contemporary literary figures in Iceland is largely lacking.

It is of course doubtful whether the responsibility of accounting for the immense complexities that are inherent in a career such as the one enjoyed by Laxness, a writer whose vital role “in the formation of the national identity of [his] countrymen” made him into a cultural saint, should be entrusted to a single figure, however capable. That such a “monopoly” is precisely what came into being is difficult to deny, however. Responding in 2003 to a review of the first Laxness biography to appear in Iceland,<sup>76</sup> where it was noted that that state of Laxness studies was far from what it should be, Helga Kress, literature professor at the University of Iceland, pointed to the decades old work of Hallberg to refute the charge, stating

The first thing to do would have been to mention the foundational work of Peter Hallberg on Halldór Laxness, which covers his entire life in four volumes and many articles. Icelandic scholars have for years been engaged in primary research on many aspects of Laxness' works and published as a result books

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<sup>75</sup> “Bókin um Laxness.” *Samtíðin*. 4/1961, p. 13. In the original: “Því miður má draga í efa, að tekizt hefði að skapa hér á landi verk um Halldór Laxness á borð við rit Hallbergs. Forsendur virðast naumast fyrir jafn hlutlægu og umburðarlyndu mati á vinnubrögðum nóbelskaldins í andrúmsloftinu heima á ættjörð þess. Auk þess komum við í bili vart auga á nema örfáa Íslendinga, er ætlandi væri að leysa svipað afrek af hendi og Hallberg hefur gert, og óvíst er, hvort þeir kæmu því í verk. Er því ekki annað sýnna en gjalda beri Hallberg alúðarþakkir fyrir frábæra greiðasemi við íslenzka bókmenningu. Okkur er auðveldara að þiggja hana, þar sem vitað er, að þessi ágæti Sví er tengdur Íslendingum mjög traustum sífjaböndum og því miklu handgengnari okkur en flestir aðrir útlendingar.”

<sup>76</sup> Björn Þór Vilhjálmsson. “Skáldatími.” *Morgunblaðið*, 16 December, 2003.

and articles [...] and recently there have furthermore been published article collections on Laxness.<sup>77</sup>

In addition to the vacuity of mentioning the work of a Swedish academic when it was the work of Icelandic scholars (or lack thereof) that was being criticized, hardly a word of Kress' rebuttal withstands scrutiny. The "primary" work that Icelandic scholars had "been doing for years" was in large part a retread of Hallberg's work, often repeating it directly (this applies in particular to Halldór Guðmundsson' first monograph and portions of Árni Sigurjónsson's two volume book in the 1980s), and then the aspirant but failed doctoral contender Jónsson and the political analysis by Hróarsson. The numerous book publications that Kress suggests had livened up the academic discourse on Laxness thus amount to the extremely demure total of about four (with one published in two parts) in 20 years, none of them by Kress herself. The collections referred to at the end are probably *Halldórstefna*, which came out in 1993, and *"Ekkert orð er skrípi ef það stendur á réttum stað"* ("No Word is a Misfit if it Stands in the Right Place"), published in 2002. One imagines she has the latter in mind ("recently"), which was not peer reviewed and collected the texts of a series of 15 minute talks, many of them by non-academics, all of them extremely brief and only a handful of any real academic interest.

We might recollect here how, in the context of a "Laxness-gap," we noted above that the Icelandic film industry was weak, lacking the infrastructure

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<sup>77</sup> Helga Kress. "Fyllt í gap." *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, 27 December, 2003, p. 16. In the original: "Hér hefði fyrst átt að nefna grundvallarrit Peters Hallbergs um Halldór Laxness sem spannar alla ævi hans í fjórum bókum og fjölmörgum fræðigreinum. Þá hafa um árabíl íslenskir fræðimenn stundað grundvallarrannsóknir á ýmsum þáttum í verkum Halldórs og birt um þær bækur og greinar. [...] og einnig hafa nýlega komið út safnrit með greinum um hann."

necessary to tackling the adaptation of the epic novels. Ástráður Eysteinnsson has described the academic literary institution in Iceland in a similar fashion:

Iceland, while it possesses a long-standing and relatively rich literary culture, does not have a strong tradition of literary historiography, in which one literary historian picks up from another, correcting, amending, adding, deleting. The main exceptions to this general rule are studies in the canonized genres of medieval Icelandic literature, mainly the Sagas of Icelanders (Íslendingasögur), eddic and skaldic poetry, the Sturlunga Saga collection, and the writings attributed to Snorri Sturluson (1179?-1241), i.e. the Snorra Edda (on Nordic mythology and poetry) and Heimskringla (history of the Norwegian kings).<sup>78</sup>

This is essentially the same point as was made in *Samtíðin* four decades earlier. Still, just as Guðrún Halldórsdóttir and Þorsteinn Jónsson demonstrated that accomplishments could be made in the filmic context, Halldór Guðmundsson, Árni Sigurjónsson and others such as Eysteinnsson himself, and Vésteinn Ólason had done their best to infuse rigor and consistency into Laxness scholarship. It could be done but people seemed rather to shy away from the task. Again we seem to be faced with Laxness' "shadow" — the "extreme reverence" in which he is held, it seems, making the work of critical appropriation daunting.

It is important to note that other central authors of the twentieth century in Icelandic literature were in much the same situation as Laxness, even a worse one since they lacked a diligent Swede of their own. Þórbergur Þórðarson might be mentioned here, Gunnar Gunnarsson as well. And replaying the imbalance that characterized Andrésson's literary history, mentioned above, only on a larger scale, would of course not be beneficial in cultural or academic terms. That is, in noting a certain dearth of scholarly activity in Laxness' case, we are by no means positing that he should somehow be a privileged subject of academic

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<sup>78</sup> Ástráður Eysteinnsson. "Halldór Laxness and the Narrative of the Icelandic Novel." *Scandinavica* 1/2003, p. 19.



discourse or that he is the only one of the significant figures in Icelandic twentieth-century literature to have been sadly neglected.

The publication of Halldór Guðmundsson's joint biography of Gunnarsson and Þórðarson, *Skáldalíf* (A Poet's Life), in 2003 was thus a very welcome contribution. Guðmundsson's volume was followed by Pétur Gunnarsson's two volume biography of Þórðarson, *ÞÞ í fátækralandi* (ÞÞ In the Country of the Poor, 2007) and *ÞÞ í forheimskunarlandi* (ÞÞ in the Country of the Blind, 2009). 2010 saw the publication of "Að skilja undraljós" ("To Comprehend a Light of Wonder"), a collection of academic papers on Þórðarson and a year later *Landnám* by Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson was published, an ambitious and years in the making biography of Gunnar Gunnarsson.

Since the centenary of Halldór Laxness in 2002, there has also been considerable activity in Laxness studies, starting with the publication that year of the first monograph focusing on the author since the late 1980s, *Fjallræðufólkið* (People of the Sermon on the Mount) by Gunnar Kristjánsson. The essay collection "*Ekkert orð er skrípi ef það stendur á réttum stað,*" mentioned above was published that year. So was a volume of the annual journal of Landsbókasafn Íslands — Háskólabókasafn (Library of Iceland — University Library), *Ritmennt*, that was devoted solely to Laxness. Entitled *Þar ríkir fegurðin ein. Öld með Halldóri Laxness* (There Beauty Alone Reigns. A Century with Halldór Laxness), the volume included nine original scholarly contributions, some of notable value. 2002 also saw the publication of Ólafur Ragnarsson's *Halldór Laxness. Líf í skáldskap* (Halldór Laxness. Life in Literature), a substantial volume, almost 500 pages, based on conversations between Laxness and Ragnarsson, his long time

publisher. Ragnarsson followed this with a similar volume in 2007, *Til fundar við skáldið Halldór Laxness* (A Meeting With the Writer Halldór Laxness).

Soon after the centenary news also spread that two authors had biographies of Laxness in the works, Halldór Guðmundsson and Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson. The latter planned a three volume biography, with the first volume entitled *Halldór*, the second *Kiljan*, and the third *Laxness*. This came to pass and in the span of the next four years roughly 2500 pages of biographical research on Laxness were published. A valuable addition to the biographical domain appeared in 2011, in the form of a collection of Laxness' letters to his wife Ingibjörg Einarsdóttir in the period from 1927–1939, which included the years Laxness spent in California trying to break into the movie business, *Skáldið og ástin. Halldór Laxness: Bréf til Ingu 1927–1939* (The Poet and Love. Halldór Laxness: Letters to Inga 1927–1939). In 2009, Haukur Ingvarsson published *Andlitsdrættir samtíðarinnar* (Aspects of the Present), a book-length study of Laxness' last three novels — *Kristnihald undir Jökli*, *Innansveitarkróníka* and *Guðsgjafaþula* — and in 2012 Jón Ólafsson published *Appelsínur frá Abkasíu. Vera Hertzsch, Halldór Laxness og hreinsanirnar miklu* (Oranges from Abkhazia. Vera Hertzsch, Halldór Laxness and the Great Cleansings), which dealt with aspects of Laxness' experiences in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, the meanings of which are still debated.

It is within this scholarly milieu, considerably more dynamic than that of previous decades, that the present research program needs to position itself.

### 3.3 Thematic Constellations

One way of describing the contours of the current research project and the chapters that follow would be to say that a trajectory from intense belief in the promise of modernization and modernity itself to an equally intense disillusionment in said concepts is being outlined. Laxness' career, it will be maintained, can be read with modernity as a hermeneutical framework, and indeed, within such a framework many different approaches and avenues present themselves. The one chosen here is to divide Laxness' career into three periods. The first involves the youthful neo-romantic phase, his "religious orgies" and then the modernization phase, the latter being by far the most important. There follows a period of intense political engagement, both in life and literature, and here the modernity framework would involve and invoke most notably the rise of totalitarianism and the ideological struggles of the Cold War. This was also the period during which Laxness wrote his realist epics.

Thirdly, there is the period after 1945, the post-war period of Laxness' literary output, the latter half of which almost imperceptibly turns into Laxness' "late period" in the sense conceptualized by Edward Said in his discussion of late style.<sup>79</sup> Laxness' development towards radical negativity with regard to modernity in this third phase, it will be argued, is gradual — certain gestures and thematic invocations can be noted in the novels published between 1948 and 1960 but it is in the plays that Laxness wrote in the 1960s, the aforementioned *Strompleikurinn*, *Prjónastofan Sólin*, and *Dúfnaveislan*, that we note a significant

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<sup>79</sup> Edward Said. *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain*. New York: Vintage Books, 2006. One attempt has been made to read Laxness through the prism of Said's concept of "late style," in that instance the novel in question was Laxness' last, *Guðsgjafapula*. See Björn Þór Vilhjálmsson. "Í ljósaskiptum minninganna. Athuganir á sjónarhorni, formtilraunum og síðstíl í *Guðsgjafapulu* Halldórs Laxness." *Skírnir*, 2/2009.

rift, indeed a full fledged “break” with all his previous works. The negativity in question is also manifested in two of Laxness’ three last novels, all published after the theatrical period which lasted from the publication of *Paradísarheimt* (Paradise Reclaimed) in 1960 to the release of *Kristnihald undir Jökli* in 1968, during which Laxness did no novelistic work.

The necessity of unpacking the concept of modernity should be clear after the description above, brief as it is, as well as placing it in a dynamic relationship with these texts and their intense and radical engagement and dialogue with a great variety of questions, problems, opportunities and shifts in subjective experience that the shifts of modernization have given rise to; a constellation of issues that could not have been articulated nor responded to before the “break” of modernity. Included in the constellation thus invoked would be a range of issues, stretching from the reconfiguration of gender politics brought on by urbanization, or the class struggle and socialist dreams of revolution — also the result of urbanization — to the rise of multi-national corporations and the industrialization of culture. The shrinkage of the world — both in terms of the loss of what Weber termed “disenchantment” and in the sense of McLuhan’s conception of the “global village” — is at stake, as are new subjectivities and new ways of dehumanizing subjects.<sup>80</sup> From the wonders of technology (reducing infant mortality, penicillin) we move to its capacity to destroy the world in the blink of an eye.

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<sup>80</sup> Max Weber. “Science as Vocation.” *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology*. Trans. and ed. by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York and London: Routledge, 2009. Marshall McLuhan. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1998.

As the repetitive use of the noun would seem to indicate, technology stands as the central metonymy of modernity, by far the most important one and in a sense the bedrock upon which modernity justifies itself. We will therefore pay particularly close attention to textual markers of modernity that involve technology and are not mere static, empty reality effects, but represent the fundamental subject matter of a text or inflect the textual consciousness in a decisive way.

In addition to technological modernity, the following chapters will pay particular attention to gender and gender-related concerns, which invariably shed light on often unexpected facets of the modernity concept. Laxness' interest in gender politics manifests itself in various ways, among them how different ideological and social frameworks, psychic control mechanisms, repressive structures and inoculation hot spots are in play when constructing and shaping male and female subjectivities; the same goes for the establishment of structures, institutions and disciplinary mechanisms that monitor sexual behavior. Reflections on these subjects would infuse his writings from the first to last.

### *3.4 Generic Concerns*

The central and defining formal element of the current research program is the fact that it involves two distinct modes of literary address. Of the three broadly outlined "phases" of Laxness' career, we will be looking at the first and third — albeit even then our approach will be selective, focusing on the non-fiction in the first period of Laxness' career and the plays in the third. Had the second been

incorporated, with the great novels and the most titanic political struggle in history as a backdrop, along with Laxness' deep engagement with the latter, the girth of the dissertation would have expanded beyond reasonable bounds. The same applies to the novelistic part of Laxness' career, central as it is to his authorial figuration and the fact that it represents in the majority opinion the highest plateau of his artistic achievement.

It is important to note however that Laxness' novels and other writings, albeit not the focus of the research, are included and touched upon, analyzed and interrogated, when the context of the overall research program requires it. The novels thus included range from his first, *Barn náttúrunnar* to his last, *Guðsgjafaþula*, and works published in between such as *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, *Atómstöðin* and *Kristnihald undir Jökli*. These and other novels, as well as short stories and travelogues will be discussed. And as an addendum, it might be mentioned that the novels do represent the aspect of Laxness' oeuvre that has been afforded by far the greatest attention by scholars. Indeed, with the exception of Eiríkur Jónsson's *Rætur Íslandsklukkunnar* and Sigurður Hróarsson's "*Eina jörð veit ég eystra*": *Halldór Laxness og Sovétríkin*, all monographs on Laxness by Icelandic authors deal with his novelistic output while some expand the framework in order to include other aspects of Laxness' career as well.<sup>81</sup>

In a way, my theoretical approach to the concept of modernity inevitably points towards certain aspects of Laxness' substantial body of work, while these same works, at the point when the study was being conceptualized, shaped my

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<sup>81</sup> In *Laxness og þjóðlífið* I and II Árni Sigurjónsson is for example attentive to the ideological and aesthetic currents of the first decades of the twentieth century, as well as political debates on cultural issues and the concept of nationality; he also devotes a few pages to Laxness' essays.

method of navigating the complex conceptual terrain of modernity. In the background of this hermeneutical circle lies a preference or curiosity regarding those aspects of Laxness' career that are less frequently addressed in the scholarly literature. Most important however is the fact that by holding these two periods of Laxness' career up for joint examination and contrast, we get as clear a picture of the terrific distances he moves during the half century he was most active, in ideological, philosophical and aesthetic terms, as it is within my capacity to offer.

The dissertation traverses the boundaries of genre in other words, dealing with essays and non-fiction on the one hand and plays on the other. The emphasis may strike some readers as surprising, even curious. The domain of the theater is not usually placed at the center of the debate on literature and modernity although two figures do tend to feature prominently, and both happen to be Scandinavian, Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg. Both, as it turns out, have immense significance for Laxness, particularly the latter.

With the exception of Eliot, Stein, Celan and a number of others in the realm of poetry — and perhaps precursors such as Hölderlin and Goethe — the novel has been the privileged venue to mediate the experience of modernity and, indeed, as a form it is commonly associated with modernity's inception. In a well known work on the rise of the novel, Ian Watt accentuates a number of novelistic characteristics that are closely related to the ethos of the Enlightenment, including the break from an atemporal substantive worldview and the emphasis on the individual and how a causal connection, in other words human agency, comes to challenge notions of an unchanging, preordained world. Watt also

associates the novel with a new form of psychology, namely the notion that subjectivity is formed through experience in time and the past can explain present behavior and mental states: “The novel’s plot is also distinguished from most previous fiction by its use of past experience as the cause of present action: a causal connection operating through time replaces the reliance of earlier narratives on disguises and coincidences.”<sup>82</sup>

It is therefore not saying too much to note that there is an almost unconscious tendency towards the form of the novel when the relationship between literature and modernity is examined, as if the novel were the natural habitat of the textual expression of all that which is modern, which is far from being the case. From Montesquieu to Kant to De Sade to Baudelaire to Kierkegaard to Marx to Nietzsche to Freud to Du Bois to Le Corbusier to Benjamin to Fanon to Primo Levi to Hunter Thompson; modernity is made up of textual encounters in the non-fictional realm, a great spectrum of textual engagements in the long-form essay, the memoir, autobiographies and various works of social reflection and thinking.

In Ian Watt’s account of the emergence of the novel, one concept dominates, that of realism, the desire to achieve “the immediacy and closeness of the text to what is being described.”<sup>83</sup> In that sentence, the seeds of the great literary aesthetic divide of the twentieth century reside. Emerging in the opening decades of the twentieth century in opposition to the aesthetic dominance of realism, modernism questioned many of the fundamental assumptions of realism

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<sup>82</sup> Ian Watt. *The Rise of the Novel. Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. London: The Hogarth Press, 1995, p. 22.

<sup>83</sup> Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 23.



about representation, the function of language and the constitution of the subject, bringing about a sense of crisis in all these domains. The rupture brought about by modernism relates not only to Laxness' early poetry and *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* but also, and perhaps primarily, the late plays he wrote in the 1960s, as well as *Kristnihald undir Jökli*. As we examine Laxness' plays, five in all, and come closer to the late work, issues of aesthetic rupture will come to the forefront. It will prove necessary, however, to address several of the implications of modernism and its relation to modernity at an earlier point, as the relationship is privileged in theoretical and scholarly discourse and is indeed often seen as constitutive of the relationship between literature and modernity. This is pithily captured by Frederic Jameson in a question he poses midway through his monograph on modernity: "Why not simply posit modernity as the new historical situation, modernization as the process whereby we get there, and modernism as a reaction that can be aesthetic and philosophico-ideological".<sup>84</sup> He has no sooner uttered those words than he starts problematizing them, using them as springboards into a discussion of their manifold implications, a number of which will be touched on below.

#### **4. Modernity, Literature, Laxness**

Laxness' work involves a formal dimension where the modernist enterprise of problematizing and renewing linguistic signification in response to social shifts and a variety of global and local crises, as well as the paradigm shifts occurring in the realm of the sciences and humanist investigations, is clearly in evidence. But

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<sup>84</sup> Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, p. 99.

reading Laxness, one is also invited to reflect on the manner in which the experience of modernity can in general terms be rendered on a textual level. The metaphors and figurations of technology are prominent here as key facets of the social forces that come together in the concept of modernity. Referring to “metaphors” and “figurations” is meant to invoke how much of “modernity” belongs to the level of representation.<sup>85</sup> Trains and airplanes exist in reality, of course, as devices of wondrous mobility but the meanings that accrue to them are discursive; even the account to a spouse of the horrible security measures in a just completed flight has entered the domain of the symbolic. We will be examining such symbolic structures, how they mediate and position a new subjectivity in modernity, along with many other shifts and changes, and how this is registered in the specific domain of literature as well as non-fiction.

It is here that the presence of motifs directly invoking the modern, or more subtly indicating a stance *vis a vis* modernity, the “material evidence of modernity,” such as the atomic bomb, or somewhat less threateningly, electricity, the automobile, the phonograph, movies and the cinematic apparatus, radio, various modern communication methods, multinational entertainment conglomerates, the mechanization of industry, and so forth, become key

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<sup>85</sup> Figuration is commonly seen as asking language to do more work than is necessary, strictly speaking, for acts of practical communication and is thus associated with excess, as well as poetic or literary language. Linguist and literary theorist Roman Jakobson questioned this stance in the early 1950s when he presented his famous communication model where “literariness,” in opposition to earlier formalist thinking, is seen as a functional element in a variety of non-literary discourses. Later theorists of figuration, influenced by Nietzsche’s thinking on language, would radicalize Jakobson’s approach, replacing his notion of “dominants,” that is, the method through which Jakobson retained the possibility of generic and discursive categories and distinctions, with an emphasis on the topological nature of all language. It might be added however that at stake is not a new problem. The debate on figurative versus transparent language can be traced back to Plato and his dialogue, *Gorgias*, In the dialog “rhetoric,” which in part stands for the figurative use of language as it is defined as speech “about speech” and produces “conviction without knowledge”. Plato. *Gorgias*. Trans. by Donald J. Zeyl. *Plato – Complete Works*. Ed. by John M. Cooper. Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis and Cambridge, pp. 795, 800 / 449d, 454e.

signposts to the cognitive mapping of Laxness' textual worlds and authorial work.<sup>86</sup> In his work, deep-seated institutional structures of modernity are placed in a relationship with material technologies emblematic of a new era.

Tracking these aspects of Laxness' work, and identifying discursive sites representative of modernity, such as rationalization or Laxness' lasting engagement with the culture industries and media technologies, not to mention his investment in formal innovations that stand in relation to structures of modern subjectivity, allows us to glimpse important new conjunctions within Laxness' oeuvre — and provide a fresh account of the disjunctions — that range from his early occupation with the practice of modernization and his emphasis on the multifaceted repercussions of the “new” to the manner in which, in the later works, he presents the social complex as a site of conflicting potentiality and contested ideological horizons, representing the tensions of a world both enchanted and disenchanting. The suggestion here, one that constitutes the ground of the chapters that follow, is that a close examination of the manifold ambivalences that inflect Laxness' relationship with modernity, and how he addresses issues and topics related to the modern within the parameters of narrative, form and theme, opens up previously under-explored aspects of his work, as well as his complex positions regarding contemporary cultural and social discourses.

A rigorous engagement with Laxness' representation of institutional structures of modernity and the visible signifiers of modernity and the lifeworld

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<sup>86</sup> The notion of the technological instance constituting “material evidence of modernity” is borrowed from Marian Aguiar and her paper “Making Modernity: Inside the Technological Space of the Railway.” *Cultural Critique*. Winter, 2008, p. 67.

of modern subjects reveals an author whose early advocacy for modernization and passionate investment in a cosmopolitan modernity, rather than coming to a halt, remains a vibrant concern while also undergoing certain transformations in his later work. Important linkages can be made between early and late writings, while in ever more subtle ways modernity becomes intertwined with Laxness' thinking about temporality. Any attempt to understand the broad structures shaping Laxness' career and work, in other words, must necessarily address the modernity of his writings.

#### *4.1 Modern Narratives*

As is already evident, the scope of the study extends beyond the confines of the novel. Different textualities and discourses — essays, plays, fiction, travelogues, political debates, occasional pieces — will be contextualized and discussed in tandem, placed in dialogue as it were, and the ambivalence that follows such juxtapositions will, it is hoped, provide for productive destabilizations. Equally clearly, however, the study does not attempt to represent the whole body of Laxness' creative work. My research project centers on Laxness' interaction with institutional structures of the modern as well as representations of the material context of modernity as lived experience, and while this might include nearly the entire oeuvre, my attention is focused primarily on the plays and the non-fiction as mentioned above.

However, before proceeding to a more detailed description of individual chapters and how the problematic of technological modernity is traced through

Laxness' career, it is important to engage with the conceptual domain being invoked and present a framework for approaching Laxness under the rubric of modernity.

While defining Laxness' engagement with the modern too narrowly can be a problem, endowing such an encounter with an organizational principle is nevertheless necessary. Indeed, many would be quick to point out that an even more substantial predicament than a too stringent reduction of the concept's scope in relation to the literary is its seemingly open-ended nature, and the possible vagaries inherent in the process of relating aesthetic objects to what is, among other things, a historical and philosophical, not primarily a literary, category.

As Ástráður Eysteinnsson points out, it is also difficult to deny any modern aesthetic text the status of being in some sense the cultural counterpart of social modernity.<sup>87</sup> Any modern author, one might therefore say, expresses a vision of modernity. In the same way, however, any black author could be said to express "a vision" of racial existence; or a woman to express a "womanly" vision of the world. Clearly, there is a host of concepts whose wide connotative range cannot be allowed to dilute the analytical force embedded within them if wielded with precision and intent. But the task of accounting for any of these "visions" can be a tricky endeavor and the dimensions at stake are far from self-evident. The relevance of critical articulations of the dynamics involved in all politically and culturally complex, contested and ambiguous concepts would seem to rest, in

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<sup>87</sup> Ástráður Eysteinnsson. *The Concept of Modernism*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990, p. 72.

each individual case, on something beyond a universally shared sensibility. The particular, as Adorno would say, should not be subsumed under the universal.

That is, a conception of what is sought in the notion of modernity needs to be in place so as to allow an assessment of its meanings and the variety of its representations.

A first step towards responding to these problems is acknowledging the tensions surrounding the concept of modernity, how it is in a very acute sense a marker of privilege, and how the debate over the modern is enmeshed in a global situation of unequal power relations.<sup>88</sup> One cannot, for example, overlook a history of imperialist politics marked by the diffusion of scientific knowledge as a method for the West to set up “relations of dependency” between receivers and donor countries, as well as a variety of other economic and ideological divisions.<sup>89</sup> Citing Oskar Lafontaine’s memoir of his experiences under the Schroeder administration in Germany,<sup>90</sup> Frederic Jameson notes that modernity has become a discursive marker of considerable value to free-market ideologues, perhaps even the “last” or final product for the West to export to the “third” world: “in a situation in which modernization, socialism, industrialization (particularly the former, pre-computerized kind of heavy industry), Prometheanism, and the ‘rape of nature’ generally, have been discredited, you can still suggest that the so-called underdeveloped countries might want to look forward to simple ‘modernity’ itself.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar. “On Alternative Modernities.” *Alternative Modernities*. Ed. by D. P. Gaonkar. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001, pp. 7–9.

<sup>89</sup> Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, pp. 229–230.

<sup>90</sup> Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, p. 9.

<sup>91</sup> Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, pp. 9–10.

Jameson draws attention to the way in which many of the once proud signpost of modernity and modernization (industrialization, the striving, frequently heedless, for dominion over nature) have been critically recast as symptomatic of the destructiveness and inner contradictions of capitalism, even rationality itself.<sup>92</sup> Unable to reflect on itself, the capitalistic system, in Jameson's depiction, simply turns around and exports the same set of unsustainable values to other parts of the world, precisely those countries and populations whose centuries long exploitation has underwritten Western privilege.<sup>93</sup> Jameson thus points out that the promise of modernity, its utopian register, has lost its coherence and become unconvincing in key respects. This is precisely the problem facing Jürgen Habermas in his attempt to recuperate the project of modernity.<sup>94</sup> Not only must the concept of modernity, if posited in a redemptive or heroic register, account for catastrophes of the past committed in the name of reason, but it must also square up to the fact that the logic of relentless growth, which grounds its most forceful and emblematic representative, capitalism, is deeply at odds with the finitude of the environment and the natural world. Thus, while the modern may at first seem safely in hand from the perspective of wealthy industrialized countries, its inherent contradictions run deep and may never have been more pressing.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Jameson was an early proponent of Adorno in the English speaking world and important connections to the latter's thinking on rationality and nature can be discerned in these articulations. Among the foremost contradictions of capitalism, it now has become apparent, is its role in climate change and its seeming inability to tackle the problem in a serious fashion. On this, see another theorist of modernity, Anthony Giddens. *The Politics of Climate Change*. Cambridge, Oxford and Boston: Polity, 2011.

<sup>93</sup> Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, pp. 11–12.

<sup>94</sup> Jürgen Habermas. "Modernity – An Incomplete Project." Trans. Seila Ben-Habib. *Postmodern Culture*. Ed. Hal Foster. London: Pluto Press, 1985.

<sup>95</sup> In *Living in the End Times*, Slavoj Žižek points out that the lesson that can be drawn from global warming is that human freedom depends on the maintenance of an equilibrium when it comes to

There are however certain problems with Jameson's conception of modernity. A reader whose curiosity happened to be raised by the title of Jameson's book, *A Singular Modernity*, might be tempted at this point to inquire into his conceptualization of the notion of modernity as a form of commodity for "exportation," both because the global register of the concept is important in any serious engagement with its meanings, and because Jameson seems to be offering a particular and, perhaps, a provocative way of viewing its international dispersal. One might furthermore wonder whether a conceptualization of modernity based on notions of "exportation" and "singularity" runs the risk of proving unduly limiting and one sided, at least in the sense of privileging Western models. Indeed, Jameson's curt dismissal of the notion of "alternative modernities" suggests that the "singularity" invoked by the title of his book is intended to be understood in a literal fashion and that, furthermore, he sees the Western model of modernity to be the one at issue:

How then can the ideologues of 'modernity' in its current sense manage to distinguish their product — the information revolution, and globalized, free market modernity — from the detestable older kind, without getting themselves involved in asking the kinds of serious political and economic, systemic questions that the concept of postmodernity makes unavoidable? The answer is simple: you talk about 'alternate' or 'alternative' modernities. Everyone knows the formula by now: this means that there can be a modernity for everybody which is different from the standard or hegemonic Anglo-Saxon model. Whatever you dislike about the latter, including the subaltern position it leaves you in, can be

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the living conditions on the planet. Global warming thus places clear constraints on the freedom of humans to behave as they please. These constraints are the contradictory result of man's almost limitless ability to enact his will on the environment — his complete freedom from natural restrictions in other words. Man's capacity to transform his environment has, furthermore, destabilized living conditions on Earth. Man's tremendous freedom of action has therefore drastically curtailed his freedom: "The lesson of global warming is that the freedom of humankind was possible only against the background of stable natural parameters of life on earth (temperature, the composition of the air, sufficient water and energy supplies, and so on): humans can "do what they like" only insofar as they remain marginal enough so as not to seriously perturb natural preconditions. The limitation of our freedom that becomes palpable with global warming is the paradoxical outcome of the very exponential growth of our freedom and power, that is, of our growing ability to transform nature around us, up to and including destabilizing the very framework for life." Slavoj Žižek. *Living in the End Times*. London and New York: Verso, 2011, pp. 332-333.



effaced by the reassuring and 'cultural' notion that you can fashion your own modernity differently, so that there can be a Latin-American kind, or an Indian kind or an African kind, and so forth.<sup>96</sup>

To begin with, the idea that alternative modernities involve "a modernity for everybody" is a deliberate caricature on Jameson's part. More notable, however, than the attempt at irony is how the misrepresentation undermines the text's central contribution to modernity studies, namely Jameson's displacement of the concept of modernity unto the domain of the tropological.<sup>97</sup> That is, by refusing to entertain the notion of alternative modernities, Jameson comes into conflict with the thinking that grounds his own approach to modernity. The following "thought-experiment" demonstrates in a dramatic fashion the nature of the tropological and suggests where the problem lies:

Thus while Luther or German objective idealism may well offer self-evident though dramatic starting points for some worldwide modernity, to reread Hitler as the agent of the very fulfilment of a specifically German modernity is surely to offer a powerful defamiliarization of the recent past as well as a scandalous rewriting procedure. The trope reorganizes our perception of the Nazi movement, displacing an aesthetic of horror (the Holocaust, Nazi racism and the genocides) along with other ethical perspectives (the well-known 'banality of evil', for example) and even those political analysis in which Nazism is seen as the ultimate unfolding of the substance of radical right ideology in general, with a very different developmental narrative context [...].<sup>98</sup>

Placing Hitler as the emblematic figure of German modernity is certainly an "irresponsible" reading of history but, clearly, Jameson's aim is to employ the outlandishness of the proposition to foreground the function of modernity as a linguistic category. The gesture presupposes the instability of the fundamental temporal and periodizing function of the concept and consequently highlights the importance of the narrative point of view when the history of modernity, or

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<sup>96</sup> Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, p. 12.

<sup>97</sup> Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, pp. 39–41.

<sup>98</sup> Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, p. 36.

its origins, are recounted. Jameson thus takes an acknowledged methodological and perhaps also, on a deeper level, epistemological problem for historiography to what is a radical and debatable conclusion, namely that modernity is not a concept at all but a trope. In other words, that its content is utterly malleable and its function thus primarily narratological. We will return to this position but for the present and in order to accentuate the peculiarity of Jameson's reticence to afford different locations a modern formation of their own, it is sufficient to note that the thinking underlying his entire excursion into what Hayden White would call the figurative dimension of all historical narratives is the very same as the one that grounds the concept of alternative modernities, namely that there is no firm or transcendental center for the content of the concept of modernity and that, furthermore, it is important to "defamiliarize" dominant Western models.

Jameson's critique of alternative modernities is also closely connected to his representation of modernity as "commodified," something we touched upon above. Modernity thus understood must distinguish itself from its "detestable" earlier manifestations for two reasons. First there are the market imperatives. Modernity must be endowed with the attractive burnish of a new product; traces of its totalitarian and terroristic past are antithetical to this purpose. Secondly, the new commodified modernity represses the reality of the postmodern age; fully embracing its past would also mean acknowledging a conceptual, cultural and historical rupture, which, again, would interrupt the economic program because, rather than selling the information revolution or rebranding the industrial revolution, systematic political problems would come to the fore and demand our attention; that is, acknowledging that modernity has ended or been

superseded brings to the fore the problems it leaves (left) in its wake. The notion of alternative modernities, however, demands a reconceptualization or rethinking of both positions. If modernities can be “created” outside the West, rather than imported as a commodity, the reification of the Western model is less assured. Following upon this, postmodernity will find the world-stage somewhat crowded if modernity, rather than packing up and leaving, has transformed itself into a multitude of alternative modernities that perkily go about their business, unaware of the “break” that is supposed to have rendered them obsolete.

It might be pointed out, in addition, that in order for Jameson’s inscription of modernity to be coherent, we must, firstly, accept Jameson’s audacious rhetorical maneuver of offering the musings of an obscure politician from the Schroeder government as the definitional backbone of the new concept of commodified modernity, rather than engaging with, say, the famous analysis of modernity offered by a compatriot of the aforementioned politician, someone who is in fact known for his work on sociological and philosophical issues relating to the modern era; Habermas. If this sleight of hand is not accepted, if the reader finds that Jameson is getting away rather easily, even if only in terms of constructing a straw man, the division between a “new” marketable modernity and a “detestable” old one fades away and disappears and we are left with Habermas’ “unfinished project,”<sup>99</sup> for example, or, more generally speaking, a

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<sup>99</sup> Another, second order effect of Jameson’s rhetoric of “detestable” modernity involves the argumentative bad-faith gesture of ignoring the ambivalent content of cultural and social modernity in favor of a one-dimensional portrait. Responding to this tendency among critics of the modern, Habermas notes that “this leveling can also be seen in the diachronic comparison of modern forms of life with pre-modern ones. The high price earlier exacted from the mass of the population (in the dimensions of bodily labor, material conditions, possibilities of individual choice, security of law and punishment, political participation and schooling) is barely even noticed.” Jürgen Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Trans. by Frederick Lawrence. London and Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990, p. 338.

notion of modernity that sees processes of rationalization, secularization and urbanization, to name just these three, as complicated and continuous historical phenomena rather than a “detestable” backdrop to a new version of modernity.

This in fact can happen without losing sight of Jameson’s essential point, however, which involves an understanding of modernity as, at least in part, an effect of power relations. Furthermore, if the idea that the concept of postmodernity somehow facilitates the analysis of systematic political and economic problems is rejected, which is not unreasonable to do as Jameson offers no evidence for such cognitive benefits, the second pillar of his argumentative edifice falls. What we are then left with is his dismissal of cultural difference in the name of world-wide capitalism: “But this is to overlook the [...] fundamental meaning of modernity which is that of a worldwide capitalism itself. The standardization projected by capitalist globalization in this third or late stage of the system casts considerable doubt on all these pious hopes for cultural variety in a future world colonized by a universal market order.”<sup>100</sup>

All this speaks to the “modernity debates” of twenty years ago, where we saw for example Jürgen Habermas stake out a position in defense of enlightenment principles and ideals, and engage on various fronts with critics of the logic of modernity, be it those who depict the narrative of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, deeply ambivalent as any reading of it must be, as being under the sway of “terroristic reason,” to discursive practitioners who mourn the loss of a substantive worldview and find the disenchantment of culture deeply

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<sup>100</sup> Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, pp. 12–13.

problematic.<sup>101</sup> Of course, Habermas was particularly at odds with a variety of poststructuralist thinkers, but none of them however proved as difficult to grapple with as the work of his mentor in the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno, and particularly the 1947 volume Adorno wrote with Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Dialectic of the Enlightenment). Habermas in a sense has spent his career debating with Adorno. *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* and the Frankfurt School provide an important framework within which to approach the concept of modernity as well as Laxness, something that we will return to shortly.

What should be emphasized at this point is that the “lineage” of debates on the modern, going back beyond Habermas to the “modernization” theories that became prominent in the decades after the Second World War, speak to the great excitement surrounding modernization efforts as well as the disillusionment with technology and ideals of progress that followed the First World War, only to be exacerbated by what followed. The fault-line between these two positions can then be traced through many, if not most, critical discursive engagements with the modern. These conflicts and ambiguities, again, will be attended to more closely in the following chapter, but, importantly, this is where we start to enter into the immediate social context of Laxness, whose experiences of modernity and modernization were initially, and quite significantly, shaped by local resistance to “foreign influences,” the celebration of a medieval literary heritage and a set of rural values that were at odds with a cultural milieu that he witnessed abroad in his travels, as well as the changes occurring in Reykjavík, which was slowly urbanizing. His early series of articles on the poverty and backwardness of the provinces, despite shocking and

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<sup>101</sup> Habermas, “Modernity – An Incomplete Project,” p. 9

offending numerous readers, represent in this context an important moment in the push-back against the anti-modern ideologies of rural uplift that fronted for the economic interests of a wealthy land-owning class, ideologies that had been gaining ground since the end of the First World War.

As Laxness' engagement with the modern and various structures of modernity became more complex and conflicted, we will also see him struggling with a set of questions that speak to, for example, the rich tradition of critically probing modern social formations that we associate with Weber and his discursive successors in the Frankfurt School, from Adorno to Habermas. There are six main reasons for the centrality of this lineage of thinkers, emphasizing the Frankfurt School proper, for the present undertaking.

1. The Frankfurt School depends on a dialogue with an intellectual tradition that is uniquely important to conceptions of modernity. On the one hand that includes the eminent idealist philosophers of the nineteenth century, primarily Kant and Hegel, and then there is a daring attempt to combine the work of Marx and Freud in social and cultural analysis.
2. A substantial part of the first generation of the Frankfurt School scholars and the second generation, first and foremost Jürgen Habermas, put the task of accounting for modernity, i.e. producing a theory of modernity, at the center of their projects. The results, most notably, have been *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Dialectic of Enlightenment, 1947) and *Theorie des*

*kommunikativen Handelns* (The Theory of Communicative Action, 1984–1987).

3. The difference between the first two generations of the Frankfurt School towards the logic of modernity is famous, and Habermas is usually seen as the one who attempts to recuperate what his predecessors had condemned utterly. That the matter is not so simple does not change the fact that the differences in approach between, in particular, Adorno and Horkheimer and Habermas, are in themselves extremely suggestive and productive for thinking about the problems thus delineated.
4. The work of the Frankfurt School represents the first serious academic engagement with the emergence in the twentieth-century of mass culture.
5. Aside from the benefits of the above points when it comes to attempts to contextualize and analyze cultural artifacts and cultural work, there is a strange affinity between the Frankfurt School and Halldór Laxness, evidenced in responses to the culture industry as well as the Holocaust.

When examining the complex set of discourses that is subsumed within the notion of modernity, it is also important to acknowledge the incompleteness that is an unavoidable (and perhaps also vital) ingredient of any such conceptualization, the complex play of difference that inflects the concept, evident for example in conceptions of metropolitan areas versus rural areas in “developed” countries, and the somewhat troubling function of the concept of

modernity as a place-holder, always dependent on context for meaning. Thus, for example, the dynamics of modernization, as they have played out in the West, demonstrate that there is always a preceding moment, a position anterior to the modern moment, that reaches into the presentness of the modern and thus constitutes its advent as an event and a struggle and its space a site of contention. One need only think of Paul Virilio's classic juxtaposition of the industrial might of Empire, as compressed into the airplane, which, carrying a camera, holds forth to "document" and "map" the continental farm lands of World War I, territories that had remained virtually unchanged for centuries.<sup>102</sup> Similarly, there is always an "elsewhere" that is in some sense more completely or "authentically" modern, even if only in the form of an ideal, positive or regulatory, which thus identifies the modernity at hand with emptiness, a structural lack. Thus, the politics of modernization disallow easy or narrow consignments. In an important sense, modernity is always, as Arjun Appadurai has pointed out, haunted by incompleteness and inadequacy, "the modern subject is posited on a permanent deferral of the moment of arrival in the state of being modern."<sup>103</sup> This becomes extremely acute in the case of Laxness, and his stance towards, and, for a time, intense desire for the modern, as he looked on cosmopolitan Europe from a distinctly marginalized position. The realization that what he initially longed for may never actually be reached, at least in the way he originally imagined, may well have been a constitutive factor in his increasingly complex and fraught relationship with many markers of modern life.

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<sup>102</sup> Paul Virilio. *War and Cinema. The Logistics of Perception*. Trans. P. Camiller. London and New York: Verso, 1989, pp. 85-89.

<sup>103</sup> Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 68.



The risk of modernity becoming, as Eysteinnsson points out, an empty signifier can be navigated by not allowing the expression of something called “modernity” to function as an artificially imposed common denominator, and, no less importantly, resisting the temptation to align the notion too closely with a specific historical situation, and thus risk rendering it monolithic. Therefore, as the Icelandic context will of course be of central importance, we must remain sensitive to the way in which the experience of modernity and modernization in Iceland diverges from “traditional” European and continental models, while at the same time try not to get locked into a stringently local investigation.

Peripheral as the country may have been from urban and cultural centers, it still partook of European discourses, and the absence of certain practices should not be taken as decisive proof that these same practices did not play an important cultural role in defining the parameters of national discussion and national self-imaginings.

#### *4.2 Trajectories*

As we now continue, we will start by taking an initial look at the theoretical context that gives shape to the concept of modernity, centering particularly on the tensions and debates surrounding rationalizing processes as they have come to the fore in the work of Max Weber and the Frankfurt School, and important antecedents in the philosophical tradition. These theoretical constructs of modernity all engage with modernity as a form of narrative, be it a story of progress or a dialectic of enlightenment and regression, some even approach the narrative of modernity as a form of philosophical discourse. Important here is

the philosophical heritage of the Frankfurt School and the cultural critique associated with the major names of the School, from Theodor Adorno to Jürgen Habermas. Most important, however, is the constitution of a framework that allows for the productive employment of modernity as a conceptual domain for the reading and interpretation of Laxness' works. This is what the first chapter attempts to do.

In this project's attempt to illuminate Laxness's engagement with the various narratives of modernity, the author's entire career is being traversed. Laxness lived through tumultuous times, and witnessed a new culture rising out of the ashes of two wars; he participated in the great political debates of his era and became himself the subject of intense political and aesthetic debates, a fact that places the biography in a close relationship with the vocation of writing. This means that a certain consideration of Laxness' life and his cultural context is required, as well as the various contestations arising from the interaction between the textual and the author's extra-textual existence. Indeed, the biography quickly proves relevant as linkages between the figure of Laxness and modernity came to prominence early in Laxness scholarship. Here I have in mind the aforementioned Swedish scholar Peter Hallberg's seminal study, the first volume of which, *Den store Vävaren*, published in 1954, offers a unique perspective on Laxness' relationship with modernity.

In chapter one we will thus move on to a closer inspection of Laxness's self-figuration and appropriation of the cultural capital of the modern, as well as certain biographical elements that interact closely with the concept of modernity. Moving from these generalized observations about Laxness and

modernity, the subsequent sections in chapter one attempt to account for the content of the concept of modernity by identifying its cognitive, social and philosophical registers, keeping historical articulations and key historical events close at hand. Turning then from what might be considered something of a “classical” paradigm, although neither totalizing nor claiming singular authority, the chapter turns to problems or blind-spots within the classical model, with the aim of expanding the notion of modernity beyond the traditional confines of Western centers of culture and economic power, a gesture that opens up important space to discuss marginality and the notion of the periphery in relation to Iceland, while retaining those formal moments of the concept of modernity, classically understood, that still seem, despite proliferating viewpoints, indissoluble from shared understandings of the word. Having thus produced (by necessity) a selective mapping of a complex conceptual terrain, we move on to the consideration of the relationship between literature and modernity, noting how scholars have emphasized the pivotal role of the aesthetic in the overturning of past models and the instauration of normative claims that justify themselves by reference to a logic that is grounded in the activation of those very same normative claims.

Laxness published his early cultural polemics and his groundbreaking modernist novel, *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, in the 1920s. The opening decades of the twentieth century mark a moment of a pivotal shift in societal organization in Iceland towards urbanization and industrialization. This trend was discomforting for many, thus provoking intense discussions of the tangible manifestations of the changes underway. The debate that ensued was carried out

in political journals, periodicals and newspapers, and at stake were questions of the nation and nationality, Iceland's marginality and skewed temporality in terms of neighbouring countries and the continent, the cultural heritage and the trends sweeping Europe at the time: the importance of different "isms" and in general the fear and attraction provoked by the emblems of modernity.<sup>104</sup>

Laxness' role in this cultural, social and literary context, as he emerges as an ardent spokesman for modernization and modernity, is the subject of chapter two, which examines key-essays from the period, *Alþýðubókin* (The Commoner's Book, 1929), and, in particular, his stay in Hollywood. It will be contended that the significance of Laxness' personal engagement with the "culture industry," his two-year stay in Hollywood as he attempted to make a career for himself as a screenwriter for the big studios, has received insufficient attention in critical scholarship, particularly when it comes to the examination of his relationship with the modern. Indeed, Laxness' dialogue with modernity reached a level of particular intensity in his reflections on cinema and mass culture.

By tracing the development of Laxness' 1929 essay on the early studio system, "Kvikmyndin ameríska 1928" (The American film in 1928), through a variety of drafts and versions, we are able to grasp how his understanding of the modern becomes more conflicted and complex as certain tensions and contradictions come to light. As a matter of fact, Laxness' engagement with the "culture industries" is of pivotal importance in his career as the struggles we note in the essay — Laxness' attempts to navigate between his enthusiasm for

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<sup>104</sup> See in this context Benedikt Hjartarson, "Dragging Nordic Horses past the Sludge of Extremes. The Beginnings of the Icelandic Avant-Garde." *The Invention of Politics in the European Avant-Garde (1996-1940)*. Edited by Sascha Bru and Gunther Martens. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006.

the technological medium of the movies and his distrust of the capitalistic edifice that grounds the film industry, also emblematic of modernization and rationalization — will return throughout his career in his fictional works. Indeed, as Laxness works through and thematizes a multifaceted vision of the modern, radically different from his optimistic, early peons to modernization, we see him return to tropes and problems initially theorized in this particular essay.

In chapter three Laxness' plays are read in a political and gendered context. The early plays feature characters that represent different “aspects” of the Enlightenment and modernity, such as Dagur Vestan in *Straumrof* and Feilan Ó. Feilan in *Silfurtúnglið*; both are in charge of what in the respective plays represents the technological motor of modernity. It is however the female characters that in effect destabilize or deconstruct the rational world of progress and technological abundance, within the environs of which the men conduct their business oblivious to contradictions, conflicts and crisis that configure modern existence. Another way of putting this would be that in these two plays female agency serves to reveal the limitations and thin veneer of Enlightenment principles, the way in which these resemble a Potemkin village, being a civilized front that nevertheless barely masks the brutality, cruelty and viciousness of power that in fact constitutes the reality of modernity.

The thematization of the gendered organization of urban, bourgeois existence in *Straumrof* reveals the aspirations of modern society to be a doubling of the Weberian iron cage. The bars that confine men are shown to be rather slight, indeed, the male version of the iron cage has a recreation center and offers a plentitude of comforts that, upon closer inspection, prove to be grounded on

the intolerable existential space that women are expected to inhabit.<sup>105</sup> And in *Silfurtúnglið* the binary opposites represented by the commercial exploitation of women in the culture industry, on the one hand, and the safety of the domestic sphere on the other are both rejected and both are shown to involve forms of domination and exploitation.

Laxness' last three plays, *Strompleikurinn*, *Prjónastofan Sólin* and *Dúfnaveislan* go even further; these are written after Laxness' political disillusionment and they depict a world where there is indeed little that can be held on to. Much as Laxness' *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* is a key work in the history of Icelandic modernism, his late plays count among the very first modernist works for the stage. And along with *Silfurtúnglið*, they herald the "return" of the culture industries into his work as a substantial thematic entity. . Indeed, *Strompleikurinn*, *Prjónastofan Sólin* and *Dúfnaveislan* represent the starkest manifestation of Laxness' nihilistic turn and they share a constellation of themes and a world view, as well as character types, that justifies addressing them together, and positing them, if not as a trilogy, then as a closely linked series.

However, they were not particularly popular. Indeed, none of his plays were. *Straumrof* was quite famously, or perhaps notoriously would be more apt, performed only five times but that was enough to send Reykjavík into an uproar. When *Silfurtúnglið* opened two decades later in 1954 its box office receipts, while nothing to be ashamed of, suffered in comparison to the immense success the stage adaptation of *Íslandsklukkan* (Iceland's Bell), co-written by Laxness,

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<sup>105</sup> There are of course many other systems and forms of subjugation that subsidize and ground the privilege of the white, male subject in modernity, but Laxness emphasizes the structural relationship of social norms to the middle class woman in this particular instance.

had enjoyed four years earlier. The late plays are however by far Laxness' most ambitious theater works and while writing them, he concentrated on the stage for several years, abandoning the novel for example in a vocal fashion while praising the artistic possibilities of the theater. It is nevertheless safe to say that no aspect of Laxness' career has been as studiously ignored as his career as a playwright.

By tracing connections between all five plays, contextualizing them in terms of contemporary cultural and political discourses, and offering a new framework for their interpretation, the chapter seeks to offer a radical reevaluation of the plays, both in terms of their intrinsic artistic worth and their importance in the context of Laxness oeuvre as a whole. It will also be argued that when it comes to Laxness' critique of modernity, his late plays, the three he wrote in the 1960s, are the most despairing, bleak and radical of his career.

We have forsaken the land and gone to sea!  
We have destroyed the bridge behind us —  
more, we have demolished the land behind us!

Friedrich Nietzsche  
*The Gay Science.*

It is difficult to imagine how one can shape an  
attractive political programme if you believe in the  
'end of history' and have excluded the dimension of the  
future and of radical change (let alone 'progress')  
from your political thinking.

Frederic Jameson.  
*A Singular Modernity*

## Chapter 1: Laxness and Modernity

### 1. *The Old and the New*

“The old ways may have served us well, but the new ones aren't any worse for that,” Icelandic author Halldór Laxness writes in an essay published in the mid 1920s on the somewhat obscure, yet, at the time, contentious issue of new family names.<sup>106</sup> Laxness disagreed with those who thought the trend of coining new surnames represented a threat to the traditional patronymic system and thus traditional values, or, more to the point, that the questioning of longstanding ways of life and conventions was a negative in and of itself and to be avoided. Laxness, instead, suggested that choice and change should trump tradition; “being unprepared for the new equals cultural decrepitude,” he states with the

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<sup>106</sup> Halldór Laxness. “Ættarnöfn.” *Vörður*, 2 April, 1925, p. 3. In the original, the passage reads: “Gömlu siðirnir kunna að hafa verið ágætir, hinir nýu eru ekki lakari fyrir því”. The essay addresses the controversy that had developed regarding the popularity of the adoption of (new) family names, which some thought would undermine the conventional patronymic name system. In Iceland, an individual's last name is traditionally that of the father's first name with “son” (son) or “dóttir” (daughter) added, depending on gender. A woman whose first name is Ragna and whose father's first name is Garðar would thus be Ragna Garðarsdóttir. A family name, on the other hand, as is common in the United States and elsewhere, remains unchanged through the generations, and is gender neutral. Laxness' stance in this matter is perhaps not surprising in light of the fact that his own last name, Laxness, represents precisely the issue at stake in the debate, being a family name that he had himself taken as he dropped his patronym (Guðjónsson). In 1923 he, in addition and according to custom, took on the middle name “Kiljan” as he was baptized and confirmed into Catholicism.



directness that would come to characterize his polemical style.<sup>107</sup> He then adds, almost, it seems, as an afterthought, yet entirely in keeping with the essay as a whole, “all things being equal, there is one thing that I prefer to the old, and that is the new.”<sup>108</sup>

At first glance the essay might seem both too specific and esoteric in its concerns to retain our interest but like much of the non-fiction that Laxness produced in this period, with considerable prolificacy, it is layered and its range turns out to be surprisingly expansive. Indeed, the essay offers suggestive insights into Laxness’ thinking on cultural issues at the moment of his emergence as a public figure. He connects the debate over surnames and patronyms with issues of societal change by pointing out, for example, the patriarchic ideology inherent in the assumption that a child should necessarily bear its father’s name.<sup>109</sup> Laxness’ interest in modernization is reflected in the essay’s celebration of progress and the notion that a thriving and “organic culture is characterized by the new being continually replaced by the newer; new clothes, new behavior, new rebirth, new thinking, new words, new names.”<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, the essay’s underlying concern with the dynamics of change, the resistance that social

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<sup>107</sup> Laxness, “Ættarnöfn,” p. 3. In the original, the passage reads: “enda ljósastur vottur gamalmennsku að vera ekki við nýum síðum búinn.”

<sup>108</sup> Laxness, “Ættarnöfn,” p. 3. In the original, the passage reads: “Eitt er sem ég tek frammyfir hið gamla, að öðru jöfnu, og það er hið nýa.”

<sup>109</sup> Laxness suggests that there is no logical or historical rationale for the custom of having a child take its father’s name: “Whether or not the antiquated custom involved individuals being named with reference to their fathers is of no concern in this instance. The preference of new generations is no less valid than that of the forefathers. Anyway, it appears that the convention of naming someone after their fathers is in no sense more prestigiously ancient than that of naming them after something else, their mothers for example [...]”. Laxness, “Ættarnöfn,” p. 3. In the original: “Hvort verið hefur almennast í fornöld að menn væru kendir við feður sína, skiftir hér litlu máli. Smekkur nýrra kynslóða er síst réttlægri en venjur forfeðranna. Annars mun það trautt vera fornara að menn séu kendir við feður sína en eitthvað annað, til dæmis móður sína [...]”. Laxness’ writings on women’s rights and modernization are discussed in greater detail in chapter 2.

<sup>110</sup> Laxness, “Ættarnöfn,” p. 3. In the original: “Með þeirri þjóð er lífræn menning, þar sem nýúng fylgir nýúng; ný föt, ný ráðabreytni, ný endurfæðing, ný hugsun, ný orð, ný nöfn”.

transformation elicits as well as its appeal, illustrates in its own way modernity's tense relationship with the historical past and its own internal conflicts; how, in an era where, as Marx and Engels famously put it, "all that is solid melts into air," the freedom and promise of an existential order that is no longer grounded in substantive philosophies of meaning — values therefore being conditional and subject to revision — must contend with the possibility of anxious backlash as people see their traditional ways of life disappearing.<sup>111</sup>

For Laxness, the culture that greeted him as he came of age was undergoing significant and, compared to previous decades, swift changes, the forces of modernity having recently arrived in Iceland.<sup>112</sup> Born in 1902, he was in a sense shepherded into the world by the twentieth century and, perhaps more so than other writers of his generation, he approached the task of depicting and engaging with the contradictions of a tumultuous modernity with a sense of purpose. One might even say that for a considerable part of his career as writer and social commentator, Laxness was something of a cultural barometer, registering moments of "pressure" and anticipating important shifts in the "atmospheric" milieu of his native country. Debates about some of the most

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<sup>111</sup> In the context of *The Communist Manifesto*, the phrase "all that is solid melts into air" references the economic logic of capitalism, which places social customs and markers under erasure, or, as Marshall Berman puts in his famous book whose title derives from the Marx/Engels quotation, and positions *The Communist Manifesto* along with the works of Baudelaire and Goethe as a key modern text: "In this world, stability can only mean entropy, slow death, while our sense of progress and growth is our only way of knowing for sure that we are alive. To say that our society is falling apart is only to say that it is alive and well." *All That is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity*. London and New York: Penguin Books, 1988, p. 95. In a brief aside, it might be mentioned that the notion of solidity, as initially put forward by Marx and Engels, and then later taken up by Berman, has provided an interesting backdrop for the work of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, whose theorization of postmodernity, taken up at a later point in the dissertation, is grounded on the concept of "liquidity," which is contrasted to a modernity that is now conceptualized as "solid". See for example *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000. The quote from *The Communist Manifesto* is to be found on p. 223 in the Penguin (New York and London, 2000) edition translated by Samuel Moore.

<sup>112</sup> The historical circumstances of "the modern breakthrough" in Iceland are discussed more closely below.

fundamental rifts, upheavals and fragmentations that characterize modernity — urbanization, education reform, mechanization and industrialization to name a few — were constitutive parts of Laxness' early horizon.<sup>113</sup>

He witnessed modernity's signifiers being systematically interrogated, at times welcomed but also stigmatized and frequently rejected, with modernity's conceptual domain coming in for similar scrutiny.<sup>114</sup> It is tempting to assume in this context that what Laxness took from the resistance to social change that he could see around him — the way, for example, that the medieval literary heritage and rural values were strategically placed to celebrate traditional ways of life in opposition to destabilizing “trends” from abroad — was a sensitivity for the deep social repercussions of technological change, an awareness of and appreciation for the explosive capacity and potentiality of the modern.<sup>115</sup> Laxness' emphasis

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<sup>113</sup> Industrialization threatened the economic interests of the farming class, which meant that technological advance and influences from abroad were viewed with deep suspicion by significant segments of the social power structure. The ideological manifestations were divided across a range of striking prejudices and unfortunate assumptions, including the eugenicist notion that the countryside was the seat of a primordial lifeforce, which provided townships and urban areas, themselves positioned as sites of physiological degeneration and moral decay, with the infusion of “pure blood,” necessary for their continued functioning. Ólafur Ásgeirsson. *Iðnbylting hugarfarsins: Átök um atvinnuþróun á Íslandi 1900–1940*. Reykjavík: Bókmenntaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1988, pp. 16–17, 46–52.

<sup>114</sup> Árni Sigursjónsson speaks in this context of a “new romanticism” that became influential in the 1920s. Its foremost elements were the idealization of the farming life, the exaltation of humility and poverty; materialism was criticized and communal ideals rejected in favor of reactionary notions of independence and the value of solitude. *Laxness og þjóðlífið I. Bókmenntir og bókmenntakenningar á árunum milli stríða*. Reykjavík: Vaka–Helgafell, 1986, p. 52–54. An interesting example of the way in which the conceptual domain of modernity was manipulated and figured is offered by Þröstur Helgason in his discussion of the intellectual journal *Vaka*, founded by a group of conservative intellectuals, including Sigurður Nordal, and the publication in the pages of the journal of Jóhann Sigurjónsson's symbolic/early modernist poem “Sorg” (Grief), a gesture that Helgason reads as directed against trends of societal change such as urbanization (based on a thematic reading of the poem), while its form (being in many ways unorthodox and suggestive of modernisms to come) is deemed acceptable because the formal aspect, being here seen as separate from the poem's content, functions as an automatic defense against charges of the poem being deployed as an ideological critique of modernity, thus rendering its message both subtle and effective. Þröstur Helgason. “*Vaka og Vaki*, upprisa og uppreisn – ‘svo náskyld orð’. Sigurður Nordal og móðernisminn.” *Ritið* 1/2012, pp. 53–54.

<sup>115</sup> For a discussion of how the cultural heritage came to function within reactionary rhetoric and anti-modern ideologies, see Sigríður Matthíasdóttir. *Hinn sanni Íslendingur: Þjóðerni, kyngervi og vald á Íslandi 1900–1930*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2004, p. 123–131. As to the

on the “new” — echoing the famous modernist credo<sup>116</sup> — and the manner in which his insistence on renewal takes on the form of both extensive listings and the proclamation of a wholesale preference, as seen above, suggest just such a position, as does Halldór Guðmundsson description of young Laxness as a fervant “delegate of modernity,” someone who “wanted the country to familiarize itself with *all* of modern culture, immediately, with all of its assets and flaws.”<sup>117</sup>

Laxness’ relationship to the “new” is among the things this chapter will survey in order to outline the contours of a larger problematic involving Laxness’ engagement with various aspects of modernity. The “new” here is understood in a wide context as referencing shifts in the cultural horizon of early twentieth-century Icelandic society, the connections between a shifting world-view and cultural currents abroad, the relationship between local and transcultural cultural practices and how these infused the presence of the heritage, tradition, and traditional economic formations with a dynamic instability that was observed, expressed and partaken in by cultural artifacts, in this case texts produced by Halldór Laxness.

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“explosive” effects of modernity, see Marshall Berman’s aforementioned *All That is Solid Melts into Air*.

<sup>116</sup> The famous phrase, imperative, and, encapsulated in three words, modernist manifesto “make it new!” derives from Ezra Pound.

<sup>117</sup> Halldór Guðmundsson. *“Loksins, loksins”: Vefarinn mikli og upphaf íslenskra nútímabókmennta*. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1987, p. 122. In the original, the passage reads: “Halldór var boðberi nútímameningarinnar, vildi að þjóðin kynntist henni *allri* sem fyrst, með kostum og göllum – hún átti ekki fyrst að fara í gegnum síu varfærinna menntamanna.” When Guðmundsson speaks of Halldór Laxness as a “delegate” of modernity, he has in mind, in addition to *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (The Great Weaver of Kashmir, 1927) and the early poetry, the series of articles on societal and cultural modernization that Laxness published in the 1920s. A selection of these was published in 1986 as *Af menningarástandi* (Regarding the State of the Culture). Some of the essays are touched on below but they are discussed more extensively in chapter 2.

Another way of putting this would be to say that at stake is the relationship between the related but distinct concepts of modernity, modern culture, modernism and modernization and how these notions, with their accompanying conceptual implications and multitude of transnational inscriptions, are manifested, reflexively addressed, thematized, displaced and symbolized in the work of a particular author; how, in other words, Laxness performed the function identified by Guðmundsson above, namely to be modernity's "delegate."

We will note for instance that although important to Laxness, the category of the modern was never safely contained; rather it was conflicted and always in some sense deeply compromised. Indeed, initially it was flat out rejected. Then, after being embraced, it was still forced to cohabit in a subjective conceptual field that was decisively marked by the sacred and Laxness' religious commitments.<sup>118</sup> Complicated and often requiring extensive contextualization, issues such as these and others relating to Laxness' modernity are not always addressed comprehensively, as many would require an entire chapter unto themselves. Rather they are touched upon to trace, as mentioned above, an outline or a figure of a complex network of discourses that involve modes of social and aesthetic ordering, their traditional formations and the changes brought on by the birth of historicity and the emergence of modern societies.<sup>119</sup>

The aim of the first chapter of the dissertation is twofold. On the one hand there is the clear necessity of articulating a coherent stance *vis a vis* the

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<sup>118</sup> The primary textual marker here would be Laxness' 1925 polemical pamphlet *Kaþólsk viðhorf* (Catholic Views), discussed more closely in chapter 2.

<sup>119</sup> On the modern and the birth of historicity, see Frederic Jameson. *A Singular Modernity. Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. London & New York: Verso, 2002, p. 49.

theoretical and conceptual paradigms employed and, on the other, explain how the concept of modernity not only relates in important ways to Laxness' works but also provides analytical tools that open up pivotal hermeneutic spaces regarding many of these same works.<sup>120</sup> The methodological issues will be returned to in short order. To start with, however, an account will be given of Laxness' 1920s period of proselytizing for modernity, and biographical constructions of Laxness' figure during this phase of his career by notable Laxness scholars will also be discussed. Laxness' religious experiences are outlined, again partly articulated through the prism of previous Laxness scholarship and then a selective overview of some of the ways in which Laxness' works can be approached under the rubric of modernity is offered.

Moving from these generalized observations about Laxness and modernity, the subsequent section attempts to account for the content of the concept of modernity by identifying its cognitive, social and philosophical registers, keeping historical articulations and key historical events close at hand. Turning then from what might be considered something of a "classical" paradigm, although neither totalizing nor claiming singular authority, the introduction turns to problems or blind-spots within the classical model, with the aim of expanding the notion of modernity beyond the traditional confines of Western centers of culture and economic power, a gesture that opens up important space to discuss marginality and the notion of the periphery in relation to Iceland, while retaining those formal moments of the concept of modernity, classically understood, that still seem, despite proliferating

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<sup>120</sup> Laxness' oeuvre includes fifteen novels, four short story collections, a book of poetry, fourteen essay collections, four autobiographies, two travelogues, a religious monograph and seven plays.

viewpoints, indissoluble from shared understandings of the word. Having thus produced (by necessity) a selective mapping of a complex conceptual terrain, we move on to the consideration of the relationship between literature and modernity, noting how scholars have emphasized the pivotal role of the aesthetic in the overturning of past models and the instauration of normative claims that justify themselves by reference to a logic that is grounded in the activation of those very same normative claims.

It will then be argued that certain conceptual domains (culture, progress, presence, redemption, the apocalypse) provide the most fruitful engagement with Laxness and modernity, both the period during which he proselytized for modernity and the period when he decisively turned against its central tenants. A hermeneutical model that frames our engagement with Laxness' texts thus comes into view, one that is based, as already indicated, on a variety of structures of experience in modernity but with particular emphasis on those that are riven by conflict and, indeed, view modernity in radically different and opposite terms.

### *1.1 The Monastery and Cultural Modernity*

The metaphor of the barometer invoked above, while not haphazard — the scientific connotations of the meteorological device, whose history and invention can be traced back to Descartes, speak to important thematic concerns in the present context — is nevertheless slightly misleading.<sup>121</sup> That is, it is important to note the roundabout way in which Laxness came to his role as modernity's

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<sup>121</sup> W.E. Knowles Middleton. *The History of the Barometer*. Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.

“delegate,” to employ Guðmundsson’s phrase, and the fact that over time he would develop a more problematic relationship to signifiers of the modern and processes of modernization. If the barometer can be read as a future oriented device, and thus emblematic of modernity in the sense that radical shifts in envisioning the future are among the factors grounding the modern breakthrough,<sup>122</sup> Laxness himself, after an initial period of proselytizing for the modern, came to focus increasingly on the historical past, tradition and the cultural heritage. Ástráður Eysteinnsson points out that Laxness’ work in the 1930s and 1940s can be read as a “multilayered contemporary dialogue with the Icelandic literary tradition,” while Peter Hallberg has noted how Laxness, with his magisterial *Gerpla* (The Happy Warriors) published in 1952, “steps” into the Saga heritage.<sup>123</sup>

When it is noted that Laxness “stepped” into the Saga heritage with *Gerpla*, certain simplifications are inevitable. The novel’s formal feats are beyond comparison, of course, but unlike, for example, Gunnar Gunnarsson’s series about Iceland’s “landnám” — settlement — there is an immense distance between the textual consciousnesses that holds sway in *Gerpla* and the textual “models,” the Sagas, which are being referenced, incorporated and commented

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<sup>122</sup> Reinhart Koselleck has articulated how reflection on the future transformed historical understanding in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: “Political calculation and humanist reservations marked out a new plane for the future. Neither the One Big End of the World nor the several smaller ones could apparently affect the course of human affairs. Instead of the anticipated millennium, a new and different temporal perspective had opened up [...] It was now possible to look back on the past as ‘medieval’ (mittelalterlich). The triad of Antiquity, Middle Ages, and Modernity had been available since the advent of Humanism. But these concepts became established for the entirety of historical time in a gradual manner from the second half of the seventeenth century”. “On the Relation of Past and Future in Modern History.” *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Trans. by Keith Tribe. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 17.

<sup>123</sup> Ástráður Eysteinnsson. “Halldór Laxness and the Narrative of the Icelandic Novel.” *Scandinavica* 1/2003, p. 53. Peter Hallberg. *Verðandi bókin um Halldór Laxness*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1955, p. 76-85. See also Peter Hallberg. *Hús skáldsins. Um skáldverk Halldórs Laxness. Frá Sölku Völku til Gerplu. Vol. II*. Trans. Helgi J. Halldórsson. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1970.



upon.<sup>124</sup> Indeed, the fact that Laxness was considered rather disrespectful of the Saga heritage in *Gerpla* was not to his advantage during the deliberations of the Nobel committee, which as a body considered said novel not to be one of Laxness' best.<sup>125</sup>

Eysteinn Þorvaldsson divides Laxness' career as a poet in two parts, pointing to 1930 as the break where Laxness' virtually abandoned literary experimentalism.<sup>126</sup> Of course, this does not preclude an engagement with modernity, far from it, but it does suggest a recalibration when it comes to celebratory discourses of progress and modernization as well as a shift in cultural politics.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Ástráður Eysteinnsson, in his discussion of *Gerpla*, draws out just how complicated the modern engagement with the heritage can be when conducted in a self-reflexive fashion and in a mode that accentuates the manifold distances that separate the subjective experience of the mediating and receiving agents in the literary act, rather than trying to place these necessary (biological, historical, spatial, temporal) factors under erasure. He writes: "While *Gerpla* may appear to have reaffirmed Laxness' place at the heart of Icelandic narrative aesthetics and historical identity, it also curiously distances him from all the writers who seemed to share his concerns, although this may not have been apparent at the time. It was a prevalent view that the role and value of the novel as a genre were based on a mimetic rendering of reality, and Laxness himself was an adamant spokesman for this premise. Yet, in spite of this, *Gerpla* is an experiment in language, an intertextual and metafictional adventure that defies the laws of realism. Its language is neither that of the sagas nor that of the modern realistic novel; in its amalgamation of different language styles it constitutes a striking idiolect, achieved through a linguistic freedom that the contemporary practice of the novel could hardly account for." Eysteinnsson, "Icelandic Prose Literature," p. 418. For more, see Vésteinn Ólason. "Halldór Laxness og íslensk hetjudýrkun." *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 3/1992, pp. 31–41.

<sup>125</sup> This came to light in 2006, when the traditional 50-year moratorium on the academy's papers was lifted. See Þróstur Helgason. "Skeyti fjórmenninga ekki í vörslu akademíunnar." *Morgunblaðið*, 3. January, 2006, p. 4.

<sup>126</sup> Although he focuses on poetry, Eysteinn Þorvaldsson allows for a broader reading of the "break" in Laxness' career. He notes that Laxness' "literary creation in general" is characterized by the abandonment of progressive formal experimentalism after 1930. As Þorvaldsson is not concerned with Laxness' novels or plays, the period of the 1960s and 1970s lies outside of the context of his discussion. "Ljóðagerð sagnaskálds. Um ljóð Halldórs Laxness." *Halldórsstefna*. Ed. Elín Bára Magnúsdóttir og Úlfar Bragason. Reykjavík: Stofnun Sigurðar Nordals, 1993, p. 124.

<sup>127</sup> At stake are rather extensive fields of intellectual and ideological development as well as cognitive investments and struggles. The most fruitful and direct method of mapping such domains is through a close examination of the documentary and biographical record. Rather, however, than pointing to a particular biography or volume of biographical research, it is useful to note that a highly condensed yet fruitful summary of the main currents of Laxness' development during his most productive decades is to be found in Halldór Guðmundsson. "Sjálfstætt fólk – átök alþjóðahyggju og þjóðernishyggju á millistríðsárunum í íslensku bókmenntalífi." *Íslenska söguþingið 28.–31. maí 1997*. Ed. by Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson and

To briefly summarize, what these scholars thus posit is an initial period of modernist experimentation, the last vestiges of which run their course by 1930, and a subsequent phase characterized initially by the social realist epics and then also by Laxness' increased concern with the heritage; social realism here functioning perhaps as a "gateway" literary mode for a much closer and intimate engagement with the Icelandic past, which the Hallberg quote above suggests reaches an apogee of sorts with *Gerpla*. It is then common to view Laxness' work in the 1960s, particularly *Kristnihald undir Jökli* (Under the Glacier, 1968) as a return to the literary experimentation of the 1920s.

In what follows, this model will be revised and it will be argued that the third break occurs much earlier than suggested above. It will also be posited that the "return" to modernism falls within a trajectory that essentially constitutes the contents of the third break. In this new model, the Second World War is of central importance. The twin atrocities of the Holocaust and nuclear attacks on Japan entail a rupture in Laxness' conception of modernity. The works that follow, from *Atómstöðin* (The Atom Station, 1948) onwards represent attempts to come to grips with the radical challenge these events represent to Enlightenment ideals. The engagement reaches its fullest manifestation, not in the novelistic return to modernism as represented by *Kristnihald undir Jökli*, but rather the work Laxness did in the years immediately prior in the theater. That's where Laxness starts again to engage with literary experimentation, and he does so in radical fashion.

When speaking about Laxness' roundabout or slightly convoluted path towards his status as a modern figure, his involvement with the Catholic Church looms large. An institution less likely to be associated with the modern would at first seem hard to imagine and, indeed, few things made Laxness stand out quite so distinctly in the rudimentary urban culture of Reykjavík in the mid 1920s as his (widely publicized) Catholicism.<sup>128</sup> His defense pamphlet for the papal religion, published in 1925 as *Kaþólsk viðhorf* (Catholic Views), was considered newsworthy, in part because it fused the debate on secularism with literary infighting — in addition to, of course, turning the “alien” sect of Catholicism into something of a spectacle.<sup>129</sup>

The target of Laxness' rhetoric was Þórbergur Þórðarson and his at the time notorious *Bréf til Láru* (Letter to Laura, 1923). Although not Þórðarson's first published work, he had previously authored two books of poetry, *Hálfir skósólar* (Half Soles of Shoes, 1915) and *Spaks mans spjarir* (Wise Man's Clothing, 1917), he was virtually unknown upon its publication. The early volumes of poetry were unusual in that they placed themselves decisively out of the mainstream of the poetic discourse of the time, being mock-ironic and parodying the sentimentality of the still dominant mode of neo-realism.

Unlike the two books of poetry which were little read, *Bréf til Láru* became a sensation, as well as a literary scandal. Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson describes the reception thus

The book created a scandal, provoking responses from clergymen and intellectuals alike, and causing Þóraðarson to be dismissed from his teaching jobs at two of Reykjavík's secondary schools. The outrage that met *Bréf til*

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<sup>128</sup> Halldór Guðmundsson. *Halldór Laxness: Ávisaga*. Reykjavík: JPV, 2004, pp. 165–167.

<sup>129</sup> Catholicism itself was of course also a marginal branch of Christianity in Protestant and Lutheran Iceland at the time (as it is today).

*Láru* was not due to the author's political beliefs or his attacks on Christianity alone. One of the aspects of the text that stirred up the Icelandic literary world was his candor when it came to bodily functions and sexuality.<sup>130</sup>

*Bréf til Láru* is a text that is particularly difficult to define. On the one hand, for example, it employs one of the most conventional literary expressive forms available, the “public” letter, that is, a lengthy text, one that the author may indeed have labored over, but one that still remains within the practical epistolary genre, being a letter sent by a specific person to a specified recipient. The difference is that the author expects the letter to be read aloud and passed around; that it will have an audience in other words beyond the titular recipient. However, within this most grounded and everyday of all literary forms, Þórðarson explodes all literary standards, generic demarcations, notions of thematic unity, propriety and sanity, and all this he accomplishes in a language that is absolutely new, driven and powerful and breathless, yet so perfectly pitched and controlled that the supposition could not but raise its head that the nation had with this slim and scandalous volume discovered what might well be its foremost living stylist and wordsmith — an inkling that would in time be proven largely correct.

While not uncategorizable upon its appearance, *Bréf til Láru* was relegated to the rather large and indiscriminate category of autobiographical non-fiction. It was inconceivable to think of *Bréf til Láru* as a novel when it was published, yet there is no reason to think that a reader engaging with the text in the current historical moment would pause for a minute before designating it as

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<sup>130</sup> Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson. “Realism and Revolt: Between the World Wars.” *A History of Icelandic Literature. Vol. 5 of Histories of Scandinavian Literature*. Ed. by Daisy Neijmann. Lincoln and London: The University Press of Nebraska, 2006, p. 369.

such, although still, almost a century after its publication, it would most certainly be felt to be a highly bizarre one.

When concepts such as modernism and the avant-garde came along, reading *Bréf til Láru* as a novel became an option. What was however particularly significant for Laxness at the time was the fact that Þórðarson's text included a vehement critique of the Catholic Church.<sup>131</sup> The following point of historical denunciation can for our purposes, and for the moment, stand in for a plethora of negatives and deficiencies enumerated by Þórðarson

From time immemorial and right up to the current moment, priests and church have been either the spokespeople or for hire by state and the forces of capital and wealth to keep the masses in ignorance, hinder reform that would help the poor, promote strife and war, suppress every free thought and support the ruling classes and economic exploiters in despicable oppression and capital accumulation.<sup>132</sup>

Laxness wrote a book as a response, the aforementioned *Kaþólsk viðhorf*. The public spat was played out in a few lectures and a few literary missives but the two remained friends; Laxness, being considerably younger, realized that with Þórðarson the figure he had in some sense been looking for had finally emerged. Someone wholly unconstrained by tradition, a like-minded spirit.

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<sup>131</sup> For more on Þórbergur Þórðarson, see *Að skilja undraljós. Greinar um Þórberg Þórðarson, verk hans og hugðarefni*. Ed. Bergljót Soffía Kristjánsdóttir and Hjalti Snær Ægisson. Reykjavík: Bókmennta- og listfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, Háskólaútgáfan, 2010; Halldór Guðmundsson. *Skáldalíf. Ofvitinn úr Suðursveit og skáldið á Skriðuklaustri*. Reykjavík: JPV útgáfa, 2006; Pétur Gunnarsson. *ÞP – Í fátæktarlandi*. Reykjavík: JPV, 2007; Pétur Gunnarsson. *ÞP í forheimskunarlandi*. Reykjavík: JPV, 2009; Benedikt Hjartarson, “pr-r-pr-r-pr-r-Reykjavík! Þórbergur Þórðarson og þúki fútúrismans,” *Heimur ljóðsins*, ed. Ástráður Eysteinnsson, Dagný Kristjánsdóttir and Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson. Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2005.

<sup>132</sup> Þórbergur Þórðarson. *Bréf til Láru*. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1987, p. 46. In the original: “Frá örófi alda og alla leið til vorra daga hafa klerkar og kirkja verið málsvarar eða leigutól ríkis og auðvalds til þess að halda almúganum í fáfræði, hindra umbætur á kjörum fátæku stéttanna, blása að sundrung og styrjöldum, kæfa niður hverja frjálsa hugsun og styðja hina ræðri stéttir og fjárplógmenn í svívirðilegri kúgun og auðsöfnun.”

Interestingly, Laxness — being discursively aligned with the Catholic Church at roughly the same time that he is arguing for modernization, perhaps the single most important factor in the process of secularization — rarely posits or stages direct conflict between the Church and modern values in his non-fiction writings of the period.<sup>133</sup> At stake however is the contested moment when reason assumed religion's explanatory role in the social complex.<sup>134</sup> That precise shift, hugely traumatic and destabilizing, provides a central thematic focus for *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (The Great Weaver of Kashmir, 1927), Laxness' third novel and arguably the first modernist novel in Icelandic literature. Along with Laxness' early, experimental poetry — “Unglingurinn í skóginum” and “Rhodymenia palmata” to name two prominent examples — Þórðarson's aforementioned *Bréf til Láru*, *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* heralded a new attitude among the young authors and a new literary sensibility.<sup>135</sup>

*Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* also represents the culmination of Laxness' youthful period, and expresses a cosmopolitan sensibility unprecedented in Icelandic literature while enacting formal innovations that were similarly unparalleled.<sup>136</sup> At the same time it depicts and thematizes a version of the

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<sup>133</sup> In his reading of *Alþýðubókin* (The Commoner's Book, 1929), Sigurður Hróarsson maintains that “Christian idealism constitutes the ground of Laxness' entire reformist stance,” and identifies religious strains in other writings of the period, noting however that a rift seems to occur with religious connotations and references disappearing pretty much in the 1930s. While Hróarsson does have a point, his take seems to me far too literal and insufficiently sensitive to rhetorical maneuvers, irony and a brand of humanistic discourse that, while engaging in a dialogue with the ethical dimension of religious practice, has abandoned doctrinal adherence. See “Eina jörð veit ég eystra.” *Halldór Laxness og Sovétríkin*. Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1986, p. 17 and pp. 52–62. The quote in the original reads: “[...] og Kristin hughyggja myndar grundvöll allrar úrbótahyggju hans.”

<sup>134</sup> Charles Taylor. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge and London. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.

<sup>135</sup> The poetry, and these two poems in particular, will be looked at much more closely in chapter 2.

<sup>136</sup> *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* is heavily inflected by the confessional mode and its formal experimentation is characterized by a fluctuation between the third person narration and passages narrated in the first person (in the form of letters and streams of consciousness). The

conflicted biographical experiences discussed above, the rejection of modernity through the embrace of pastoral ideology in the field of art and the acceptance of the savior in the field of ideology. The antipodal values being represented by physical love on the one hand and the monastery on the other. Referencing *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* as any sort of testament to the ideological conflicts of the biographical figure of the author is however a risky move, the premise being shaky to say the least, in the sense that such readings of fictional renderings of the authorial subject turn a blind eye to the entire field and problem of mediation. Additionally, the reader would be accepting Laxness's own interpretation of events, as well as the text (for instance that the novel represents his moment of coming face to face with the religious urge, and that the novel constitutes a formal and aesthetic act of disavowal). There is however no need to dismiss the authorial claims, nor to ignore biographical echoes. These discourses need to be contextualized but such work needs to be conducted in a careful fashion.

The disparity between a figure who on the one hand stakes out an allegiance with the most provocative literary formation of the period and argues vehemently for the need for social life in Iceland to modernize and move away from the trappings of ignorance, backwardness and superstition and into technological modernity and, on the other, also writes and publishes an entire monograph in defense of, among other things, the infallibility of the Catholic pope and the insidious dangers of free will, is clearly juggling several sets of contradictory ideas, beliefs and subjective investments. The tensions that might

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cohabitation of different narrative strategies, the foregrounding of a crisis-ridden subjectivity, the inclusion of different genres, and a surrealist streak, separates the work from the conventionality and unselfconscious mode of representation prevalent in novels of the period.

be assumed to be embedded in the resulting textual discourse have not, however, been thoroughly examined or placed in an ideological and philosophical context. When Soffía Auður Birgisdóttir points out that the field of Laxness studies has in general been remarkably silent on the issue of Laxness' Catholicism, she is undoubtedly correct.<sup>137</sup>

It is interesting in this context to look back to *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, and place it in a relationship with a key late work, *Kristnihald undir Jökli* (Under the Glacier, 1968).<sup>138</sup> The two novels are separated by more than three decades but the affinities between them are notable. *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, as indicated, occupies a privileged place in Icelandic literature as a formally groundbreaking work while *Kristnihald undir Jökli* represents Laxness' return to literary modernism; in other words, both function in literary historical and biographical terms to reconfigure Laxness' authorial name, the earlier work places the author securely in the literary vanguard while the latter can be read as the reclamation of just such a position in a cultural landscape that has grown more complex.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Soffía Auður Birgisdóttir. "... adieu to the religious orgies': Halldór Laxness, Þórbergur Þórðarson and Catholicism." *Laxness und die europäische Moderne*. Eds. Stefanie Wurth and Benedikt Hjartarson. Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 2014 (forthcoming).

<sup>138</sup> The English translation of the title of *Kristnihald undir Jökli*, by Magnús Magnússon, as *Under the Glacier*, initially published in Britain in 1976 and in print more or less since then, and reprinted by Vintage as recently as 2006 with a new introduction by Susan Sontag, is strangely incomplete and flawed. Even if the translator is attempting to achieve an intertextual moment of connection with Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947), not including the concept of Christianity in the title is a mistake. The fact that the glacier in question is Snæfellsjökull also produces unfortunate associations with Jules Verne's classic *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864), suggesting in a farfetched way that Laxness' novel might somehow take place *under* the glacier rather than at its roots.

<sup>139</sup> There are three essays that one can point to as the most incisive commentaries on Laxness' *Kristnihald undir Jökli*: Peter Hallberg. "Kristnihald undir Jökli." *Skírnir*, 1969, pp. 80–103; Vésteinn Ólason. "Ég tek það gilt. Hugleiðingar um Kristnihald undir Jökli." *Afmælisrit til dr. phil. Steingríms J. Þorsteinssonar 2. júlí 1971*. Reykjavík: Leiftur, 1971, pp. 104–124; Ástráður Eysteinnsson. "Í fuglabjargi skáldsögunnar. Um *Kristnihald undir Jökli*." *Halldórsstefna*. Ed. by Elín Bára Magnúsdóttir og Úlfar Bragason. Reykjavík: Stofnun Sigurðar Nordals, 1993, pp. 172–173.



Both texts, furthermore, are concerned with the institution of Christianity and religion as a philosophical problem in modernity and, by extension, a cultural situation complex enough to have garnered a host of conceptual designations characterized by nothing so much as their incompatibility.<sup>140</sup> This is why it is suggested that we, at this moment, posit *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* and *Kristnihald undir Jökli* at the opposite ends of a career trajectory, as the twin bookends to the oeuvre so to speak. The gesture is of course not fair, it is even empirically scandalous, since the earlier novel does not mark the start of Laxness' literary career and the latter most certainly does not mark its end. But let's allow the two novels to bracket Laxness' career, almost as a thought experiment, and then recall Max Weber's famous advice to those who could not bear "the fate of the times," namely that they should "return silently [to] the arms of the old churches."<sup>141</sup> It is of course quite possible that in 1918, the year Weber's essay "Science as a Vocation" was published, the incapacity to fathom or accept the modern world may have been a very understandable, even a "rational" gesture given the cruel and surreal events of the First World War.<sup>142</sup>

Still, Weber was not specifically invoking the trauma of war. His concern was to contrast a scientific worldview with past models of understanding, and, in a sense, "address" those unable to let go of a substantive method of

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<sup>140</sup> As noted above, Laxness' religious experiences in the 1920s were considered newsworthy and *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* invites autobiographical readings on those precise grounds, shot through with extensive ruminations on religion as it is. Laxness' religious background and his literary experimentation deeply influenced his public figuration at the time. It is however important to note that in neither instance, not in the case of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* nor *Kristnihald undir Jökli*, do the "reconfigurations" that are being discussed take place in a vacuum. In both cases there is context and a causal chain in terms of public pronouncements and literary production. This is discussed more fully later in the introduction.

<sup>141</sup> Max Weber. "Science as Vocation." *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology*. Trans. and ed. by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York and London: Routledge, 2009, p. 155.

<sup>142</sup> Georg Henrik von Wright. *Framfaragoðsögnin*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntfélag, þýð. Þorleifur Hauksson, 2003.

reasoning.<sup>143</sup>What is especially interesting, however, is the way in which Weber's choice of a "shaming mechanism" points towards the significance of the religious institution in his own earlier account of the historical unfolding of rationality in the modern era, the monastery being the site from which rationalization emerges and develops through the protestant ethic into the spirit of capitalism, while the twentieth-century church becomes the symbolic site of its exhaustion — and it should be noted that Weber's theory of modernity will be discussed more closely in a subsequent section.<sup>144</sup>

Being mindful of Weber's thematically related tropes in our discussion of Laxness' engagement with religion and modernity, it is as a matter of fact tempting to take momentary shelter in these two historically loaded and highly symbolic institutional structures — the monastery and the church, the former constituting the symbolic centerpiece of the earlier novel, *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, while the later work revolves around the institution of the modern church — as the alignment brings to light a linkage between pivotal moments in Laxness' career, as well as highlighting the distances traveled during an important period of his life.

Laxness entered a monastery four years after Weber gave his lecture on science, bringing on himself censure in the Weberian spirit from his wide circle of acquaintances and friends, as well as posthumously eliciting a frown from a biographer, who, much like Weber earlier, viewed this as an act out of step with

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<sup>143</sup> Lawrence A. Scaff. "Fleeing the Iron Cage: Politics and Culture in the Thought of Max Weber." *American Political Science Review*, 3/1987, pp. 739–741; Steven Seidman. "Modernity, Meaning and Cultural Pessimism in Max Weber." *Sociological Analysis*, 4/1983, pp. 270–272.

<sup>144</sup> Max Weber. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. Talcott Parsons. London: Routledge, 1992. Weber's famous theorization of religion and the spirit of capitalism is discussed more closely below.

the times.<sup>145</sup> Nevertheless, when Laxness in late 1922 entered the Benedictine monastery in Luxembourg, sources tend to suggest that a genuine spiritual conviction motivated his sojourn.<sup>146</sup> Arguments have been put forward indicating that monetary concerns played a part, that, in other words, the monastery functioned as an “affordable” alternative to a cosmopolitan existence that at the time was out of Laxness’ economic reach.<sup>147</sup> Even if financial concerns played a role, which they may well have done, they are unlikely to have been decisive, as, in order to surmount the daily difficulties of the poverty-stricken artist, more straightforward solutions than the rigorously demanding, somewhat alien and extremely ascetic monastery life, were available to the young author.<sup>148</sup> The fervent religiosity that is on display in Laxness’ letter to his friend Einar Ólafur Sveinsson in July of 1922 would, at any rate, be hard to fake:

I feel that I can hardly keep silent regarding the degree to which my religious maturity has exponentially increased since the beginning of May. Events of this importance have not happened to this so-called soul of mine since I learned the Lord’s Prayer [...] The key to true devotion, the only true devotion is within one’s grasp once a person has come to accept the endless depth and grandeur of this phrase: your will be done. I feel like I could write a novel of many hundreds of pages on the perspectives that have opened up to me.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, p. 129.

<sup>146</sup> Letters from Laxness’ time in the monastery have been preserved, as well as his diary from the period. Laxness’ biographers and biographical commentators are by and large of the same mind when it comes to Laxness’ religious earnestness. Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, pp. 128–150. Ólafur Ragnarsson. *Til fundar við skáldið Halldór Laxness*. Reykjavík: Veröld, 2007, pp. 321–339; Peter Hallberg. *Vefarinn mikli I*. Trans. Björn Th. Björnsson. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1954, pp. 98–153.

<sup>147</sup> Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, p. 130.

<sup>148</sup> Halldór Laxness. *Kaþólsk viðhorf. Svar gegn árásum*. Reykjavík: Bókaverslun Ársæls Árnasonar, 1925, p. 68. Laxness’ diary from this period was later published as *Dagar hjá múnkum* (Reykjavík: Helgafell) in 1986, and there he describes a fairly rigorous program of religious study, prayer and doctrinal adherence that frequently interrupted sleep and stretched across all hours of the day. Nevertheless, leisure was not prohibited and Laxness had the opportunity to work on his second novel.

<sup>149</sup> Quoted in Hallberg, *Vefarinn mikli I*, pp. 102–103. In the original: “Mér finst ég varla geta orða bundist yfir því hve mikið hinn religiösi þroski minn hefur aukist síðan í byrjun maí. Jafnmerkilegir atburðir hafa ekki hent þessa svokölluðu sál mína síðan ég lærði faðir vorið [...] Lykillinn að sannri tilbeiðslu, hinni einustu sönnu tilbeiðslu er fenginn, þegar menn hafa komist

While the sentiments are certainly genuine, it is difficult to read these words and not come away relatively certain that their author is extraordinarily far removed from the humble simplicity and modesty that he so avowedly describes.

To reference Weber's distinction between "academic theology," an empty form of religion but officially distinguished, decorative and performative in nature, and genuine mysticism, towards which Weber always maintained a positive attitude, Laxness' initial earnestness seems to position him in the realm of the latter while the ceremonial aspects of Catholicism were also appreciated, very much so as a matter of fact, and might be taken to be indicative of an "academic" dimension to Laxness' religious practice.<sup>150</sup>

### *1.2 Remnants of Neo-Romantic Discourse*

Laxness was apparently able to reconcile considerable oppositions in terms of his everyday life and existential outlook and it is not surprising that biographers have found him a fascinating subject. Peter Hallberg, for example, portrays Laxness as an ambitious and talented youth and something of a seeker in the romantic mold, while Halldór Guðmundsson accentuates a degree of angst and existential crisis when depicting his early years. Both, however, describe Laxness' literary career in its earlier stages as constituting a trajectory that leads from conventionalized neo-romanticism to a variety of social realist moments, inflected by nationalistic essentialism, and culminating with a decisive gesture aimed at the unsettling of tradition and the revaluation of cultural orthodoxies in

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til viðurkenningar um hina takmarkalausú dýpt og mikilleik þessa orðs: verði þinn vilji. Mér finst að ég gæti skrifað bók um á mörg hdr. Bls. um öll hin nýju perspektív sem mér hafa opnast."

<sup>150</sup> Weber, "Science as Vocation," pp. 154–156.

the unfinished novel draft from 1924, *Heiman ek fór* (Leaving Home, 1952),<sup>151</sup> which represents an early attempt to grapple with materials later and more cohesively addressed in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*.<sup>152</sup>

The difference between *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* and Laxness' first novel, *Barn náttúrunnar* (Child of Nature, 1919) encapsulates this progression. The latter work is an anti-modern paean to philosophical and physical acclimatization to primal cohabitation with nature, seen here as a site for the unmediated and organic connection with truth and the just and the good life, even the divine. Prelapsarian dwelling and ecstatic asceticism may not be easy, nature can be a difficult task master the story makes clear, but the rewards are also immense and unique.

Modernity, urbanity and foreign lands represent the opposing forces, as well as material wealth, the use of mass produced goods and employment in professions that are not directed at the production of raw materials for immediate sustenance. The dramatic conflict between the opposing world views is played out in the love relationship between a rich male urbanite who dreams of the simple rural life and a female "child of nature" who plays her instrument in golden meadows while dreaming of an urban life of material wealth. The somewhat confusing tale that consequently ensues involves two suicides, an

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<sup>151</sup> *Heiman ek fór*, left unfinished as Laxness embarked on *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, retaining for the latter work certain themes and characters, was eventually published to mark the occasion of the author's fiftieth birthday. At that point however the antiquated first person pronoun "ek" was changed to the more modern "eg," while still leaving something of a temporal gap as the title isn't brought fully up to date in terms of modernized spelling, which would have had pronoun as "ég".

<sup>152</sup> While the "modern breakthrough" in Scandinavian literature involved sharply increased social awareness, and a growing emphasis on urban reality, the realistic turn was still inflected by romantic undercurrents and its energies were frequently directed at depicting nature, the farmland and labor in the countryside. Knut Hamsun's immense presence in the decades following the turn of the century furthered the prominent position of rural literary discourse. For a discussion of "hamsúnismi" in the Icelandic context, see Sigurjónsson. *Laxness og þjóðlíf* I, pp. 52–56.

episode of eye gouging and a number of remarkable reversals that signally attest to the author's age at the writing of the book, which was seventeen.<sup>153</sup>

While certain elements from *Barn náttúrunnar* might seem to resonate with *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, such as the refutation of the modern, material world and a critical stance towards industrial capitalism, the distances that have been traversed by Halldór Laxness in terms of technique, outlook and thematic handling between the two books are enormous. The reflexive employment of different literary registers, ranging from realist discourse to modernist formal experiments, place the narrating consciousness of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* at a distance from the subject matter. Nature is also depicted as a site for bourgeois leisure in the latter novel, a spatial location deeply intertwined with urban and modern living and little hope is held out for a return to the older and closer existential bond with the natural environment celebrated in *Barn náttúrunnar*, as well as romantic and neo-romantic discourse in general. Importantly, the author presents this new cultural situation in the form of an analysis rather than in tones of mourning or as a critique.<sup>154</sup>

Laxness' 1923 short story "Júdítt Lvoff" is in a way an intermediary text here, and is in addition an intriguing early example of Laxness' engagement with Hollywood and the culture industry. The story tells of Júdítt Lvoff, a flamboyant

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<sup>153</sup> For more on *Barn náttúrunnar*, see Árni Sigurjónsson. *Laxness og þjóðlífið II. Frá Ylfingabúð til Urðarsels*. Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 1987, pp. 9–17; Hallberg. *Vefarinn mikli I*, pp. 23–28.

<sup>154</sup> Halldór Guðmundsson's "*Loksins, loksins*": *Vefarinn mikli og upphaf íslenskra nútímabókmennta* remains the only monograph on *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*. Significantly, however, Peter Hallberg's massive volume *Vefarinn mikli* is named after Laxness' novel and is in considerable part an analysis of the novel and a mapping of the literary "influences" at play in the text and other constitutive elements. Other important texts on *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* include Eysteinnsson, "Fyrsta nútímaskáldsagan og módernisminn." *Umbrot*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1999; Kristinn Ólason. "Orð þín eru fögur og hryllileg": lítið eitt um fegurðina og sannleikann í *Vefaranum mikla frá Kasmír*." *Glíman*, 1/2003; Garðar Baldvinsson. "Þegn, líkami, kyn." *Skírnir*, 2/2000.

Russian woman with an uncertain and perhaps a somewhat risqué past, who meets the unnamed narrator at Þingvellir, the national heritage park and site of the ancient Althingi, the first parliament, and as they get acquainted, Laxness emphasizes the young woman's modernity: she travels in an automobile, a rare sight at the time, wears the bobbed cut and seems entirely self-sufficient and uninhibited. Her modernity appears at times to be a function of her foreignness, and sometimes *vice versa*. While not becoming lovers, the narrator and Lvoff do become close enough for the former to be taken aback when next he meets the Russian woman, in a street in Copenhagen, and learns that later that summer she became engaged to a simple farming boy from the provinces. "He knew the ancient Icelandic Saga; not the foreign novel," is how the dynamics of the relationship are summarized by the narrator.<sup>155</sup>

The narrator does not seem particularly judgmental, however, when he learns that Lvoff was merely playing a cruel joke on the rural innocent, but through the depiction of the "false" seduction, the text posits a clear distinction between naivety of the pre-modern Icelandic society and the treacherous straits of cosmopolitan modernity (symbolized as well by the invocation of the Saga and the foreign novel). Significantly, during the narrator's reunion with Lvoff, several years after their initial meeting, he is offered the chance of making a career for himself in the movie capital of the world, Hollywood, by Lvoff's husband, an older business tycoon with connections. The offer stands as perhaps the ultimate manifestation of the dangerous promise and allure that Lvoff herself embodied in the opening of the narrative, that is, modernity, glamour and the new;

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<sup>155</sup> Halldór Laxness. "Júdítt Lvoff." *Sögur*. Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 2000, p. 83. In the original: "Hann þekti hina íslensku fornsögu; ekki hinn erlenda róman."

something unmoored from tradition, cosmopolitan and free of the constraints of a national or cultural heritage.

The narrator is ideally placed as a cosmopolitan sophisticate, endowed with insight into the culture of his homeland and the characteristics of his compatriots while also able to “cross over” into foreign cultures with grace and confidence, a man of the world, fluent in several languages, endowed with a certain bohemian charm and not in any danger of falling into a trap like the Icelandic farm boy who became Lvoff’s plaything that initial summer. Until, that is, the promise of Hollywood success is dangled in front of him. The text positions itself, however, in a way that leaves the earnestness of the offer in doubt, and the tycoon himself is portrayed as sickly and weak, almost mummified and with a funerary smile that can be read as an indicator of Laxness’ later depiction of Hollywood as a deadened industry that signifies the end of culture, a locale that stands for reification, cultural amnesia and the death of art. Notably, the tycoon also embodies the exact opposite of the rugged health and vitality of the farm hand Lvoff left behind in Iceland, a comparison which may seem to align Laxness with a conservative nationalist and romantic position at this early stage in his career, albeit a more conflicted and ironic one than was common at the time.

Whether or not Laxness was capable of bearing “the fate of the times,” as Weber puts it, he at the very least did not enter or remain in the monastery “silently.” Rather, he wrote with considerable profligacy, staying in touch with friends through extensive correspondence and working on a novel, in addition to avidly reading contemporary European literature. Indeed, Hallberg and



Guðmundsson both note that the stay in the monastery seems to have afforded Laxness the opportunity to reflect on modernity, his own experiences and the Icelandic cultural context.<sup>156</sup> Judging by Laxness' social writings upon his return to Iceland, a more nuanced appraisal of the manifold contradictions at work in the shaping of the contemporary social complex seems to have developed during his stay in the abbey.<sup>157</sup> Laxness was at any rate less swayed by post-war trends concerning the decline of Western civilization and the destructive capacity of technology than he had been on his initial excursions to continental Europe, although this discursive trajectory did not disappear from his writings, as Jóhann Páll Árnason has demonstrated in his examination of the presence of Oswald Spengler in *Alþýðubókin*.<sup>158</sup> However, Laxness became much less enamored of the rural discourses and neoromantic ideologies that provided the aesthetic framework for his earliest work.<sup>159</sup>

It is difficult to offer a more detailed account of the cultural and conceptual shift that has been delineated above, or make claims about the precise contours of the motivational framework that infused Laxness' development in this period. The reason is not lack of sources, as mentioned numerous letters from the time have survived, as did Laxness' diary from the monastery. At stake, rather, are the problems that tend to accompany the evaluation of a shift in subjective perception and cognitive outlook that is gradual and, furthermore, impossible to grasp as a cohesive narrative or as a structural whole as it is fragmented and in

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<sup>156</sup> Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, pp. 128–150; Hallberg. *Vefarinn mikli I*, pp. 98–153.

<sup>157</sup> These writings are touched upon below but are discussed more extensively in chapter 2.

<sup>158</sup> Jóhann Páll Árnason. "Oswald Spengler og Halldór Laxness." *Skírnir*, 2/2007.

<sup>159</sup> On neoromanticism in the Icelandic context, see Guðni Elísson. "From Realism to Neoromanticism." *A History of Icelandic Literature. Vol. 5 of Histories of Scandinavian Literature*. Ed. by Daisy Neijmann. Lincoln and London: The University Press of Nebraska, 2006, pp. 308–356.

many ways contested and contradictory (as shown, for example, by close temporal proximity between Laxness' embrace of anti-rationality in *Kaþólsk viðhorf* and his celebration of material rationality in his writings on modernization), and thus also in some sense always partial.<sup>160</sup> Laxness' *Weltanschauung* did not shift wholesale; the issue involves a subtle transition and a complex cognitive process. His thinking on modernity thus unfolded in conjunction with various other developments and had, furthermore, by no means come to a close when Laxness left the monastery in 1924. What can however be said with certainty is that Laxness' "education" in this period included secular matters as well as spiritual, a combination of ancient transcendence through religious practice and modern decadence by way of the iconoclastic visions of the modernist authors Laxness read at the time.<sup>161</sup>

### *1.3 Modern Conflicts and Literary Ascension*

It is worth recalling at this point that the discursive junction of departure for the above discussion was the symbolic site of the monastery in Weber's account of Western rationality and its counterpart, the church, in his depiction of the modern vocation. Having employed the monastery and Laxness' personal experiences within just such an institution to sketch an outline of a tumultuous period in his career, we must, in order to reach the latter site, jump forward roughly forty years, or to 1968, the moment when we see Laxness emerging from a self-imposed and widely publicized novelistic exile with the publication of

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<sup>160</sup> Many aspects of Christian ethical doctrine proved for instance quite compatible with Laxness' later social and communist political development, see Hróarsson, "Eina jörð veit ég eystra," pp. 52–62.

<sup>161</sup> Hallberg, *Vefarinn mikli* I, pp. 30–55.

*Kristnihald undir Jökli*, a work whose striking opening movement involves a boarded-up church. That the local church should have remained shut for years constitutes one of the many infractions committed by Snæfellsnes' rogue priest Jón Prímus, and it is precisely his conduct of his office that is being investigated by Umbi, the novel's narrator. What concerns us here is how Laxness resituated himself within the literary landscape with this novel.

In the early 1960s, Laxness' stature within Icelandic culture could not have been more secure. He was resting comfortably at the very summit of literary and cultural respectability and a powerful stream of unassailable legitimation was still emanating from the Nobel Prize he had received just over a decade earlier.<sup>162</sup> In a surprising move, however, Laxness suddenly indicated publicly that he would be taking a break from novel writing. Apparently he didn't know for how long, and the matter may not have been quite certain — and the phrasing employed here to describe Laxness' manner of approaching the possibility of novelistic retirement (Laxness was careful to be precise, if only on this point, that he was only thinking of the form of the novel), namely that it was suggested in a brief aside, rather than proclaimed or announced with fanfare, is not accidental or haphazard as the utterance in question came about as an excursive moment in a scholarly essay on the state of modern literature. But as the years passed without a new novel appearing, the suggestion — or was it an announcement? — took on increased weight and seriousness. When everything was said and done, the cessation of novelistic work would turn out to mark nearly a decade in Laxness' career as a writer, or from the publication of

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<sup>162</sup> Still, the 1960s was a tumultuous time and Laxness' peaceful cultural reign had its ups and downs, as recounted for example by Haukur Ingvarsson. "Sækjum gull í Gljúfrastein." *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 4/2002, pp. 15–25.

*Paradísarheimt* (Paradise Reclaimed) in 1960 to the appearance of *Kristnihald undir Jökli* eight years later.<sup>163</sup>

At no point in Laxness' career had there been a comparable "fallow" period in terms of his novelistic output.<sup>164</sup> That there was talk of "crisis" is not surprising.<sup>165</sup> It is not however as if idleness was Laxness' problem. During the eight years in question, he published seven books.<sup>166</sup> Indeed, Ástráður Eysteinnsson has suggested that had Laxness not "announced" (or suggested) his disillusionment with the form of the novel by writing an essay that denounced many of its conventions and called for a radical rethinking of the role of the contemporary novel, as well as criticizing many of its progressive and experimental modern forms, it is quite conceivable that Laxness' overall and general productivity in this period would have overshadowed and pushed aside the fact that the wait for a new novel was still ongoing.<sup>167</sup>

The scholarly essay in question, where Laxness expresses his intention of giving up the novel, "Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit"

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<sup>163</sup> Regarding the meanings generated by Laxness' novelistic "silence," see Björn Þór Vilhjálmsson. "Í ljósaskiptum minninganna: Athuganir á sjónarhorni, formtilraunum og síðstíl í *Guðsgjafabúlu* Halldórs Laxness." *Skírnir* 1/2009, p. 346.

<sup>164</sup> Laxness published his first novel, *Barn náttúrunnar*, at age 19 in 1919 and his last, *Guðsgjafabúla* (The Rhyme of God's Bounty) in 1972. During the early phase of his career, the longest periods that pass between novels are the four years between his first and second novel, *Undir Helgahnúk* (Under the Holy Mountain, 1924) and the three years that pass between the publication of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* and *Fuglinn í fjörunni* (The Bird on the Beach, 1931). It would be four years again between *Atómstöðin* (The Atom Station, 1948) and *Gerpla* (The Happy Warriors, 1952), and then five passed between the publication of the latter and *Brekkukotsannáll* (The Fish Can Sing, 1957).

<sup>165</sup> Peter Hallberg: „Halldór Laxness á krossgötum. nokkrir drættir úr þróunarsögu hans eftir viðtöku nóbelsverðlauna 1955.“ *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 1/1968, pp. 73–76.

<sup>166</sup> During this period Laxness published *Strompleikurinn* (The Chimney Play, 1961), *Prjónastofan Sólin* (Sun Knitting, 1962), *Skáldatími* (A Poet's Lesson, 1963), *Sjöstafakverið* (The Seven Letter Booklet, 1964), *Upphaf mannúðarstefnu* (The Emergence of Humanism, 1965), *Dúfnaveislan* (The Dove Party, 1966), and *Íslendingaspjall* (A Chat With Icelanders, 1967). These, then, are three plays, a short story collection, and three essay collections, one of which, *Skáldatími*, was strongly autobiographical and caused a sensation for political reasons, more precisely because it contained Laxness' reckoning with the Soviet Union and communism. This is discussed further in the beginning chapter of two.

<sup>167</sup> Eysteinnsson, "Í fuglabjargi skáldsögunnar," pp. 172–173.

(Private Memorandums Concerning Novels and Plays), was, and this is important, a rather spectacular performance, laying out in detail Laxness' struggle with the formal problems of the novel as a mode of expression.<sup>168</sup> Indeed, a curious narrative of redemption is embedded in the affinities and connections between the essay and *Kristnihald undir Jökli*. That is, the daring innovations of the new novel seemed to demand to be viewed in the context of Laxness' engagement with formal issues in the essay.

Thus, also, it became clear that the eight-year "silence" had not been a period of inactivity but rather of struggle and crisis. In other words, the period of Laxness' retreat from the novel form acquired a narrative dimension involving an artist's intense struggle with his medium and possible structures of expression. The narrative was dramatic and the stakes high. Iceland's foremost novelist was wrestling with the very condition of possibility of writing within the parameters of the mode that represented the aesthetic core of his lifetime of work. The result of the struggle, Laxness' "return" to the novelistic arena with *Kristnihaldi undir Jökli* could thus be read in terms of redemption, the

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<sup>168</sup> Laxness' essay "Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit" was collected in *Upphaf mannúðarstefnu* (Reykjavík: Helgafell) in 1965, but had appeared in print earlier and was initially commissioned for a Soviet magazine. Guðmundsson, Laxness' biographer, suggests a connection between Laxness' ruminations on the problems of novelistic narration in the essay and what he identifies as a pervasive strain in thinking on literature at the time and summarizes as "the death of the novel." Guðmundsson is likely thinking of the French New Novel (the *nouveau roman*) although one might also, if not for the temporal disjunction, think of the somewhat later discourse on "the literature of exhaustion," and John Barth's manifesto of the same name. The connection to the French New Novel is plausible, in part because Laxness wrote of the movement and was thus familiar with it, although his accentuation of tradition and the heritage in the essay in question would strike the continental iconoclasts as somewhat off-kilter. See Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, p. 667. "Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit" will be discussed in more detail in chapter three.

revolutionary form of the novel demonstrating that the crisis had been resolved and transcended.<sup>169</sup>

The correlation between the two texts — Laxness' two famous modernist novels, *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* thematizing the monastery, while the other, *Kristnihald undir Jökli*, centers around the institution of the modern church — is significant in the sense that in between, as if “framed” by two moments of aggressively embracing modernist aesthetics within an “architectural” or thematic framework that invokes the past through the conceptual domain of religion, lie the most significant ideological polarizations of Laxness' career as well as his greatest successes.

The affinities between the two works also transcend the thematic, formal and symbolic correspondences to include issues having to do with literary history. Ástráður Eysteinnsson has noted in this context how fascinating it is that Laxness who was pivotal in introducing literary modernism in Iceland with the earlier novel and his poetry in the 1920s, and who, more so than any other single author, enshrined realism as the dominant literary practice in the following two decades, should in the 1960s, a time when modernism was making its breakthrough in Iceland as a continuous literary practice, with Laxness now not a figure representing progressive aesthetics but among the central figures and symbols of the literary establishment and the tradition that the modernists rebelled against, return to literary experimentation and the aesthetics of modernism, precisely when he could have been expected to rest on his laurels.<sup>170</sup>

Laxness was partaking in the movement that refused to acknowledge the

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<sup>169</sup> For a discussion of the contemporary reception of *Kristnihald undir Jökli*, see Haukur Ingvarsson, *Andlitsdrættir samtíðarinnar*, pp. 45–52.

<sup>170</sup> Eysteinnsson, “Í fuglabjargi skáldsögunnar,” pp. 172–173.

primacy of the aesthetics he had himself been promoting for three decades,<sup>171</sup> had in a sense institutionalized and made paradigmatic, and constituted the mode of his best known works. Worth noting is that his “contribution” to a resurgent modernism was not in the least cautious or timid, nor was it by any stretch of the imagination an attempt to jump on a fashionable bandwagon. *Kristnihald undir Jökli* is an undisputed masterpiece of Icelandic modernism, one of a handful of keywords from the period.

It needs to be emphasized however that Laxness’ return to modernist aesthetics did not entail a return to the idealism of Laxness’ youth. On the contrary, the late works, *Kristnihald undir Jökli*, *Guðsgjafaþula* (The Rhyme of God’s Bounty, 1972), the late plays and many of the short stories, see Laxness struggling with a set of questions that speaks to, for example, the rich tradition of critically probing modern social formations that we associate with Max Weber and his discursive successors in the Frankfurt School, from Adorno to Habermas to Honneth.<sup>172</sup>

Clearly, an engagement with the modern does not depend on a positive “attitude” (on behalf of the theorist, the author, the implied author, or the

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<sup>171</sup> Laxness would, throughout the decades, after his own period of modernist experimentation had come to a close, write with a certain harshness against literary modernism and its foremost practitioners,

<sup>172</sup> Laxness’ last novel *Guðsgjafaþula* returns to the “scene” of Iceland’s modernization push, taking place in the 1920s and other key moments of industrialization, and dealing with capitalistic and economic “adventure” that was the emergent fishing industry. The tone and approach is however radically different from the way in which Laxness wrote on similar themes as a young man, the novel being highly experimental and switching frequently between the register of the surreal and a pessimistic mode. I have argued elsewhere that the novel is primarily concerned with memory and finitude, and that it can be suggestively read through Edward Said’s concept of “late style,” see Vilhjálmsón, “Í ljósaskiptum minninganna”. The suggestion that Weber, Adorno and Habermas form a “tradition” of critical thinkers on modernity is of course pervasive, but for an excellent and brief explanation of the philosophical and sociological bindings at stake in such formulations, see Stephen Crook, Jan Pakulski, and Malcolm Waters. *Postmodernization: Change in Advanced Society*. London, Newbury Park, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1992, pp. 47–57.

narratorial logic of the text) towards modernization or modernity's relationship with the heritage, and a purportedly "negative" viewpoint towards aspects of modernity can provide the grounds for a critique that is by no means a less important form of engagement than the famous proselytizing of Laxness' early period.<sup>173</sup>

An *enfant terrible* of sorts in the 1920s, Laxness turned into the leading figure of the Icelandic radical left in the 1930s, adored and even worshipped by many.<sup>174</sup> His increasingly prominent place in Icelandic culture was accompanied by growing critical interest in his work, resulting in the emergence of something resembling a hermeneutic tradition or consistent activity that sought to explicate his role within the Icelandic literary system but simultaneously partook in the semi-mythologizing of his career and persona. Thus, for example, the chapter on Laxness in Kristinn Andr sson's pioneering 1949 study of twentieth century Icelandic literature, * slenzkar n t mab kmenntir, 1918–1948*, virtually equates Icelandic cultural modernity with Laxness as a figure.<sup>175</sup> It is also possible that the temptation to partake in the celebratory figuration of Laxness' career and persona was furthered by the manner in which Laxness's literary output was

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<sup>173</sup> This relates to a theme of considerable importance in literary history and in terms of mapping literature's relationship with the social, namely the antagonistic stance taken by many modern authors towards processes of modernization and the capitalistic and bureaucratic systems of ordering human life in modernity. This constellation of aesthetic, historical, philosophical and political matters is often referred to under the umbrella term of "the two modernities" and is discussed more closely below.

<sup>174</sup> See for example Kristinn Andr sson's remembrance and recollections of Laxness as a comrade in the struggle for social justice in *Enginn er eyland. T mar Rau ra penna*. Reykjav k: M l og menning, 1971. See also Gu mundsson, *Halld r Laxness.  visaga*, pp. 357–361; Andr sson, *Enginn er eyland*, pp. 58–60; J n  lafsson. *Appels nur fr  Abkas u. Vera Hertzsch, Halld r Laxness og hreinsanirnar miklu*. Reykjav k: JPV  tg fa, 2012, pp. 13–42.

<sup>175</sup> Kristinn Andr sson. * slenzkar n t mab kmenntir, 1918–1948*. Reykjav k: M l og menning, 1949, pp. 17–36.



studiously ignored by right wing publications long after his stature ought to have made turning a blind eye quite impossible.<sup>176</sup>

#### 1.4 *The Great Weaver*

What needs to be emphasized at this point is the centrality of Swedish scholar Peter Hallberg within the field of Laxness studies. His two-volume work, *Den store Vävaren. En studie i Laxness' ungdomsdiktning* (The Great Weaver. A Study of Laxness Early Work, 1954) and *Skaldens hus. Laxness' diktning från Salka Valka till Gerpla* (The Poet's House: Laxness' Works from Salka Valka to Gerpla, 1956), published more than half a century ago still occupy a privileged position when it comes to academic research programs centered on Laxness.<sup>177</sup> The two volumes have not only proven influential but may with considerable justification be viewed as the signal gesture that marks the emergence of Laxness studies. The unique access Hallberg enjoyed to Laxness' personal correspondence, manuscript drafts and the author himself, in addition to Hallberg's rigorous scholarship and facility with his subject matter, made possible the creation of a scholarly apparatus that to this day remains a respected and in many ways an authoritative interpretation of Laxness' life and work.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, pp. 439–542.

<sup>177</sup> Each of Hallberg's two volumes was split in two for the Icelandic publication, presumably for economic reasons. *Vefarinn mikli* I appeared in 1957, *Vefarinn mikli* II in 1960, *Hús skáldsins* I in 1970 and *Hús skáldsins* II in 1971. In addition to these central works, Hallberg has also written *Verðandi bókin um Halldór Laxness* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1955), *Halldór Laxness* (Trans. by Njörður P. Njarðvík. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1975) and innumerable articles, book chapters and shorter pamphlets on Laxness, in addition to translating many of his works into Swedish.

<sup>178</sup> In a review of the Icelandic translation of the first half of *Den store Vävaren*, Helgi J. Halldórsson notes that the volume makes its subject "grow in size by being dissected, both as a man and as an author". "Vefarinn mikli". *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 1/1958, p. 95. In the original: "Einnig má höfundinum verða það nokkur huggun, að hann vex við krufninguna bæði sem maður og skáld". Hallberg's personal archives of Laxness-related materials have proven to

A stunning indicator of the confluence of Laxness' *oeuvre* and the meaning generation of Hallberg's study is the design of the Icelandic four-part translation of the two volumes. Beginning in the mid 1940s, Helgafell published Laxness' works in a unified line, distinguished by straight lines and the play of black and white (the design of the books was discussed more closely in the Introduction). The interior side of the front hard cover of all the volumes was furthermore imprinted with Laxness' initials, "HKL" [Halldór Kiljan Laxness], foregrounding the image of the author through the notion of his signature and thus indicating the close relationship between the authorial figure and the works, the former being posited as the signified of the latter, the source of literary meaning and value. Even after a corporate merger significantly changed the character of Helgafell, the design remained unchanged and is without a doubt the best-known book design of the twentieth-century in Iceland and became metonymic for Laxness' authorial name.

Hallberg's two books on Laxness were not translated into Icelandic in direct sequence, although they had appeared in Sweden within a couple of years of each other. The first half of the former volume, *Vefarinn mikli. Um Æskuskáldskap Halldórs Kiljans Laxness I*, appeared in 1957 with the second following in 1960. Hallberg's follow up, *Skaldens hus*, was also split in two in translation, with the first part, *Hús skáldsins. Um skáldverk Halldórs Laxness frá*

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be of singular value. As mentioned above, his relationship with Laxness was close and their decades long correspondence shows that he enjoyed Laxness' untrammled trust, something that no doubt facilitated Hallberg's ability to approach Laxness' friends and acquaintances and gain access to their personal documents. As considerable distances tended to separate Hallberg from his contacts, he was frequently entrusted with primary documents on loan. These Hallberg would copy before returning and there are known instances where the originals of very important materials have been lost or destroyed, leaving Hallberg's reproductions as the only extant copies. See Ólafur Ragnarsson. *Halldór Laxness. Líf í skáldskap*. Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 2002, pp. 221–223.

*Sölku Völku til Gerplu I*, appearing a decade after *Vefarinn mikli II*, in 1970, with the second half coming along the next year. It was Helgafell, Laxness' publisher, which released the books in Iceland and, in a striking move, the outward appearance of Hallberg's scholarly works replicated exactly the conspicuous look and design of Laxness' own volumes. The translations of Hallberg's books were in other words published employing the same black and white striped design pattern that so distinctively characterized Laxness' works.

Symbolically, this highly expressive gesture incorporated the scholarly apparatus into Laxness' artistic corpus, indicating in no uncertain terms that Hallberg's account of Laxness' life and works met with the author's approval and favor, as well as being institutionally acceptable by financial interests. Even more striking however is the fact that Laxness' initials were retained on the inside cover of Hallberg's four Icelandic volumes, blurring the boundary between the commentary and the original work, Hallberg and Laxness.

Indeed, Laxness the literary institution appropriates the scholarly apparatus in a manner that seems almost to invoke Freudian introjection. What initially may be seen as an act endowing the study with an unassailable authority, through Laxness' "signature," thus also suggests an authorial figure, facilitated by a corporate entity, restlessly reaching for ownership of a text that uniquely mediates, displays and constructs his image.

As has already been suggested, the two volumes are endowed with an important biographical dimension. Although not conceived primarily as biographies, Hallberg's methodology, which is heavily reliant on the author as a figure and anchor for meaning, a scholarly approach that goes hand in hand with

a penchant for biographical interpretations of literary works, turns the first book length accounts of Laxness' works into what, in this instance, amount to the prototypical authorial biography.<sup>179</sup>

Hallberg's formulation of a key moment in Laxness' "positive" relationship with modernity, namely Laxness leaving the monastery and the period leading up to the publication of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, is thus of interest, in part because subsequent work within Laxness studies has been extensively shaped by Hallberg's pioneering research and authoritative interpretations.<sup>180</sup> What we are seeing, in other words, when we follow Hallberg, is something of a paradigm being set in place. Another reason why it is fruitful to pay attention to this particular textual moment harks back to the structure and ideological emphasis of the earlier volume, *Den store Vävaren*, which deals with the period before Laxness leaves for the United States in 1927.

First and foremost, the book should be read as an extended meditation on Laxness' relationship with a highly charged and important cultural moment, namely Iceland's initial and intense modernization phase, which, combined with the fraught world-historical situation, makes for a dramatic backdrop for the narrative of Laxness' youthful extravagances and subsequent maturation. The centerpiece of *Den store Vävaren*, however, and the implicit crisis that shadows its developmental story-arc, is the problem facing a modern author, one who is something of an iconoclast and cosmopolitan, when he needs to find a place for

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<sup>179</sup> The importance of the biographical aspect of Hallberg's works is borne out in the frequency with which they have been referenced by subsequent biographers. Indeed, Gissurarson, the Laxness biographer mentioned above in connection with plagiarism, was convicted for his use of Hallberg as source material. See Jón Ólafsson. "Fölsuð fræði. Stuldur, svindl og uppspuni í vísindasamfélaginu." *Ritið*, 4/2004, pp. 103–121; Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon. *Fortíðardraumar. Sjálfsbókmenntir á Íslandi*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2004.

<sup>180</sup> In Iceland, it was precisely this aspect of Hallberg's work that was singled out for compliment, see Halldórsson, "Vefarinn mikli," p. 95.

himself within the traditional boundaries and setting of his native country.<sup>181</sup> In other words, Hallberg presents modernity as the problem that Laxness must overcome while simultaneously positing him as a figure deeply intertwined with the modern. Indeed, for Hallberg, Laxness' modernity reaches an apotheosis with *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* — and is then transfigured into something different. Nevertheless, such transcultural work is not without its risks, Hallberg suggests, and its implications reverberate within the space of the national and the cultural heritage.

Laxness is attempting to breach the gates of a culturally enclosed environment and thereby facilitate modernity's entrance. Embedded within the logic of such a task, however, is an undertow that, if unheeded, threatens the integrity of Laxness' cultural project. Hallberg presents an author determined to break out of the confines of a national tradition and shrug off the weight of the heritage. However, a competing perspective on these attempts at renewal is also present. Cosmopolitanism in this latter view veers towards the refusal to work for the development of traditional national literature, and consequently implies the dilution of national identity; staking out a position in the modern can also be seen as a betrayal of the heritage, a denial of the difference between the indigenous and the foreign.

It is in this register that Hallberg notes with concern that “[f]or a considerable time it seemed as if Halldór would reject [his] relationship [with the cultural heritage],” and that his “fascination with the latest cultural fads from

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<sup>181</sup> For an in depth discussion of cultural geopolitics and the problems facing members of a “minor” literary culture in the international space of letters, see Pascale Casanova. *The World Republic of Letters*. Trans. by M.B. DeBevoise. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004. This issue — as well as Casanova's work — will be returned to below.

abroad” seemed capable of severing his connection to “the ancient traditions of his homeland.”<sup>182</sup> The tendency thus described, the ramifications of which are assumed to be negative, first manifests itself in the draft *Heiman eg fór* (I Left Home, 1952) and the early cultural critiques but, and this appears to be cause for some relief, Hallberg notes a new strain of interest and sympathy towards the lived experience of the Icelandic people in the 1925 article, “Af íslenzku menningarástandi.”<sup>183</sup> There, Hallberg glimpses a shift away from the self-importance of his artistic persona and an increased maturity, Laxness is moving towards acceptance of his national heritage. One obstacle remains, however. *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* could not but be “explosive in a cultural environment as isolated, homogenous and tradition bound as Iceland was at the time.”<sup>184</sup>

Hallberg is juggling two competing perspectives on *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* when he accounts for the impact of the novel in these terms. On the one hand, the analytic thrust of the entire volume aims to explain the multifaceted importance of Laxness’ novel in the context of Icelandic literature and map the author’s revolutionary method, how he engages recent European cultural movements and attitudes in a deliberate, even forceful conversation. On the other, and this becomes particularly evident in later chapters, Hallberg is keeping an eye on Sigurður Nordal’s well known 1928 review article where he discusses the novel and offers a fairly critical evaluation, particularly in terms of

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<sup>182</sup> Hallberg, *Vefarinn mikli* I, p. 186. In the original: “Lengi vel var varla annað að sjá, en að Halldór afneitaði þessum tengslum; það var sem hrifning hans af nýjabruminu í menningu umheimsins mundi slíta sundur öll bönd við fornar hefðir ættlandsins”.

<sup>183</sup> Peter Hallberg, *Vefarinn mikli* II. Trans. Björn Th. Björnsson. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1970, pp. 171–172.

<sup>184</sup> Hallberg, *Vefarinn mikli* II, p. 20.

those features of the text that Hallberg identifies as positioning the book in an international, rather than a national, context.

Nordal, professor at the University of Iceland and the eminent literary scholar of his time, stressed the necessity for restraint in transnational cultural dialogue. In effect, he advised that Icelanders should watch their step and import only the best elements of European culture while discarding the rest in order to safeguard the national heritage from corrupting influences.<sup>185</sup> These sentiments are in evidence in his review of Laxness' novel. Laxness, not surprisingly, is found wanting in restraint, his engagement with the currents circulating around Europe too wanton, uncritical and intemperate. Nordal suggestively compares the novel to a junkshop filled with a random selection of cultural artifacts, one that is organized according to a principle of chaotic eclecticism rather than aesthetic order. Inherent to this type of establishment, he points out, is the danger that one purchase, not just junk, but fakes, imitations that at first glance seem striking but turn out to be worthless.<sup>186</sup>

In the metaphoric scheme of the review, the junk shop functions as an inverse mirroring of another institution, one constituted in a negative fashion by what Laxness' "junk shop" of a book is not. This alternative, and preferable,

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<sup>185</sup> Sigurjónsson, *Laxness og þjóðlífið I*, pp. 43–48; Árni Sigurjónsson. "Nokkur orð um hugmyndafræði Sigurðar Nordal fyrir 1945." *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 1/1984, pp.49–63. Guðmundsson, "Loksins, loksins," pp. 45–62.

<sup>186</sup> Sigurður Nordal. "Bókmenntaþættir." *Vaka*, 1928, p. 93. While the metaphors in play, as employed by Nordal, never touch directly on the racial, the potential for a racialized discourse is clearly present. Indeed, another critic writing on *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* a little later, Jakob Jóh. Smári, goes that route when he depicts the novel as the product of a "bastard culture among the great nations, where countless 'piteous races' [...] are mixed into nonsense". "Norræna hreyfingin og Halldór Kiljan Laxness." *Eimreiðin*, 2/1932, p. 235. For a further discussion see Benedikt Hjartarson. "Dragging Nordic Horses past the Sludge of Extremes. The Beginnings of the Icelandic Avant-Garde." *The Invention of Politics in the European Avant-Garde (1996–1940)*. Ed. by Sascha Bru and Gunther Martens. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006, p. 250. The translation of the Smári-quote belongs to Hjartarson.

establishment would then purvey in “genuine” cultural goods whose authenticity is determined by an organic connection to a tradition, which is made manifest not through spectacle or showmanship, but restraint and an edifying evocation and handling of the heritage. The tracing of cultural genealogy thus becomes constitutive of a rigorous classification process, which again manifests itself as a clear comprehension of the typological status of each individual work. What in other words can be termed the musealization of literature, as Nordal’s negative opposite to the junk shop is in some sense an institution of conservation, is pitted against the foreign bazaar of modernist eclecticism and disorder. Nordal’s outlook is indicative of his broader ideological positions, advocating for a “new romanticism,” traditional values and a vision of organically cohesive social structures; being by and large quite hostile to “fads,” scientism, urbanity and technology.

Summarizing Nordal’s views on the novel, in a chapter dealing with the critical reception, Hallberg notes that at the time *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* threatened to “rupture the coherence of the Icelandic literary system” which traces its history back for more than 700 years, and that the novel in fact was “an ominous augury of the growing ‘disintegration’ of Icelandic culture”.<sup>187</sup> No longer paraphrasing Nordal directly but still speaking in his register, Hallberg goes on to note that in the years to come, after having “sown his oats in the modern movement and gone as far as possible,” Laxness would in an increasingly significant fashion endeavor to integrate the “Icelandic heritage” into his

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<sup>187</sup> Hallberg, *Vefarinn mikli* II, p. 193. In the original the quotes read: “Frá hans [Nordals] sjónarmiði býður Vefarinn mikli þeirri hættu heim, að samhengið í íslenskum bókmenntum rofni” and “Hin margslungna skáldsaga er ef til vill uggvænlegur fyrirboði aukinnar ‘upplausnar’ íslenzkrar menningar”.



work.<sup>188</sup> He would as a matter of fact develop in line with “Nordal’s cultural program.”<sup>189</sup>

Although a chapter remains of Hallberg’s book at this point, where biographical conjunctions between Laxness’ life and *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* are discussed, the next to last chapter represents the culmination of Hallberg’s analysis and reconstruction of the cultural framework of the novel. Needless to say, emphasizing the fact that Laxness’ modernist text had a destabilizing effect on the contemporary cultural scene is part and parcel of discussing the work — and Nordal’s perspective is both highly articulate and forcefully presented, in addition to the fact that his sentiments carry considerable authority due to his scholarly eminence. In that sense, the emphasis placed on accounting for Nordal’s point of view — and thus the “threat” the novel posed to the integrity of Icelandic culture — is understandable.

But in structural terms, Hallberg’s sympathetic rendering of what is essentially a conservative stance represents an abrupt “conclusion” to what has been an extended investigation into a series of volatile cultural contributions, whose “charge” and significance reside precisely in the destabilizing effect that so disturbed Nordal. It might be worth keeping in mind however that when Hallberg is composing his study, Laxness has long since turned away from literary modernism, and his public polemics against Nordal are deep in the past. As a matter of fact, his most recent work would have been *Gerpla* (The Happy

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<sup>188</sup> Hallberg, *Vefarinn mikli* II, p. 193. In the original the quotes read: “Í hinu viðamikla æskuverki hljóp hann af sér hornin í nútímastefnunni, fór eins langt og komizt varð.” Then: “Síðan hefur hann tileinkað sér íslenzka arfleifð í æ ríkara mæli.”

<sup>189</sup> Hallberg, *Vefarinn mikli* II, p. 193. In the original: “Að vissu leyti hefur þróun Laxness síðan hann ritaði *Vefarinn mikla* verið í samræmi við menningarstefnu Nordals”.

Warriors, 1952), where the literary heritage of the Sagas is engaged with closely. Nordal's perspective on Laxness might therefore appear to have gained in hermeneutic weight in the intervening decades.

Hallberg's second volume proceeds to build on the above view, aiming to demonstrate how Laxness, turning back from causing a "rupture" in the Icelandic literary system, came to incorporate specifically national concerns, such as the literary heritage and the contemporary class struggle, rather than foreign aesthetic trends, into his work. As we turn to more recent scholarly works on Laxness, *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* and modernism in a subsequent section, we will also track how Hallberg's "channeling" of Nordal's views, particularly the manner in which they inflect his notion of Laxness "sowing his oats" in the modern movement, and him "going as far as possible" in terms of modernist innovation makes the turn to realism an almost teleologically ordained event, has remained an influential stance and perspective on Laxness' career.

### *1.5 Mastering the Code of Modernity*

Hallberg depicts *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* as a work grounded both in the present moment and recent past, bearing the marks of modernity in its affinity with depth hermeneutics, intense subjectivity, inwardness and psychology, as well as a fragmented and conflicted world view.<sup>190</sup> He then posits Laxness as confronting a conservative literary milieu with what by and large it lacks, a vibrant connection with foreign aesthetic currents. Laxness was however not always this finely tuned into the literary landscape, as Peter Hallberg has pointed

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<sup>190</sup> Hallberg, *Vefarinn mikli* II, pp. 44–51, 131–153.

out in his discussion of a passage from Laxness' *Rauða kverið*, which Laxness was at work on in 1922.

It is important to keep in mind that this is a fragment of a novel, abandoned by Laxness and never published. The novel he abandoned *Rauða kverið* for, *Heiman eg fór* was also abandoned, but the third time is the charm, next it was the turn of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*. With that important caveat in mind — we are examining a work that did not meet Laxness' criteria — the sequence Hallberg notes is still illuminating in precisely the context of aesthetic modernity and the peripheral status of Iceland in European culture, as well as Laxness' early preoccupations and literary development.

The sequence that gave Hallberg pause depicts student friends gathered together in some Reykjavík abode having an impassioned late night debate. Their conversation is rendered in a lively fashion but a vague dissonance can still be felt, an incongruity that highlights the discontinuity of the temporality of literary spaces and this becomes only more obvious as the conversation of the students gains momentum. While arguing about the significance of the Russian revolution, a genuinely modern theme at the time, the students also debate the intellectual ramifications of Georg Brandes and his theories, as well as Nietzsche's philosophy. The problem is that these are figures who, rather than authenticating the novel's modernity, reveal it to be drastically incomplete: "The synchronization of [Brandes and Nietzsche] and Lenin indicates the acute disparity that's involved in Iceland's interaction with foreign cultural

movements. Their dissemination and the original chronology are incongruous”.<sup>191</sup>

It is as if in Iceland, viewed through the prism of *Rauða kverið*, different cultural time zones exist conterminously — from the relatively up to date to the hopelessly passé and outmoded — and the inability to distinguish between them is what marks the marginality of the culture. Furthermore, the “time lag” identified by Hallberg indicates that modernization is in a sense “unequal” and we are reminded of the way in which the idea of “catching up” to modernity is closely associated with Laxness’ project in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*. Indeed, the provinciality of Icelandic culture in the 1920s is a frequent theme of Hallberg’s, as it is in Laxness’ own early writings.

What Hallberg refers to as cultural “disparity” has been taken up by literary scholar Pascale Casanova through her concept of a literary “Greenwich meridian,” which in her mapping of cultural geopolitics speaks to the intellectual and artistic domination of certain metropolitan centers. Deviations from aesthetic standards as mandated in these midpoints of culture, practices which function as the mean standard of literary modernity, determine the distance of a text from the center of the world of letters.<sup>192</sup> What the bohemian urbanized sophistication of *Rauða kverið* is thus striving to portray is undermined by the clear cultural peripherality of its (author’s) world-view, an untimeliness which in a sense conflates notions of temporality and spatiality.

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<sup>191</sup> Hallberg, *Vefarinn mikli I*, p. 71. In the original the passage reads: “En þessi samstilling þeirra og Lenin er einmitt mjög einkennandi um snertingu Íslands við erlenda menningarstrauma. Miðlun þeirra og upphafleg tímaröð stenz ekki alltaf á”.

<sup>192</sup> Pascale Casanova. *The World Republic of Letters*. Translated by M.B. DeBevoise. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 88.

In Casanova's theory, "modernity" manifests itself in a complex discursive code signifying a shift and a divorce from tradition. A new consciousness can be seen as permeating those moments of aesthetic expression viewed as prototypically modern. Thus when Casanova describes literary modernity as "the frantic quest for the present," she is not simply identifying a generalized sense of mirroring, nor offering a vaguely descriptive formulae, rather, she is indicating that as an aesthetic concept and expression, modernity includes a normative dimension, that to be modern means mastering the intricate code of modernity, including the historical imperative of marking a new historical moment by and through the rejection of history.<sup>193</sup>

Hallberg's point, however, in discussing *Rauða kverið* is that such painful and awkward temporal/cultural disjunctions are avoided in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* — an issue we will return to below. But Casanova's notion of literary modernity as something belonging first and foremost to metropolitan centers attuned to the "real time of international life," and thus, necessarily, also distant and seemingly out of reach for writers from peripheral "literary provinces," is useful in terms of grasping the larger significance of the temporal *faux pas* Hallberg points out, and it also raises the question of whether, and then how, Laxness manages to navigate his problematic geographical distance from the modern in the latter work.<sup>194</sup>

In other words, through the notion of "small literatures" in a world republic of letters, Casanova brings up the problem of centers and peripheries, politics and ideology, geography and demographics, the disparity between wealthy

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<sup>193</sup> Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, p. 91.

<sup>194</sup> Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, pp. 93, 95.

industrial centers and the provincial way of life, technology and tradition, all sites that complicate the ways in which modernity is to be understood and related to literary practice and the social world.<sup>195</sup>

Notions of geographical disparity are of central importance when it comes to the modern and these can be discerned and read on several distinct levels. Thus for example, the “modern” countryside, compared to the metropolitan hubs of commerce and culture, has traditionally been seen as lacking modernity — this notion, surely, characterizes the discourses of rurality emphasized up through the twentieth century in Scandinavian literature, where, on the one hand, the provinces are valued for their closeness to and affinity with nature, their unspoiled authenticity and the purity of their heritage; on the other, however, scorned as backward and culturally deprived, dirty, poor and linked, through labor with the functions of the body.

Moving from the national to the transnational, a similar disjunction proves to be in place as an image of continental urbanity, economic prosperity, military might and technological prowess is posited against and compared to Nordic peripherality, pastoral naivety and relative lack of resources.<sup>196</sup> In this context, Iceland’s remoteness comes across as particularly marked. Poor under Danish rule, late to modernize, and cut off from regular cultural exchange by its

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<sup>195</sup> Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, p. 175.

<sup>196</sup> From another perspective, however, the global North reigns supreme in the race to be modern while the less modernized South lags behind, its comfortable climate long believed to provide insufficient inducement to get to grips with the cold reality of mechanization and industrialized activity. Through the twentieth century colonial bodies did the work that, in Western metropolitan collectivities, had long since been relegated to the inhuman modern industry of machines. Going on, disparity regarding “access” to and “affinity” with the modern can also be identified at the level of class and gender, with certain classes becoming the objects of modernity, cogs in the industrial machines and victims of the destructive capacities of urban centers, while the modern is also gendered through the association of pre-modern or non-modern characteristics with, for example, female subjectivity.

geographical isolation in the far north, Iceland's marginality in terms of the rest of Europe cannot be overestimated — indeed, as Eysteinnsson has noted, even today Iceland is frequently missing on maps of Europe.<sup>197</sup> Thus, as Laxness was maturing as a writer, Iceland could certainly be said to occupy what Casanova terms a “dominated and peripheral position” with regard not only to literary modernity but also to Europe's other “small countries.”<sup>198</sup> Laxness' travels, his much trumpeted cosmopolitanism, his discursive appropriation of the modern, as described in detail by Hallberg, can in the above context be read as a series of attempts to locate a “gateway to the present,” through what Casanova terms “assimilation” or cultural modernization on the individual level.<sup>199</sup> She would even go further and say that the contours of Laxness' “apprenticeship” are familiar from any number of narratives deriving from “literary worlds” characterized by their “smallness, poverty, backwardness, and remoteness,” and from whence artists head out into the world in search of the modern.<sup>200</sup>

But by making Laxness' cultural identity partly dependent on the “novelty” of literary modernity, in the sense that Hallberg's narrativization culminates in the triumphant return, the homecoming that ruptures the isolation of the native country and (almost) heralds a revolution, he also opens his figuration of Laxness up to a specific aporia. The author who significantly acquired his aesthetic education elsewhere cannot but be faced with the contradiction that the very “authority” that authenticates and underwrites his artistic identity

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<sup>197</sup> Ástráður Eysteinnsson. “Icelandic Resettlements,” *sympløke* 5.1, 1997, p. 154.

<sup>198</sup> Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, p. 176.

<sup>199</sup> Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, p. 179.

<sup>200</sup> Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, p. 183. Eysteinnsson's article, “Icelandic Resettlements,” cited above, maps how marginalization of the sort described by Pascale Casanova is “refused” through the activation of various historical and literary discourses, and the privileging of language. How in other words, various ideologies and constructions of the heritage are set to work turning the margin into a center.

(through the metaphorical gesture of “immersion” in foreign aesthetic “currents”), and allows his textual practice to be construed as “innovative” and “unprecedented” in a peripheral context, also places him in the role, not of the pioneer, but of a latecomer, someone who in one way or another is forced to “imitate” or “repeat” a process already accomplished elsewhere, and in a certain sense always more fully, more completely and more “authentically”.

That such a process is strictly speaking more or less unavoidable in all literary contexts, and that “imitation” is surely an insufficient concept to articulate the process at hand, should not obscure how integral the notion of repetition is to the problematic relationship between peripheral literatures and cosmopolitan centers from whence the various artistic currents and modernisms “originate,” and the pressing nature of the subsequent questioning of originality and cultural authenticity.<sup>201</sup> What Hallberg correctly designates as Laxness’ contribution to the Icelandic literary system, we now see, also rests upon geography, and complex cultural politics in relation to the status of modernity, the problem of belatedness and what Casanova terms “literary destitution”.<sup>202</sup>

Hallberg’s methodological emphasis, the manner in which he minutely maps Laxness’ incorporation of important precursors, precedents and prominent cultural currents, the existence of analogs and affinities, how he portrays Laxness’s breakthrough as inexorably linked to him becoming a “great weaver” of intertextual strands in an international context, this approach, in addition to providing the groundwork for Hallberg’s claim that Laxness not only “reacted” to

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<sup>201</sup> For a discussion of strategies of creatively “repeating” literary motifs derived from a “dominant” culture, and the potentialities of “difference” in shifting contexts, see Luís Madureira. *Cannibal Modernities. Postcoloniality and the Avant-garde in Caribbean and Brazilian Literature*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2005, pp. 1–21.

<sup>202</sup> Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, p. 181.



the cultural modernity he encountered on his European travels, but that he creatively appropriated aspects of its multiplicity, also situates *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* as a “citing text,” to borrow a phrase from postcolonial theory, allowing it to be read as symptomatic of an anxious, even somewhat ambivalent, method of appropriating the modern from a peripheral position.<sup>203</sup> That is, Laxness’ “excessive” citation of the modern may be seen to signify, rather than the status and achievement of modernity, anxiety about its possible absence or, at the very least, concerns about Iceland’s and his own “subordinate” position *vis a vis* notions of a fuller modernity. In other words, while Hallberg reliably and insightfully traces the outline of Laxness’ adherence to the modern, objectified and made manifest in the novel’s system of footnotes and specific, named references, as well as the deployment of a complex connotative scheme, he relegates to invisibility the sense in which this self-legitimizing strategy, how this bravura display of a modern process of *Bildung*, opens up an approach to the text that is not based on Laxness’ own self-projection as a “path-breaker” and “original,” an “authority” on the latest trends in modern literature, but as an author who registers and experiences modernity from a position of disempowerment when it comes to cultural hegemony and emblems of the modern, how, within the discourses of modernity, he is in a sense an “emissary” from the periphery, assigned, if only by himself, to bring back a “report” on the conduct of culture in distant metropolitan centers.

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<sup>203</sup> The notion of a “citing text” derives from Carlos J. Alonso. *The Burden of Modernity. The Rhetoric of Cultural Discourse in Spanish America*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 22–3. Reading *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* as a “citing text” is especially inviting in terms of the first edition from 1927, where Laxness included a plethora of footnotes, involving issues such as surrealism and theology, which were dropped in later editions.

### 1.6 Consummate Negativity

The above discussion of how Laxness navigated literary modernity in order to “bring” modernism to Iceland left the conceptual groundwork pretty much alone; questions regarding the constituent factors of literary modernity were not asked, nor even how “literary” modernity differs from plain modernity. Is modernism the “natural” expression or artistic counterpart of modernity? Before moving to a more detailed discussion of how *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* has been positioned as the harbinger of the new in the Icelandic literary system, it is useful to briefly consider these questions. Not because we aim at a “new” definition of literary modernity or plan to settle once and for all the disputations between modernism and realism. Far from it, a limited number of thinkers and theorists will be referenced very briefly and selectively, almost in flashes, in the hope that doing so adds up to a “collage” that informs our discussion of Laxness and the cultural framework within which he is placed. This will be done in two parts; this one deals with literature and aesthetics and modernity, while a more rigorous historicization of the concept will follow a couple of sections down.

In a historical schema that is both elaborately drawn and, seemingly, self-evident, literary theorist and historian Matei Calinescu posits that the modernity of a literary text is determined by the way in which it conveys a sense of the present and, in what might constitute a prime example of a tautology, expresses the experience of modernity.<sup>204</sup> Calinescu, however, is offering a categorical definition that is both more stringent and less general than it first appears and is grounded by the conceptual trappings of a “break”. The shift in experience that

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<sup>204</sup> Matei Calinescu. *Five Faces of Modernity. Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1987, pp. 3–10, 39–41.

is brought forth in modernity has any number of talismanic markers and designations. Urbanization has been mentioned but we might in addition point to mass production, speed and mobility, crowds, capitalism and consumerism, institutionalized law, security and a centralized state, but, most fundamentally, the revolutionary notion of the future as neither predetermined nor undetermined but open to transformation.

This wholly new conceptual field can be encapsulated in various anticipatory cognitive frameworks that suddenly become a part of the subjective and everyday world of individuals, ranging from class and geographic mobility to new conceptual horizons and action orientations in terms of gender. A stark symbolic example would be the fact that a child born in the later stages of modernity is virtually certain to live a life that will register the structuring influences of radically different forces and customs than those affecting the life conducted by the person(s) handling its rearing. A child born in 1900 could quite conceivably, in vigorous old age, engage in regular email correspondence while the defining event during the golden years of someone born in 2013 might well be the catastrophic reconfiguration of the ecosystem of the planet.

The immense quickening of social change in the nineteenth century, and its high-speed velocity in the twentieth is not only historically new, and grounded in technoscience, but it also transplants the concept of change from the corporeal register (the future entails ageing and eventual death) to a conceptual one, defined by a mixture of epistemological certainty and uncertainty (I know things will change but I don't know how), that positions subjective experience in modernity as radically new. When Calinsecu thus speaks of the aesthetic

importance of “presentness,” it is in the context of the realization that the present is truly fleeting, indeed, the new concept of the future has rendered a previously intransigent present entirely ephemeral.<sup>205</sup> The past, as well, is demarcated in a new way, making it for example the subject of nostalgia.

Conversely, despite a conceptual and social horizon that may remain the same for generations, material conditions may be such that individual and experiential stability and security are sorely lacking. Disease, starvation, unpredictable weather, bad technology, worse medicine, capricious leaders, lawlessness and so forth tended to make life something of a gamble in past ages, and stock-full of shocks. From this perspective, the process whose initial movements were conceptualized by Thomas Hobbes as the rise of the “Leviathan” and culminated, so to speak, in the complex dialectic between the state and capitalism that shapes most modern social formations, may have provided a sense of stability unknown in previous times.<sup>206</sup> Both interpretations are valid up to a point and the important thing is not to choose between them, fragmentation and destabilization versus security and the principles of subjectivity, but to realize that as a function in literature, “modernity” engages with an existential problematic and tensions of the sort listed above, although the examples given are hypothetical in their specifics.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 40.

<sup>206</sup> Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan: Authoritative text, backgrounds, interpretations*. Ed. by Richard E. Flathman and David Johnston. New York: Norton, 1997.

<sup>207</sup> This is emphasized through a historical narrative that posits a trajectory that reaches from the “Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns,” where the authority of the classics was disputed but classical and timeless models were still sustainable, to the historicization of the category of beauty in the romantic era, symbolized by a semantic shift where the concept of the modern increasingly came to signify the value of immediacy and the modern moment.<sup>207</sup> That is, critics and writers start making allowances for separate and autonomous worldviews and sets of values and to be modern involved, much like the painter of modern life and the flâneur, mastering the intricate code of modernity, in addition to the historical imperative of marking a

The tradition put forward by Calinescu in order to illustrate the above concept of modernity emphasizes figures such as Stendhal and Baudelaire, authors who, while perhaps aesthetes in some sense, were deeply involved in the melting pot of the new urban life and, perhaps because they were not isolated by privilege, demonstrated an affinity for existential structures and life experiences that had not previously been considered suitable for artistic expression. For Jürgen Habermas, it is indeed in the work of the latter that “the spirit and discipline of aesthetic modernity assumed clear contours.”<sup>208</sup> Both accentuate the “negativity” of literary modernity and its aesthetic rejection of what Habermas terms “the organizational cores” of modern life, namely the capitalist enterprise and the bureaucratic state apparatus.<sup>209</sup>

Indeed, Habermas discusses the rupture between aesthetic and societal modernization, and points to art’s “anarchistic intention of blowing up the continuum of history”.<sup>210</sup> For Habermas, aesthetic modernity is located in a moment of resounding refusal, while still holding on to the promise of creative destruction. Aesthetic modernity addresses the contradictions of an anarchistic subjectivity, refusing to be molded by history and tradition, that finds itself embedded in a hostile historical moment, simultaneously self-marginalizing and riven by the desire to overcome marginalization and to reinvent history and reintegrate itself into a (now altered) version of a historical consciousness on the basis of a new canon/new society/new relationship between art and life. The

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new historical moment through the rejection of history. Calinescu, *The Five Faces of Modernity*, pp. 35–58. Baudelaire and his influential conception of modernity are discussed below.

<sup>208</sup> Jürgen Habermas. “Modernity – An Incomplete Project.” Trans. Seila Ben-Habib. *Postmodern Culture*. Ed. by Hal Foster. London: Pluto Press, 1985, p. 5.

<sup>209</sup> Jürgen Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Trans. by Frederick Lawrence. London and Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990, p. 1.

<sup>210</sup> Jürgen Habermas. “Modernity – An Incomplete Project,” p. 5.

latter movement indicates that the desire to explode the continuum of history still remains very much a historical act, selective destruction in a sense, and it is through this double movement of rejection and affirmation that Habermas envisions the possibility of overcoming the ruptures that divide the three domains of specialized knowledge from everyday life in modernity.<sup>211</sup>

From under the sway of traditional authority, be it the material force of the aristocracy, the conceptual tenants of religious orthodoxy or, as mentioned, the veneration of classical artistic techniques, Calinescu and Habermas see a break with tradition running across literature and modern social formations.<sup>212</sup>

There are those however who disagree with such a stance. Someone might for example want to point to Emile Zola rather than Baudelaire, noting that a novel such as *Au Bonheur des Dames* (The Ladies' Paradise, 1873), with its thematization of the rise of urban consumer society through the depiction of the world's first department store stands in a close relationship to modernity.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Habermas uses the distinction between three value spheres — scientific-technical, moral-legal, and aesthetic-cultural — to explain both how specialized knowledge has developed from earlier periods in history, and how specialized knowledge has achieved autonomy in modernity; said autonomy is necessary to an extent but has also led to a rift between these branches of knowledge and the lifeworld. These distinctive realms or “spheres” derive from Kant — one can even go back to the Ancient Greeks here — and his tripartite set of philosophical critiques of practical and moral reason and aesthetic judgment. Max Weber is intermediary here from whom Habermas gets the conceptual apparatus directly.

<sup>212</sup> Habermas however retreats from a firm commitment to the understanding of the shared identity and communal affinities between modernity and modernism in a fivefold move that involves historicizing the notion of the modern, positing the failure of the modernist paradigm as a fact, noting the weakness of modernist resurgence and implicitly, asking why modernity only gets represented “properly” during literary states of exception, and positing a moment of realism and lack of “artifice” as the healing gesture that can recuperate the division between value spheres and thus confirm the value of the aesthetic. See his “Modernity – An Incomplete Project.”

<sup>213</sup> Zola's novel also deals with the effects of industrialization and mass production, the tumultuous historical event when women entered the public sphere as consumers, and a host of other subjects closely related to the social upheavals of the nineteenth century. For a discussion of the cultural ramifications of the department store, see Erika D Rappaport. “‘A New Era of Shopping’: The Promotion of Women's Pleasure in London's West End, 1909-1914.” *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*. Ed. by Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995. Important, as well, is Walter Benjamin's excavation of a “past modernity” in his *Arcades Project*, where he looks in particular at the Parisian shopping arcades.

That is, the mode of realism is quite naturally a participant in the literary discourse of modernity. In his book, *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx has, for example, traced the manner in which the American realist tradition incorporated and thematized the tumultuous inroads of the industrial revolution.

Reading Nathaniel Hawthorn's diaries, Marx pauses during a moment in the text where Hawthorne describes the pastoral quiet being riven by the sudden noise of a locomotive, symbol of the new industrial power of the United States and associated with fire, smoke, speed, iron and clamor. The unwelcome interruption, Marx points out, is indicative of how the "ominous sounds of machines, like the sound of the steamboat bearing down on the raft [in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*] or of the train breaking in upon the idyll at Walden, reverberate endlessly in [American] literature."<sup>214</sup>

Marx goes on to trace the critical and disharmonious representations of industrialization back to the English Romantic poets, Wordsworth and Blake in particular, and then, offering a somewhat more abstract view of the conflict between natural idyll and urbanization, he follows some of the basic thematics in question back to Roman poets of the pastoral mode, such as Virgil. However, what distinguishes the literature of modernity and its relationship to technological change from all previous articulations of developmental problematics and conflicts between different modes of existence is the nature of the interruption in Hawthorne's diary and what the interruption in fact entails:

True, it may be said that agents of urban power had been ravaging the countryside throughout recorded history. After they had withdrawn, however, the character of rural life had remained essentially unchanged. But here the case is different: the distinctive attribute of the new order is its

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<sup>214</sup> Leo Marx. *The Machine in the Garden. Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 15-16.

technological power, a power that does not remain confined to the traditional boundaries of the city. It is a centrifugal force that threatens to break down, once and for all, the conventional contrast between these two styles of life.<sup>215</sup>

Marx is not primarily interested in the formal methods employed to register the modern experience (in the sense of privileging formal experimentation and defamiliarization on the linguistic level). The structure, valence and connotations of the textual engagement are important but primarily in terms of how, for example, the conceptual register of something so straightforward as “smoke” can be played with and activated in order to accentuate the contrast between the hearth and the steam engine.

In other words, representing the changes implicit in industrial modernity is a task that depends on the resituating and reinscription of literary conventions, rather than their deconstruction or manufactured breakdown. Ultimately, it is the brute force of technology that for Marx distinguishes between literary depictions of temporal change prior to and then anterior to the industrial revolution, that is, he registers modernity as a thematic function in literature, more precisely as the “pressure of change” and suggestive of a rift with the past in the sense that what the present “intends” as an inheritance for the future (the past and its traditions) will be destroyed by way of the wanton use of technology.<sup>216</sup>

Negativity certainly seems to be the order of the day; Calinescu and Habermas basically agreeing on what the former famously termed “the two

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<sup>215</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, p. 32.

<sup>216</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, p. 24. The authors discussed by Leo Marx include J.F. Cooper, Mark Twain, Henry Thoreau, Hermann Melville, Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, Robert Frost, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck and many others.



modernities” — a rift between societal and aesthetic modernity.<sup>217</sup> Marx discussing, if in a very particular context, the loss of stability in modernity, falls within the same basic parameters. The last perspective that I want to bring into the *mélange*, and I am aware that this might look like a deliberate attempt to outdo what has come before, is that of “consummate negativity,” as put forward by Theodor Adorno, and then very briefly consider how he and his fellow Frankfurter, Max Horkheimer, viewed certain cultural products as facilitating in the liquidation of subjectivity in modernity. Some readers will no doubt be quick to dismiss this notion of “consummate negativity” as yet another instance of Adorno’s endless wanderings down closed-off cul-de-sacs; the answer for him and the Frankfurt School is always the same, these readers might continue, all is lost, modernity is a fallen place of cultural kitsch, institutional violence and systematic disenfranchisement where the interiority of the individual is mercilessly brutalized by the capitalist nightmare all around.<sup>218</sup>

While the individual is indeed brutalized by the capitalist nightmare that surrounds us, according to Adorno, that is only half the truth. In that same passage, Adorno explains:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives

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<sup>217</sup> This is how Calinescu articulates the conflicted modernities: “It is impossible to say precisely when one can begin to speak of the existence of two distinct and bitterly conflicting modernities. What is certain is that at some point during the first half of the nineteenth century an irreversible split occurred between modernity as a stage in the history of civilization — a product of scientific and technological progress, of the industrial revolution, of the sweeping economic and social changes brought about by capitalism — and modernity as an aesthetic concept. Since then, the relations between the two modernities have been irreducibly hostile”. Calinescu, *The Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 41.

<sup>218</sup> Seyla Benhabib notes that for Adorno and Horkheimer “administrative and political domination extends into all spheres of social life.” “Modernity and the Aporias of Critical Theory.” *The Frankfurt School. Critical Assessments. Volume 1*. Ed. by Jay Bernstein. London and New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 118.

must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from the felt contact with its objects — this alone is the task of thought.<sup>219</sup>

The first sentence perfectly encapsulates what it is about Adorno that infuriates analytical philosophers. However, the “despair” invoked is not so much the only, or even the most useful response to a certainty that reason and rationality are, in their deepest and most secret and powerful core, fatally flawed, but rather the only stance allowed to thought after the Holocaust. As Andrew Bowie points out, no other major philosophical figure in the latter half of the twentieth century placed the Holocaust at the center of his or her philosophical project in the same way that Adorno did.<sup>220</sup> This is one of the reasons that Adorno’s work will prove immensely fruitful as we move away from Laxness’ period of ebullience in the prospects of modernity to a radical, indeed despairing confrontation with what he had come to believe undermined its enlightened potential.

We should also note that in its essence, the sentiments expressed above are profoundly positive. The determination to strive for a view of the world, as it will present itself, one day, to “the messianic light” means that values remain, there are still metaphysics, but they are now negative. But again, this is not a pessimistic admission, on the contrary, it is what is left to us after the shipwreck of modernity, but if one keeps in mind, as Adorno does, that “consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite,” then there is indeed an avenue open for thought to retain the concept of beauty,

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<sup>219</sup> Theodor Adorno. *Minima Moralia. Reflections From a Damaged Life*. Trans. by E. Jephcott. London: Verso, 2000, p. 247.

<sup>220</sup> Andrew Bowie. *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2013, pp. 16–19.

as well as other values in a post–Auschwitz world.<sup>221</sup> For a closing sentiment, this being the last page of *Minima Moralia*, Adorno cannot be faulted for despair or promoting hopelessness, and, indeed, it is tempting to think that what we have just read points to what might be the Frankfurt School version of “the gay science” — Nietzsche’s pathway to loving life.

Furthermore, negativity is what allows a work of art to speak meaningfully and truthfully to modernity, or so contends Adorno with his working partner Max Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. For them, Frank Capra’s Christmas classic, *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946), would be infinitely more insidious and damaging to a subject’s interiority than the infamous excretions of the diseased mind known as the Marquis de Sade; the pervert–demon and degenerate sadist responsible for *Les 120 journées de Sodome* (Salo: 120 Days of Sodom, 1787/1904) and *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (Philosophy of the Bedroom, 1795), among others.

Why would that be? Precisely because its loathsome negativity, Adorno and Horkheimer would say reveals the world as “indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light.” The idealized pastoral idyll of Bedford Falls is the truly loathsome representation in this scenario, put forward by the premier apologists for the atrocities of modernity, the American culture industry: “The dark writers of the bourgeoisie, unlike its apologists, did not seek to avert the consequences of the Enlightenment with harmonistic doctrines. They did not pretend that formalistic reason had a closer affinity to morality than to immorality,” Adorno and Horkheimer note, indicating an extreme version

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<sup>221</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 247.

of the view that realism, willingly or not, cooperates with power and domination. It is the “light-bringing writers,” they continue, those who march in lockstep with dominant morality and adhere to social regulations that disguise the truth of the “indissoluble alliance of reason and atrocity, bourgeoisie society and power, by denying that alliance, the bearers of darker messages pitilessly expressed the shocking truth.”<sup>222</sup>

There is a scene late in Austrian director Michael Haneke’s film *Funny Games* (1997) that shows the family–father at last getting to a shot–gun and killing one of the two men who at the start film orchestrate a home invasion, the progression of which revolves around sadism and torture and is extremely disturbing; the family son being killed in one scene. Then something unexpected happens, the surviving invader gets a remote control, looks at the camera and speaks to the audience. This is what you were hoping would happen, isn’t it? Well, not so quick. Then he uses the remote to rewind the film we have been watching, and in which he is a participant, to the time just before the shotgun is found and makes sure it is unavailable to the father. Then the film proceeds and the entire family is killed. Adorno and Horkheimer, in spite of not being favourably disposed towards movies, might just approve of Haneke, and not just because of the modernist touches but because the film comments on how Hollywood narrative conventions have conditioned audiences to expect film protagonists to survive and villains to get their just comeuppance. The reality, however, is that bourgeoisie power has chosen to create a society of such enormous economic injustice, inequality, social problems, and ghettoization of a

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<sup>222</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 92.

large proportion of its populace that violent crime is certain to occur with great frequency. The system is built to facilitate the wiping out of the family in the movie, in other words, not their rescue, and this Haneke dares to show.

It is not that positives are deliberately being excluded, and we will as a matter of fact address the foremost spokesperson for the project of modernity as being far from lost, the aforementioned Jürgen Habermas, when we address the content and history of the concept in greater detail. But it should be reiterated that the “consummate negativity” of *Minima Moralia* has its counterpart in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as well, which is in its essence also a positive, hopeful, activist work. After explaining how Enlightenment thinking must start to reflect on itself, the fate of everything rests on things not continuing as they have, the authors conclude with the following statement: “What is at stake is not conservation of the past but the fulfillment of past hopes.”<sup>223</sup>

This limber dance along the precipice of hope and despair corresponds in suggestive ways with the trajectory of Laxness’ career. True believer to begin with, he came to doubt not only the Western, capitalistic drive for world domination, as any good Communist would be expected to, but the entire project of the civilized twentieth-century.

### 1.3 Writing (About) Modernity

There is yet another way in which the figure of the barometer, employed at the beginning of the chapter to indicate Laxness’ sensitivity to shifts and changes in his cultural milieu, outlines aspects of Laxness’ career. Anyone who has seen a

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<sup>223</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xvii.

working barometer in Iceland knows how quickly its signifying function changes, a fact having to do with its status as an index of weather patterns in a notoriously unpredictable island climate. Laxness himself, of course, is the apprentice monk who became a revolutionary socialist, the hopeful Hollywood screenwriter who came to detest the culture industry, the early modernist who became a leading proponent of epic realism, the youthful writer who rejected the authority of the literary heritage only to be granted the highest possible literary honor, the Nobel prize, for reviving the tradition of the saga in modern times. These (multiple) metamorphoses are inherently related to his engagement with the modern. Indeed, beyond the twists and turns of a long and productive career, the many breaks and readjustments, one can glimpse a number of preoccupations and consistent patterns in his work and among these perhaps none are more important than Laxness' sustained reflection on the possibility of *writing* to render the experience of modernity in aesthetic terms; the mode of the aesthetic here understood to involve a philosophical and political dimension as well as a strictly literary one.<sup>224</sup>

Within such a framework, Laxness' early experiments with form, as well as his remarkable late return to modernism, are obviously of interest when his relationship to modernity is discussed, indeed, the activation of the revolutionary formal awareness of the avant-gardes and modernism is in many

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<sup>224</sup> Anthony J. Cascardi maintains that one of the central problems of modernity studies is a tendency for theoretical approaches and constructions to focus on sharply delineated registers or cultural spheres; for instance the philosophical discourse of modernity, but then leaving unattended the enormous complexities that arise on the ground, so to speak, of material historical reality and, conversely, that historians tend to disregard the almost foundational importance of discursive practices. Cascardi's point is in my opinion valuable, and the conceptual aporia that he identifies is navigated and hopefully transcended in what follows. *The Subject of Modernity*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 1-16.

instances a particularly vital example of the process of posing questions about modernity in the register of the aesthetic.

The perspective on Icelandic literary history put forward by Hallberg in his study of Laxness, where a literary system is largely out of touch with contemporaneous international practice, and is rejuvenated by the influx of new currents in the work of young authors, primarily Laxness but also Þórbergur Þórðarson, has been developed further, with particular attention being paid to the status of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* as representing the “birth” of modernism in Iceland.<sup>225</sup>

Thus, the relationship between Laxness’ breakthrough novel and modernism is the subject of Halldór Guðmundsson’s study, *“Loksins, loksins”*: *Vefarinn mikli og upphaf íslenskra nútímabókmennta* (At last, at last: The Great Weaver and the beginning of modern Icelandic literature, 1987). While broad in scope and to a degree remarkably multifaced, the study’s central argument is narrowly focused on the claim that Laxness’ novel marks the occasion of a literary paradigm shift: “*The Great Weaver* exploded the late–naturalistic novel, the literary tradition, dominant ideology, accepted notions of self–understanding and self–consciousness,” in such a decisive fashion that “a new era had begun in Icelandic literary history”.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Modernism as a category was not in common usage when Hallberg wrote his two volume study, and as has already been touched on, he was for various reasons hesitant to associate *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* to closely with the continental art movements. It is only later that the term starts to be applied to Laxness’ novel and early poetry.

<sup>226</sup> Guðmundsson, *“Loksins, loksins”*, p. 208, 7. In the original: “*Vefarinn mikli* sprengdi hina síðarnatúralísku [sic] skáldsögu, bókmenntahefðina, ríkjandi hugmyndafræði, viðtekna hugmyndir um sjálfsskilning og sjálfsvitund”. Then: “Hafi einhverjir lesendur *Bréfs til Láru* verið í vafa um að nýtt tímabil væri hafið í íslenskri bókmenntasögu hvarf þeim sá vafi með útkomu *Vefarans mikla frá Kasmír* röskum tveimur árum síðar.”

The title of Guðmundsson's study is aptly chosen in the context of his argument. "Loksins, loksins" is a reference to the famous opening of Kristján Albertsson's review of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, which appeared in *Vaka*, the same journal that would a year later publish Sigurður Nordal's article discussed above. In the review, which was enthusiastic but not uncritical, the influential editor and cultural commentator asserts that the novel's originality and freshness constitute a rupture of sorts in Icelandic literature, it: "rises like a cliffrock above the mundane flatness of contemporary Icelandic poetry and fiction".<sup>227</sup> It is important to note that Albertsson's comment functions equally as a condemnation of the contemporary literary situation as it does as a compliment to Laxness, and the signification of the rupture, while connected to the notion of innovation, is not clearly formulated as a *formal breakthrough*.

The novel, which takes place in the aftermath of World War I, tells of Steinn Elliði, a talented poet and a sensitive, supremely intelligent young man, and his doomed love affair with Diljá, the companion of his youth. Despite being the scion of a wealthy corporate clan, Steinn is critical of his bourgeoisie environment and the capitalistic order, and initially assumes that art represents the transcendental realm, offering the only way to a meaningful existence. Nevertheless, Steinn finds no respite, his search for the "truth" or some totalizing way of making sense of the world propels him ever onward. He passes through various stages, represented by extended discursive engagements, at times in the

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<sup>227</sup> The opening paragraph of the review is as follows: "Loksins, loksins, tilkomumikið skáldverk, sem rís eins og hamraborg upp úr flatneskju íslenskra ljóða- og sagnagerðar síðustu ára!". Kristján Albertsson. [ritdómur um *Vefarinn mikla frá Kasmír*]. *Vaka*, 1927, p. 306. In retrospect, the review stands as something of a watershed moment in Laxness' career. Although the majority of those who discussed the novel publicly did not share Albertsson's enthusiasm, his review, along with the general controversy engendered by the work, did much to place Laxness at the center of the contemporary literary situation.



form of monologues, concerned with philosophical, religious, moral and political conundrums. At the end, he rejects both the claims of the aesthetic and his love for Diljá when he enters a monastery.

In what was an unusual gesture at the time, not one but two reviews appeared in *Vaka* that year, suggesting severe disagreement among the editors. Albertsson, as we have seen, wrote a positive review but his colleague on the editorial board, Guðmundur Finnbogason, director of the National library and former professor of psychology at the University of Iceland, disagreed strongly. In the following issue he wrote an almost equally well-known, if much briefer, commentary on the novel. The review comes to two words with an additional (and omitted here) bibliographical reference: “Vjelstrokkað tilberasmjör.”<sup>228</sup> Not easily translatable, “tilberasmjör” associates butter (smjör) with a leach-like supernatural creature (tilberi) out of folk tales and rural superstition. The concept thus denotes butter made from cream, which has been stolen by a creature summoned forth for that purpose by a woman using magic. Qualifying the nature of the butter with “vjelstrokkað,” meaning that the butter was prepared with a machine, Finnbogason suggests a non-organic domain of production. Extrapolating from the connotations around the notion of mechanization, Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson summarizes Finnbogason’s view of the novel quite nicely, saying that for him it represented “a modern mechanical monstrosity.”<sup>229</sup>

In his review Finnbogason implies that Laxness’s work is neither original nor authentic, that it has in fact come into existence through “borrowings,” that,

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<sup>228</sup> Guðmundur Finnbogason. “Ritdómur um *Vefarann mikla frá Kasmír*.” *Vaka*, 3/1927.

<sup>229</sup> Jóhannsson, “Realism and Revolt,” p. 373.

essentially, the work owes its constitutive parts to literary sources outside the text and outside of its proper “existential” domain (in the sense that the *tilberi* must be sent onto *another’s* property, which in addition to thievery represents a spatial transgression). In this sense, Laxness’ novel is posited as unnatural, even dangerous, and Finnbogason indicates that, through its affinity with modernity and technology, *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* epitomizes automated ease rather than aesthetic diligence and hard work.

Furthermore, as the work of preparing the butter was a traditional female occupation, and since there was assumed to be a connection between *tilberi* and the female (it was always summoned by a woman), Finnbogason could be seen as linking the author with traits characteristically associated with the feminine, such as being susceptible to fashions, ornamentation and foreign trends, for instance, which would also be an indirect commentary on literary “fads” from abroad, as well as subtly contributing to the debate swirling around the novel and its brief thematization of homosexuality. Finnbogason’s condensed connotative scheme is reminiscent of Nordal’s “junk-shop” metaphor in that for both a harmonious engagement with the past functions as artistic criteria, and his dismissal of the work is stressed at the level of form by the extreme brevity of the review.

If Albertsson associates the novel quite explicitly with renewal in the aesthetic sphere, and thus indirectly to modernism, Finnbogason evokes that other but related domain, modernity, to frame his visceral dislike of the work. For him, *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* seems to represent a forceful opposition to the

organic, traditional, rural and national model for literature that also represents something of an ideal for Nordal.

Guðmundsson's book would appear to align itself quite clearly with the thrust of Albertsson's review, not only is the opening of the review quoted in the title but the whole notion of a "rupture" and a new "dawning" in Icelandic literature brings the two authors together in their appreciation of Laxness' work. In what follows, however, I will argue, in what may appear as something of a reversal, that Guðmundsson is more successful in situating *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* in a coherent relationship with the discourses swirling around Finnbogason's dismissive assessment, modernity in other words, than he is in arguing for the novel's status as a modernist breakthrough.

In light of Guðmundsson's thesis, it is somewhat surprising how rarely his claims for *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*'s status as a modernist work are based on close analysis of the formal features of the text, features that would designate Laxness' novel as a departure from normative standards. While mentioning the inclusion of different literary genres and the use made of surrealism, Guðmundsson does contend that *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* represents something "completely new" in Icelandic literature but in general he doesn't seem to think much of the novel as a formal breakthrough, writing that "it is easy to argue that *Vefarinn mikli* is flawed when it comes to form" and describing its overall effect as "formlessness" in the sense of a haphazard or slapdash mixture of incompatibles.<sup>230</sup> These comments are accompanied by a quote drawn from

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<sup>230</sup> Guðmundsson, "Loksins, loksins," pp. 198, 195, 198. In the original: "Bókin var eitthvað algerlega nýtt í íslenskum bókmenntum". "Auðvelt er að rökstyðja að form *Vefarans* mikla er

Laxness' own somewhat dismissive later comments about the book where he, among other things, describes it as being largely a realist work. "But this does not mean that the novel's form is totally meaningless," Guðmundsson adds.<sup>231</sup>

To some extent, Guðmundsson is engaging in a conversation with earlier Laxness critic Helena Kadecková who in her doctoral dissertation argues for an emerging modernism in Icelandic literature in the works of Laxness, Þórðarson and Nordal, a modernism which did not however come to full flowering until in the post-war era. What is particularly notable, however, about Kadecková's position is her claim that the cohabitation of different narrative strategies in Laxness' novel is indicative of a structural flaw in a novel that essentially *intends* to remain within the boundaries of normative novelistic discourse, but occasionally veers off course, thus marking it as a failed "realist" work.<sup>232</sup> Guðmundsson quotes her findings, without perhaps duly noting the contradiction that thus lodges itself into his own research program if, indeed, he accepts the claim that not only is *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír's* most notable formal characteristic the fact that it's form is "flawed" (even if that doesn't render the book "totally meaningless") but also that the novel is essentially, "in its base," a realist work.<sup>233</sup>

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gallað". (The error in italicization is in the original). "Heildarform *Vefarans mikla* er vissulega hálfgerð formleysa".

<sup>231</sup> Guðmundsson, "*Loksins, loksins*," p. 195. In the original: "En það þýðir ekki að form verksins sé tóm markleysa."

<sup>232</sup> Helena Kadecková. "Upphaf íslenzkra nútímabókmennta." *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 2/1971, p. 118. Guðmundsson, "*Loksins, loksins*," p. 91.

<sup>233</sup> Guðmundsson, "*Loksins, loksins*," p. 195. "Það er líka deginum ljósara að undirstaða *Vefarans*, 'basinn', er raunsæisskaldsaga með nokkurnegin eingilsaxnesku sniði". Laxness is being quoted from *Seiseijú, mikil ósköp*. Ástráður Eysteinnsson has countered this hermeneutic approach, maintaining that rather than being evidence of failure, the novel's "unruly" nature, the fact that it incorporates realism but at the same time refuses to succumb to traditional modes, how, in other words, Laxness compels the discourse of realism to function in an unfamiliar context, thus

At stake, at least initially, is a somewhat fuzzy use of concepts, exemplified by the reference to *nútímabókmenntir* (modern literature) in the subtitle of Guðmundsson's book. There are at first glance few rationales for employing the notion of *nútímabókmenntir* as either a substitute or an umbrella concept for modernism in Icelandic. The fact that Guðmundsson nevertheless maintains that his notion of "modern literature" is to be understood in the context of, or even as a particular brand of, "early modernism" can therefore seem somewhat startling. Here the influence of Hallberg is, I think, of some importance. Disinclined to employ a heavily conceptual vocabulary, and working before *modernism* became a common conceptual tool, Hallberg described the textual valences of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* as "completely contemporary," "bearing the mark of the present," and being "international in nature," exemplifying "new-fangled stylistics," being "psychologically contradictory," emblematic of "high-strung emotions," and as "capturing the color spectrum and the frantic rhythm of the present;" the novel is "revolutionary" and "iconoclastic" in the "fiery spirit of youth".<sup>234</sup>

Hallberg's descriptive range encapsulates in many respects what would later be termed modernism, and the closest he himself comes to categorizing his list of descriptive affinities between the novel and the modern is when he uses the notion of "nútímastefna" (modern movement).<sup>235</sup> It is thus possible that Hallberg's emphasis on the novel's radical "presentness," its "contemporariness,"

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denaturalizing its validity claims, best exemplifies the novel's modernist status and constitutes the ground of its destabilizing force. See "Fyrsta nútímaskáldsagan og módernisminn."

<sup>234</sup> Hallberg, *Vefarinn mikli* II, pp. 44, 51, 131, 134, 151, 153, 223. In Icelandic the quotes read: "stæði að öllu leyti rótum í samtíðinni og bæri mark hennar," "alþjóðlegt eðli hennar og nýttízkuleg stílbrogð," "ósamræmi sálarlífsins," "háspennt geðshræring," "hinn hrjúfi litur og ofsafengni hrynjandi samtímans," "óbeizlaðir," "myndbrotamaður," "eldmóður æskunnar".

<sup>235</sup> Hallberg, *Vefarinn mikli* II, p. 193. In the Icelandic translation, the phrase used is "nútímastefna".

may be in the background of Guðmundsson's use of *nútímabókmenntir* to reference a literary mode or sensibility particularly concerned with modernity and its effects and symptoms.

In "*Loksins, loksins*", the notion of "turn-of-the-century modernism" points towards a moment characterized by new representational strategies of subjectivity, and the author references the *fin de siècle* as being indicative of the broad literary historical contours he wishes to delineate.<sup>236</sup> In Guðmundsson's depiction, this moment of incipient modernism stands separated from modernism "proper" by the First World War and the shock of the Russian revolution. Nonetheless, the epoch in question is deeply enmeshed in the societal upheavals associated with modernity and a new urban culture.

Guðmundsson posits a brutally abbreviated period, one that, perhaps, stands as the last moment of an uncompleted modernity, demanding, and harvesting, a literary expression suited to a particular temporal logic. The artist, reacting to a new sense of freedom that can also be read as social marginalization, becomes a seer and a critic constructing a modernity separated from the middle class; artistic discourse in a sense withdrawing into its own autonomy. An expansive interiority, shaped by the spirit of psychoanalysis and the will to power, is constructed to compensate for an obscure social role, and an all-encompassing subjectivity comes to supersede the world in importance:

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<sup>236</sup> Guðmundsson, "*Loksins, loksins*," pp. 15–16, 137–161.

“Their reaction to a crisis of values is to make their subjectivity the origin of all values,” Guðmundsson notes.<sup>237</sup>

Describing the aesthetic revolt of the 1890s that forms the background of Guðmundsson’s study, albeit in a more localized context, Susan Brantly identifies the new emphasis on subjective, symbolic expression, and the evocation of psychological states through the use of dreams and hallucinations, as an important step away from the realist prose of the preceding decade.<sup>238</sup> The literary landscape of *sekelskiftet* (turn-of-the-century), as it was called in Sweden, is precisely what Guðmundsson aims to capture in a more pan-European fashion with his notion of “turn-of-the-century modernism.” The picture he subsequently offers is in some ways familiar as the literary sources he relies on — Strindberg, Papini, and Weininger — were also discussed by Hallberg, as was the matter of how they “influenced” Laxness. Hallberg, however, employs his list of influences to explicate certain textual strands found in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, while Guðmundsson uses them to mark a moment when the intense formal radicalization of literature, music and painting was underway, but not yet widely disseminated in terms of movements and practice, and representative works were still largely absent.

Positively, Guðmundsson brings a strong interpretation of Laxness’ work to the table but, and this cannot be overlooked, the fact that his gesture is dependent on such a very limited range of authors, who still lack a clearly defined commonality, and that it overlooks so much (Weininger’s brand of

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<sup>237</sup> Guðmundsson, “*Loksins, loksins*,” p. 160. In the original: “Þeir bregðast við gildiskreppu með því að gera sjálf sitt að uppsprettur allra gilda”.

<sup>238</sup> Susan Brantly. “Into the Twentieth Century: 1890–1950.” *A History of Swedish Literature*. Ed. by Lars G. Warne. Lincoln & London: The University of Nebraska Press, 1996, pp. 241–273.

misogyny needs to be contrasted with figures of the “New Woman,” the supposed political apathy of *some* turn-of-the-century writers needs to be addressed in the context of, for example, the modernism of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and the “martyrdom” of Wilde), makes his argument falter at precisely the point when his conception of emerging modernism should come into focus.

That the European literary landscape referenced by Guðmundsson remains only vaguely articulated in terms of wider practice results in the weakening of his concept of early modernism, and the fact that his literary model encompasses only two properly proto-modernist figures, Strindberg and Papini, along with brief asides concerning a few more, tempts one to conclude that the notion might simply represent the overdetermination of particular moments of Laxness’ eclectic reading list, rather than being indicative of an actually existing paradigm. This is not to say that the literary current Guðmundsson identifies is not significant in the development of modernism. The turn-of-the-century works of Strindberg and Hamsun were central contributions, but rather that he fails to account for it as cohesive practice beyond a random sampling of deterritorialized writers whose affinity with one another seems to be, primarily, that they were read by a particular Icelandic author.<sup>239</sup>

Addressing the relationship between *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* and the solipsistic or subjective “modernism” that provides the novel with its models, Guðmundsson maintains that not only does Laxness decisively neutralize “late

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<sup>239</sup> A preliminary move, when discussing the protomodernists, is to account for national context. See Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, pp. 99–105.



naturalism”<sup>240</sup> as a dominant mode of literary discourse in Iceland, as did the early modernists in the capitals of Europe, but that the novel also represents “a step out of the subjectivism of the new literary perception”.<sup>241</sup> Laxness’ novel thus simultaneously imports a “new” literary sensibility aligned with turn-of-the-century modulations in progressive circles and abandons it.

This double movement of importation and overcoming is underpinned by another retroactive gesture. Speaking of the main female character in the novel, Diljá, and her relationship to the central character and the novel’s dominant consciousness, Steinn Elliði, Guðmundsson observes: “Diljá alone is endowed with the intuition to see through him [Steinn Elliði]. Repeatedly, her innocent questions and comments puncture his talk balloons [...] The author created Diljá in order to be able to employ a humanistic measure to evaluate the overgrown ego-monster of the turn-of-the-century.”<sup>242</sup> Not only is Laxness, in this account, employing a stock portrait of femininity, aligned with innocence, the irrational and nature, he is also harking back to a position deriving from early nineteenth century reactions to Kant’s decisive delimitation of reason, namely that the path

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<sup>240</sup> Guðmundsson frequently references “late-naturalism,” and posits it as being made redundant by the early modernists. One might argue, as Toril Moi does, that the characteristics thus culled and articulated by Guðmundsson seem to bear a stronger relation to idealism than naturalism. See Toril Moi. *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism. Art, Theater, Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 67–105.

<sup>241</sup> Guðmundsson, “*Loksins, loksins*,” p. 195. In the original: “Þetta þýðir að *Vefarinn mikli* er (ásamt *Bréfi til Láru*) í senn afdráttarlausasta tjáning huglæga uppreisnarandans sem gerði útaf við síðnatúralismann í sagnaskáldskap, og skref út úr sjálfhverfu hins nýja bókmenntaskilnings.” The last word in the quote, “bókmenntaskilningur,” would initially seem to be correctly translated as “literary understanding” but in the context of Guðmundsson’s larger argument, it seems evident that what is at stake is self-understanding modulated by a particular historical situation, a form of perception dependent on an external referent, more so than any form of abstract understanding divorced from circumstance.

<sup>242</sup> Guðmundsson, “*Loksins, loksins*,” pp. 191, 193. In the original: “Diljá ein býr yfir því innsæi að sjá í gegnum hann. Hvað eftir annað stingur hún á hans stóru talblöðrum með saklausum spurningum eða athugasemdum, svo við blasa frasar án jarðbundins eða manneskjulegs inntaks.” “Höfundurinn hefur skapað Diljá til að leggja mælikvarða hins mannlega á ofvaxið ég-skrímli aldamótatímans.”

to true enlightenment is to be found by short circuiting the processes of reason through intuition, unmediated experience, emotions and inspiration.

The question thus becomes not only why Laxness should feel impelled to undermine the vehicle of his “revolutionary” contribution at the very moment he is supposedly employing its structures to revitalize Icelandic literature, along with the subsequent problem of why Laxness should have activated (then dismissed) a relatively outdated form of literary modernism when more recent, more explosive and controversial models were not only available but also constituted an important part of his own self-figuration, as well as the aesthetic debate in Iceland, but also why the modernizing impulse, in its critique of a less modern literary sensibility, should seek recourse in early romanticism.

These questions become all the more pressing when placed in context with the fact that the various avant-garde movements and modernist aesthetics formed a significant aspect of the discursive grounds of the novel’s reception and evaluation. It was furthermore in relation to these more radicalized methods of expression that the author positioned his work in interviews and journal pieces at the time of publication. Responding to these questions, and attempting to come closer to the main thrust of Guðmundsson’s argument, it is important to note that he draws a parallel between the fate of early modernism in Europe, which did not survive the war or was drastically changed by it, and its budding Icelandic variant. Doing so he also outlines a teleological narrative that not only encapsulates the fading away of turn-of-the-century modernism but also, and more importantly one might say for his argument, comes to depict Laxness’ “abandoning” his progressive experimentation as inevitable. While that will be

shown to be a problematic gesture, we will also note that a suggestive picture of Laxness' engagement with modernity emerges in the process.

The new form of artistic autonomy, manifested in subjectivity as well as a critical stance towards social and aesthetic norms and genteel bourgeois prosperity, comes into evidence in Icelandic literature the 1920s, Guðmundsson maintains, around the time when "revolutionary" energies are being transferred from the cause of independence to the cause of the class struggle. And it does so in the works of socially engaged authors. Indeed, the most progressive authors are the same ones who experiment with solipsistic modernism. The representative early modernist works are furthermore the same works that at the time were read as demanding revolutionary change (*Bréf til Láru* by Þórðarson is exemplary here). This represents a deviation from the historical model Guðmundsson himself depicts, where trailblazing egos wantonly journeying inwards come to flounder in the historical imperative of art's self-transcendence and rebirth into the class struggle. The disparity can perhaps be ascribed to the "time-lag" discussed above or taken to indicate that the autonomy of the new subjectivity in Icelandic letters was perhaps not as great as initially assumed.<sup>243</sup>

As a matter of fact, neither of these alternatives is what Guðmundsson has in mind. The collapse of the affinity between Guðmundsson's foreign models and the Icelandic modernism he is outlining is "collateral damage," willingly incurred in exchange for the possibility of representing early modernism as exhausted, a literary *cul de sac*, and Laxness' subsequent development as a social realist

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<sup>243</sup> Guðmundsson, "Loksins, loksins," p. 22-23.

inevitable. Being temporally removed from his models, Laxness is according to Guðmundsson not simply working in the register of early modernism, he is working through it, critically incorporating and interrogating its motifs and themes, and is therefore able to take the step discussed above that removes him from the subjectivism of his models and allows him to broaden his horizons: “Precisely because *Vefarinn mikli* was an explosion in Icelandic literature, and a reckoning with what motivated it in the first place, the turn-of-the-century modernism, the novel did not represent an avenue that the author could continue on.”<sup>244</sup>

Thus, in Guðmundsson’s interpretation, Laxness aims to demonstrate performatively the limits of a fully autonomous subject and an aesthetic removed from social reality, thereby opening an avenue to political engagement. “[T]he [first world] war and the [Russian] revolution” provide Steinn Elliði, the novel’s main character, with “a new paradigm for contemplating the future of western culture, a paradigm outside the self,” Guðmundsson writes, just as, these events demonstrated to real-life writers that that there “were things more terrible than the everyday,” and that “a way out of Europe’s cultural crisis” was to be found in the active struggle for social change.<sup>245</sup> It is thus not surprising that the struggle for “a just society” became Laxness’ new “paradigm” in his contemplation of the

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<sup>244</sup> Guðmundsson, “*Loksins, loksins*,” p. 201. In the original: “En einmitt vegna þess að *Vefarinn mikli* var sprenging á íslenskum bókmenntavettvangi, og uppgjör við eigið tilefni, aldamótamóðernismann, gat hann ekki markað neina braut sem höfundurinn gæti haldið áfram eftir.”

<sup>245</sup> Guðmundsson, “*Loksins, loksins*,” pp. 176, 22. In the original: “En stríðið og byltingin hafa gefið honum ný viðmið í hugsun um framtíð vestrænnar menningar, viðmið utan hans sjálfs.” “Fyrri heimsstyrjöldin og rússneska byltingin höfðu gengið af þessari heimssýn dauðri. Stríðið sýndi svo ekki varð um villst að til voru skelfilegri hlutir en hversdagslífið, og byltingin virtist boða leið út úr menningarkreppu Evrópu.”

future of culture.<sup>246</sup> The historical circumstances combining to render the world-view and untrammelled subjectivity of turn-of-the-century modernism outdated are thus in evidence at the textual level in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, which in turn is Laxness' method of representing to himself the need of their overcoming, which in turn is Laxness being swept up by the winds of history. "None of the authors could continue down this path. Halldór Laxness returned home and picked up the thread of the traditional Icelandic narrative".<sup>247</sup> Here, the affinity with Hallberg and his contention that with *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, Laxness had "sown his oats in the modern movement and gone as far as possible," is clear.

While construing the history of modernism as a series of increasingly "successful" and radical experiments, as, in a sense, a narrative movement from the manifestoes and the avant-gardes to the high modernist masterpieces, is itself problematically teleological gesture, it is difficult to subscribe to the notion that the "subjectivism" of Strindberg's *Inferno* and Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, two of Guðmundsson's examples, somehow represents a *cul de sac*, either in terms of the authors' career or the radicality of their mode of expression and handling of subjectivity, one moving on to *A Dream Play*, the other to *Ulysses*. Indeed, a troubling collapse of temporal and geographical distinctions occurs when Guðmundsson posits an affinity between a literary moment that in hindsight can be viewed as an important moment in the history of modernism, and one that essentially signals its own displacement. There is no controversy surrounding the fact that Laxness did indeed swerve away from the

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<sup>246</sup> Guðmundsson, "Loksins, loksins," p. 204. In the original: "Barátta alþýðufólks fyrir bættum kjörum og réttlátara samfélagi varð viðmið hennar [menningargagnrýni HKL]".

<sup>247</sup> Guðmundsson, "Loksins, loksins," p. 204. In the original: "Enginn höfundanna gat haldið áfram á þessari braut. Halldór Laxness sneri heim og tók upp þráð íslenskrar sagnahefðar."

aggressive cosmopolitanism and formal experimentation of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, and his earlier poetry, but the historical reasons for the refusal of the aesthetic option represented by modernism in Iceland during this period cannot be explained by the “emptying out” of the form itself.

There is however another narrative that emerges out of Guðmundsson’s research, namely the mapping of the modernization of Reykjavík and the development of a functional, domestically centered public sphere. As an urbanized culture slowly emerges and economic realities shift, a rift between traditional agrarian communities and new social formations becomes apparent. A professionalized intellectual class that had only recently come into being was well placed to respond to this polarization. Educated abroad in cosmopolitan centers, and taking up university positions upon their return, most members of this cultural “elite” nevertheless embraced the cause of cultural conservatism. The field of literary production is similarly characterized by a blend of hesitation and hostility in the face of the new.

Offering a panoramic view of the notable authors of the period, Guðmundsson paints a fairly dispiriting picture, the scale ranging from the virulently anti-modern (Jón Trausti) to the blandly naive (Einar Kvaran), with a fiercely argumentative privileging of the pastoral, not surprisingly inflected by a deep strain of anti-urbanism (Sigurjón Jónsson) as well as right wing hectoring (Jón Björnsson) making up a considerable portion of the rest. “A middle class society is coming into existence in Iceland, but writers and intellectuals still focused on the more or less imagined pleasures of farming communities,

desirous of the warmth of intimate, small-scale communal life.”<sup>248</sup> Guðmundsson contends that these ideological structures proved difficult to overcome and that a whole generation of authors really “had no idea of how to react” to modernity, except through rejection.<sup>249</sup>

Thus what Guðmundsson, essentially, is going after with his notion of *nútímabókmenntir* emerges. A new literary “form” is required to represent social reality that has undergone drastic change, and a contemporary literary scene that verges on the monolithic in its retrograde tendencies is in dire need of a shake-up. It was not until Icelandic literature had achieved the capacity to represent urban existence and a new international cultural situation that it could be called modern. This, above all, is what Þórðarson and Laxness accomplish. Their breakthrough and renewal is encapsulated in Hallberg’s notion of “capturing the color spectrum and the frantic rhythm of the present,” they position the novel as an “open form” capable of addressing the present and together they mounted a counter-attack on the cultural conservatism of the university intellectuals.<sup>250</sup>

The point however being that modernism as such is not an integral part of this revolution, which is partly ideological, partly generational, and when it comes to literary form, dependent on structures much wider than those commonly designated as modernism. Guðmundsson’s contention that Laxness, in his subsequent social realist novels, manages to do justice to Iceland’s new found

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<sup>248</sup> Guðmundsson, “*Loksins, loksins*,” p. 86. In the original: “Borgaralegt samfélag nútímans er að halda innreið sína á Íslandi, en rithöfundar sem menntamenn horfa aftur til meira eða minna ímyndaðrar sælu bændamenningarinnar, þrá hlýju hins nána og fámenna samlífs.”

<sup>249</sup> Guðmundsson, “*Loksins, loksins*,” p. 79. In the original: “enginn vissi glögg til hvaða ráða skyldi gripið í staðinn”

<sup>250</sup> Guðmundsson, “*Loksins, loksins*,” p. 206.

modernity quite well, suggests as much. What Guðmundsson presents in his book is a suggestive and wide-ranging account of textual modernity, the way in which a vision of the modern plays out in a cultural context initially hostile to precisely such imaginings.

To summarize, Guðmundsson suggests that Laxness' modernist work can be articulated and placed in a relationship with a variety of other textual strategies that interrogate the way in which subjectivity is mediated and positioned in modernity. Such interrogations, such *writing*, can take on many forms while being constrained by no single mode of representation or narrative formation. It would thus seem to follow from his work that it is important to resist the temptation to privilege Laxness' "modernist" period as standing somehow in a closer, more organic or more urgently dynamic relationship with the discourses of modernity than, for example, his realist novels.

If multiplicity of concepts that springs up just within the covers of one book (early modernism, modernism proper, turn-of-the-century modernism, modernity, etc.) is any indication, it truly is a jungle out there. And perhaps it is. Susan Stanford Friedman puts the problem well when she describes the terms "modern," "modernity" and "modernism" as constituting a critical Tower of Babel, "everyone keeps talking at the same time in a language without common meanings," she notes.<sup>251</sup> Scholarly work is at risk of dispersion and isolation in the cacophony of voices, Friedman suggests. On the other hand, however, she also points out that terms that resist consensual definition can prove "fertile

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<sup>251</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman. "Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of *Modern/Modernity/Modernism*." *Modernism/modernity*, 3/2001, p. 497.



terrain for interrogation,” creating new and exciting sites for critical examination.<sup>252</sup>

Friedman is certainly correct about the two discursive poles; considerable gaps can be found between schools of thought and individual theorists, as well as between disciplines and scholarly fields. This is particularly evident if one looks to the social sciences where, up until recently, the very notion “modernity” was, if not unknown, not a part of the accepted technical vocabulary (industrial society or capitalist society were employed instead).<sup>253</sup> Friedman is also correct in that, while the tension and what often seems to be a debate conducted at cross-purposes can be dispiriting, such “resistances” can also be fruitful, and conducive to further research. Nevertheless, the intention here is not to attempt to find a solution to the dilemma but rather to navigate a path through a conceptual maze in such a way as to make the critical vocabulary, as it is employed in the present case, coherent and identify signposts that are important in terms of the work of Halldór Laxness.

Therefore, if a cognitive mapping of Laxness’ textual worlds is impossible without getting to grips with the very concept of modernity, that same task brings forth a number of complexities involving definitional matters, methodological issues and problems involving the conceptual vocabulary that is employed, much as Friedman suggests. In an attempt to respond to these problems, therefore, the concept of modernity will be contextualized and “activated” within a historical, aesthetic and philosophical framework.

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<sup>252</sup> Friedman, “Definitional Excursions,” p. 497.

<sup>253</sup> Peter Wagner. *Modernity: Understanding the Present*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012, p. 13.

## ***2. The Times They Are A-Changin'***

Modernity is primarily a periodizing concept and is thus related to temporality and history. In his book on early melodrama and modernity, film historian Ben Singer offers a useful summary of some of the key aspects of modernization, that is, the historical process through which societies in some sense “arrive” in modernity.<sup>254</sup> Of these, the interrelated “events” of the industrial revolution and urbanization must count as among the most drastic shifts in social organization and the practice of everyday life, with full-scale migration from the provinces to cities, starting in the eighteenth century, reaching full velocity in the nineteenth.<sup>255</sup> In addition to being emblematic of how traditional ways of life shifted in modernity, these are also dramatic manifestations of the enormously complex but far-reaching effects of the rise of capitalism and its development into a smooth and self-sustaining system of consumerism and commodity culture, a process that according to Colin Campell became an economic mainstay in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but manifested itself most clearly from the 1920s onwards.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Ben Singer. *Modernity and Melodrama. Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, pp. 17–37.

<sup>255</sup> Singer, pp. 20–22; James Harvey. *The Urban Experience*. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

<sup>256</sup> Colin Campell. *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Consumption*. Oxford & New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987, pp. 7–40. Guy Debord argues that the society of the spectacle emerged in the 1920s and Jean-François Lyotard posits that the cultural aspect of postmodernity emerged at roughly the same time. That is, Lyotard aligns cultural postmodernism with modernism while Debord seems mainly concerned with technological advance and revolutions in electronic media. See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995; Jean-François Lyotard. “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” Trans. Régis Durand. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984. For a recent study on urbanization, consumerism, cinema and the 1920s see Kristen Whissel, *Picturing American Modernity. Traffic, Technology, and the Silent Cinema*. Durham & London: Duke University Press,

Singer also addresses new technologies, the establishment of legal codes, and colonialism as important subsets of larger historical processes, such as the aforementioned demographic shift from the provinces to cities and the rise of capitalism. In this sense, modernity is seen as constituting a “break” that separates the present era from the preceding one on grounds substantial enough to motivate a historical rift. Yet modernity is also an ambiguous concept, notoriously difficult to pin down. One might for example point to how, in addition to its temporal dimension, modernity is also assumed to be at least partly a spatial concept, since the West, a geographic location, is on a fundamental level associated with the content of the concept of modernity.<sup>257</sup> In the past, the spatial considerations that associate modernity and the West were largely unquestioned and self-evident, that is, until they were brought to the fore as problems, or at any rate as something less than a universal truth, when cultural theorists of different stripes started to question its grounding assumptions and address with full seriousness the possibility that social formations different from dominant Western models might claim modernity for themselves, making the notion of “alternative modernities” an important conceptual tool. In addition, there is the aesthetic category of modernism, a complex and contested concept by itself, which connects deeply with and inflects

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2008. Relevant as well, although dealing with a somewhat later period, is Kristin Ross. *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies. Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1995.

<sup>257</sup> This is evident within the tradition of so-called “modernization theories,” as well as the work of Jürgen Habermas, both of which are discussed more closely below.

scholarly discourse on social modernity, particularly in the field of the humanities.<sup>258</sup>

Retaining the temporal dimension of modernity — as opposed to conceptualizing it as the cultural framework for an artistic movement, or as an ahistorical tendency or a universal literary characteristic — the spatial factor nevertheless remains important, as indicated by the fact that the social configuration thus invoked seems to come into being, or “commence,” at radically different historical points depending on where one comes down on the globe.<sup>259</sup> While, for example, discussion between academics in the West on the possible end of modernity and the emergence of “postmodernity” was underway, entire continents were just starting to grapple with the possibilities and problems of modernity. Even within the conventional parameters of Western modernity, the complications that periodizing gives rise to are numerous. Thus, for example, while examining the wide spectrum of possible “origins” for modernity in the context of Europe and North America, Ben Singer essentially lets the question remain open, leaving the reader of his book on melodrama with the sense that modernity’s commencing moment occurred at some point

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<sup>258</sup> Matei Calinescu goes so far as to maintain that it was in the realm of the aesthetic that the historical consciousness that marked the modern break initially came to prominence. See Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, pp. 1–63.

<sup>259</sup> An example of a text that deals with modernity largely through the prism of literary modernism is Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*. The paradigmatic articulation of an ahistorical conception of modernity is Charles Baudelaire’s essay “The Painter of Modern Life.” See *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. Trans. Jonathan Mayne. London: Phaidon Press, 2006, pp. 1–41. Paul De Man’s famous essay “Literary History and Literary Modernity” attempts to activate Baudelaire’s conception of modernity within the context of literary history in general. See *Blindness and Insight. Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, pp. 142–165.

between 1300 and 1880.<sup>260</sup> As a concept, modernity therefore turns out to be both more complex, contested and fluid than might at first be assumed.

The problem of the “origin” of modernity will be returned to below, both in the context of the “modernization” theories of the latter half of the twentieth century and theoretical interrogations of historiography. It is however useful to bracket the question of a specific moment of rupture for the time being and examine, even if only briefly, what may be the single most influential thesis on modernity, at least since Marx and Nietzsche, namely Max Weber’s analysis of disenchantment and rationalization, the spirit of capitalism and the protestant ethic. In this context, the instauration of modernity is not seen as an event but a process whose historical roots reach back to antiquity and, furthermore, one that has close affinities with events and cultures elsewhere on the globe but, due to a series of “fortuitous” developments, the West becomes the site of the “realization” of the constitutive elements of the modern, while other geographic areas are “left behind”.

The question that grounds Weber’s text is the following: “Empirical knowledge, reflection on problems of the cosmos and of life, philosophical and theological wisdom of the most profound sort, are not confined to [the West, so] why did not the scientific, the artistic, the political, or the economic development [elsewhere] enter upon the path of rationalization which is peculiar to the Occident?”<sup>261</sup> Rationalization is here understood as the employment of a systematic method and a clearly defined conceptual vocabulary, and can thus manifest itself in art as well as science.

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<sup>260</sup> Singer, pp. 17–37.

<sup>261</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, pp. 13, 25.

But why, although “capitalistic adventurers,” to give a Weberian example, are a transcultural and transhistorical type, did the process of rationalization catapult the Western “adventurer” from being an inveterate risk-taker into an organization man, a book-keeping man, the rational gatherer of capital, which then became the foundation for modern economic life? This, as noted, is the context of Weber’s inquiry. However, the parameters of his investigation are more complicated as Weber points out that “rationalizations of the most varied character have existed in various departments of life [and] furthermore, each one of these fields may be rationalized in terms of very different ultimate values and ends, and what is rational from one point of view may well be irrational from another.”<sup>262</sup>

The very concept of rationality is, in other words, fluid — the demarcation between rationality and irrationality, Weber suggests, is a cultural construct, except in so far as certain “variations” lead to immense power, wealth, technological advance and the concomitant ability to dominate, brutalize and colonize other cultures.

When explaining the Occidental “variant” and its unequalled success in precisely these domains, economic conditions are central (glossed by Weber thus “economic rationalism is [...] dependant on rational technique and law”), but what must also be taken into account is “the disposition of men to adopt certain types of practical rational conduct.”<sup>263</sup> This is a fundamental issue, as demonstrated by Jared Diamond’s investigation into cultures that “failed” — went extinct — because of their inability to move outside traditional forms of

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<sup>262</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 26.

<sup>263</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 26.

thinking and behavior, even in the face of acute necessity.<sup>264</sup> In other words, Weber seeks the grounds of the materialistic environs of the West in the way in which “magical and religious forces,” “ethical ideas,” and notions of “duty” — a cultural ethos in other words — bend a culture in the direction of certain macro-scale social patterns and behavioral models, and thus also towards, or away from, a particular development of capitalism and rationality.<sup>265</sup>

### *2.1 Everyday Practice and Religious Values*

In his seminal text *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber therefore maintains that through its founding logic and the constitutive discourse of the sacred, Christianity remained significantly embedded in a conception of spiritualized community up until the Reformation, at which point institutional rifts called forth a new alignment of religion with social development. A twofold movement involving the consolidation of reason unfolds as we view the process of rationalization stemming from a disenchanting religious worldview where the idea of salvation connects with universal moral principles, autonomous self-control and abstract action orientations — the monastery is here the ideal type — with the additional feature of the notion of *caritas*, love for mankind, which comes to structure an ethic of reciprocity, but which then comes into conflict with the logic internal to certain protestant sects, particularly Calvinism, where purposive rational activity is linked to the idea of grace through the notion of a calling. This in turn means that the withdrawal

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<sup>264</sup> Jared Diamond. *Collapse. How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. London and New York: Penguin, 2011.

<sup>265</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 27.

from the daily world of work in the name of otherworldly values is no longer sanctioned: “the only way of living acceptably to God was not to surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism,” but rather seek “the fulfillment of the obligations imposed on the individual by his position in the world.”<sup>266</sup>

Calvinism demanded that the search for salvation, and the ethical principles bound to that effort, permeate all aspects of life with the result that the vocational sphere is objectified; norms and values are divorced from vocational activities that in turn become success-oriented pursuits of particular interests.<sup>267</sup> That is, not only is it not necessary to be a formal member of the church in order to establish a relationship with the divine; formerly “ethical” and thus religiously sanctioned pursuits, such as caring for the sick, are displaced as pathways to grace. Replacing these social and ethical structures is worldly success, which, in the context of a personal connection to the deity, reflects and manifests the beneficial light of a higher authority.

Thus, the new notion of a calling provided the mindset, even some of the organizational principles, that facilitated the emergence of capitalism (for Weber “the most fateful force in our modern life”), and thus the secularization of action and enfranchisement from traditional bonds, by intertwining the notion of success with the notion of redemption in such a way that an economic standard

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<sup>266</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 80.

<sup>267</sup> This is why Frederic Jameson emphasizes that secularization of means does not result immediately in the lessened presence of religion in the everyday but, rather, the opposite, as earthly existence as a whole becomes a trial and preparation for the drama of salvation, and thus integrated even more closely than before into a religious framework. Religion’s activation of the value of the worldly dimension in the evaluation of spiritual grace is however unsustainable as the “increasing rationalization of means, or earthly conduct [...] results in the sudden permutation of the final term, in other words, in the disappearance of religion itself as an ultimate value”. Frederic Jameson. “The Vanishing Mediator; or, Max Weber as Storyteller.” *The Ideologies of Theory*. London & New York: Verso, 2008, p. 329.



became ethically charged and dramatized in a transcendental fashion.<sup>268</sup> Societal rationalization in its capitalistic aspect is thus dependent on the emergence of a “neutralized” ethical space, which in this instance is provided by the concept of *Beruf*, where economic success and organizational diligence have been accepted as regulative ideals for social behavior and interpersonal relationships, but then proceeds according to a logic of its own: “The more the world of the modern, rational, capitalist economy followed its own immanent laws, the less accessible it became to any imaginable relationship with a religious ethic of brotherliness.”<sup>269</sup>

In Weber’s thesis, the rise of capitalism is dependent on a negotiation between the secular and the divine where spiritual or cultural value is aligned with human action, and functions simultaneously as an illustration of origins (the rationalization of social formations) and an explication of an inevitable ending (the religious world view). The forces harnessed and given shape unique to the West by a conflux of religious doctrine and social circumstance eventually undermine the link between everyday practice and religious values, the very nexus that initially brought these same forces forth. The result, for the discourse of the divine, is the withdrawal of its status as intrinsic to the world picture and presupposed ground of values.<sup>270</sup> Under the banner of spiritual predestination

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<sup>268</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 17.

<sup>269</sup> Max Weber. “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions.” *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology*. Trans. and ed. by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York and London: Routledge, 2009, p. 331.

<sup>270</sup> In view of complexities of Weber’s thesis, care should be taken not to affix the relationship between enlightenment/modernity and religion as solely antagonistic; the interactions were complex and religion, in addition to proving conducive to the rise of capitalism and the rational organization of society, inflected the very conception of reason throughout the early modern period. Thus Matei Calinescu points out that despite the growing prestige of reason, “the self-consciousness of modernity as a distinct and superior period in the history of mankind was not free from all association with religion. On the contrary, such associations were, during certain

and the necessity of proving one's faith in worldly activity, the capitalistic social complex comes to dominance, and then proceeds to question, and eventually discard, value systems incompatible or detrimental to the rationalization of the lifeworld.

Thus Weber articulates an encompassing societal rationality through a historical account of the multifaceted repercussions of a particular form of an ethically rational conduct of life. In the process, as suggested above, he reverses the classically Marxist notion of the infrastructure determining the effects of the superstructure, positing the latter as an integral part of the way in which Occidental rationalism develops at the level of society as a whole.<sup>271</sup> Embedded in his account is a vision of how the piece-by-piece removal of the transcendental set of assumptions of the past, and their replacement by efforts at rationalized order, has made humankind dominant but also called forth anxieties for subjects henceforth irrevocably assigned to the task of constructing the legitimizing framework for the values of their culture, what Habermas refers to as the normative content of modernity.<sup>272</sup>

Indeed, in his discussion of Weber's rationalization thesis, Habermas points out that, aside from analyzing the initial conditions where the methodical conduct of life in terms of a vocational ethic is of central importance, Weber's most important contribution to the understanding of the social formations of

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periods, numerous and very close, and it is only by bringing them into focus that we can become fully aware of one of the structural ambiguities of modernity's idea". Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 33. See also S.J. Barnett. *The Enlightenment and Religion: The Myths of Modernity*. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2003, pp. 201-222.

<sup>271</sup> For more on this, see Karl Löwith. *Max Weber and Karl Marx*. Trans. by Hans Fentel. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

<sup>272</sup> As Habermas puts it: "Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; it has to create its normativity out of itself." Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 7.

modernity is his working out of modern structures of consciousness as represented in cultural spheres of value.<sup>273</sup>

That is, the tremendous expansion of technically useful knowledge in the centuries following the Enlightenment lead, for Weber, to the separating out of three distinct spheres of value, scientific, moral and aesthetic, which, increasingly unable to function on substantive grounds as religious worldviews, take up whatever problems or everyday issues that were previously dealt with within the religious framework. These spheres are closely linked to what Habermas refers to as the conceptual horizon of modernity, which offers both an approach to the “inner logic” of modernizing impulses and a way of articulating a critique of modernity itself.

This last mentioned point refers us to another aspect of modernization and modernity. As noted above, the importance to Weber’s theory of religious and non-religious conceptual models, which for centuries structured social behavior and experience, is clear; indeed, his focus on cultural, spiritual and epistemological paradigms grounds his investigative method. Shifting the attention away from tradition, however, and towards the manner in which the subversion of past models was an integral facet of the development of a new form of conceptual self-reflexivity that defined the modern area as distinct from the past, but did not do so in terms of capital accumulation or a shift in the

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<sup>273</sup> Jürgen Habermas. *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume One. Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Trans. by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1985, pp. 165 and 230–242. The differentiation into cultural value spheres is also referred to as the fact-value split. At stake is a process whereby empirically verifiable facts start to trump traditional value systems in the establishment of “truth”. That this in no way makes the notion of a value system itself redundant is reflected in the very notion of value spheres, that is, values don’t disappear, they change, and in modernity values are increasingly determined by specialized knowledge, productivity and organizational efficiency.

conception of grace, but in terms of notions of subjectivity and history, counts as among Habermas' most important contributions to the Weberian model.

The shift in question is traced to Hegel and his conception of the dialectic as a method of transcending older models of conceptual thinking as well as grounding new ones.<sup>274</sup> Before, however, turning to what might thus be termed the philosophical instauration of modernity, it is useful to note the manner in which Weber's articulation of rationalization as the primary mode of modernization has grounded, often in a very problematic fashion, theories that much more narrowly target the logics of change behind the notion of modernity.

## 2.2 *Master and Slave*

"Modernization theory" is an umbrella concept employed to refer to the work of sociologists and historians who, from the 1960s onwards, attempted to map the developmental logic and history of innovation that underlies the rise of Western social formations, as well as the formal relationships in the global marketplace of goods, labor and technology that distinguish modern social forms from traditional societies.<sup>275</sup> In a fundamental fashion, the work being done in this

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<sup>274</sup> Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp. 23–44.

<sup>275</sup> For an overview of modernization theory, see Peter N. Stearns. "Modernization." *Encyclopedia of European Social History. From 1350 to 2000. Vol 1*. Ed. by Peter N. Stearns. New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000; Nils Gilman. *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. Joel S. Khan. *Modernity and Exclusion*. London and New York: Sage Publications, 2001; Jim McGuigan. *Modernity and Postmodern Culture*. New York: Open University Press, 2006; Thomas J. Misa, Philip Brey and Andrew Feenberg (eds). *Modernity and Technology*. Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2004, and Alvin Y. So. *Social Change and Development: Modernization, Dependency and World-System Theories*. London and New York: Sage Publications, 1990. The modernization theories are among the central discursive formations that Lyotard attacks in his seminal text on knowledge in modernity, positing them as among the most debased forms of the emancipatory narrative that he discusses. Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on*

area constitutes a paradigmatic inheritance from Weber's influential project and can thus be read as a response to his grounding question in *The Protestant Ethic* as to why certain forms of rationality had emerged in Western civilization, and only in the West.

Tracking modern "characteristics" such as the rise and dominance of capitalism, the widespread acceptance of scientific procedures, imperial regulation of land, altered discipline of the soul, the creation of "truth" and the conquest of nature by man and other modern topoi, modernization theorists constructed models of historical causality and development, highlighting certain events and developments as dominants while others were viewed as secondary.<sup>276</sup> That the historical formation of Western Europe proved influential, in the sense that its key characteristics would in the course of time come to spread to other cultures, is accepted, although not necessarily in the context of power and domination and the history of colonialism.<sup>277</sup> Modernization theory, rather, attributes to this cluster of factors, gathered under the rubric of modernization, the role of a normative standard for the evaluation of successful social development — something that Weber found himself unable to do unambiguously and Habermas, in a yet different way, addresses the conceptual modeling thus conducted in a highly critical fashion.<sup>278</sup> This approach, which

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*Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984.

<sup>276</sup> For a useful discussion of modern topoi, see David Morley. "Postmodernism: The Rough Guide." *Cultural Studies and Communications*. Ed. by James Curran, David Morley and Valerie Walkerdine. London, New York and Sidney: Arnold, 1996, pp. 51-52.

<sup>277</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak addresses the issues thus enveloped in silence in the domain of modernization theories in a seminal fashion in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak." *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg. Basingstoke: McMillan, 1998, pp. 271-313.

<sup>278</sup> Nils Gilman notes that when modernization theorists "did draw non-linear distinctions between underdeveloped countries, it was in spite of their theory rather than because of it." *Mandarins of the Future*, p. 5.

sought to explain processes of change over centuries, came to flounder in precisely the last mentioned area, in the shoals of a loosely argued conception of “preferable” difference and, equally problematic, a notion of absolute conformity in terms of direction of change.<sup>279</sup>

At stake is not primarily the distinction between technological progress and economic modernization, both of which, as social historian Peter N. Stearns has pointed out, can function as synonyms for industrialization in general — keeping in mind that such conflation risk certain lacunae — but rather the theorization of a “template” of patterns emerging in the West and the notion that their subsequent replication outside the West is the desired and “natural” trajectory for progress.<sup>280</sup> Exemplifying this approach is Krishan Kumar’s well-known treatise on the rise of modern societies, wherein he bluntly states that through its successful enactment of the modernization project, “Western society was not merely leading the way, it was showing to the rest of the world, as in a mirror, its future condition.”<sup>281</sup>

Through a skewed image of temporality and reflection, Kumar indicates that the authenticity of Western culture relies on the gaze of another, in whose figure the grateful recognition of a future fate confirms the current status and achievement of the West — a figuration bizarrely reminiscent of Hegel’s depiction of the master–slave relationship in his explication in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* of the progress of subjectivity, particularly as relates to the repression of the free flow of intersubjective recognition and its replacement

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<sup>279</sup> That “Western” modernity developed as some sort of a cohesive whole is a contention that is difficult to substantiate. For more on this, see Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, pp. 97–105.

<sup>280</sup> Stearns, “Modernization,” p. 3.

<sup>281</sup> Krishan Kumar. *The Rise of Modern Society*. New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988, p. 7.

by a form of subjugation, manifested in the demand for acknowledgement of mastery.

However, if the process described by Kumar were to be read more closely through a Hegelian prism, it would quickly reveal itself to stand in direct contradiction to Hegel's theorization of the development of self-consciousness as pictured in the master/slave relationship. Although the slave's acknowledgment of the master's superior position is central to the dynamic in question, Hegel goes on to explain how it is precisely the subservient position of the slave that renders him the vessel of the progression of Spirit — rather than the master — as, through the molding and shaping of the physical world via work, the slave comes closer than does the master in obliterating the subject/object distinction.<sup>282</sup> Bracketing Hegelian connotations, however, Kumar's geopolitical theory, in order for the process being described to be coherent, a consensus regarding the constitutive factors of the "original" set of social markers needs to exist, as well as for the validity of the very logic of the "expansion" model. Neither, as it happens, can be found.

In addition to improperly designating an object of a modernizing process, the flaws of modernization theory, exemplified by but not limited to Kumar's thesis, include the "priority" issue; the fact that concomitancy does not equal causality. Identifying primary causes has proven elusive for modernization theory, and descriptions of the intertwining of otherwise discrete processes and what may be coincidental temporal correspondences in the emergence of certain features into the cultural field have falsely assumed the function of causal

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<sup>282</sup> G.W.F. Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. By A. V. Miller. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 111–119.

generators, with the result that an essentially diachronic process comes to depend, at least partially, on the logic of synchronicity.<sup>283</sup> This is directly related to the problem of when in time modernization can be said to commence, proposed dates range from medieval times to the turn of the eighteenth century — much as Singer noted above. There are thus four main difficulties: a Westernized teleological model, definition, causation and chronological imprecision.<sup>284</sup> The straightforwardly triumphalist version of modernization theory has justifiably been delegitimized. Nevertheless, the need to address the social, political, cultural, psychological, and institutional conditions arising in modernity, and the various struggles that have taken place in order to enable or resist these conditions, remains.

This is particularly urgent in accounts that intertwine cultural and societal modernity such as the present one. The transformative societal shifts involved in modernization are linked to discourses shaping modernity's self consciousness, as well as the aesthetic dimension inherent in new perceptions — and

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<sup>283</sup> The point is that particular social developments, such as penal reform, the expansion of print and education, the opening of trade routes, the discovery of tonality, certain types of architecture, and so forth, are difficult to place in a causal relationship with each other. This is nevertheless what needs to be done if a “template” for modernization is to be created and exported. Such a template is different from Weber's accentuation of rationalization, whose development, for Weber, is a major problematic and extremely difficult to explain. Another “model” of how to proceed, exemplified recently by Steven Pinker, is simply to gather a host of social developments together into a conceptual constellation under a rubric such as “the humanitarian revolution,” which is then employed as a generalized explanatory mechanism. Pinker does, however, attempt to isolate literacy and print as a causal factor, moving in that case along argumentative lines laid out by scholars ranging from Jürgen Habermas to Ian Watt who identify the eighteenth and nineteenth century novel as key to the formation of modern subjectivity. Pinker however lays much more weight on the “Gutenberg revolution” than is perhaps common, veering in a sense towards the hyper-theorization associated with Marshall McLuhan. Steven Pinker. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. New York and London: Viking, 2011, pp. 467–513. Jürgen Habermas. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991. Marshall McLuhan. *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 2011. Ian Watt. *The Rise of the Novel. Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. Berkeley and London: The University of California Press, 2001.

<sup>284</sup> These are discussed in Stearns' “Modernization,” pp. 5–10.



accounting for these features in tandem and without succumbing to a simplified narrative of progress is the task that Jürgen Habermas sets for himself in his theory of communicative action and his polemics against postmodernism.<sup>285</sup> Importantly, he aims to correct the flaws of modernization theory by going back to Weber and his model of societal and cultural rationalization.

The difference Habermas locates between Weber's earlier interventions and the later methodological development of a subset of the field of social theory dealing with modernization processes is the latter's stylization of modernity as a spatio-temporally neutral model for social development. At stake for Habermas is the distinction drawn between functional logic of institutions and social strata (the state, the economy, etc.), on the one hand, which tends to place modernization as an automatic process once certain preconditions have been met, and, on the other, the conceptual horizon of Western rationalism, that is cultural modernity.<sup>286</sup> Habermas has explicitly laid out how the value of the Weberian project rests on conceptualizing linkages between practical rationality (the combination of means-end rationality and value rationality) and rationality of world perspectives and spheres of value (cultural rationalization).<sup>287</sup> The

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<sup>285</sup> Habermas maintains that the basic principles of the Enlightenment should not be abandoned despite the manifold catastrophes that characterize the supposedly rational and enlightened modern world, a position that was heavily contested by postmodern theorists and was itself partly motivated by the construction of the concept of postmodernism. However, the concept of the postmodern will only be briefly touched on in these pages; the general viewpoint is that, albeit fashionable in the 1980s and 1990s, the concept is severely limited as a critical tool, at least if considered as a periodizing term or a historical "sequel" to modernity. The historical changes or transformations that the concept of the postmodern is/was intended to identify simply do not seem consequential enough to substantiate a "break" of the sort associated with modernity, or, indeed, any substantial periodizing break. As a late variant on modernism, the concept may however serve a purpose in the cultural sphere. For a useful article on historiography and "breaks," see Reinhart Koselleck. "On the Relation of Past and Future in Modern History." *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Trans. by Keith Tribe. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

<sup>286</sup> Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp. 336–367.

<sup>287</sup> Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action I*, pp. 173–181.

templates of modernization theory thus cease to grasp modernization as the historical objectification of rational structures, rather these structures start to be viewed as automated and abstract, which leads to the conclusion, antithetical to Habermas' whole project, namely that Enlightenment culture is exhausted. The flipside of this perspective, equally unsuitable however from Habermas' point of view, is the conceptualization of modernity that sees absolutely no decoupling whatsoever occurring between formal systems of societal modernization and rationality as such, as, in this latter depiction, reason itself threatens to become a site and agent of historical atrocity.<sup>288</sup> Habermas' task thus becomes to explicate the manner in which the concept of modernity was initially constructed as a site of trans-historical value and how it can be reclaimed as a still valid model of the ideal function of self-understanding.<sup>289</sup>

### *2.3 Normativity and Models of the Past*

According to Habermas, Hegel was the first philosopher to raise to the level of a philosophical problem the process through which a system of values can be created without recourse to tradition or a perspective that lies outside of modernity.<sup>290</sup> The centrality of modernity in Hegel's philosophical project can be

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<sup>288</sup> This may constitute the gravitational field of Habermas' critique. His position in this instance is similar to, for example, Noam Chomsky's long standing criticism of continental philosophy. Indeed, Chomsky's recent public disagreement with Slavoj Zizek can be viewed as a highly abbreviated version of the positions put forth in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. On the Chomsky/Zizek debate, see Justin Clover. "Atlantic Rim': Chomsky v. Zizek." *The Nation*, September 2-9<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

<sup>289</sup> It is not unreasonable to assume that with his early background in Marxist theory, Habermas would agree that the power dynamics and the profit driven nature of capitalism influence the way in which modernity is represented and understood, but there is nevertheless a core meaning to the concept that is not dependent on the point of view of a randomly selected narrating subject, and this is that in modernity values are subject to rational debate.

<sup>290</sup> Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 17.

detected on two interrelated fronts. Firstly, there is the conceptual horizon, traced along a line that leads from language (the importance for Hegel of new words such as *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times) to his problems with the self-understanding of modernity as expressed by, first and foremost, Kant. Secondly, there are concrete historical phenomena and their complex relation to life histories and development, and how, through a historicization of consciousness, he comes to the conclusion that the progression of "Spirit" has left the social world without reference to something internal to knowledge that can stabilize a historical moment unable to ground itself in past certainties. That is, the religious worldview that could combine knowledge with everyday life on the grounds of static essences has receded and fissures and differentiations now run across the culture. In the context of the sundered harmony of life, Hegel construes the task of philosophy as reversing the self estrangement of "Spirit" and the establishment of a system of thought that demonstrates the power of reason to function as cultural unification and ground for normative values, i.e. take the place of religion in the construction of a coherent and cohesive worldview.

Ivan Soll emphasizes that this, essentially, is the role that Hegel envisioned for *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the redemption of metaphysics and the attempt to justify what for Kant was an illicit use of reason. Thus Hegel hoped to demonstrate, through the concept of the Absolute and the method of the dialectic, how the antinomies of modernity could be transcended and the concept of modernity thus secured and stabilized.<sup>291</sup> If absolute truth and the infinite can

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<sup>291</sup> Ivan Soll. *An Introduction to Hegel's Metaphysics*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1969, pp. 111-150.

be handled by finite concepts, Hegel had, he believed, transcended the foundational impasse encountered by Kant through the notion of *thing-in-itself* (Ding an sich).<sup>292</sup> The project, however, was destined to fail — not only because unconditioned reason ceases to have a critical function, as Habermas points out, and thus divorces itself from the logic that set the whole project of modernity into motion, but also, as historian Hans Blumenberg has argued, the very grandiosity of the scheme (explicate a universal history and a systematic logic that positions man in it) is an attempt to answer a premodern question with modern means, effectively taking up a religious problem to which the tools of rationality were unsuited.<sup>293</sup>

Nevertheless, Hegel's construction of modernity is foundational, and encapsulating his thinking is "the principle of subjectivity," which Habermas equates with the core shift of the Enlightenment, that is, the liberation of subjects from traditional roles and values, and how a religious worldview is transformed by critical-rational reflection: "In modernity, therefore, religious life, state, and society as well as science, morality, and art are transformed into just so many embodiments of the principle of subjectivity".<sup>294</sup> Historically pre-existing law is met by new will formations based on individual rights, Protestantism — much as Weber suggests — emphasizes the insights of the isolated subject, and inwardness starts to determine the essence of art. However, the clearest expression of the principle of subjectivity is Kant's analysis of the foundations of knowledge in his three critiques. Kant's division of reason into formal "moments"

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<sup>292</sup> Soll, *An Introduction to Hegel's Metaphysics*, pp. 120–127.

<sup>293</sup> Hans Blumenberg. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Translated by Robert M. Wallace. London and Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983, pp. 37–51.

<sup>294</sup> Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 18.

— carried forward in Weber and Habermas' conception of value spheres — functions in a way as a summary of the diremptions that run through modernity on the basis of the principle of subjectivity; the faculties of practical reason and judgment are separated from theoretical knowledge.<sup>295</sup>

In a sundered age, Hegel's position of centrality thus depends on his articulation of the manner in which fragmentation grounds the process of bringing reason to preeminence, and the consequent construction of a philosophical project which aims at the overcoming of those very divisions. Indeed, when it comes to grasping modernity descriptively, as mentioned above, few tropes have proven to be as firmly established as that of "fragmentation".<sup>296</sup> This has been articulated by Marshall Berman who posits social, moral and political fragmentation as symptomatic of modernity:

as the modern public expands, it shatters into a multitude of fragments, speaking incommensurable private languages; the idea of modernity, conceived in numerous fragmentary ways, loses much of its vividness, resonance and depth.<sup>297</sup>

Lamenting a split that is related but not identical with Hegel's conception of the loss of a substantive worldview, Berman, as the above quote suggests, is skeptical of the emergence of "private languages" and a newly divisive social

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<sup>295</sup> Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp. 19–22, 30–32.

<sup>296</sup> David Frisby notes that "the key to the contemporary analysis of modernity does not lie in the direction of an investigation of the social system or even its institutions, but in the 'invisible threads' of social reality, in diverse 'momentary images' or 'snapshots,'" or, as he puts it shortly, in the "fragments of social reality." Rejected, in other words, are totalizing theories of the Marxist school as well as the grand sociological programs that ushered in the twentieth century. What the cultural critic is faced with, rather, much as the reader of a modernist literary work, is an almost ruined yet strangely beautiful sensory experience that is fleeting and partial. See *Fragments of Modernity. Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002, p. 6. Speaking in a similar register, Jon Hughes notes that the modern subject is faced, or "burdened," with the "impossible task of rebuilding the lost integrity of the world [and] to make sense of a society itself riven by conflict and instability." *Facing Modernity. Fragmentation, Culture and Identity in Joseph Roth's Writing in the 1920s*. London: Maney Publishing, 2006, pp. 1–2.

<sup>297</sup> Marshall Berman. *All That is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity*. London & New York: Penguin Books, 1988, p. 17.

map, both of which seem to tear at and undermine the new understandings of the modern arrived at by the poets and writers of the nineteenth century that Berman focuses on. However, these shifts, seismic as they undoubtedly were, could also be said to be emancipatory, symptomatic of the undermining of a cultural hegemony that, while different from the medieval and early modern power structures, nevertheless represented the interest of a class newly risen to prominence, that is the white, male, propertied bourgeoisie.

For Berman, modernity, if it ever represented a cohesive worldview, is by the turn of the twentieth century palpable only through the very abruptness with which its emblems disappear, and the rupture extends to the division “between our culture and our lives”.<sup>298</sup> This last mentioned rift aptly sums up the motivational force behind Habermas’ conception of modernity, and the importance he places on explicating the theoretical and philosophical grounds of the concept; indeed, Berman’s notion of a drastic disjunction between culture and life speaks directly to Habermas’ notion of enlightenment principles and ideals constituting a project still incomplete:

The project of modernity formulated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic. At the same time, this project intended to release the cognitive potentials of each of these domains from their esoteric forms. The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life — that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life.”<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, p. 24. Embedded in the quote is a host of different but related discourses: the migration from the country to the city, the disintegration of the extended family, community and traditions, as well as the alienation of labor as theorized by Marx; relevant as well is the manner in which the relentless acceleration of social processes divides the self and foments pathologies and the new conception of a radical division between the past and the present way of life brought forth by the installation of a break.

<sup>299</sup> Habermas, “Modernity – An Incomplete Project,” p. 9.

According to Habermas, the uncertainty of the continued vitality of the project of modernity, and its failure in several key respects, is due to the “cognitive potentials” of the three domains being in thrall to a culture of experts and the rigor of instrumental reason at its most extreme, where insufficient space is given over for collective decision-making.<sup>300</sup> In a somewhat later articulation, this problem would be framed as the colonization of the lifeworld by “system” imperatives.<sup>301</sup> Habermas in other words frames the Weberian triumvirate as a site of rupture and isolation from everyday life, much as Berman in his brief aside does, and Hegel in a paradigmatic fashion had instituted as a grounding problem, and thus identifies the grounds for critique and the Hegelian dimension of his own project — which amounts to reclaiming what was lost as the notion of unified reason was abandoned, without recourse to the philosophy of consciousness.<sup>302</sup>

#### 2.4 *The Iron Cage*

Habermas’ conception of enlightened modernity— and his deployment of the Weberian paradigm — has however been opposed in quite a fundamental fashion by a series of culture critics, many of whom Habermas has engaged with

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<sup>300</sup> Habermas, “Modernity– An Incomplete Project,” pp. 8–9.

<sup>301</sup> Jürgen Habermas. *Theory of Communicative Action Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*. Trans. by Tomas McCarthy. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1985. Briefly put, for Habermas, “system” represents the coercive functions of society.

<sup>302</sup> Perhaps the central facet of the philosophical discourse of modernity of which Habermas is highly critical. The philosophy of consciousness elevates the individual and the individual consciousness (including the transcendental place afforded reason in idealism) to a position of epistemological authority that Habermas finds to be unsustainable and wishes to replace with notions of intersubjectivity and communicative action — the philosophy of consciousness being, for example, unable to account for claims regarding legitimacy. See Jürgen Habermas. *Legitimation Crisis*. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press, 1975.

directly, and who not only distrust the project of the recuperation of reason within an unchanged societal, institutional and ethical framework and would, furthermore, vehemently dispute Marshall Berman's take on the essential positivity of modernity's progress, indeed its many "spectacular triumphs".<sup>303</sup> It is interesting in this context that Berman traces what he posits as a lineage of theoretical "negativity" back to Weber whose "contempt for modern men and women" is, Berman maintains, encapsulated in the notion of the "iron cage".<sup>304</sup> We will have occasion to return to this "lineage of negativity" in conjunction with the concept of the iron cage when Laxness and communication technologies are discussed.<sup>305</sup> It is necessary however to address the conclusion of Weber's text on the protestant ethic. The way in which the trajectory of Weber's thinking on modernity moves from relatively value-neutral perspectives to a value laden conclusion is of pivotal importance to subsequent scholars who conceive of the project of modernity very differently from Habermas.

Having traced how rational conduct in social and economic domains was born from the spirit of Christian asceticism, Weber closes his text on the following, pessimistic note:

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter's view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of

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<sup>303</sup> Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p. 17. Habermas' *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* is, as a whole, intended as a rejoinder and a dismantling of these anti-enlightenment and "irrational" positions.

<sup>304</sup> Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p. 28.

<sup>305</sup> See chapter 4.1.



the 'saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment.' But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage.<sup>306</sup>

In his project, Weber traces the rise of cultural modernity and maps the grounding forces responsible for the societal alterations of the West prior to and in the wake of the industrial revolution, and how this historical process has produced a modern consciousness confident in its dominance and self-sufficiency, but which must also address the ambivalences inherent in the processes that brought it to eminence. The trope of the "iron cage" furthermore suggests that the inhabitants of modernity may have failed at that task and that at the very moment of the material triumph of modernity, they have become the objects, rather than the subjects, of modernization and its rationalizing impulses.

Critical reflections on modernity, which cast doubt on the value and self-sufficiency of reason, have produced discursive versions of the modern experience that are drastically incompatible with the ideals of progress, bringing forth, as noted above, a strand of oppositionality that runs through prominent philosophical, artistic and sociological interventions and representations of modernity. The desire to achieve the "rational organization of everyday social life," to quote Habermas and his well known articulation of modernity as an "incomplete project," demands to be weighed against the contradictions embedded in the cognitive potentials of enlightenment ideals when, during moments of catastrophe, these potentialities have become terrifying actualities shattering optimism and the belief in reason and rationalization.<sup>307</sup> Ironically

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<sup>306</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 181.

<sup>307</sup> Habermas, "Modernity – An Incomplete Project," p. 9.

enough, it is Habermas' precursors in the Frankfurt School that may have offered the pre-eminent articulation of this stance.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer present a striking critique of conventional historiography, structures of Western rationality and the philosophical tradition, as well as articulating what they see as the self-destructive aspect of man's untrammelled dominance over nature. The dilemma they face is enormous. The only way to salvage enlightened thinking is through the use of enlightened thinking but they are certain that "the very concept of that thinking, no less than the concrete historical forms, the institutions of society with which it is intertwined, already contains the germ of the regression which taking place everywhere today."<sup>308</sup> It is important to note that the volume was published in 1947 and that both authors fled the Nazis. That reason is no guarantee against barbarity is a fact that impacted their lives directly and is reflected in the well known axiom, "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology."<sup>309</sup>

It is clear by the above quote for example that Adorno and Horkheimer do not ascribe to Weber's distinction between cultural and social rationalization but, rather, collapsing the two domains, they view rationalization as a whole as the expression of the flawed structure of Western reason. This thought is signaled in the opening movement of the text where the aims of the enlightenment are articulated only to be contrasted all the more strikingly to their failure: "Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing

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<sup>308</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xvi.

<sup>309</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xviii.

them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.”<sup>310</sup> Mere affirmation of Enlightenment ideals in the face of a continuing series of catastrophes is a radically insufficient gesture for Adorno and Horkheimer, and the failures of the Enlightenment can absolutely not be explained or accounted for by seeing it as an “incomplete project”, *pace* Habermas, as this view explains “lapses” as simply being due to an insufficient amount of reason.

Deeply troubled by what he perceived as the binding together of reason and domination in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Jürgen Habermas has spent his career devising a conceptual approach to modernity that can persuasively articulate the goals of the Enlightenment as being neither exhausted nor irreducibly linked to terror, but rather rendered incomplete through a variety of institutional aporias and the flawed application of reason to modern societal complexities. This represents the polar opposite of Adorno and Horkheimer’s view of contemporary society, which is most aptly described as cultural and theoretical analysis of political domination. They see domination extending into all spheres of social life by ever more efficient techniques, thus bringing forth a completely administrated society. Indeed, Habermas maintains that the problem of the self-identity of Enlightenment and myth, their complete and utter binding together, so central to Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument, opens no productive avenues for critical theory but, rather, decisively shuts them down. For Habermas, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* represents a conceptual and intellectual burn-out as:

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<sup>310</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 1.

The suspicion of ideology becomes total [...] It is turned not only against the irrational function of bourgeois ideals, but against the rational potential of bourgeois culture itself, and thus it reaches into the foundation of ideology critique that proceeds immanently. But the goal remains that of producing an effect of unmasking. The thought-figure, into which a skepticism regarding reason is now worked, remains unchanged: Now reason itself is suspected of the baneful confusion of power and validity claims, but still with the intent of enlightening.<sup>311</sup>

Significantly, Habermas acknowledges the multiple points of origin available for stories of the emergence of modernity.<sup>312</sup> It is precisely such deep seated uncertainty that calls for the articulation of modernity's self-understanding, its "philosophical discourse," which traces the outline of the forces authoring and authorizing the claims of the modern (of a "break"). Indeed, the central argument of *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, how it is possible to return, through a theory of communicative action, to a path available but not taken in modernity, is itself a narrative reconstruction of the meaning of the breakthrough of the modern and its manifold social processes.<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 119. Habermas' somewhat dismissive reading of the work has been dismissed in turn, with Robert Hullot-Kentor stating that "*Dialectic of Enlightenment* knows more about Habermas than does Habermas about the book," thereby also gesturing towards a genre of Adorno studies where the question of what "Adorno's critique of Habermas might look like" is pursued. Robert Hullot-Kentor. "Back to Adorno." *Things Beyond Resemblance. Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 28. Simon Jarvis discusses the "Adorno-on-Habermas" hermeneutical time warp in his "General Introduction." *Theodor W. Adorno. Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory. Volume I*. Ed. by Simon Jarvis. London and New York. Routledge, 2007, p. 7.

<sup>312</sup> An example would be Habermas' elucidation of Hegel's several false starts in terms of supplying a conceptual framework that would suffice for normative purposes in a modernity where past models were deemed unacceptable — a narrative that satisfied certain rational standards in other words — as well as Habermas' central thesis in the book that modernity's central flaw is a conceptual error, the wrong plot-line was followed. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp. 23–30.

<sup>313</sup> Lyotard, for example, finds Habermas' notion of "consensus" when it comes to the function of communicative action to be unrealistic and even totalitarian, suggesting in its stead a multitude of language games and micro-networks of community building and knowledge formation. While elements of Habermas' project may indeed serve (by necessity of human frailty rather than because of a conceptual flaw internal to the theory) as a regulatory ideal rather than contemporary practice. Lyotard's own suggestion is surprisingly naïve however to the workings of capitalism and the market, seemingly arrogating, for example, the knowledge building "language-game" of how to respond to an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico to the local community of BP experts. See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 37.

However, the positing of Habermas's conception of modernity in opposition to Adorno and Horkheimer's is not intended to result in an articulation of ultimate preference. Indeed, holding one theoretical edifice up as "victorious" or "more theoretically solid," not to mention "more correct" in contrast to the other is unproductive to the highest degree, as the work of the first and the second generation of the Frankfurt School represents twin summits in the same mountain range. Both respond to Weber and both interrogate modern social formations in a critical fashion, as well as tracing the origins of modernity to certain key moments. As such, they both contribute in significant ways to understanding modernity and these are the positive moments — a somewhat strange utterance in the context of Adorno and Horkheimer — that can be activated fruitfully in what follows.

### *2.5 The Structure of Modernity*

Clearly, modernity is a contested concept. Its conceptual horizon is framed by the notion that normativity need not be grounded in historical models or a substantive view of the world, rather, that a foundation for normative claims can be located in the realm of the ideal, envisioned in Hegel's philosophy as abstract reasoning in its highest form, that is, pure conceptuality independent of the object world in its functioning. Ostensibly a reaction to Kant, Hegel's philosophical project can also be read as a response to the process of secularization and, in that context, something of a failure. Reason — as abstract, self-generated conceptual cognition — has no ethical dimension while the discourse of technology, and the performative dimension of the mastery of

*technis*, has enormous persuasive powers, going so far as to render basic categories of cognition ambiguous and subject to misprision. This is the point of Weber's "iron cage," bondage gets mistaken for freedom because a network of rationalized procedures and productive systems, highly beneficial in technical terms and grounded in the most modern forms of knowledge, is "given" the power to specify and determine the content of a concept wholly alien to its workings, that is, human freedom. The same applies to notions of social justice and other forms of practical reason.

The concept of modernity is also troubled and destabilized by the variety of its possible historical manifestations and causal connections. It is difficult to locate its origins, although, as indicated above, they can certainly be aligned with the material history of technological advance. It should be kept in mind however that Weber looks to cultural factors when explaining the emergence of modernity, not technical leaps such as the invention of the steam engine or the "break" of the industrial revolution. He, instead, emphasizes modes of thinking and behavior, the role of values. Thus, the periodization of modernity is vague, the historical and conceptual content of the periodizing signifier is ambiguous, and, as if things weren't troublesome enough, some would prefer to drop the entire conceptual edifice and replace it with another one, postmodernity, which, one might argue, is even more difficult than modernity to analyze and get to grips with.

While theorizing modernity, as has been suggested, has resulted in a variety of different positions, including an influential tradition of deeply skeptical thinking on the subject, a tripartite conceptual formation seems to

emerge from the academic discourse. Briefly put, it is the division between social and cultural modernity with an institutional realm — the state being the prime example — as the third element, mediating between the former two. It then depends on the intention and aims of different research programs which category is highlighted. Accounts of social modernity range from “objective” historical narratives that attempt to depict, explain and contextualize the events that shape the modern period, to a more philosophically inclined examination of social structures and cultural artifacts, including, famously, Walter Benjamin’s account of the cultural, political and ontological repercussions of technological reproducibility and his emphasis on cinema as the primary cultural mode of modernity.<sup>314</sup> Later work on the effect of technology on subjective experience, the works of Friedrich Kittler and Wolfgang Schivelbusch being an example, largely follows in Benjamin’s footsteps.<sup>315</sup> Works dealing with modernism as a formal practice would fall squarely in the cultural category. Yet others focus on institutions, Max Weber’s analysis of bureaucracy being perhaps the classic example and Foucault’s analysis of the disparate yet also institutionalized structures of social power would be the foremost contemporary example of such a methodology.<sup>316</sup>

It is thus possible to suggest that the concept of modernity involves the combination and interplay between the historical reality of social experience, termed the “lifeworld” by Habermas, and whose most potent symbol is

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<sup>314</sup> Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version.” *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin. Trans. by Edmund Jephcott, R. Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and others. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008.

<sup>315</sup> Friedrich Kittler. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Trans. by Winthrop-Young and M. Wutz. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

<sup>316</sup> Max Weber. “Bureaucracy.” *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology*. Translated and edited by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York and London: Routledge, 2009, pp. 196–267.

technology, a conceptual domain of abstract reasoning and thinking whose marker is independence from tradition and a substantive worldview, objectified for example in the works of the historical avant-garde no less than the writings of Darwin, and then an institutional framework that (ideally) objectifies rational structures of thought in order to facilitate the workings of the life–world. That none of these positive hypotheticals may indeed properly designate modernity — as pointed out by Adorno and Horkheimer — does not however invalidate their structural interrelationship. From the Frankfurt perspective, rather than motivating progress, their interrelationship would be viewed as the engine of the administrated society.



The special architectonic structure of the Kantian system, like the gymnasts' pyramids in Sade's orgies and the formalized principles of early bourgeois freemasonry — cynically reflected in the strict regime of the libertine society of the 120 Days of Sodom — prefigures the organization, devoid of any substantial goals, which was to encompass the whole of life.

Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno and Max Horkheimer.  
*Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Dandyism is the last spark of heroism amid decadence  
Charles Baudelaire  
"The Painter of Modern Life"

## Chapter 2: Laxness' Early Writings on Modernity

### 1. A Modern Figure

In the span of less than six years, Laxness became the figurehead, even the embodiment, of modernity in Icelandic cultural discourse, and he achieved this status by writing arguably the first modernist novel, some of the earliest modernist poetry, and proselytizing for modernization in a series of articles that still stand as unique moments in what otherwise was frequently a bitter, unpalatable debate; essentially the cultural and literary symptom of a clash between immense social forces — modernity and an entrenched rural power structure that could trace its genealogy back for almost a millennium. Reykjavík was not yet a capital, except in name, but it was slowly growing into one, while the traditional centers of influence, economic, political and cultural, were rural and, much like in ages past, in the hands of rich and gentrified country-folk who lived comfortably in opulence — and did so despite the incredible poverty and hardship that surrounded them.

Indeed, the misery of the Icelandic farm hand right up through the first decades of the twentieth century beggars belief. Through the centuries, much of

the rural workforce were virtual serfs, disenfranchised by a law called *vistarbönd*, a settling ordinance that decreed that all those who were not landowners or renters, which was about quarter of the nation, were required by law to take on work on farms and freeholds for no pay, where they, furthermore, had absolutely no status, no prospects, no rights — the farmer however could legally abuse his charge(s) physically, *hirtingarvald* it was called, “disciplinary power” would be the polite and a semantically adequate translation, “license to do what the heck you wanted” would however be a much more accurate translation —and were entirely dependent on whatever farmer happened to own the land and hold their contract.<sup>317</sup> These folks had one day a year when they could move and travel freely, which is when they could seek alternative employment. The distance that can be traversed on foot in a single day ... well, it was not great. The atmosphere must have been fairly prison-like. *Vistarböndin* defined the social environment in Iceland up until the nineteenth century.

The excavation of just such a history forms the opening of Laxness’ most famous essay on modernization, “Af íslensku menningarástandi” (Regarding the Cultural Situation in Iceland, 1925), where an aged man describes the harsh conditions of his youth. As modernity made its inroads, so the old farming elite could feel the ground under its feet start to shake and crumble, the age old foundations proving not entirely stable. Industrialization had come to the southwest corner of Iceland and townships sprang up around the coastline, prompting a whole-sale migration of rural labor from the countryside.

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<sup>317</sup> Gísli Gunnarsson. *Upp er boðið Ísaland. Einokunarverslun og íslenskt samfélag 1602–1787*. Reykjavík: Örn og Örlygur, 1987, pp. 103–146. See also Bragi Guðmundsson and Gunnar Karlsson. *Uppruni nútímans. Íslandssaga frá öndverðri 19. öld til síðari hluta 20. aldar*. Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 1986, pp. 57–67, 94–102.

Laxness was an active participant in these titanic shifts while he also became a seasoned world traveler before he reached the age of twenty, this in a time when nobody except those of the upper classes really left Iceland. Traveling abroad was still so newsworthy that the names of those that “sailed,” as it was called, were published in a daily newspaper. Before the decade was out, and before he hit thirty, Laxness published what is still the single best-known book of essays in Icelandic literary history, *Alþýðubókin* (The Commoner’s Book, 1929), and was by then also the author of three novels, a short story collection, a book of poetry was about to see the light of day, and his voluminous writings in journals and newspapers had made him a household name considerably before his literary activities registered widely.

He had spent time in a monastery and two years in Hollywood trying to make it in the movie industry as a screenwriter. Considering how little time Laxness actually spent in Iceland during the decade, it is slightly surreal how strong his presence seems to be in the cultural life of the nation; wherever one looks, no matter at what issue or debate, there Laxness will turn up with an article or if not, he was sure to make his opinions felt and heard in the interviews and newspaper profiles that quickly became a staple of the fledgling Icelandic media. If worst came to worst, and there was nothing from Laxness himself, chances were that an angry letter from a reader, a column or an article eviscerating the young upstart would be somewhere in the paper or journal one happened to have tucked under an arm, walking the streets of Reykjavík in the late 1920s. While not the first modern figure in Iceland, one might point to poet and entrepreneur Einar Benediktsson for example, Halldór Laxness still came to be synonymous with modernity and remained its avatar for more than a decade.

The arrival of modernity was not however so much a “breakthrough” as it was the continually delayed arrival of an unusually slow-gaited visitor whose outline was discernable against the twilight horizon. Around the turn of the twentieth century, visitors would voice feelings of sympathy (disdain is also a possibility) at the tumble-down and dilapidated housing situation that was the norm in the country. They would also ask questions, being understandably taken aback by the lack of transport routes and the fact that transit infrastructure of any sort, that is, roads, bridges, railways, coastal ship lanes, lighthouses, a postal network, a telegraph, and other markers of mechanized mobility, were simply absent. Historians point to 1890 as a pivotal year in economic terms as it was then that it started slowly to dawn on the merchant and ruling class that “business methods and market rates” tended to “influence the state of the domestic economy to a substantial degree.”<sup>318</sup> Business practices improved, in the sense of becoming more efficient and organized and shortly thereafter, industrialization arrived and Iceland’s prospects grew brighter, although the process of modernization depended on fisheries and the newly motorized fishing fleet.

The consequences of the shifts just recounted were immense. The countryside was in danger of being depleted as farmhands flocked to new forms of employment in townships and the capital, where they also found new modes of entertainment. Gender relations were destabilized in a radical fashion, indeed, life in a densely populated area came to entail precisely the decisive rupture

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<sup>318</sup> Magnús S. Magnússon. “Efnahagsþróun á Íslandi 1880–1990.” *Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun 1880–1990. Ritgerðir*. Ed. by Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Svanur Kristjánsson. Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun og Sagnfræðistofnun. Háskóli Íslands, 1993, p. 117. In the original: “Þó má greina afgerandi breytingu á hugarfari og þankagangi landsmanna kringum 1890 þegar þeir fóru að veita því eftirtekt að viðskiptahættir og viðskiptakjör máttu sín mikils til að útskýra það sem gerðist í efnahagslífinu.”

from the past represented by the lone traveling figure above, but as his leisurely gait indicates, it was overall a slow process. Still, the natural order of things, settled in many instances for as long as there were written accounts, was suddenly being debated and criticized, with changes in the air. It is Laxness' role as an active participant in the exciting disarray that was the rise of a technological, mechanized, slowly urbanizing Icelandic modernity, particularly the pivotal interwar decade of the 1920s, that will be examined in what follows. It is safe to say that Laxness was something of a chameleon in these circumstances; not that he shifted his position or lacked strong opinions, far from it, but rather that he had an uncanny capacity to be at home in wildly varying locales, domains and habitats, urban and rural.

There are two unifying themes that run through the chapter. The first involves what in Scandinavia became an issue of immense controversy in the 1880s and was referred to as the "Woman Question." We mentioned the natural order of things above and indeed, few things had been considered more thoroughly than the "nature" of women and the consensus reached was also universal, or next to it. And if one sought advice in religion, pretty much the same answers were to be found there: the social roles of women were sharply constrained so as to harmonize with their "essence;" their sphere of activity was the domestic one and their most important role was as mothers. Once these things started being questioned, and then more than questioned, an immense struggle occurred and, indeed, immense shifts in the social lives of women in the Nordic countries took place from the middle of the nineteenth century, when women essentially had no civil rights, and 1919, when suffrage was achieved in Sweden, last of the Nordic countries to enfranchise women. In Iceland, women

got the vote in 1915 but the matter remained a controversial issue, of course, as it did elsewhere and has remained, and always revolving around the same basic thing, equality, although the symbolic trappings changed.<sup>319</sup> In the 1920s, for example, the issue of women's rights was being discussed under the conceptual domain of "fashion". Laxness partook in the debate and his writings on women's rights are organically connected to his other writings on modernization; he was a radical feminist and many of the questions raised in the 1920s will be examined further in his plays.

The second major thematic strand of the chapter is the conceptual domain and social practice of mass culture. An immense revolution in telecommunication technologies started around the turn of the nineteenth century in the wake of what is often referred to as the "second industrial revolution" — grounded in the harnessing of electricity — and new media such as photography was transmogrified into a newer one called movies; radio promised to unify vastly dispersed areas and illuminate and educate even the most remote farmlands as news of the world could be beamed through the land virtually as it happened. Interpersonal communications were given an entirely new experiential domain with the telephone, while daily newspapers, preceding the radio, became a part of the same information wave. A person reading the Sunday edition of *The New York Times* would be subjected to more information than a seventeenth century farmer in his whole life.

Linkages between electrical energy and the altered social landscape of modernity influenced the vocabulary and metaphors of cultural critics, including

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<sup>319</sup> See here Nancy F. Cott. *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, especially chapter four, "Equal Rights and Economic Roles," pp. 117–142. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987.

Walter Benjamin, who wrote of the “jolts” and “shocks” of urban life, as well as those addressing experimental artistic practices in terms of the “shock of the new”.<sup>320</sup> As a matter of fact, one of the reasons Benjamin was fascinated by the cinema was that he viewed it as a site allowing for indirect mastery of the forms of modern existence that produced subjective “shocks.”<sup>321</sup> Thinking along similar lines, Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz posit a direct link between the modern and the cinematic experience when they state that the culture of modernity “rendered inevitable something like cinema, since cinema’s characteristics evolved from the traits that defined modern life in general.”<sup>322</sup> Laxness’

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<sup>320</sup> Georg Simmel. “The Metropolis and Mental Life.” *The Blackwell City Reader*. Edited by Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson. London: Blackwell, 2002, pp. 11–20. Walter Benjamin. “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” *Illuminations*. Translation Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968, pp. 155–201. The term “the shock of the new,” as applied to artistic practices of the modernist era, was notably employed by art critic Robert Hughes in his 1980 book *The Shock of the New*.

<sup>321</sup> Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version.” *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin. Translated by Edmund Jephcott, R. Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and Others. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008. It should be noted in this instance that it is necessary to distinguish between three versions of Benjamin’s essay. The initial draft, which was critiqued heavily by Adorno and consequently rewritten by Benjamin. The second version, initially published in a French translation through the intermediary function of Max Horkheimer and then the third, best known version, published in an English translation in the widely disseminated collection of Benjamin’s essays edited by Hannah Arendt, *Illuminations*. See Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin. ‘Editor’s Introduction.’ *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*. Cambridge & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008, pp. 1–18; Miriam Hansen. *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno*. Berkeley & New York: University of California Press, 2011, pp. 104–131. For Adorno’s critique, see “Letters to Walter Benjamin.” *Aesthetics and Politics*. Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin et. al. London & New York: Verso, 2007, pp. 120–126.

<sup>322</sup> Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz. “Introduction.” *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*. Ed. by Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1995, pp. 1–2. The book contains a number of articles in which scholars from various disciplines examine and reevaluate the development of film and film spectatorship in relation to the sensory and cultural environment of modern metropolitan life. A central idea in this new approach is that film spectatorship can be related to previous transformations in subjective experiences of modern life. Attention is brought to bear on various new forms of entertainment and leisure activity that followed the rise of a metropolitan urban culture. Phenomena as diverse as wax museums, amusement parks, and panorama and diorama exhibitions created an allure for the development of a mass audience, one that was attracted to the technological innovations, sensory stimulation and life-like visual representations of reality. Thus the principles of cinema spectatorship had been developed and reinforced even before cinema came into existence. See also Vanessa R. Schwarz. *Spectacular Realities. Early Mass Culture in Fin-De-Siècle Paris*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1999.

engagement with issues of modernization and the social role of technological innovation, as well as new cultural forms, render it far from surprising that he should show interest in a new artistic medium that had moved from the cultural margins to become a global force during his youth and early adulthood. Peter Hallberg points out that Laxness was working on an idea for a screenplay as early as 1922 and he first attempted to visit the US for an extended period in that same year, an unsuccessful precursor to his later stay in Hollywood.<sup>323</sup> Laxness' experience in Hollywood and his reflections on his experience constitutes an important aspect of the chapter.

In Iceland, in a somewhat unusual developmental scheme, the telephone arrived in 1889, long before the telegraph, which did not step ashore with the required radio operator in tow until 1905. The first daily newspaper (*Vísir*) was founded in 1910, a second one in 1913 (*Morgunblaðið*), and a fairly rich environment for journals and magazines developed over the next years and decades. Experiments with radio broadcasting started in the early 1920s, these however proved short lived, but a State Broadcasting Service was founded in 1930.<sup>324</sup> It is thus perhaps fitting that we start our reading of Laxness' 1920s non-fiction work with an early article, "Þjóðkirkjan og víðboð" (The State Church and Radio), published in 1924, where Laxness sets forth some very imaginative uses for radio broadcasts in Iceland. A short theoretical prelude or preface clears the way for our discussion of Laxness, the church and the new uses being made of the electromagnetic sphere.

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<sup>323</sup> Hallberg, *Vefarinn mikli* I, pp. 57–58.

<sup>324</sup> For the various dates and temporal order of the technological shifts that were occurring as they are listed above, I found Gunnar Stefánsson's *Útvarp Reykjavík. Saga Ríkisútvarpsins 1930–1960* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1997, pp. 13–55) to be helpful.



The prelude focuses on key theorists that derive from the Weberian tradition, and pay particular attention to the paradoxes of the twentieth century, as well as the new technologies that were being discovered, mass-produced and marketed. These are Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer on instrumental rationality, Jean-François Lyotard on technoscience and Sigmund Freud on the new technologies of the mind that he developed in the opening decades of the century.

The second half of the present chapter engages with Laxness' writings on cinema, specifically Hollywood cinema, and there we borrow a concept coined by Adorno and Horkheimer, namely that of "the culture industry," and the analysis will also rely on some of Adorno and Horkheimer's theoretical models, concepts and philosophical acuity in order to better place and open up Laxness' remarkable extended essay, "Kvikmyndin ameríska 1928" (The American Film in 1928).

Having staked out a claim in mass culture it may seem a bit surprising that the other central concept of the first half of the chapter is its traditional opposite, nemesis even, namely modernism and the avant-gardes. Indeed, after our discussion of Laxness' reflections on radio and religion, we will move on to his "modernist period," or its early phase, that is the time when he was writing and publishing experimental poetry that was utterly unprecedented in the local literary culture — but still before *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* had been published. The way in which Laxness placed himself strategically within the framework of the discourses of the new in order to construct a self-figuration as a

representative of modernity then leads us on to consider his rhetorical maneuvers in several of his most important essays.

The culmination of the chapter's engagement with mass culture, new cultural technologies and Laxness' relationship to the always shifting ground of modernity is a thorough analysis of the aforementioned essay on Hollywood. It represents a watershed moment in Laxness' understanding and evaluation of key aspects of the modern, and is in addition a unique historical document, as will be shown. As noted above, our friends from Frankfurt will show up, indeed, the spirit of critical theory, the methodology instaurated by the school, infuses these writings in too many ways to mention.

### *1.1 Civilization and its Discontents*

Max Weber's invocation of the tensions between subjective freedom and administrative rationality as encapsulated in the metaphor of the "iron cage" resonates throughout twentieth-century thinking on modernity.<sup>325</sup> Indeed, in his book on modernity, Marshall Berman ascribes a paradigmatic importance to Weber's thesis, albeit a negative one in the sense that he views the notion of the iron cage as marking a conceptual break between those who, despite its manifold problems, find the modern experience invigorating and conducive to aesthetic innovation, and those who view modernity as a failed enterprise.<sup>326</sup> As Berman makes clear, the resistance to capitalistic and bureaucratic modernity during the

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<sup>325</sup> Max Weber. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. by Talcott Parsons. London: Routledge, 1992, p. 181.

<sup>326</sup> Noting of Weber and those who followed in his wake, Berman states that, "[t]wentieth-century critics of modernity almost entirely lack this empathy with, and faith in, their fellow modern men and women [and according to Weber] we are beings without spirit, without heart". Marshall Berman. *All That is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity*. London & New York: Penguin Books, 1988, p. 27.

age of the industrial revolution was frequently articulated in the register of the aesthetic, and — as we have seen — another trope, that of the “two modernities,” has become short-hand for such articulations.<sup>327</sup> It is no coincidence, however, that Berman, who views modernity in a generally positive light, should criticize Weber and, particularly, the discursive tradition that emerges in his wake, one that ranges from Adorno to Foucault.<sup>328</sup>

If the argumentative aim is the explication of an expanded sphere of human action and freedom brought about by modernization, Weber’s theory of modernity demands, one might say, a riposte.<sup>329</sup> In Weber’s model no subject position independent of ideological constraints and inculcation seems available, or, as he puts it, the “tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order” brought into being “technical conditions” that “determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism.”<sup>330</sup> While conceptions of the subject have shifted and changed over time, its representation has often involved the trope of the prisoner, from Plato’s cave to Foucault’s panopticon. Weber’s articulation of the “iron cage” places itself firmly in this tradition while also giving up as lost the Enlightenment ideal of liberated subjects and the free play

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<sup>327</sup> Matei Calinescu. *Five Faces of Modernity. Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1987, pp. 1–60. According to Berman, all the “great modernists of the nineteenth century [...] attack [the environment of modernity] passionately, and strive to tear it down or explode it from within.” *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, p. 19.

<sup>328</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer are, along with Foucault, viewed as representing the *cul de sac* of enlightenment thought, and Weber’s premier disciples, and thus come in for particularly harsh criticism. Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, pp. 28–36.

<sup>329</sup> *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* being one of the most “renowned” works of modern social science, opening up and revolutionizing the field, according to Anthony Giddens who in his introduction nevertheless addresses how many of Weber’s central assumptions have come under criticism. Anthony Giddens. “Introduction.” Max Weber. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. by Talcott Parsons. London: Routledge: 1992, p. vii.

<sup>330</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, pp. 181–182.

of the faculties.<sup>331</sup> For Berman, however, this view of social power structures represents “a seamless web [...] into which no life can break,” and thus a position that closes off, rather than opens up, fruitful theoretical perspectives.<sup>332</sup>

Attempting to overcome the negativity of Weber and his heritage, Berman suggests a number of strategic maneuvers, the most important of which involves the attempt to heal the wounds of fragmentation brought on by modernization by recapturing the *joie de vivre* that characterized the great nineteenth century engagements with technological change and shifting social contexts. What has shattered in modernity, what is broken, is the relationship of the subject to social experience and social meaning. This, Berman states symptomatically, is a condition where the subject experiences “split modernity,” the rift is between „our“ desire to “be rooted in a stable and coherent personal and social past“ and the ever quickening and revolutionary shifts occurring in modernity. That is, the shared “desire for clear and solid values to live by” comes into conflict with the “desire to embrace the limitless possibilities of modern life and experience.”<sup>333</sup> In a sense Berman is coming to terms with a problematic, and expressing a sentiment, that he has “inherited” from the major theorists of the modern age, Marx, Durkheim and Weber. Nevertheless, despite its fragmentary aspect, Berman notes that “modernity can be said to unite all mankind”, implying a historical state or situation where nobody is (or can be) left untouched by the ever more tightly knit and interwoven tapestry of economic interests that shape the global community and thus, directly and indirectly, the effects of

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<sup>331</sup> Plato. *The Republic*. Trans. by G. M. A. Grube. London & New York: Hackett, 1992. Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

<sup>332</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 34.

<sup>333</sup> Berman, *All that is Solid Melts Into Air*, pp. 24, 33, 35.

modernization and developmental processes. Berman then ventures the hopeful suggestion that the:

modernisms of the past can give us back a sense of our own modern roots, roots that go back two hundred years. They can help us connect our lives with the lives of millions of people who are living through the trauma of modernization thousands of miles away, in societies radically different from our own [...] They can illuminate the contradictory forces and needs that inspire and torment us.<sup>334</sup>

Berman's discussion of modernity exemplifies a contradictory state of desiring the stable certainties of the past while simultaneously realizing that they are unable to account for a new world picture. Indeed, what can be glimpsed here is Berman's reliance on (and desire for) grand narratives, something that unifies and offers respite from the shattering of tradition — a "tradition" whose own goal was the shattering and revision of what came before. Indeed, at times Berman, much more so than Habermas for example (whose awareness of the dangers internal to rationality is quite rigorous, hence his elaborate theory of communicative action and its regulative function), seems to be maintaining, at least implicitly, that the long series of twentieth century catastrophes merely represents an unfortunate deviation from the otherwise straightforward course of rationality and progress.

### *1.2 Calamity Triumphant*

Staying however with the Weberian paradigm for the moment, there are two seminal texts of cultural criticism that engage with the implications of his thesis with striking awareness of its dystopian register; texts that do not avert their eyes, so to speak, from the difficulties inherent in the positing of an

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<sup>334</sup> Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, pp. 15, 39.

administrated society but also attempt to move the discussion forward and open up new philosophical and social dimensions. I have in mind Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) and Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947).<sup>335</sup> The latter text famously opens with a harsh verdict on the accomplishments of modern civilization: "Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity."<sup>336</sup> The aphoristic, almost Nietzschean, tenor suggests that social and technical advance has been bought at too high a price and that the hopes of the Enlightenment have not come to pass, rather the opposite.<sup>337</sup>

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer are taking up Weber's mantle in the sense that they, too, grapple with the history and development of rationalization and its twin domains, the promise of emancipation and the eternally recurring realization of exploitation and brutality. Although not a work of historiography in any conventional sense, Adorno and Horkheimer's text nevertheless reaches further back in time than Weber's did, considerably so, as they contend that "the moment of mendacity

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<sup>335</sup> In Weber, the social conditions summarized in the metaphor of the iron cage are fairly recent, still contested and change remains a conditional possibility. None of this applies to Adorno and Horkheimer.

<sup>336</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 1.

<sup>337</sup> At stake in the present context is a late nineteenth and twentieth century "tradition" of thinkers; the earliest ones being Nietzsche and Weber, then Freud and the Frankfurt School. In the second half of the twentieth century, poststructuralist thinking would take up the mantle of the critique of Western structures of reason. There is also the "counter-enlightenment" — a movement whose name was coined by Isaiah Berlin and refers mainly to German romanticism. While the linkages between the two are important, the focus at present, as noted above, is on the lineage leading from Nietzsche and Freud. An excellent lineage of the former "tradition" is Allan Megill. *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida*. Berkeley, London and New York: University of California Press, 1987. On the counter-enlightenment, see Isaiah Berlin. *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

which triumphs in the fraudulent myth of fascism” in the twentieth century was always already in place, being reflected in the “basic text of European civilization,” Homer’s *The Odyssey*, which, in their reading, dramatizes the “principle[s] of capitalist economy” through the emphasis on the secularized cunning of its titular hero.<sup>338</sup> Fascism, it should be noted, becomes an ahistorical term in the text, signifying the moment when the mask of reason slips from the always-present mythic mode of thinking and reveals the “savage rage” that unconsciously grounds naturalized power hierarchies such as the inequality between races and the sexes.<sup>339</sup> The calamity of modernity is the triumph of its mythic aspect.

It is not only administration and the engineering of choice that is at stake in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* but the moment when the iron cage ceases to simply constrain the subjects of modernity and becomes a mortal threat to those who dwell within its confines, comparable perhaps to the scene near the end in the first *Star Wars* movie when the walls of the garbage compactor of the Death Star start to move in on the heroes, threatening to crush them; “sickness becomes the symptom of recovery” Adorno and Horkheimer write, identifying a state of persistent delusion on the part of Western rationalized subjects with regard to their relationship with the natural world, their communal and interpersonal structures and the way in which they represent their interiority to themselves, all of which coalesces into a condition that Adorno and Horkheimer view as terminal for humanity.<sup>340</sup> In his late work of metapsychology, Freud comes to much the same conclusion, emphasizing and analyzing what for him

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<sup>338</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 37, 48.

<sup>339</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 87.

<sup>340</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 89.

represents an unresolvable conflict between the liberty of the individual and the human drive for pleasure and happiness on the one hand and, on the other, the formation of advanced civilization, the social “mechanism” spoken of by Weber, which is designed to regulate and inhibit these very drives.<sup>341</sup>

It is in this context that Freud articulates his conception of the “sacrifice of the instincts” and posits that the discontent produced by ever more stringent regulatory systems is devastating enough to threaten the very foundation and existence of modern society, that is, in the psychological economy discussed by Freud, where ever more extensive mechanisms of repression mirror and respond to the growing administrative apparatus in modern societies, prevalent despair loosens the shackles of the death drive, Thanatos, and renders it dominant and uncontrollable.<sup>342</sup> In this respect, Freud’s reasoning is extremely bleak: “one is bound to come to the conclusion that the whole effort [of Western civilization] is not worth the trouble, and the outcome of it can only be a state of affairs which the individual will be unable to tolerate.”<sup>343</sup> Fuelled by an irresolvable contradiction that renders life intolerable, the civilizing, rationalizing, and cultured aspects of modern life are likely to be defeated by the death drive, the desire for the absolute elimination of unpleasure, a desire whose

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<sup>341</sup> Freud started developing his notion of the “pleasure-ego” and the “reality-ego” in the early teens but the best known formulation of the dialectic at stake would come in the mid 1920s with his grounding of pleasure as a regulating principle of mental functioning in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. James Strachey. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1961.

<sup>342</sup> Freud notes that in “consequence of this primary mutual hostility of human beings, civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration. The interest of work in common would not hold it together; instinctual passions are stronger than reasonable interests.” Sigmund Freud. *Civilization and its Discontents*. Trans. by J. Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961, p. 69.

<sup>343</sup> Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 111.



definitive realization is the oblivion of non-existence, which “we can only welcome as a [...] deliverer.”<sup>344</sup>

Freud speaks of “sacrifice” in connection with the instincts and, indeed, the concept constitutes a pivotal linkage between Freud’s text and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In Freud’s model, as indicated above, civilization imposes immense sacrifices on the individual in the form of the repression of libidinal instincts but also, and more generally speaking, the entire range of the instincts or drives, which all need to be monitored and modified.<sup>345</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer are also invested in the history of subjectivity and for them the dialectic of sacrifice provides a similarly important insight into the workings of reason, its destructive capacity and, in their theorization, its intertwinement with myth. Early in their book of “fragments,” they note that: “All sacrificial acts, deliberately planned by humans, deceive the god for whom they are performed: by imposing on him the primacy of human purposes they dissolve away his power”.<sup>346</sup> Approaching forces that far exceed the human, the rational and cunning creatures that are described in the passage still manage to manipulate and out-manuever the divine, and they do so by sacrificial substitution, making one thing stand for another. In other words, by means of the work of representation and symbolization. This then becomes the means and methodological process by which reason progresses, “the substitution that takes place in sacrifice marks a step toward discursive logic” where material particularities are represented by figures, symbols and equations and, ultimately,

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<sup>344</sup> Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 41.

<sup>345</sup> Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 89.

<sup>346</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 40.

modern science, which is the “highest” form of instrumental rationality.<sup>347</sup> Being dangerously blinkered by the sole focus on “what can be registered mathematically,” “science [...] becomes aestheticism, a system of isolated signs devoid of any intention of transcending the system.”<sup>348</sup> Science, in other words, is endowed with an autonomous existence and is removed from the realm of human experience. It turns into an enclosed system of abstract conceptuality where the knowledge-seeking endeavor itself, although optimistic about its ability to penetrate the deepest abyss of being and material existence, takes on a self-destructive aspect, partly because as a system of thought, scientism is so easily assimilated into, and even conducive to the formation of the administrative *imperatives* of the monetary–bureaucratic system of modern societies, which itself is closely linked to the mode of thinking that Adorno and Horkheimer associate with fascism.<sup>349</sup>

Freud describes an essentially similar process by invoking “the vicissitudes of the instincts,” a process of sublimation that is forced upon the psychic apparatus “entirely by civilization.”<sup>350</sup> In particular, Freud delves into the strange contradiction that through science and technology, “a feeble animal organism” has, as it were, become a “kind of prosthetic God” with “power over space and time,” yet the cultural ideals that direct the societal endeavors usually gathered together under the rubric of “progress” prove unendurable and thus function in a manner akin to the disease of autoimmunity, turning the contents of

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<sup>347</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 6.

<sup>348</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 13.

<sup>349</sup> For Adorno and Horkheimer, the mode of thinking associated with instrumental rationality is summarized in a succinct fashion as the inability to “think thinking”. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 19, see also p. 156.

<sup>350</sup> Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 51.

the system radically against the system itself.<sup>351</sup> The loss of emancipatory possibilities and subjective agency posited by Weber as the inevitable result of the rationalization process are thus articulated in these two texts, on the one hand, in the register of a damaged interiority longing for annihilation and, on the other, as a distorted self image, which serves as an alibi for domination, and a delusional belief in progress, where “progress” is in fact a metonymy for the act of species suicide.

### *1.3 Devices of Wonder*

Shared among all four, Weber, Freud, Adorno and Horkheimer, is the theme of the “prosthetic God,” mankind as the wielder of devices of wonder and power, able to construct self-sustaining systems that quickly overwhelm the cognitive capacity of any individual to grasp them. Among contemporary cultural philosophers, this particular vision of modernity is manifested in the concept of “technoscience.” When employed by, for example, Gilbert Hottois or Jean-François Lyotard, the concept of technoscience refers to a mode of thinking that is particular to modernity, even late modernity, where traditional action-orientated frameworks and value systems are subordinated to the imperatives of performativity and productivity.<sup>352</sup> Perhaps the earliest articulation of this mode

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<sup>351</sup> Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, pp. 44, 39.

<sup>352</sup> On the subject positioning of postmodern information economics and computerized societies, Lyotard notes that: “The transmission of knowledge [serves to] supply the system with players capable of acceptably fulfilling their roles at the pragmatic posts required by institutions.” Placing himself more firmly within the discourse of oppression that is characteristic of Weber and his followers, Lyotard also states: “In matters of social justice and of scientific truth alike, the legitimation of that power is based on its optimizing the system’s performance — efficiency. The application of this criterion to all of our games necessary entails a certain level of terror, whether soft or hard: be operational (that is, commensurable) or disappear.” See Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. p. 48, xxiv.

of thinking as a problem in modernity, or at least the paradigmatic one, derives from Friedrich Nietzsche; a philosopher whose importance for all the figures mentioned so far, including Weber and Freud, was incalculable. For Nietzsche, the problem of modernity was encapsulated in his concept of “nihilism”. For Nietzsche, nihilism represents the loss of all values as nothing foundational can be grounded in a non-transcendental system and this concept, imbued with the meaning entrusted to it by Nietzsche, will be important when we discuss Laxness’ last three plays.<sup>353</sup>

In a playful image that represents an early articulation of nihilism and a critique of scientific thinking and methodologies, Nietzsche compares the work of the “theoretical man” to the physical labor of digging a hole to the center of the earth. Disappointingly, however, before ever reaching the center (and thus, presumably, ultimate truth), the hole keeps being filled in by the spade-work of the neighboring scientist, who is engaging in the exact same enterprise, with equal futility because next to him is another scientist, and so on.<sup>354</sup> The excavation may reveal, in the moment before the earth starts to be shoveled in again, a law of nature or the preconditions that define a mammal, but the absurdity of the project lies in a conception of science that is the polar opposite of the one articulated above, rather than being foundational, scientific knowledge is provisional and compromised by its subjective and anthropomorphic nature, as well as the tendency of the practitioners of science, as Nietzsche viewed it, to work at cross purposes with each other.

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<sup>353</sup> See in particular, Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Will to Power*. Trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale. Ed. by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage, 1968.

<sup>354</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy or, Hellenism and Pessimism*. Trans. by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1967, pp. 94–95.

The iron cage, the theoretical man, the vicissitudes of the instincts and the dialectic of sacrifice; these are all examples of the attempt to figure modernity through the prism of technology and science and the rise of the rationalizing structures that made, for example, the conduct of capitalistic business practices possible, as well as the existence of the modern state. It is useful at this point to look back at Lyotard's notion of "technoscience" and how, in addition to its critical signification, the concept also denotes the complex interplay, and distinction, between technology and science.<sup>355</sup> From this perspective, the former concept, technology, indicates the way in which solutions to material problems are put forward and enacted while the latter references a conceptual domain, one that in modernity has taken shape as both a method and a body of knowledge.

The combination of the two concepts into a single phrase then serves to indicate the exponential growth of the capacity and power of technology under the aegis of scientific protocols. At stake as well, is the relationship between science and culture and whether the former is somehow constituted by or dependent on historical forces or cultural constructions. Although disputed, particularly among deconstructive cultural and social theorists, not least the inheritors of Nietzsche, scientificity is commonly seen as transcending historical specificity and cultural contexts.<sup>356</sup> Transient historical phenomena and power systems, it is thus maintained, may influence the development of science, determine its directions and the contours of its manifestations, even prevent its

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<sup>355</sup> Don Idhe and Evan Selinger. "Introduction." *Chasing Technoscience. Matrix for Materiality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003, pp. 1–14.

<sup>356</sup> The work of Bruno Latour features prominently here, in particular his *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*. Trans. by Steve Woolgar. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

emergence, but they do not shape the content of the concept. Technology on the other hand need not be scientific and is subject to constant change, rejection and improvement, and therefore belongs to a different register.<sup>357</sup> But as noted, this view is of course not uncontested. Gillian Beer for example holds a cultural constructivist position, stating “neither literature nor science is an entity, and what constitutes literature or science is a matter for agreement in a particular historical period or place.”<sup>358</sup> A conceptual distinction that is based on disciplinary differences proves at any rate to be limiting as the functional difference between the constitutive domains of the notion of technoscience has no explanatory capacity when it comes to the cultural implications of its rise. Therein lies the value of Weber’s analysis, encapsulated in the metaphor of the “iron cage,” as well as that of the other philosophers referenced above, from Nietzsche to Adorno to Lyotard.

Although in constant motion and subject to contestations in the field of legitimation, sometimes even, as the Beer quote demonstrates, viewed as conceptually empty, the hermeticism, isolation, and self-enclosed “aestheticism” identified by Adorno and Horkheimer as constitutive of the scientific enterprise, can nevertheless be seen to endow scientific discourse with the rarefied distinction of being fundamentally unassailable as the abstraction of an ultimate truth that is, theoretically, applicable to any material phenomena. This is not to deny that science might for example, much as Adorno and Horkheimer point out, be blinkered in terms of social experience, unable to give direction to human life,

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<sup>357</sup> Writing, for instance, is a technology and an important aspect of the notion of technoscience is the manner in which scientificity enhances human technological capacity.

<sup>358</sup> Gillian Beer. “Translation or Transformation? The Relations of Literature and Science.” *Openfields: Science in Cultural Encounter*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 173.

or that it represents an enclosed system. Indeed, although always in motion, as noted above, a fact that motivates its symptomatic emplotment in narratives of progress, science is, counter-intuitively but much in keeping with the functioning of systems once they have been set in place, also resistant to change and development; science, so to speak, throws itself out into the world already having assumed its form of utter finality and perfection.

These predicates are primarily grounded in semantics and linguistic logic, somewhat akin to the line of thinking suggested by Beer but, importantly, retaining a conceptual meaning, a signified that posits itself as transcendental and therefore serves to ground the entire system: applicability, or, as Lyotard noted in a somewhat different context, performativity.<sup>359</sup> That is, failed science can be argumentatively sidelined as simply not being science, but once, for example, the success of something like the Geodesic mission has been established, not only has the roundness of the Earth been measured in a way that is final and nonrevisable, but the methodologies that ground the project have also proven themselves to be beyond dispute.<sup>360</sup>

As Beer points out, agents ranging from individuals to whole communities are of course free to deploy the concept at will, fill it with whatever content they please, but if the plan is to vaccinate for polio or fly across the Atlantic, the conception of science that is being used better accord with the modern one. If the point is being slightly belabored, the reason is that the array of epistemological and ontological privileges that were thus consolidated by science in a spectacular fashion, and in such a brief span of time, represents one of the most dramatic

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<sup>359</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. 2–5.

<sup>360</sup> On the Geodesic mission, see Ken Alder. *The Measure of All Things: The Seven-Year Odyssey and Hidden Error That Transformed the World*. London and New York: The Free Press, 2003.

events of modernity.<sup>361</sup> Mostly, the privileges associated with speaking the uncontested and uncontestable truth had belonged to another discursive formation, religion. Transcendent claims were usually metaphysical; now, however, universal truths were brought down to the material plane and although less dramatic than the revelations of the mystics and philosophers, at least in narrative and emotional terms, this proved to be the ideological engine that powered modernization and secularization in the West.

As we have seen Laxness met with difficulties when arguing for the transcendence of religion while also being unwilling to undermine the foundation of the technological efficiency that he so vehemently promoted, namely science. The church of course had attempted to navigate the same dilemma for centuries.<sup>362</sup> Technology can function admirably within a theistic framework, although it may perhaps not progress all that far. Religion tends to do less well within a scientific framework; hence the frequent hostility. While Laxness grappled most forcefully with this problematic in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* and *Alþýðubókin*, it makes a peculiar and highly suggestive appearance in an early essay entitled “Þjóðkirkjan og víðboð” (The State Church and Radio, 1924). In light of the fact that the essay’s ostensible purpose is to admonish Icelanders for spiritual turpitude, its lightheartedness and humor are surprising, but the most interesting aspect of the essay is how it activates the domain of technology in its portrayal of the reduced scope of religion in modernity. Being

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<sup>361</sup> Focusing on the moment when science became, rather than a hermetic form of knowledge with almost no discursive connection to the population at large, an adventure and a discipline to be pursued in something of a democratic fashion, Richard Adams’ *Age of Wonder: The Romantic Generation and the Discovery of the Beauty and Terror of Science* (New York and London: Vintage, 2010), is a useful depiction of this moment of transition.

<sup>362</sup> A good example is the way in which Laxness repeats the conventional Catholic defense in the case of the burning of Galileo in *Kaþólsk viðhorf* (Catholic Views, 1925). The classic statement on the subject is Bertrand Russell. *Religion and Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.



essentially more optimistic with regard to the human condition than the theorists noted above, a stance that comes as part and parcel with the belief in redemption and a substantial world — the loss of this world view is precisely the content of Nietzsche’s concept of nihilism — the article is nevertheless deeply ambivalent about the meanings of modernity and it offers a vision of technology’s potential erection of an “iron cage” through the ideological imprimatur of its mediated content. In this way it points the way forward to Laxness’ later writings.

#### *1.4 Drift of the Present*

The beginning of the essay reveals that Laxness has done a bit of fieldwork — somewhat in the manner of Umbi, the Bishop’s emissary that the author would send out into the countryside roughly four decades later in *Kristnihald undir Jökli* (Under the Glacier, 1968) — and examined the conduct of Christianity in various places outside the capital. He then shares his findings in the essay, which are dismaying. Disinterest in religious practice and doctrinal adherence is widespread, Laxness reports, and church attendance is shameful, virtually non-existent. Indeed, churches that are not boarded up and abandoned tend to serve as makeshift slaughterhouses for local farmers or, virtually a best-case scenario, as the storage spaces for common bric-a-brac, obscure objects long discarded. To say that churches in Iceland have ceased to function as sites of sacred

reflection and communion is to make light of the dire situation that Laxness appears to have encountered on his travels.<sup>363</sup>

The factual accuracy of Laxness' report is almost entirely beside the point. His aim is rhetorical rather than evidentiary or journalistic — and should in addition be read and understood through the prism of his Catholicism. The depictions of boarded up churches and animal carcasses illustrate, first, the self-defeating ramifications of the reformation, which here, in addition, serves as one of many metonyms of modernity, and, second, what Laxness takes to be the profoundly inane symbolic economy of Lutheranism. Although seemingly less important, the latter point is in fact central to the essay, as Laxness sees ritual and the observance of traditional models as the cornerstones of the meaning generation of religion. That is, Laxness is something of a materialist and a behaviorist when it comes to religious practice: one is what one does, not what one says.<sup>364</sup>

On those rare occasions when a church might actually serve as the site of a sermon, what takes place is usually no more than oratorical exercises of little or no spiritual value, what Laxness refers to with considerable irony as “lectures,” rhetorical excursions listless in style and banal in thought.<sup>365</sup> In place of the authentic religious mediator who supervises and conducts a ritual of historical and existential significance and thus lends urgency and coherence to religious observance, the Lutheran flock is placed in the hands of a second rate

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<sup>363</sup> Laxness' list of less than illustrious uses being made of churches in the countryside is in fact considerably longer and includes, in addition to that already mentioned, dance halls and storage space for riding attire. See Halldór Laxness. “Þjóðkirkja og víðboð.” *Vörður*. 20 December, 1924, p. 4.

<sup>364</sup> This is manifested and on display frequently in Laxness' diaries from his days as an incipient monk, *Dagar hjá múnkum* (Days with Monks, 1987).

<sup>365</sup> Halldór Laxness, “Þjóðkirkja og víðboð,” p. 4.

peddler of middle class pieties: “People choose to stay home or venture out for a fun leisure trip rather than listen to some spiritual inanity that they could easily come up with themselves.”<sup>366</sup> What Laxness is referencing here, most importantly, is the fact that the Lutheran priest writes his own sermons and homilies. The regularity and frequency with which the priest is required to do this results in the dilution of the divine message.

The underlying thrust of the article involves the secularist movement inherent to modernity — the state of the churches is emblematic of a shift in values — and how, in such an age, religion simply becomes one of any number of available life style choices or past-times. Appearing to accept the irreversibility of this process, Laxness still argues that rather than simply giving up and allowing the unfortunate trend to continue gaining momentum, technological modernity, the very origin of the social forces that so radically undermine the stature of the sacred, may in a surprising reversal offer a way of not only addressing the decline in church attendance but also provide a highly rational method of reducing the expenses of the state in running and maintaining a religious apparatus for the entire nation. What, Laxness asks his audience to ponder, constitutes the major outlay of funds when it comes to a system of state run churches? This it turns out is a simple business equation, applicable to the local shopkeeper as well as the institution that mediates divine wisdom on Earth, namely real estate and staff. In a gesture that is radically of its time and reminiscent of Taylorism and other ideologies of efficiency that were gaining ground in the decades after the turn of the century, Laxness suggests a model

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<sup>366</sup> Laxness, “Þjóðkirkja og víðboð,” p. 4. In the original the quote reads: “Fólk kýs heldur að sitja heima eða fara í skemtitúr, en hlusta á eitthvað andlegt glundur, sem það gæti kanske makað sjálf.”

that maximizes productivity through the combination of downsizing and outsourcing.<sup>367</sup> What needs to be done is to find a single talented orator and place him in front of a microphone at the national broadcasting corporation.

Employing modern mass communication technologies would not only make virtually the entire priesthood superfluous but also ensure that the Christian “message” had an unprecedented audience. All that is required, in addition to the talented communicator, Laxness suggests, is to place a radio “in every home”.<sup>368</sup> Under such circumstances, a single figure suffices to conduct Sunday mass for the entire nation, and as churches have been replaced by the domestic sphere as the site of interaction with the divine, something that at any rate is in keeping with the nature of Lutheranism, valuable real estate is freed up.

Laxness illustrates his position through the ironic invocation of technology and its alignment with a substantive lack deeply embedded in the Lutheran church, a lack that is associated with its signifying system and how the “worldliness” of its practices plays into processes of secularization. Laxness for example subtly references the way in which Lutheranism broke with Catholicism on the grounds of the latter’s insularity and monopolistic tendencies, the response to which is most clearly symbolized in the Lutheran move away from Latin to national languages, that is, its radical break was manifested and made permanent through the employment of communication media, in this case the

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<sup>367</sup> John Allen. “Fordism and Modern Industry.” Stuart Hall et. al (eds). *Modernity. An Introduction to Modern Societies*. London: Blackwell, 1996, pp. 280–306.

<sup>368</sup> Laxness, “Þjóðkirkja og víðboð,” p. 4. In the original: “Þá virðist mér svona fónn þurfa að komast inn á hvert heimili á Íslandi.”

priest, the church and “vulgar tongues”.<sup>369</sup> By extension, radio and technological communicative media is the modern manifestation of “vulgar tongues,” radio in particular holding out to the individual a promise of a private and, in a sense, unmediated relationship to the world at large. News and culture and, generally speaking, human speech originating in distant and unknown subjects, now enters the home and engages the individual (easily extrapolated into a the notion of a global audience) in an intimate conversation, much like the Lutheran system replaced an enormous mediating apparatus with the concept of the personal prayer. The complexities that are involved in the acclimatization to the demands of modernity reveal however a conflicted attitude on Laxness’ part towards not only the godless current moment but also the cause he is supposedly promoting, religious orthodoxy, as his fascination with the new medium of radio, as will be touched on below, cannot help but shine through.

It is also important to note that when he proposes a delivery system for religion directly into the home, Laxness is, in part, employing hyperbolic irony as a mode of critique but he is also engaging with discourses that were newly prominent in Iceland at the time and involved the immense shifts in social practice that were heralded by the markers of technological modernity; markers that had, in a brief span of time, moved from being tantalizing rumors to making themselves felt in everyday life.<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> The vulgar tongue refers to the shift from Latin to vernacular speech in European countries in the medieval and early modern period. See Jacques Le Goff. *The Birth of Europe*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006, pp. 146–189.

<sup>370</sup> Major journals in the first decades of the century, with *Eimreiðin* being most conspicuous in this instance, but the others following along similar lines, devoted considerable space and energy to keeping up with technological progress. Several, for example, featured regular columns on technological advance.

The very first article introducing the technology of radio to the Icelandic reading public had, for example, been published only a year earlier.<sup>371</sup> In an interesting temporal juxtaposition, Otto B. Arnar published a reflective essay entitled simply “Útvarp” (Radio) in the same weekly magazine as Laxness, *Vörður*, with Arnar’s article appearing the day before “Þjóðkirkjan og víðboð,” which serves as an indicator of the dynamic nature of the interest in technology and modernity at the time.<sup>372</sup> Arnar seeks to counter the arguments of those suspicious of modern technology and foreign influences, and criticizes the delight this faction shows in having successfully closed the country off from the “pestilence” of broadcast radio;<sup>373</sup> at issue, Arnar maintains, is a fundamental misunderstanding of the function and possibilities inherent in the new technology, which includes an important pedagogical dimension and the dissemination of culture into sparsely populated and isolated areas.<sup>374</sup> He goes on to emphasize that in order to fully harness the usefulness of the medium, a radio needs to get into “every home,” a sentiment that Laxness would echo the very next day, albeit in a different context.<sup>375</sup>

In another substantial article on radio, published around the same time, Guðmundur Jónmundsson laments the limited distribution of radio devices among Icelanders.<sup>376</sup> This would as a matter of fact be one of the factors limiting and delaying the institution of broadcast radio on a regular basis, that is, the

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<sup>371</sup> Sveinn Sigurðsson. “Töfrar loftskættatækjanna.” *Eimreiðin*, 5–6/1923, pp. 373–375.

<sup>372</sup> “Útvarp” by Otto B. Arnar was published in *Vörður* on 19 December, 1925, Laxness essay, as noted in an above footnote, appeared a day later, on 20 December.

<sup>373</sup> For more on this, see Stefánsson, *Útvarp Reykjavík*, pp. 27–29.

<sup>374</sup> Arnar, “Útvarp,” p. 2. What Arnar says in the original is: “Við Íslendingar höfum ávalt verið varkárir gegn erlendum ‘pestum’ og áhrifum, og lengi tókst okkur að loka landinu fyrir þessari ‘farsótt’ (sem sumir skammsýnir menn nefna útvarpið).”

<sup>375</sup> Arnar, “Útvarp,” p. 3.

<sup>376</sup> Guðmundur Jónmundsson. “Loftskætti og útvarp.” *Vörður*, 3 July, 1926, p. 2.

distribution of radio sets — as well as conflicts around the license to sell such devices.<sup>377</sup>

Significant figures such as novelist and playwright Guðmundur Kamban made it clear, for example, that cars on the streets, the web spun by the telegraph across the country, radio broadcasts and film screenings entailed absolutely no contribution to Icelandic culture, even undermining its traditional forms.<sup>378</sup> To an extent, Laxness, the “delegate” of modernity as Guðmundsson put it, implicitly aligns himself with Kamban and the contradictions that ensue destabilize the homology that is necessary to ground Laxness’ point about contemporary Icelandic religious practices.<sup>379</sup> In his essay, the new medium of the radio is presented as a clearly revolutionary force and a unique venue for addressing an enormous but disparate audience as a cohesive whole. Indeed, although the radio is not the main subject of the article, the thrill involved in finding a cultural use for a new technological medium, and the implications of the societal change embedded in its wide distribution, are clearly discernable in the playfulness and imaginative range of Laxness’ rhetoric.

At the same time, radio also functions as a mechanism that facilitates the main critical theme of the article, demonstrating how the banality of Lutheranism has rendered religious practice vacuous. This is condensed in the redundant figure who preaches without a congregation. That is, the fact that

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<sup>377</sup> Stefánsson, *Útvarp Reykjavík*, pp. 29–40.

<sup>378</sup> Guðmundur Kamban. “Sjerkenni íslenskrar menningar.” *Vörður*, 27 March, 1926, p. 2. Kamban notes that: “Eins og það ástand, að Reykjavík er nú jafn hrönnuð bifreiðum og götur Parísarborgar, eða að sömu film sem sýnd eru í New York eru hespuð í íslenskum sjávarþorpum, eða að ritsíminn ríður net sitt yfir landið, eða að komið er upp þráðlausumstöðvum og radió – eins og allt þetta hafi bætt einni alin við hæð menningarinnar.” On the development of the “picture–radio,” see “Erlender frjettir.” *Vörður*, 1 September, 1928, p. 4.

<sup>379</sup> Halldór Guðmundsson. “*Loksins, loksins*”: *Vefarinn mikli og upphaf íslenskra nútímabókmennta*. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1987, p. 122.

radio should prove such a convenient medium for a debased and flawed discourse would seem to imply that it also suffers a profound lack, that as a method of communication it is “flat” and incapable of sustaining the multiple valences necessary to mediate a symbolic register as ornate and tradition bound as Catholicism, one that far outstrips language as a conduit between the human and the transcendental. It is in this sense that a homology is posited between Lutheranism and radio. Modern technology, along with Lutheranism, a strange but also a peculiarly Weberian conflation, is thus placed in opposition to the true faith whose organic connection to the past functions as a critical rejoinder to the ephemeral drift of the present. As noted, Laxness also implicitly invokes the criticizing voices that Arnar and Jónmundsson attempted to counter, the ones maintaining that radio could only mediate insignificant and vacuous content, that its mechanical reproduction of sound was hollow and that, as a medium, radio was only suited to cultural mediocrity and, in addition, it usually didn’t work properly (a common complaint involved static, white noise and distorted sound); all this would seem a fit analogy with Lutheranism.<sup>380</sup>

Writing about “talking machines,” Friedrich Kittler notes that they place the distance between the source of the utterance and the receiver under erasure, as if “voices travelled along the transmitting bones of acousting self-perception directly from the mouth into the ear’s labyrinth [and] hallucinations became real.”<sup>381</sup> The hallucination in question is the problem of indexicality and

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<sup>380</sup> The complaints appeared in various newspapers and weekly journals at the time, as well as more local journals printed in the provinces. An excellent coverage is offered in Guðjón Friðriksson. *Nýjustu fréttir. Saga fjölmiðlunar á Íslandi frá upphafi til vorra daga*. Reykjavík: Íðunn, 2000, pp. 58–70. See also Stefánsson, *Útvarp Reykjavík*, p. 32.

<sup>381</sup> Friedrich Kittler. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Trans. by Winthrop-Young and M. Wutz. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 37.



seemingly perfect mimeticism, but, more importantly, the lack of distance thus created cannot help but undermine the sacred (a conceptual constellation grounded in the distance between the human subject and the divine) and thus speaks closely to what Laxness took to be the Lutheran disregard for ritual, display and the symbolic function that had always been an important facet of religious practice for him, as noted above.

The resultant emptiness is replicated in the empty, if direct, processes of broadcast dissemination; its deceptive and illusionary depiction of “presence.” Nevertheless it is important to note that although it is precisely the capacity of broadcast radio to communicate across a vast cultural field, the incredible *reach* of modern technology in other words, that allows Laxness to conceptualize his vision of decline and articulate his critique, this same revolutionary communicative power is what fascinates him and opens up a space for the accentuation of positives and possibilities, rather than focusing solely on radio’s cultural poverty. Thus, for example, rather than emphasizing the homological relation between the medium of radio and disenchanting religious discourse, one might highlight the sheer bravado of the idea that Laxness puts forth and how, embedded in it as well, is a growing realization of the way in which, following the telegraph, the gramophone, the telephone and the cinema, technology is reshaping virtually every aspect of the lifeworld and that, despite the irony that is integral to the essay, it is clear to Laxness that the force with which this is happening is bound to destabilize age-old customs and ways of living.<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> The ideas presented by Laxness in an ironic mode in “Þjóðkirkjan og víðboð” would be argued in full seriousness less than a year later, including the efficacy of having a single mediator of the divine provide sermons for the country as a whole. See Gísli J. Ólafsson. “Víðvarp.” *Símablaðið*, 1/1925.

Although defending the institution that more than any other represents age-old customs, the modernizer in Laxness is somewhat contradictorily present in the glee with which posits technology as the means of “rescue” for Lutheranism — which, as a religious practice, is little more than a dysfunctional remnant of an old mistake, basically ripe to be thrown unto the dust-heap of history — pleasure that is characteristic of the modernizing reformer but appears in this instance not to be accompanied by the realization that, despite whatever supplement of spiritual fulfillment that the symbolic register of Catholicism may offer, science and technology are co-opting the authority of all religious systems, not just the “flawed” ones.

There is another way in which the homological critique proves somewhat unconvincing. Religious adherence, much as Laxness makes clear in *Kapólsk viðhorf*, is essentially grounded in the subject’s utter and complete surrender to the will of the gods and their earthly representatives. One of the implications of man taking for himself the role of a “prosthetic God,” to reference Freud’s description of the immense technological capacity of modernity, is that the distance of the divine from human practices and the modern man, a distance that is required for the sacred to retain its function, lessens and grows smaller until it might seem to disappear altogether. Mankind and the human domination of nature now occupy the space formerly held by religion, this being, as noted earlier, one of the driving forces of the entire modernization project. Adorno and Horkheimer address this precise point when they note that “in their mastery of nature, the creative God and the ordering mind are alike. Man’s likeness to God

consists in sovereignty over existence, in the lordly gaze, in the command.”<sup>383</sup>

Laxness’ invocation and rhetorical deployment of the radio, then, does not simply function to mock Lutheranism but also, and at the same time, to depict man as immensely powerful, modernization as an inevitable and in many ways a highly positive replacement for religion, and radio as talismanic of the future envisioned by progressive thinkers.<sup>384</sup>

### *1.5 Propaganda in the Home*

There is another aspect of Laxness’ discussion of the technology of radio that requires our attention. As a concept that invokes the way in which science functions as the impetus for technology to reach into the daily lives and everyday practices of ever-larger swathes of the population, “technoscience,” has, in Laxness’ rendering of the mass appeal of radio, turned the relatively harmless chattering of the lone priest into an unprecedented cultural force. It is in this context that it is possible to view what starts out as a critique of Lutheranism where technology is employed as an ironic device, as an incipient engagement with the culture industries; even as an allegory of their rise, propaganda, after all, is beamed into “every home” in Laxness’ hypothetical illustration of what the present could be, as well as modern demographic analysis, where technology merges with science to provide an inkling of how societies may be administrated.<sup>385</sup> It is even safe to say that more than an “inkling” of such

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<sup>383</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 6.

<sup>384</sup> The notion of the “talismanic” (and thus obliquely future oriented technological device) derives from Leo Charney and Vanesa R. Schwartz. “Introduction.” *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*. Ed. by Leo Charney and Vanesa R. Schwartz. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1995, pp. 1–2

<sup>385</sup> See Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 94–136.

administrative potentialities is provided in the essay as Laxness, when marshaling forth his closing arguments, posits the result of the technologization of religion, its mediation into “every home,” as the literal transformation of religion into a technology of power and control:

With a single priest appointed for the entire country, a solution has also been found to the persistent problem of disparate teachings being communicated from the pulpit, a problem that many consider to be of the uttermost significance [...] and the likelihood of erroneous conceptions finding their way to an audience has been radically reduced, because the radio broadcast would be unyielding in the promulgation of its opinion.<sup>386</sup>

Radio here functions as a monolithic apparatus well suited to work in the domain of ideology and political domination.<sup>387</sup> Indeed, if religion has always been a technology of power, as one of Laxness’ early influences, Upton Sinclair maintained, Laxness can be seen as playing with the notion of how, through the combinatory effects of technoscience, its function could be rendered even more drastic and effective, a line of thought that partly flounders against the historical logic of its decline.<sup>388</sup>

In the context of the above, it is important to emphasize that the hostility and critique directed at Lutheranism never completely envelopes the metaphoric vehicle of the radio, which retains an ambivalent position as medium that is limited in its expressive scope and associated with a certain class, particularly the petite bourgeoisie, but also one whose mode of address is unique in terms of

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<sup>386</sup> Laxness, “Þjóðkirkja og víðboð,” p. 4. In the original, the quote reads: “Um leið og einn prestur væri fyrir allt landið væri loku fyrir það skotið, sem ýmsum þykir nú mest til boga, að sín kenningin væri þjedikun frá hverjum þjedikunarstólnum [...] og um leið settur þröskuldur við því að trúmálalhjervillur sþryttu upp hjá fólki, því víðboðið myndi sitja við sinn keip.”

<sup>387</sup> Adorno og Horkheimer address precisely this capacity of radio technology when they note that, “[t]he step from telephone from radio clearly distinguished the roles [of participative or passive cultural engagement]. The former liberally permitted the participant to play the role of subject. The latter democratically makes everyone equally into listeners, in order to expose them in authoritarian fashion to the same programs”. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 95.

<sup>388</sup> Upton Sinclair. *Mammonart. An Essay in Economic Interpretation*. Westport: Hyperion Press, 1975, pp. 11–19.

immediacy and a mass audience.<sup>389</sup> As noted, the propagandistic efficiency of technology as envisioned by Laxness points in this instance towards his later analysis of Hollywood, but notable as well is the early sketch offered in the text, brief as it is, of the conceptual triumvirate that defines modernity. Laxness puts forward a scenario where what was emerging as an everyday technology interacts in a direct fashion with institutional structures and carries with it the possibility to rewrite the conceptual terrain of a national culture.<sup>390</sup> In a fairly precise fashion, he traces the contours of an experiential framework unique to modernity and even suggests how a central aspect of that framework, namely fragmentation, might be overcome through technological intervention. This is a point that Adelaide Morris has also made when she describes the transnational aural opulence of a medium that seems to stand for unity in the face of the manifold dispersals of modernity: “The technologies that allowed a World War II speech delivered in Germany to resound simultaneously in the streets of Toronto, Paris, London, and New York made the world once again submit to a single story teller, a politician or a poet able to weave a spell,” or, in Laxness playful framework, a somewhat flawed preacher.<sup>391</sup> The ambivalence on display

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<sup>389</sup> When recreating the typical dinnertime environment of radio listening, Laxness clearly has an upper middle class home in mind and thus accentuates how economic interest smooths the way for ideological dissemination and indoctrination.

<sup>390</sup> The conceptual triumvirate that defines modernity is here taken to include the lifeworld, a conceptual dimension and the role of institutions as a mediating force between the former two categories, see chapter 1.

<sup>391</sup> Adelaide Morris. “Sound Technologies and the Modernist Epic.” *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*. Ed. by A. Morris. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997, p. 37. A very similar thought is expressed by Sigurðsson in his early essay on radio, when he notes that “At the great races in England, which are conducted near to London on the last Wednesday of May, the so called Derby day, a wireless device was employed this past spring to tell of the results. The news of the final outcome had arrived in New York twenty seconds after the races were over or, in other words, considerably before the immense crowd present at the race itself, was aware of the result.” Sigurðsson, “Töfrar loftskættækjanna,” p. 375. In the original: “Við kappreiðarnar miklu á Englandi, sem árlega fara fram í grend við Lundúnaborg síðasta miðvikudag í maí, Derby-daginn svonefnda, var í vor notað þráðlaust firðtal til þess að skýra frá úrslitunum. Fregnin um úrslitin var komin til New-York tuttugu sekúndum

in “Þjóðkirkja og víðboð” thus contrasts in interesting ways with Laxness’ more precisely tuned rhetorical essays on modernization. Beyond that however, the essay can be viewed as a significant moment in the early formation of what would remain a key problematic throughout Laxness’ career, namely the manifold implications of technological modernity.

### 1.6 I Was a Teenage Modernist

Laxness’ striking discursive appropriation of the cultural capital of modern art, motivated in part by his own experiments with poetic form and incipient plans for an atypical novel, was central to his projection of himself as a modern figure in the 1920s. A notable case in point is the 1925 publication of one of Laxness’ best known poems, “Unglingurinn í skóginum” (The Youth in the Forest), which struck a highly distinctive note in the context of the mainstream of Icelandic poetry at the time.<sup>392</sup> According to Örn Ólafsson, it marks the “beginning of [Laxness’] modernist poetry, as it can be described as a journey from intellectual understanding to perception, the dwelling on beauty.”<sup>393</sup> Jóhann Hjálmarsson agrees, referring to the poem as the “crossroads” in Laxness’ poetic development, while Eysteinn Þorvaldsson notes, “nothing of the kind had been seen before” in

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efitr að kappreiðunum var lokið eða með öðrum orðum, löngu áður en fjöldinn af þeim viðstaddir voru kappreiðarnar, vissu um úrslitin.”

<sup>392</sup> “Unglingurinn í skóginum” was, as noted above, first published in *Eimreiðin* in 1925. It was reprinted in Laxness’ first book of poems *Kvæðakver* (Poetry Booklet, 1930). In the second edition of the poetry collection, published in 1949, rather substantial changes were made. The layout of the poem was changed drastically and several lines in the text altered to make them more elegant and “slicker”. In later iterations, the name of the poem would also be written according to the grammatical style that Laxness adopted early on: “Únglínurinn í skóginum”.

<sup>393</sup> Örn Ólafsson. “Framúrstepna Halldórs Laxness.” *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 4/1992, p. 84. In the original: “Það er eins konar *upphaf módernustu ljóða, því það má kalla ferð frá vitrænum skilningi að skynjun, að því að dvelja við fegurð.*”

Icelandic poetry.<sup>394</sup> Þorsteinn Þorsteinsson introduces the poem as “Laxness’ greatest poem” and one that stands “unique in the history of Icelandic poetry”.<sup>395</sup>

The poem was accompanied by a preface where the author introduces the new avant-garde movement of expressionism and thereby also indicates how to categorize his poem. The preface notes that:

[e]xpressionistic poetry is intended to generate subjective effects through inflection and the auditory dimension of words, rather than offer a specific correct meaning. An expressionistic poem can invoke for the reader a variety of disparate positions at the same time. Expressionism is a play with artifice, as can be said of all art more or less, and it references the imagination without shunning common sense. But those who cannot employ their imaginations will be left only with scraps when it comes to expressionism.<sup>396</sup>

While not in accordance with the consensus when it comes to the central tenets of expressionism, the above description is nevertheless accurate in terms of the logic at work in the poem. “Unglingurinn í skóginum” plays with artifice and generates an extensive range of subjective affects through the auditory dimension of words and their inflection, rather than their combination into an edifice of meaning or verisimilitude. The speaker in the poem, a young woman, describes a dream wherein she re-experiences a past moment of erotically

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<sup>394</sup> Jóhann Hjálmarsson. “Fyrstu nútímaljóðin.” *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, 7 April, 1968, p. 12. In the original: “Hér eru vegamót.” Eysteinn Þorvaldsson. *Atómskáldin. Aðdragandi og upphaf móðernisma í íslenskri ljóðagerð*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1980, p. 54. In the original: “Ekkert þessu líkt hafði sést hér áður þegar ljóðið birtist í tímaritinu Eimreiðinni vorið 1925.”

<sup>395</sup> Þorsteinn Þorvaldsson. “Mig dreyndi ég geingi úti skóg.” *Skírnir*, 1/2010, pp. 161–162. In the original: “Þetta mesta kvæði Halldórs sem er einstakt í íslenskri ljóðlistarsögu”.

<sup>396</sup> Halldór Laxness. “Unglingurinn í skóginum.” *Eimreiðin*, 1/1925, p. 70. In the original: “Expressíónistiskum skáldskap er fremur ætlað að valda hughrifum fyrir hreims sakir og hljómrænnar notkunar orða en hins, að gefa einhverja eina rétta efnislausn. Expressíónistiskt kvæði getur brugðið upp fyrir áheyrenda hinum fjarskyldustu viðhorfum í sömu andrá. Expressíónismus er hillingarleikur, eins og reyndar öll list, meir eða minna; hann skírskotar til ímyndaraflsins, án þess þó, að skynsemi nokkurs manns þurfi að fara varhluta af því, sem hann hefur á borðstólnum, og hver, sem sneyddur er gáfu til ímyndunar, gengur slyppur frá borði þar sem hann er annarsvegar.”

inflected pastoral joy:<sup>397</sup> “I dreamt that I walked in the forest, like last year, when I walked there with my female friend; and stood in the clearing by the brook.”<sup>398</sup> In the dream, however, the events are recast in an uncanny register where, instead of a female companion in the leafy environs, the speaker meets the youth of the title, a Pan-like figure whose lightly mocking tones, incessant word-play and prickly insights invoke a combination of hostility and disorientation in the speaker:

And then the youth in the forest arrives, with a young branch in hand, he runs towards the edge of the brook, dressed in a cape made of leaves.

And he looks down into the brook, takes water in his palm, throws it into the air and says

Eia!

Eia, water! Eia, pearls!

Eia plays,

plays in the sunshine

in the forest<sup>399</sup>

The poem continues in this vein, with the utterances of the youth however growing ever more abstract as their auditory dimension becomes more spectacular, almost hypnotic. Eventually, however, the vivacity and lightheartedness shift into a more funerary register, and the speaker wakes up: “Then I felt as if I started crying, and then I awoke.”<sup>400</sup>

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<sup>397</sup> The speaker gives voice to the youth of the title, recounting verbatim their dialogue with certain phrases and exclamations accentuated in an almost theatrical fashion. It might however be possible to argue that midway through the poem another voice enters the discourse, describing how the youth leans over a pool upon whose surface the past is reflected, but it is equally possible to align this interlude with the framing device.

<sup>398</sup> Halldór Laxness. “Unglingurinn í skóginum.” *Eimreiðin*, 1/1925, p. 70. In the original: “Mig dreymdi eg gengi í skóginn, einsog í fyrra, er eg gekk með stöllu minni; og stóð í rjóðrinu við lækinn.”

<sup>399</sup> Laxness, “Unglingurinn í skóginum,” p. 70. In the original: “Og þá kemur unglíngurinn í skóginum, með ungan teinung í hendi sér, hleypur fram á bakkann, klæddur skikkju, sem er ofin úr laufum. / Og hann lítur niður að læknum, tekur vatn í lófa sér, þeytir í loft upp og segir: / Eia! / Eia, vatn! Eia, perlur! / Eia leikur, / Leikur í sólskini / úti í skógi.”

<sup>400</sup> Laxness, “Unglingurinn í skóginum,” p. 70. In the original: “Þá þótti mér eg fara að gráta, og þá vaknaði ég.”



The quickly shifting registers, the willingness to ridicule and irreverently tackle themes dear to romanticism and native traditions, endow “Unglingurinn í skóginum” with immense originality. The language play is frequently exhilarating and humor is intertwined in unexpected ways with a dark and moody sexuality. The dream-like milieu is nevertheless constrained and to an extent normalized by the author (by posing it explicitly as a dream, for example) and the most bizarrely evocative images and phrasings of the poem, belonging as they do to the “youth,” are quite safely placed in opposition to the rational consciousness that ultimately holds sway and expresses itself through the figure of the speaker, who, it should also be mentioned, mediates, rather than experiences, the dreamlike irrationality on display. Laxness’ criteria as laid down in the prefatory statements are thus adhered to — rationality co-exists with a fervently vigorous imagination.

Laxness’ articulation of the framework within which his poem should be received and understood deserves further elaboration. As Þorvaldsson’s comment above suggests, expressionism was indeed foreign to Icelandic poetic practice at this time.<sup>401</sup> Nevertheless, the preface does not simply represent a

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<sup>401</sup> Critics do not entirely agree whether the poem can be said to belong to expressionism proper, or if it does, whether there are expressionistic passages in the poem interspersed with other modes of poetic discourse. Örn Ólafsson finds the picture offered by Laxness of his own poetic style plausible, noting that, “[w]hen a look is taken at the earliest of Halldór’s poems, then it seems probable that he learned to write poetry through German expressionistic writers — that is, learned to write original poetry, with stylistic breaks, in that manner that would become characteristic.” Örn Ólafsson. *Kóralforspil hafsins. Móðernismi í íslenskum bókmenntum*. Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Skjaldborg, 1992, p. 53. In the original: “Þegar litið er á þessi elstu ljóð Halldórs, þá virðist líklegt að hann hafi lært að yrkja af þýskum expressjónistum — þ.e. lært að yrkja frumlega, með stílfrofum, á þann hátt sem varð svo einkennandi fyrir hann.” Eysteinn Þorvaldsson however notes, “Even so, ‘Unglingurinn í skóginum’ can not be classified as pure expressionism. The poem is no less surreal”. Þorvaldsson, *Atómskáldin*, p. 56. In the original: “Ekki getur ‘Unglingurinn í skóginum’ samt flokkast undir hreinan expressjónisma. Kvæðið er ekki síður súrrealískt”. Óskar Ó. Halldórsson agrees with Eysteinnsson: “In Halldór’s poems expressionism is integrated with another, closely related art movement, surrealism, which is here also making its first appearance in Icelandic poetry.” Óskar Ó. Halldórsson. “Kvæðakver.” *Sjö erindi um Halldór Laxness*. Ed. by Sveinn Skorri Höskuldsson. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1972, p. 68.

useful service performed by the author to ease the reader's entry into unfamiliar territory, although the notion of the unfamiliar is important. The new movement is implicitly posited as a cultural lacuna a lack or a missing element within the Icelandic literary system, and the reader's unfamiliarity with expressionism is assumed. As a concept and discursive entity, expressionism is in this context deployed by Laxness in a symbolic register and endowed with a function that reverberates beyond the confines of the text.

In this way the formal innovations Laxness is bringing to the "isolated" shores of his home country are emphasized, that is, Laxness' role as a figure of modernity is signaled through his importation/translation/introduction of a modern idiom to a cultural locale and a literary system that lacks that particular mode of expression. Not only is the literary system itself thus made to revolve around that very lacuna (if only in a very limited, not yet canon-shifting context) but the figure of the author (Laxness) is also endowed with additional significance and his presence registered as particularly vital — this is the core of the symbolic function of the concept.

In addition to whatever else it may be, the poem is transformed into a performative act that by coming into being fills the aforementioned gap and supplies the missing, modern link. The manner in which the prefatory note locates or "inserts" an authorial presence into the text, as opposed to whatever

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Peter Hallberg, however, hesitated to follow Laxness' designations, preferring to speak of surrealist tendencies or features in the poetry. Peter Hallberg. *Vefarinn mikli* II. Trans. by Björn Th. Björnsson. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1960, p. 141–152. Þorsteinn Þorsteinsson offers the most thorough analysis of the poem to date, aligning it with surrealism, albeit with reservations; noting that Laxness' invocation of "expressionism" was probably intended to be a placeholder for experimental poetry in general, then suggesting that the poem might be designated as a "prose with poetic interludes." "Mig dreymdi ég geingi úti skóg," p. 167. In the original: "prósi með kvæðisbrotum." See also, Eysteinn Þorvaldson. "Ljóðagerð sagnaskálds. Um ljóð Halldórs Laxness." *Halldórsstefna*. Ed. Elín Bára Magnúsdóttir og Úlfar Bragason. Reykjavík: Stofnun Sigurðar Nordals, 1993.

“voice” may speak in the poem, is of the utmost significance. This is done by underlining the material status of the poem as the product of Laxness’ engagement with aesthetic modernity, the authorial signature is supplemented by the biographical figure of Laxness, which is now placed, if not precisely within the poem’s textual borders, then at least in a symbiotic relationship with it. The author’s preface can therefore be read not only as a device to highlight the formal properties of the poem and endow them with a central function in the meaning generation of the text but also as an attempt to incorporate those same formal innovations and, perhaps more importantly, the cultural ramifications of the poem’s very existence into Laxness’ biographical projection of himself within the context of Reykjavík’s cultural milieu as a spokesman for the avant-garde, even modernity itself.

Prior to the publication of Laxness’ breakthrough modernist novel, *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, his self-portrait as someone who was thoroughly familiar with recent trends in European art and thought was thus already set in place. Context is useful here. As art practice, modernism and the avant-garde were not prominent in the cultural landscape of Iceland in the first decades of the century; indeed, the scarcity of representative literary works during the initial bursts of activity elsewhere has, as is the case in other Nordic countries, made the temporal boundaries of Icelandic modernism peculiarly indistinct.<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>402</sup> For a discussion of the temporal fluctuations of Icelandic modernism, see Ástráður Eysteinnsson. “Icelandic Modernism.” *Modernism, volume 2*. Ed. by Ástráður Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007, p. 869–873.

The reception was frequently hostile, as was the case in the other Nordic countries as well.<sup>403</sup>

Benedikt Hjartarson, examining the early reception of the avant-garde in Iceland, has pointed out that not only were new artistic practices rejected en masse — meeting with something resembling “loathing,” at least among the most conservative segment of the cultural sphere — but that this stance also tended to precede the actual literary practice.<sup>404</sup> That is, the rejection was preemptive in the sense that virtually no domestic examples could be pointed to when the time came to illustrate the aesthetic malfeasance of the new movements.

Hjartarson’s case in point is Alexander Jóhannesson’s 1920 article “Nýjar listastefnur” (New Art Movements), where Jóhannesson warns in no uncertain terms against the “pathologies” and “delusions” of radical art movements such as Dadaism.<sup>405</sup> However, the only domestic example even resembling such textual practice that he can find is a single poem, the humorous “Futuriskar kveldstemningar” (Futuristic evening moods) by Styr Stofuglamm, the pseudonym of Þórbergur Þórðarson. Hjartarson goes on to suggest that Þórðarson, a former student of Jóhannesson, may have been introduced to the avant-gardes through Jóhannesson’s own, presumably unflattering university

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<sup>403</sup> See here: Mats Jansson. “Swedish Modernism;” H.K. Riikonen. “Modernism in Finnish Literature;” Steen Klitgård Povlsen. “Danish Modernism;” Jakob Lothe and Bjorn Tysdahl. “Modernism in Norway;” Ástráður Eysteinnsson. “Icelandic Modernism;” Turið Sigurðardóttir. “Modernism in Faroese Literature.” These are all chapters in the section “Borders of Modernism in the Nordic World” in *Modernism*, volume 2. Ed. by Ástráður Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007, p. 833–878.

<sup>404</sup> Benedikt Hjartarson. “pr-r-pr-r-pr-r-Reykjavík! Þórbergur Þórðarson og þúki fútúrisman.” *Heimur ljóðsins*. Ed. by Ástráður Eysteinnsson, Dagný Kristjánsdóttir and Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson. Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2005, p. 57.

<sup>405</sup> Alexander Jóhannesson. “Nýjar listastefnur” (Alþýðufræðsla Stúdentafjelagsins 9. maí 1920).” *Óðinn*, 1920, p. 43. In the original, the quoted words are “sinnisveiki” and “sálsýki”. Quoted in Hjartarson, “pr-r-pr-r-pr-r-Reykjavík!,” p. 58.

lectures.<sup>406</sup> If that was the case, the irony is obvious. Þórbergur Þórðarson would go on to become one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century in Iceland, but also one of the most eccentric and hard to define.

It is important however to note that the cultural conservatives who spoke out in this fashion against the new “isms” — and, frequently, various forms of popular culture as well — were of course perfectly aware of the fact that the new art movements had yet to make substantial inroads. They viewed their role as protecting the national culture from foreign influence, to stop the barbarians at the gate, if you will.

Halldór Guðmundsson articulates the cultural dream that may have motivated the entrenchment and resistance to new art movements:

Icelandic intellectuals [...] realize quite naturally that for most of the countries of the continent this goal of [creating a protected zone for social and moral values] is hopeless but it is as if they had aspirations that Iceland could become such a protected zone, that the country could avoid the aesthetic plagues of modernity, not least due to its isolation.<sup>407</sup>

The notion of using Iceland’s isolation as a means of protecting the nation against a variety of foes and adversaries, material and immaterial, can be seen to have been a bulwark of state diplomacy for most of the twentieth-century, one that shows no sign of relaxing its vigilance in the twenty first century.<sup>408</sup> Given the situation in the cultural field, it is clear that Laxness’ experimental poetry,

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<sup>406</sup> Hjartarson, “pr-r-pr-r-pr-r-Reykjavík!,” pp. 54–59.

<sup>407</sup> Halldór Guðmundsson. *“Loksins, loksins”*: *Vefarinn mikli og upphaf íslenskra nútímabókmennta*. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1987, p. 59. In the original: “Íslenskum menntamönnum [...] er mæta vel ljóst að [það að búa sér til verndað svæði fyrir þau samfélagsgildi og siðferðislegu gildi sem eru glötuð eða í þann mund að glatast] er vonlaust hvað flest ríki meginlandsins áhrærir, en það er einsog þeir hafi gert sér vonir um að Ísland gæti orðið slíkt verndarsvæði, gæti komist hjá hrellingum nútímans, ekki síst í krafti einangrunar sinnar.”

<sup>408</sup> Protective pay walls and enormous tariffs and importation limits safeguard Icelandic agriculture — almost as hopeless an endeavor as the name implies. Animals entering the country are strictly monitored, most being banned. Currently the European Union is the threatening cultural force that must be kept at bay.

diverging as it most certainly did from dominant models, was primed to elicit a response in a literary environment where the tendency of cultural authorities and professionals was, as Hjartarson puts it, to “smother the Icelandic avant-garde at birth”.<sup>409</sup>

### *1.7 The Taste of Literature is Salty and Iodine-like*

According to Halldór Guðmundsson “Unglingurinn í skóginum” was passed around among members of parliament as Laxness’ application for a grant supporting artists was being considered.<sup>410</sup> An enduring anecdote, promulgated by Laxness himself, has it that the poem consequently turned out to be the most expensive of his career, as it cost him the grant.<sup>411</sup> Although this version of the story has been modified in order to take into account other factors, which played to Laxness’ disadvantage (such as his Catholicism), Guðmundsson confirms that the hostile reactions of conservative members of parliament did in fact affect the grant application.<sup>412</sup>

That the financial setback in no way deterred Laxness from continuing to actively establish himself as a modern literary figure is indicated by the publication of “*Rhodymenia palmata*,” in *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* in the spring of 1926, a poem imbued with a streak of unconformity no less conspicuous than that of its predecessor. That the poem was not going to conform to poetic

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<sup>409</sup> Hjartarson, “pr-r-pr-r-pr-r-Reykjavík!,” p. 58. In the original: “kæfa íslenska framúrstefnu í fæðingu.”

<sup>410</sup> Halldór Guðmundsson. *Halldór Laxness: Ævisaga*. Reykjavík: JPV, 2004, p. 173.

<sup>411</sup> Halldór Kiljan Laxness. *Kvæðakver. Þriðja útgáfa*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1956, p. 141.

<sup>412</sup> Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness: Ævisaga*, p. 173. Örn Ólafsson comes to a different conclusion, suggesting that the cut in Laxness’ funding was merely part of large scale cuts in government expenditures that were enacted around this time. Örn Ólafsson. “Unglingurinn í skóginum og Alþingi.” *Skírnir*, 1985, pp. 71–91.

conventions and formal traditions is suggested rather starkly, and immediately, by its very title, which is obscure and would not have invoked any obvious connotations or aligned the poem with a particular discursive tradition; rhodymenia palmata being a plant that is also known as red dulse and sea lettuce flakes, decidedly devoid in other words of romantic connotations or the power of invocation.

Laxness himself described the poem's inception in a 1949 postscript to the second edition of his one and only poetry collection, *Kvæðakver* (Poetry Booklet, 1930), as well as some of the defining features of his engagement with modernism and the avant-garde movements of the period:<sup>413</sup>

André Breton published the surrealist manifesto in 1924, if I remember correctly. I was touched by this movement at its inception and signs of that are evident in "Unglingurinn í skóginum" and *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*. I imbibed everything that I could get my hands on by those authors who defined the movement. Appollinaire, Aragon, Soupault, Max Jacob (a bit older, hoewver), Bontempelli (the Italian), not to forget the most vigorous member, James Joyce. Last but not least, one revered the scholarly origin of this literary movement, Freud. Although the movement in its purest expression was more to ruminate over, and not so much a filling meal, a sort of spiritus concentratus, and thus difficult to consume unless mixed with something else, it has nevertheless become such a pivotal aspect and existential condition for modern literature that those writers of our generation that did not learn all that could be learned from it, when it emerged, are dead men. In the early spring of 1926, I combined the poems that I wrote around the time I was composing *Vefarinn mikli* into a prolonged and voluminous poetry series that I called "Rhodymenia palmate" (published in *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* 4 April 1926). I chose that particular name for the sequence because of the formlessness and irregularity of the plant in question, and because of the plant's salty, sweet and iodine-like taste, which the poem shares.<sup>414</sup>

<sup>413</sup> The reissue of *Kvæðakver* included additional poems as well as a lengthy and very curious appendix on the genesis of the poems, from where the quote above is obviously taken. The differences between the two editions are in fact substantial enough for some scholars to speak of Laxness' "two books of poetry". Halldórsson, "Kvæðakver," p. 61. In the original: "Halldór Laxness hefur sent frá sér *tvær ljóðabækur*, hina fyrri árið 1930 undir því viðhafnarlausa nafni *Kvæðakver* og hina síðari 1949 með sama nafni."

<sup>414</sup> Halldór Laxness. *Kvæðakver*. Þriðja útgáfa. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1956, pp. 142–143. In the original: "André Breton birti stefnuskrá surrealismans 1924, ef ég man rétt. Ég var í upphafi snortinn af þessari stefnu, og má sjá þess glögg merki í bæði í *Unglingnum í skóginum* og *Vefaranum mikla frá Kasmír*. Ég svalg alt sem ég náði í eftir þá höfunda sem mörkuðu stefnuna. Appollinaire, Aragon, Soupault, Max Jacob (að vísu nokkuð eldri), Bontempelli (hinn ítalski), að

Laxness is adamant that he was an early follower of surrealism and knew the movement inside and out, a position that resembles very much the one he took in the mid 1920s, as we will touch on in short order. It is almost as if the list of authors that Laxness offers up is meant to function in an evidentiary role, proving that he was an authority on this particular subject. His reference to Freud and the acknowledgment that the founder of psychoanalysis was “revered” in this period is also worth noting, as Laxness’ relationship to Freud would later become extremely problematic, indeed, it is a fair question if anyone not directly involved with the machinations of capitalism is denounced with the fervor of Freud in Laxness’ later writings. This is of course far from proving that his influence had waned, as Freud would be the first to point out.

Invoking the sense of taste to describe his new poem, and explain the title as well, is a stroke of rhetorical genius and represents the one moment in the text when the young figure determined to carve out a space for himself in the Icelandic literary milieu, and to do so with all the originality and rigor available to him, rises out of the past and can be heard in the language of the established, older manifestation of this same figure, an author with great works already behind him rather than it all being locked away in the future. It is also a genuine moment of avant-garde conceptuality where the conventional cognitive tracks

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ógleymdum sterkasta liðsmanninum, James Joyce. Síðast en ekki síst dýrkaði maður hið fræðilega upphaf þessarar skáldskaparstefnum, Freud. Þó stefna þessi hafi í hreinni mynd sinni verið meira til jórturs en fylla, nokkurs konar spiritus concentratus, og vandhæf til neyslu óblönduð, þá hefur hún orðið slíkur snar þáttur og lífsskilyrði nútímabókmennta, að segja má að þeir höfundar og skáld vorrar kynslóðar sem ekki námu af henni alt sem numið varð þegar hún kom fram, séu dauðir menn. Kvæðum þeim sem ég orti um sama leyti og ég samdi Vefarann sló ég saman í eina lánngölu á útmánuðum 1926 og kallaði *Rhodymenia palmate* (kom í Lesbók Morgunblaðsins 4 apr. 1926). Valdi ég syrpunni þetta nafn vegna formleysis og óreglu jurtarinnar sem nafnið ber, svo og vegna þess bragðs af seltu, sætu og joði sem er að jurtinni einsog kvæðinu.”



and conceptual frameworks are derailed and a new startling idea presents itself:  
how does literature taste?

What is perhaps most remarkable is how torn and conflicted Laxness is when it comes to the evaluation of this exceptional period of literary renewal. Stating on the one hand in no uncertain terms that those who did not “learn all that could be learned” from the new art movements were “dead men,” he also withdraws suddenly and seems reluctant to admit the unique, self-sustaining and independent existence of these movements, noting that in their purest expression, they needed to be incorporated into a larger literary project, much like we might mix the *spiritus concentratus* mentioned by Laxness with water. This, effectively denies surrealism and the other avant-gardes life and functionality as literary modes in and of themselves. When the second edition of *Kvæðakver* was published, Laxness had of course long since renounced his own avant-garde inclinations and had in fact become the foremost spokesman for realism in Iceland and his ambivalent stance in this instance should be received in that context.

### *1.8 Rhodymenia palmata*

The subversive streak that characterizes “Unglingurinn í skóginum” was also in evidence in an interview that *Morgunblaðið* conducted with Laxness as he arrived in Iceland with the manuscript of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* in tow. “*Rhodymenia palmata*” had been published earlier that month and much as described by Laxness above, the most immediate and striking feature of the poem is its sheer expanse, its “voluminous” nature. Stretching across three pages

and ten clearly demarcated sections with the title printed in a very respectable size and the blackness of the letters quite imposing in the heaviness of its body and its imposing density. The effect is almost forbidding. Below the name of the author appears a somewhat curious parenthetical injunction: “(Reproduction banned),” which may indeed turn the above mentioned sense of lay-out-induced foreboding into glowering disquiet (Figure 2).<sup>415</sup>

Some commentators have noted that the use of “traditional” meter in certain passages and conventional romantic subject matter and tropes serve to diffuse and mute the experimental nature of the poem.<sup>416</sup> A contrary position would maintain that the conventional passages served a very specific function, both as pastiches of an older neo-romantic and naively earnest poetic address and that through the literal incorporation of the poem’s antecedents, its innovative formal and thematic elements could be appreciated all the better. The first segment of the poem is a case in point:

Þú ert sem söngur í sefi	You are as a song in a reed <sup>417</sup>
eða seimur í gömlu stafi,	Or the faint sound of an old refrain
og mjer gleymast aldrei, aldrei	And I can never, never forget
þín ástblíðu sorgarhót	Your loving gestures of mourning
Blessi nú guð þína lituðu lokka	May god now bless your colored locks
Og ljái þjer nýja bómullarsokka	and grant you new cotton socks
Vefji sál þína silki	wrap your soul in silk
Og signi þinn tæpa fót	and bless your unsure foot
Að hann steyti ekki fram við //	That it not stumble henceforth over // <sup>418</sup>
— 1... 2... 3... — grjóti!	— 1... 2... 3... — rock!
— Og geymi þig helst í hylki <sup>419</sup>	— and preferably keep you in a capsule

<sup>415</sup> Halldór Laxness. “Rhodymenia palmata.” *Morgunblaðið*, 4 April, 1926, p. 6. In the original: “(Eftirprentun bönnuð)”.

<sup>416</sup> Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, p. 190.

<sup>417</sup> No attempt will be made to retain the metric schema in the English translation.

<sup>418</sup> This marks a line break brought on by necessity and not in the original poem.

The first four lines represent the address of the speaker in the poem to his loved one; the clichéd routine of an inflated compliment being followed by mnemonic avowals is however rendered faintly ridiculous as reeds are placed rather low on the totem pole of romantic plants and being compared to the faint reverberation of an old refrain is similarly remote from courtly etiquette, implying as it does both distance, vagueness or lack of character in the supposed object of veneration, and sheer boredom (“old refrain”). Trying to endow the last line with a tragic undertone becomes a similarly fraught matter as it seems that the loved one’s gestures of intimacy and love are indistinguishable from the body language of grief.

The next section lets go however of what vestiges of restraint there may have been operative in the opening four lines. The rhyme in lines 5 and 6 (“lokka” and “sokka” — locks and socks) clearly places itself beyond the boundaries of even the most egregious amateur poetic drivel. To drive the point home, Laxness allows these two lines to motivate the imagery in what follows, turning a lyric poem of romance and love into a meditation on footwear, a badly co-ordinated climbing style, ending with a vaguely threatening wish (“and preferably keep you in a capsule”).

It is of course possible to point to Þórbergur Þórðarson’s first two poetry collections, *Hálfir skósólar* (Half Soles of Shoes, 1915) and *Spaks mans spjarir* (Wise Man’s Clothing, 1917), which include “sentimental cognitive mush” that characterized the poetry popular with “young men a few years ago,” that

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<sup>419</sup> Laxness, “*Rhodymenia palmata*,” p. 6.

resembles Laxness' opening salvo in "Rhodymenia palmata".<sup>420</sup> The difference however lies in precision of use, the activation and awareness of cultural and literary context (intertextuality), and whether goals beyond mere pastiche can be identified. Þórðarson's parodic poems are funny, they foreground structures of feelings that are no longer in fashion and forms that are thought drab, unexciting and outworn. Laxness, on the other hand, constructs a textual montage within the boundaries of his poem where different voices are placed in a relationship that speaks to more than the "lameness" of past models. Rather the poetic discourse enacts why past forms are no longer sufficient to render the experience of modernity and are therefore outdated. The renunciation is performative in this sense and it is through innovative textuality and a dimension of intertextuality that references the literary world of the moment that the poem in effect constructs and presents its identity to the reader as something new.

The title of the segment we just looked at is "I. (On the back of a business card)." <sup>421</sup> This could be a reference to the type of writing material available to the poet at the moment of inspiration, or it could invoke the binary opposite of lyrical discourse, namely the discourse of commerce and consumption; it invokes associations with respectability, financial sufficiency, even power — not everybody has a business card after all. Ultimately it stands as a reminder of a network of social relations and possible connotative schemes that all lie outside

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<sup>420</sup> Quoted in Hjartarson, "'pr-r-pr-r-pr-r-Reykjavík!,'" p. 51. In the original: "snúði út í öfgar af meðfæddu 'innra eðli' væmnum hugsanagrat, sem hér ríkti meðal margra ungra manna fyrir nokkrum árum."

<sup>421</sup> Laxness, "Rhodymenia palmata," p. 6. In the original: "1. (Aftan á nafnspjald)".

of the parameters of traditional poetic discourse and, in particular, the type of poetic discourse that holds sway in the first section.

The header of the next section is “A soloist sings with three harmonicas,” followed by an interlude headlined “A mixed choir of fake-men (marionettes)” and then the third section is called “Conclusion”.<sup>422</sup> Interestingly, the fourth section is titled “Signature” which reminds us of the business card in the first section.<sup>423</sup> A new beginning is announced in section V. Section IX is called “New conclusion” and the final segment “The beginning of a new poem,” so in effect the flow of textuality and poetic discourse can keep on and keep on, perhaps for all of eternity.<sup>424</sup>

An example of a more experimental passage, although not the most “alienating” or unrepresentational, is section “VII. (Continuation),” which is interesting in the present context because it contains immanent echoes from the first segment discussed above, that is, the poetic discourse centers again on the relationship between lovers but this segment is altogether more serious:

Höfum við elskast?	Have we loved?
Eða hvað hefir gerst?	Or what has happened?
Skildirðu mig?	Did you understand me?
— Skilja, það er verst!	— Understand, that is the worst!
Unga mæ, þú ert annað en jeg.	Young damsel, you are other than I
Sál þín er mjer alls kostar annarleg	Your soul is to me inexplicable
Líkami þinn var aldrei líkami minn	Your body was never my body
Út verð jeg borinn. Þú fer aftur inn.	Out I will be carried. You go back in.
Þú ert sem genginn grætur // <sup>425</sup>	You almost a remnant cries for the // <sup>426</sup> true good friend

<sup>422</sup> Laxness, “Rhodymenia palmata,” p. 6. In the original: “II. (Einsöngur með þremur harmonikum),” “(Blandað kór gervimenna (marionettes),” “III. (Niðurlag).”

<sup>423</sup> Laxness, “Rhodymenia palmata,” p. 6. In the original: “IV. (Undirskrift).”

<sup>424</sup> Laxness, “Rhodymenia palmata,” p. 8. In the original: “IX. (Nýtt niðurlag),” “X. (Upphaf á nýju kvæði.)”

<sup>425</sup> Line break not in original poem.

<p>góðvin sinn  Hann er farinn, farinn, farinn  Þú finnur hann aldrei meir!  Þú ert eins og öspin  — jeg er sunnanþeyr,  döggvuð hnípir króna þín  í kvöld þegar hann deyr. —</p>	<p>He is gone, gone, gone  You will never find him again!  You are like the asp  I am the southern breeze  moistened your crown sags  tonight when he dies. —<sup>427</sup></p>
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Love as sexual difference is the thematic center here; unable, it seems, to join with the lover in the radical fusion of bodies that the speaker desires he abandons the whole enterprise of the love affair, considering the separation of the sexes as a death sentence. Somewhat immature as well, an undercurrent of rage infuses the poem, endowing the last line with overtones of a strange sort of sexual retribution, as if in his absence he hopes his former lover will not experience pleasure again. To close, whatever one may ultimately think of the poem, its daring and innovative power are no less significant than the modernist spirit that infuses “Unglingurinn í skóginum”.

### *1.9 The Social Upheavals of Modernity*

In the interview mentioned above, Laxness expresses no surprise when asked about the stir “*Rhodymenia palmata*” was causing in literary circles,<sup>428</sup> indeed, he thought it “only natural that people here in Iceland find the poem difficult to accept, as it was composed in the spirit of the new poetic movement [...] called

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<sup>426</sup> Line break not in original poem.

<sup>427</sup> Laxness, “*Rhodymenia palmata*,” p. 7.

<sup>428</sup> This may be something of an exaggeration as little evidence of a “stir” or even “fuss,” let alone “uproar” can be found when the newspapers and journals of the period are examined.

‘surrealism’”.<sup>429</sup> “I know just about everything about this movement,” he modestly adds, a claim corroborated by the journalist who adds, “Halldór has read just about every book of relevance to the movement”.<sup>430</sup> While it might be possible to detect a note of irony in the comment about Laxness’ reading accomplishments, it is nevertheless important to keep in mind that Laxness’ authority in these matters is largely taken on faith. There is however a moment when the journalist is clearly taunting the young author:

Halldór would not by any means acknowledge that this movement [surrealism] was in the spirit of the so-called ‘Da-da-ism,’ the famous art movement that came to prominence while the hostilities were at their peak in Central Europe. The pictures created under the auspices of this movement were for example quite similar to what would happen should a bottle of ink be thrown against a wall, and the wall bear the natural results.<sup>431</sup>

Despite this interlude of mild jest — which nevertheless is symptomatic of the wide-spread suspicion that was in place in Iceland in this period towards the avant-gardes and modernism, as Hjartarson points out above — the news item in question presents the young author not only as an intriguing and exciting poet but also as an intellectual and a discerning authority on European artistic trends.

Laxness’ privileged relationship to the modern is consolidated by his experiences abroad, which also make his immersion in foreign art practices, conducted mostly through reading as per the interview above — an activity that can be accomplished in Reykjavík quite as easily as in metropolitan centers —

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<sup>429</sup> “Halldór Kiljan Laxness.” *Morgunblaðið*, 29 April, 1926, p. 3. In the original: “En Halldóri þótti það eigi nema eðlilegt að menn hjer úti á Íslandi gætu eigi felt sig við kvæðið, því það væri ort í anda hinnar nýju skáldskaparstefnu, sem kviknaði árið 1922 og nefnt er ‘surrealismí.’”

<sup>430</sup> “Halldór Kiljan Laxness,” p. 3. In the original: “Jeg veit hjer um bil alt um þessa stefnu” and “Halldór, hefi lesið allar helstu bækur er um hana fjalla.”

<sup>431</sup> “Halldór Kiljan Laxness,” p. 3. In the original: “Eigi vildi Halldór með nokkru móti kannast við, að stefna þessi væri í anda hins svonefnda ‘Da-da-isma,’ hinnar alkunnu listastefnu sem ruddi sjer til rúms meðan ófriðurinn stóð sem hæst í Miðevrópu. En myndir þær, sem gerðar voru í þeirri stefnu voru t.d. svipaðar því, sem hent væri blekflösku í vegg og bæri veggurinn þess eðlileg merki.”

more authentic and substantial. These discursive maneuvers may even in some sense “permit” Laxness to invoke “expressionism” in 1925 in relation to “Unglingurinn í skóginum” and “surrealism” in 1926 in connection with “*Rhodymenia palmata*,” and then, later, to change the designation of the earlier poem to “surrealism,” without anyone closely scrutinizing his conceptual vocabulary.<sup>432</sup> Peter Hallberg, however, hesitated to follow Laxness’ designations, preferring to speak of surrealistic tendencies or features in the poetry.<sup>433</sup>

Examining Laxness’ preface to “Unglingurinn í skóginum” in the context of the international avant-garde movements, Hjartarson concludes that the poetics championed by Laxness bear limited resemblance to those radical developments in continental literature so vigorously invoked by the author. Indeed, Hjartarson finds important aspects of Laxness’ description of expressionism, particularly the emphasis on its universality and ahistorical character, to be essentially conservative.<sup>434</sup> If modernity connotes rupture and a break, expressionism, as invoked by Laxness, invokes on the contrary an image of a naturalistic ebb and flow, an “ahistorical principle of progressive literature,” Hjartarson writes, a sort of universal artistic fluency that’s always already in existence within literary

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<sup>432</sup> Laxness. *Kvæðakver. Þriðja útgáfa*, p. 142. Benedikt Hjartarson points to Laxness’ shift in conceptual usage from expressionism to surrealism when discussing “Unglingurinn í skóginum” in “Dragging Nordic Horses past the Sludge of Extremes. The Beginnings of the Icelandic Avant-Garde.” *The Invention of Politics in the European Avant-Garde (1996–1940)*. Ed. by Sascha Bru and Gunther Martens. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006, p. 239. Hjartarson has elsewhere noted that aesthetic concepts such as surrealism and expressionism were in something of a flux in this period, and thus more interchangeable than would later be the case. See Hjartarson, “pr-r-pr-r-pr-r-Reykjavík!,” p. 58.

<sup>433</sup> Hallberg, *Vefarinn mikli* II, pp. 141–152.

<sup>434</sup> Laxness. “Unglingurinn í skóginum”, p. 70. In the original, the passage in question reads: “Expressíónisminn er í sjálfu sér eins gamall og listin, þótt nafnið sé eigi eldra en frá síðustu öld; hans hefur stundum gætt meir, stundum miður, í sögu listanna, en má heita þungamiðja allrar tízkulistar, hvarvetna.” Benedikt Hjartarson. “Af úrkynjun, brautryðjendum, vanskapnaði, vitum og sjáendum. Um upphaf framúrstefnu á Íslandi.” *Ritið*, 1/2006, p. 83.



systems, thus, one may add, conceivably *returning* with Laxness into Icelandic literary history.<sup>435</sup>

That Laxness' rhetorical maneuvers and poetic practice are not, strictly speaking, in accordance with the foreign models invoked in the introductory note to "Unglingurinn í skóginum" is of less importance than the fact of their invocation. This is a point made by Hjartarson in his discussion of the hostile reception of continental art practices in Iceland. He furthermore suggests that what was being resisted, rather than modernism as such, were the social upheavals of modernity. New art was in effect classified along with films, jazz, political fermentation, social differentiation and alienation, as symptomatic of cultural decline. Hjartarson notes that "[i]n the 1920s, the use of [the artistic concepts of the -isms] constitutes a provocative linguistic act, referencing the European avant-garde is symbolic of a radical affinity with the modern and the demand that Icelandic culture undergo a process of modernization."<sup>436</sup> Outlined in this manner is a contested discursive space where anti-urban and isolationist positions were contested by other, somewhat less crisis-ridden voices maintaining the irrevocability of the modernization process and recommending engagement with foreign cultural forces.<sup>437</sup> Hjartarson's discursive analysis

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<sup>435</sup> Hjartarson, "Af úrkynjun, brautryðjendum," p. 83. In the original the quote reads: "yfirsögulegu lögmáli framsækinnna bókmennta".

<sup>436</sup> Hjartarson, "Af úrkynjun, brautryðjendum," p. 98. In the original the quote reads: "Á þriðja áratugnum er notkun slíkra hugtaka ögrandi málgjörningur, vísunin til evrópsku framúrstefnunnar er tákni um róttæka nútímahyggju og felur í sér ákall um byltingarkennda nútímavæðingu íslenskrar menningar."

<sup>437</sup> On both sides, modernism and the avant-garde functioned as ciphers in a wider cultural debate; those who, like Alexander Jóhannesson, spoke out against progressive art movements were staking out a position vis a vis the destabilization of traditional society that followed in the wake of industrialization, secularization and urbanization. See here also Árni Sigurjónsson. *Laxness og þjóðlífið I. Bókmenntir og bókmenntakenningar á árunum milli stríða*. Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 1986; Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir. *Nútímans konur. Menntun kvenna og mótun kyngervis á Íslandi 1850–1903*. Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun – RIKK and Háskólaútgáfan, 2011; Sigríður

brings out a further important point, namely that even in the absence of consistent modernist art practice, the various modern discourses were in fact continually invoked and accounted for in Icelandic literary culture – even if only as an unwelcome “other” — and thus not only associated with an incipient social modernity but also functioned as a highly dynamic force in the regulation of the literary system and the creation of literary norms and values.

## ***2. Regarding the Cultural Situation in Iceland***

The professionalization of writing was a significant concern for Laxness in this period, as the social and economic framework, what we might also refer to as cultural infrastructure, that would allow him to pursue a career in literature was entirely absent in Iceland. Writers with such aspirations had found it necessary to travel abroad and try to make a literary career for themselves in a foreign language. Given the immense difficulty of the task, the success rate was quite remarkable. Jóhann Sigurjónsson became a successful playwright in Denmark, and his play *Bjærg-Ejvind og hans Hustru* (Fjalla-Eyvindur, 1911) was a virtual sensation, and filmed in 1918 by Victor Sjöström, one of the preeminent film directors in the Nordic countries. Kristmann Guðmundsson went to Norway while Gunnar Gunnarsson followed Sigurjónsson to Denmark and achieved immense success; Guðmundsson was also a bestselling author for a period. In Iceland, Torfhildur Hólm became the first professional writer. Halldór Laxness was determined to become the second but as there was almost nothing to be had, money-wise, from books and writers were often put in hock by the printers, who

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Matthíasdóttir. *Hinn sanni Íslendingur: Þjóðerni, kyngervi og vald á Íslandi 1900–1930*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2004.

were not willing to take on themselves the financial risk involved in publishing. This is why the first edition of Laxness' first book, *Barn náttúrunnar*, lists the name of the printer but it is noted that the author himself, who was seventeen at the time, was in fact the publisher, taking on financial responsibilities for the endeavor.

Laxness was not willing to let sleeping dogs lie however, becoming a vocal spokesman for the need for the intervention of the state or municipalities in helping ensure the livelihood of artists. He wrote, for example, on the meager subsidies for the arts, allocated annually by parliament, and, somewhat later, he would be among those insisting Iceland become signatory to international copyright regulations. At this early point, however, he was particularly concerned with the task of shifting the conceptual vocabulary that framed the debate and the general modes of thinking about the role of the artist in society. What needed to change was the firmly established figuration of the literary writer as someone who pursued his muse in his spare time, once the working day was done.

Romantic notions of the writer's craft were therefore firmly rejected in a series of essays, and this included the idealization of the concept of "inspiration". Writing is work; success is a matter of application and dedication. Talent matters but keeping at it matters more, practice and more practice, writing every day for ten or twelve hours, this is what the professional writer does and for his work he would expect to be paid, at least if minimally successful:

The reason that prose literature in Iceland is less developed than elsewhere, although it may just be that nowhere, proportionally speaking, more is written, is the strange paradox that there are basically no writers here, no men whose interest in writing is undivided. Instead, there is a throng of dabblers, who turn writing into a hobby, place it in

their minds next to movies or playing cards. That is to say, here we have tailors, shoe makers, government officials, merchants, teachers, farmers and traffickers who write books in their spare time, in much the same way they go to see movies in their spare time or play bridge [...] Prose writing in Icelandic bears witness to a good mental capacity as often as it bears witness to the complete lack of professionalization, as there is hardly a profession that is as badly suited to being practiced in moments of respite. The public conception of creative writing, whether prose or poetry, are also rather laughable and in most respects somewhat childish. People view the composition of a work of literature as some sort of divine indulgence that happens when the mood is wondrous, preferably in nighttime, during twilight or in moonlight.<sup>438</sup>

The problem was not confined to dabblers in literature and common misconceptions about the way literary works come into being. The critics were also asked to shoulder their share of the blame. In another article, Laxness singles out what he describes as the critical tendency to treat utterly sub-par works of literature with silk gloves, and complementing mediocrities as if major European talents had just emerged: “This accomplishes nothing except create an unfortunate delusion in the head of the writer in question, who, having had nothing better to do, decided to try his hand at novel writing, and the next thing he knows, he finds himself canonized into the grouping of the grand masters of the form, even though he was unable to articulate a single thought in writing without mangling it.”<sup>439</sup>

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<sup>438</sup> Halldór Laxness. “Menningarmál.” *Morgunblaðið*, 24 January, 1925, p. 3. In the original: “Orsök þess að ritskapur í lausu máli á Íslandi stendur skör lægra en annarsstaðar, þótt hvergi kunni að vera meir ritað, hlutfallslega, er sá, hversu öfugmælt það má þykja, að hjer eru yfirleitt engir rithöfundar til, menn, með óskiftan áhuga á ritskap, sem starfsgrein, heldur mývargur af gutlurum, sem gera ritskapinn að tómsundarfikti, skipa honum í hugum sjer sama sess og bíósýningum eða spilamensku. Það er að segja, hjer eru til skraddarar, skóarar, embættismenn, kaupmenn, kennarar, bændur og braskarar sem skrifa bækur í hjáverkum, á sama hátt og og þeir fara í kvikmyndahús í hjáverkum eða spila bridge [...] Ritskapur í lausu máli íslensku ber vott um góða, andlega hæfileika, jafnvíða og hann vitnar um helberan skort á fagkunnáttu, enda getur vart starfsgrein jafn-illa fallna til ástundar í hjáverkum. Hugmyndir almennings um skáldskapargerð, hvort heldur er í lausu máli eða bundnu, eru næsta kátbroslegar, og í flesta staði ærið barnalegar. Menn líta á samningu skáldverks eins og eitthvað guðdómlegt fitl, sem gerist í dýrlegri stemningu, helst á næsturpeli, um sólarlagsbil, eða í tunglsljósi.”

<sup>439</sup> Halldór Laxness. “Inngangur að ritdómum. Skáldsagnagerð. Starffræðilegar athuganir. Um viðvaninga.” *Alþýðublaðið*, 18 January, 1927. In the original: “Elur þetta strákinn upp í mönnum, sem hafa kannske tekið upp á því af einhverju fikti að skrifa skáldsögur, og sumir ranka ekki svið

A particular target was the idealization of the farmer–poet, a figure that was seen as organically connected to nature and the fundamentals of existence, characteristics thought to lend his creative output special value.<sup>440</sup> This went against Laxness’ firmly ingrained belief that the urban milieu offered the only practical environment for the practice of culture in a professional manner. The figure might be described as someone who had lived all his life in the same county, fjord, “skaga,” shire or province and most likely he had deep genealogical roots there, being for example the nth first born male to take over the family farm. More likely than not a respectable position of some sort has over time and by way of tradition become something of a family allotment. Being raised with a work ethic, his writing career will be surprisingly prolific, a book every three years or five, most likely short stories, perhaps an occasional a novel. Books of regional interest, involving the genealogical trees of families in the county or histories of the proper names of natural sites, lakes, mountains, heaths and so forth, would most likely also become part of the oeuvre. It is quite likely that this hypothetical figure we have constructed would have appreciated Laxness’ first novel, *Barn náttúrunnar*.

In the fiction however the traditions and values of the countryside would be extolled, although perhaps not in a propagandistic manner, the stories may as a matter of fact well turn out to be quite realistic. They will address conventional matters of import to the farmer, the running of the farmstead, caring for the livestock, raising a family. Aside from a firm belief in the country way of life,

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sér fyrr en búið er að vísa þeim til sætis á bekk með stórsnillingum, og það þótt þeir kunnir naumast að stíla almenna athugun, svo lag sé á.”

<sup>440</sup> Árni Sigurjónsson. “Nokkur orð um hugmyndafræði Sigurðar Nordal fyrir 1945.” *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 1/1984, pp. 49–63. See also Sigurjónsson, *Laxness og þjóðlífið* I, pp. 34–58.

rural traditions and values, and deep affection for nature, the single strongest ideological strand is likely to be an adversarial stance towards modernization processes and the growth of townships around the coastline and the urban area around Reykjavík. Finally, as if to conclusively prove the value of this figuration, it would commonly be pointed out that it was among the people of the countryside that the manuscripts were preserved, as well as a great variety of other literature that was retained in oral form.<sup>441</sup>

Laxness did not accept the elevation of the farmer–poet and the illustrious cultural trappings that were commonly attached to the figure. This is his considered adjudication on the matter:

The Icelandic nation of farmers was the receiver of the ancient culture of great chieftains and clerics. And it is nothing but the truth to point out that farmers and farmworkers sustained our nationality and cultural treasures during those periods when life was most difficult. It is up for debate, however, whether this is any cause of wonder, as there was nobody else who could take on the role; either the common rural people would preserve our most valued holdings or nobody would; there is no real educated class in Iceland and has not been for centuries, let alone those groves of fecundity, academies. [...] The time has passed, that the farmer is the cornerstone of Icelandic culture. However, we must demand of the modern farmer that he do his utmost to raise his sons and daughters in such a fashion that they will utilize to the utmost their capacity to receive that which flows from the cultural reservoirs of a new age. [...] today, Icelandic culture rests on the shoulders of educated men of intellectual acuity, scientists, and geniuses of word, image and sound. — The blather about the wonders of Icelandic agrarian culture is nothing but political flattery that is without a shred of conscience.

It is not unique to Iceland but rather common all over the Nordic countries (and elsewhere), that people of the countryside engage in creative writing. There have for example been many decent writer mediocrities from the farming class, and some even a tad better [but when discussing particular figures] men prefer to say that [for example] Hans Sachs was a great poet even though he was a shoemaker [and]

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<sup>441</sup> Real–life examples, or more accurately historical examples of the figure of the farmer–poet/farmer–writer would include: Eiríkur Laxdal, Jón Thoroddsen, Stephan G. Stephansson, Þorgils gjallandi, Jón Trausti, Guðmundur Friðjónsson, and perhaps Guðmundur G. Hagalín, at least during the years he lived in Ísafjörður. Women certainly had a place within this ideology and among female writers we should mention Torfhildur Hólm, Kristín Sigfúsdóttir, and Hulda.

nobody would ever think of offering up their thanks to the shoemaking culture of Bohemia, on account of what a great poet Hans Sachs was.<sup>442</sup>

Particularly notable is how Laxness seems almost to be stemming the estuary of farmer-poets at the source when he demands that the farmer raise his children in a different cultural framework than he himself had known as a child. There is also little doubt that when Laxness brings up “cultural reservoirs of a new age,” he is referencing urban areas, which in the context of Iceland means Reykjavík; perhaps he also has those fairly densely settled townships along the coast in mind. The flow of honorifics for the modern intellectual is slightly ironic in view of the extremely conservative positions held by so many of the first generation of University professors, many indeed being wholly on the side of the farmers and rural areas in the perennial tug of war between city and country, as will be discussed further below. Placing Iceland in the context of the other Nordic countries is also a highly calculated and, for some, hurtful move as the most consistently successful way of retaining one’s belief in the superiority of Iceland and its rural culture was to forget/suppress/ignore the existence of other lands, since so many of them had the decidedly unfair advantage of being less poor than

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<sup>442</sup> Halldór Laxness. “Af íslensku menningarástandi.” *Vörður*, 28 November, 1925, p. 2–3. In the original: “Íslensk bændaþjóð varð arfþegi hinnar fornu höfðingjamennningar vorrar og klerka. Það er hverju orði sannara að bændur og búalið hafi varðveitt þjóðerni vort og menningarverðmæti meðan harðast var í ári um íslenskan þroska. Hitt er vafamál, hvort hjer sje um nokkurt undur að ræða, með því að naumast koma aðrir aðiljar til mála; annaðhvort varð bændaalþýðan að varðveita gildi vort eða enginn; hjer er ekki um neina verulega mentastjett að ræða um alda skeið, því síður gróðarstöðvar í líkingu við akademi. [...] Sú tíð er liðin, að bóndinn sé burðarstoð íslenskrar menningar. Hins ber að krefjast af nútíðarbóndan um, að hann kosti kapps um að ala svo upp sonu sína og dætur, að þau verði sem hæfust til að veita því viðtöku sem menningarlindir nýrrar aldar megna best að veita. [...] Nú á dögum hvílir íslensk menning á herðum mentaðra vitsmunamanna, vísindamanna og snillinga til orðs, myndar og tóns. — Fjasið um dásemdir íslenskrar bændamenningar á vorum tímum, er ekki annað en samviskulaust pólitískt skjall. Eigi er það heldur einsdæmi á Íslandi, heldur algengt um Norðurlönd (og reyndar víðar í löndum), að sveitamenn fáist við skáldskap. Hafa t.d. uppi verið á Norðurlöndum margir ágætir meðalhöfundar í bændastjett og jafnvel þar fram yfir [og þegar tilteknir listamenn eru ræddir] kjósa menn fremur að taka þannig til orða, að [til dæmis] Hans Sachs hafi verið stórskáld enda þótt hann væri skósmiður [og] hefir þó engum hugkvæmst að þakka það skósmíðamenningunni í Bæverjalandi, hvert stórskáld Hans Sachs var.”

Iceland (although the Nordic countries as a whole were relatively poor well into the nineteenth and in some cases the twentieth-centuries), better educated, most even having roads.

Laxness would criticize the construction of the farmer–poet from other directions as well, pointing out (like we noted above) that writing requires intense dedication and cannot be accomplished with any flair if pursued as a hobby. This applies to those living in the countryside as well as those in townships and urban areas. He would then point out that the daily work regimen of farmers who did not have the financial wherewithal to enjoy the assistance of hired hands, was utterly backbreaking; incredibly brutal work that left little time for literary pursuits. This is where the perhaps somewhat obscure reference to Hans Sachs above comes in as this facet of the argument against idealizations of the farmer–poet was of central importance to Laxness. He would commonly point to two of the most celebrated literary figures of his time, Stephan G. Stephansson and Stefán frá Hvítadal.

The former left Iceland for Canada during the great exodus at the close of the nineteenth century and created an illustrious poetic oeuvre, almost without peer in the period. The latter was a personal friend of Laxness', considered among the most talented of the young poets to emerge in the 1910s and 1920s, and his *Söngvar förumannsins* (Songs of the Traveler, 1918), became a sensation and an instant classic. Laxness would invariably make the point that one could only wonder what a genius like Stephansson might have accomplished in the field of literature, what kind of legacy he might have left, had the largest share of his time and energies not been spent plowing fields and farming animals.



Regarding Stefán frá Hvítadal, Laxness recounted his personal experiences visiting him after Stefán had moved from Reykjavík to a provincial county where he took up farming, and how the miseries of poverty and hardship sapped his poetic strength.<sup>443</sup> Speaking of Stephansson and another farmer–poet, Guðmundur Friðjónsson, Laxness writes:

The truth is that the farmer's post was the greatest possible curse upon the immense innate talents of these men; the brutal struggle to survive was a merciless iron clamp on their maturation, it confined their talents and made the growth that their gift required all the more difficult. It is impossible to read their works and not become aware that their talents were never allowed to blossom beyond a meager portion of their potential, and that they are rough around the edges. Icelandic contemporary culture has hardly been damaged by anything as much as the fact that in their lives these men ended up in the wrong vocation.<sup>444</sup>

### *2.1 Challenging the Cultural Supremacy of the Countryside*

There were of course different ways to conceptualize the figure of the farmer–poet and endow it with meaning. Underlying all such conceptualizations however were two things; one was grounded in a historical imaginary, the other involved political and economic issues, as well as the effect of deeply ingrained societal structures.

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<sup>443</sup> In an article written a year after Stefán frá Hvítadal's passing, Laxness describes his fate thus: "As fitted him leaving the city for the country, he now looked backwards, to the nation's history and the history of its peoples for some condolence values, but he also abandoned the fiery struggle taking place in modernity over ideals, principles and form, because his situation had disarmed him, and bereft of opportunities, he tried to adjust to the conventions of the enlightened Icelandic farmer of means, who worships his country's past, its history and beliefs, but dumbstruck when faced the ever changing currents of 'fashion,' which is his word for all that is becoming and is an ugly word, one that requires that what it designates be hated". Halldór Laxness. "Stefán frá Hvítadal." *Dagleið á fjöllum*. Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Heimskringla, 1938, pp. 142–143.

<sup>444</sup> Laxness, "Af íslensku menningarástandi." 28 November, p. 3. In the original: "Sannleikurinn er sá, að bóndastaðan hefir verið hinum frábæru sálargáfum þessara manna hin versta bölvun; grimm lífsbarátta hefir verið miskunnarlaus járnhemill á þroska þeirra; hún hefir markað hæfileikum þeirra bás og gert þeim torveldara fyrir um þroska, er gáfum þeirra hæfði. Hún varði þess þeim oft, að standa svo óháðum sem æskilegt hefði verið. Manni dylst eigi við lestur rita þeirra, að kraftar þeirra hafa ekki notið hálfra útþenslu á við möguleika sína, og eru alltaf að öðrum þræði óbeislaður óskópnir. Íslensk nútíðarmenning hefir ekki af mörgu beðið meiri halla en því, að þessir menn skyldu lenda á rangri hyllu."

Starting with the former, the historical imaginary at stake involved the medieval literary heritage and the dim cultural memory of great farmsteads and illustrious chieftains; men who had traveled widely and were sophisticated and educated in equal measures. These scholar-warriors still returned to their rural abodes in Iceland to write books for the ages.<sup>445</sup> In the figure of the unknown authors of the Sagas, conveniently vague, an almost limitless energy source was to be found for debates where the superiority of the countryside over settled areas and the capital was argued.

The other issue was the fact that even in the 1920s, the economic privileges of certain segments of the rural population had changed little over time. This is where the wealth of the country was gathered — land was still the most valued property a person could own — and “gentlemen” farmers had the leisure for cultural pursuits. Many who would not exactly count themselves among the elite or as “gentleman” farmers, were still financially secure and had the opportunity to engage in literary pursuits. This applied to wives as well as husbands; the best-known female authors of the initial decades of the century were all respectable mistresses of rural estates (the size of which did however vary, as did their financial security).<sup>446</sup>

The cultural supremacy of the countryside was unquestioned, or almost, in this period, and the capital resembled the youngest child among a host of

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<sup>445</sup> Sigurður Nordal. *Snorri Sturluson*. Reykjavík: Þór. B. Þorláksson, 1920. Jónas Jónsson. *Íslands saga*. Reykjavík: Ríkisútgáfa námsbóka, 1939.

<sup>446</sup> The situation was of course entirely different for women than men, the former bearing the child-rearing responsibilities that could be immense as families tended to be large, ten, fifteen and up to twenty children. Kristín Sigfúsdóttir is a case in point. She wrote in her youth but was then forced to take what eventually amounted to several decades off as family responsibilities, and many, many children, took up her time and energy. For more on this, see Árni Sigurjónsson. “Sagnagerð á þriðja áratug aldarinnar.” *Íslensk bókmenntasaga* IV. Ed. by Guðmundur Andri Thorsson. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2006, pp. 35–38.

older siblings, all of whom are more experienced and, quite frankly, much more violent, being in fact bullies. Riddled with neurosis and anxieties, Reykjavík settled for parliamentary representation that was downright ridiculous; the representatives of Reykjavík agreed — agreed may be too strong a word, it is doubtful in light of their parliamentary influence that they could have done anything — to a severe imbalance in the value of votes, an imbalance that was downright feudal, and would remain in place for decades and is still a serious democratic deficit in Iceland.<sup>447</sup> Votes cast in Reykjavík were sometimes worth less than half of a vote that was cast in a suitably rural and meagerly populated county somewhere out in the provinces: the value of the vote came to depend on an idea that it should “make up” for deficiencies in other areas. These “deficiencies” might include isolation, living in a small community, and living in a remote community (related to but not necessarily the same as isolation), that is, far from Parliament.

The idea was that the inhabitants of the capital, most living within walking distance of the Parliament, were so well placed to influence the political process that, in order to make things equal, those who could not simply mosey on down the street to the seat of legislative power and persuade a member (or members) of congress to pass, or conversely, jettison, a law in the making — which the urbanites were surely doing all the time — should have the grave political injustice of their rurality rectified by more weighty votes. This, aside from everything else, ignored the fact that a high proportion of members of parliament represented the countryside.

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<sup>447</sup> Ólafur Ásgeirsson. *Iðnbylting hugarfarsins: Átök um atvinnuþróun á Íslandi 1900–1940*. Reykjavík: Bókmenntaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1988, pp. 21–23.

When it came to appropriations, developments in Reykjavík were gladly put on the backburner by the parliamentary members representing the capital, with some members, wanting to prove their loyalty to the countryside (despite their unfortunate current circumstance as representatives of Reykjavík), proposed of their own volition spectacular allocations of common funds to some project or other, pet or serious, that, and this was the important point, was undertaken in the provinces.

As will be touched on again in a subsequent section, the new class of urban intellectuals, most affiliated with the still brand new University of Iceland or other venerable cultural institutions (such as libraries), and all of them educated in one or another of the great capitals of Europe, echoed the very sentiments we have been describing in the political sphere. This is not an obvious path to take, as Halldór Guðmundsson indicates when he asks, “it is natural to ask why the Reykjavík intelligentsia turned against its ideological patron and backer in the form of European urban culture, that they should become so critical of life in townships and cities, even the public school system.”<sup>448</sup>

## *2.2 The Rise of Reykjavík*

Although the opposition was formidable, the forces of modernization were not easily swayed from their course. What the above discussion brings to the fore, however, is the fact that at stake were immense economic interests, and the

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<sup>448</sup> Guðmundsson, “*Loksins, loksins*,” p. 55. In the original: “Spyrja mætti af hverju menntamenn Reykjavíkur hafi snúist þannig gegn bakhjarli sínum í evrópskri stórborgarmenningu, gerst gagnrýnir á borgarlífið og meira að segja skólakerfið.”

entrenched power of generations, of a social structure that stretched back nearly a millennium, and thus what a gargantuan task it was to shift elements that were, much as the strange toadying of the parliamentarians demonstrated, integrated into the very fiber of the national consciousness. Before continuing with Laxness cutting a modern figure on the streets of Reykjavík, and a swathe through the cultural field, it is useful to take a moment to discuss the material factors underlying the country vs. city debate; for instance how the very nature of the state was being contested.

With the motorization of the fishing industry around the turn of the twentieth century, the economies of settled areas along the coastline changed drastically but the concepts of “modernity” and “modern culture” should be used carefully, Hálfðanarson notes, even when touching down several decades into the twentieth century, because, despite manifold changes, rural ideologies were still prevalent and, perhaps more important, the living conditions were in general abject and without any of the conveniences usually associated with modern urban culture.<sup>449</sup>

Reykjavík represented something of an exception in this context but its growth was contested by the farming elite and viewed as a threat. The reasons behind the conflict were many and complex and rooted in traditional social forms. Iceland, much like other societies, had “always” been a rural society, that is, until the advent of urbanization. The discourses on urban culture, once Reykjavík started taking on the aspects of a nation’s capital, which may not as a matter of fact have been until a decade or two into the twentieth century, quickly

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<sup>449</sup> Hálfðanarson, “Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun,” p. 107.

became value laden with the inhabitants of the capital being portrayed as out of touch with Icelandic history, culture and the essence of the nation's identity — all of which, quite naturally, was to be found in the country and on the farms in a more undiluted and originary form.<sup>450</sup> This is a debate that Laxness participated in vigorously in the 1920s. Behind the contestation over ideology and morality were direct economic interests and the question of how to deploy the power of the state as well as what the extent of that power should be.

Hálfðanarson describes a fundamental structural contest taking place as Reykjavík emerged as an urban center and the site of the national parliament between rural forces who wanted governmental power to take on a dispersed and local form, where district councils and county magistrates, and other official functionaries based in rural communities, were entrusted with substantial administrative power; governmentality in this sense being de-centralized. On the other hand there was the substantial urban faction, which saw the existence of a strong state whose centralized power apparatus was capable of ensuring the rule of law, the smooth functioning of a bureaucratic system, which, among other things, secured the status of private property and economic freedom.<sup>451</sup>

In other words, the latter were the spokesmen of modernization and capitalism, and it is thus in a sense competition for the reins of social power, economic and political, that grounds and motivates the ideological discourse of cultural “health” and the fierce pitching of traditional rural values against “degenerate” urban ways of life. The economic situation in coastal townships and later Reykjavík was never particularly inviting for mass migration, and it took

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<sup>450</sup> Ásgeirsson, *Iðnbylting hugarfarsins*, pp. 24–28.

<sup>451</sup> Guðmundur Hálfðanarson. “Kemur sýslumanni [það] nokkuð við ... ? Um þróun ríkisvalds á Íslandi á 19. öld.” *Saga*, 1993, pp. 24–25.

quite a while for urbanized areas to become in point of fact economically viable as a destination for those seeking to improve their lives; this may as a matter of fact not have happened fully until the war. That a significant migration away from the countryside commenced — another mainstay of tales of urbanization — long before says quite a lot about the miseries of farming life for those low down on the totem pole, those that did not own land and never would and would spend their lives in a form of unpaid servitude. The tide would not be turned; there was a depression, yet Reykjavík kept growing.<sup>452</sup>

Indeed, in 1933, left wing intellectual and one of Laxness' closest friends, Kristinn E. Andrésson, could in good conscience write that, "the struggle between the countryside and Reykjavík is now settled, and Reykjavík has the prize firmly in hand, victorious. Reykjavík attracted technology from abroad, the wealth from the sea, and the workforce from the rural landowners and thus brought entirely new cultural prospects into being."<sup>453</sup>

### *2.3 The Rugged Farmhand and the Effeminate Urban Artist*

As a young naïf, not yet worldly and beyond such things, Laxness himself was under the sway of traditional Nordic pastoral models, as his earliest short stories and unfinished manuscripts testify to. These tend to exalt the vigor and ruddy health of farmers in a highly pitched and unselfconscious romantic tenor. The short story "Heiðbæs" is a case in point. Published in Laxness' first story

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<sup>452</sup> Guðjón Friðriksson. *Saga Reykjavíkur. Bærin vaknar, 1870–1940*. 2 bindi. Reykjavík: Iðunn, 1991–1994.

<sup>453</sup> Kristinn E. Andrésson. "Eins og nú horfir við." *Iðunn*, 1933, p. 125. In the original: "Átökin milli sveitanna og Reykjavíkur hafa farið svo, að Reykjavík stendur með pálmann í höndunum, sigri hrósandi. Hún dró til sín tæknina frá útlöndum, auðinn úr sjónum og mannaflann frá bændunum og skapaði þannig ný menningarskilyrði."

collection, *Nokkrar sögur* (A Few Stories, 1923), when the author was twenty one, it depicts farm hand Helgi, a “peerless worker” who is “endowed with enormous strength,” really quite superhuman fortitude. The events of the story taking place roughly a century before Adderall became an option, the fact that Helgi is “never seen sleeping” yet never “became tired,” is all the more remarkable.<sup>454</sup> In appearance Helgi was “tall and broad-shouldered, blonde and blue eyed,” being the perfect specimen of Aryan masculinity.<sup>455</sup> It will turn out that his aptitude is really for battling the molten forces of the fiery innards of the earth, but as he has not found his calling yet, and there isn’t enough work to keep him occupied continuously, those times do come around when, doggone it, he simply has nothing to do. However, Helgi is not wasteful in any area of his life, so even these troubling voids are put to use: he reads. And he always reads the same book, *Grettis Saga* (The Saga of Grettir the Strong). Needless to say, Helgi is in love with the daughter of the house, Ástríður, but cannot say it, express it, or do anything about it.

That summer, however, something unexpected happens. A traveler arrives, young and sprightly and thoroughly courteous to everybody, an artist from Reykjavík named Heiðbæs — an entirely pretentious name, never before or since heard in Iceland — who planned to spend time in the countryside capturing landscapes. He also proves an unstoppable talker. Helgi on the other hand never uttered an unnecessary word and, indeed, was a rather clumsy speaker.

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<sup>454</sup> Halldór Laxness. “Heiðbæs.” *Smásögur*. Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 2000, p. 44. In the original: “Hann hét Helgi og var fádæma verkamaður og aflsmuna” and “sást aldrei sofa og var aldrei þreyttur”.

<sup>455</sup> Laxness, “Heiðbæs,” p. 44. In the original: “Helgi var *hár og herðabreiður, ljóshærður og bláeygur*”.



Painting and talking, knowledgeable about the world, Heiðbæs charms Ástríður and they fall in love, or she grows infatuated with him, and Heiðbæs broaches the idea of her moving with him to Reykjavík. From Helgi's point of view, the extremely brief description just offered is more than enough, indeed, the combined effect of negatives and shameful revelations comes together in a mass that literally flows over the brim of what can be fitted inside the subjectivity, emotional range and cognitive functions of any one character in a short story. Heiðbæs paints — that is not a man's work, and art really has no place in life or society since all the art any Icelander needs was completed 800 years ago when the last chieftain laid down the ink quill for the last time, with the last Saga completed. And he talks. About what? The narrator makes clear that on those few occasions that Helgi speaks he finds the act difficult and does it badly. Speech, while not as useless as painting, still carries the unwholesome whiff of Reykjavík, a place filled with chattering people. And he has designs on Helgi's girl. As noted, subtlety does not yet count among Laxness' literary qualities.

The forces of nature intervene however at this point, and a nearby volcano erupts with accompanying tremors, sending floods of molten lava down the hills and great strokes of ash skyward. Heiðbæs panics, Helgi remains calm: "Who knows if the lava flows over the farm?" Heiðbæs screeches, "Or the farm should collapse in these earthquakes. The mountain might also eject giant rocks that would crush the house on top of us. Shouldn't we, by the way, ride away? I can't stand all this agitation. God almighty help me, what if we get hurt?"<sup>456</sup> "We

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<sup>456</sup> Laxness, "Heiðbæs," p. 52. In the original: "Hver veit nema hraunleðjan streymi yfir bæinn? Eða bærinn hrynji í einhverjum skjálftakippnum? Fjallið gæti líka spúið stórgrýti og mölvað á

here believe in Odin and Thor, said Helgi, and he did not say another word to Heiðbæs their entire time together.”<sup>457</sup>

The veneration for stoic, inarticulate but robust life and the loathing shown the Reykjavík lay–about, the artistic profession being of course the most useless imaginable from the perspective of those who wrestle with volcanoes. Helgi is indeed the human counterpart to the mountain that erupts; he remains quiet and doesn’t speak for long periods, massive and rock solid, but when he erupts, there are bound to be repercussions. As a matter of fact, he is not of the modern world, reading the Sagas and esteeming the old Norse gods, he is a figure out of heroic antiquity and Ástríður must at the end choose between modernity, embodied as a spineless chatterbox unable to do a day’s work, and the aforementioned representation of the glories of the past and true core and essence of the nation.

However, in his discussion of the short story, Peter Hallberg notes the single instance of a surprising note being struck. This is at the end, when Heiðbæs has most certainly proven himself incapable of facing the forces of nature. Yet, while describing his flaws, and having Ástríður motivate the point of view structure, the narrator, right in the middle of saying something completely different, becomes reflective, noting that Heiðbæs was not “the son of ice and fire” and he probably would not have cared if all the farm animals had perished:

Iceland tests the Icelander, Iceland and nothing else; was it too much to say that he had failed his test? Perhaps. It was possible that he was the man of the future, the one who would ground the fortunes of the young

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okkur húsinn. Ættum við annars ekki að ríða burt? Ég þoli nefnilega ekki miklar geðshræringar. Guð almáttugur hjálpi mér ef þetta skyldi verða okkur að meini.”

<sup>457</sup> Laxness, “Heiðbæs,” p. 52. In the original: “Við hérna trúum á Óðin og Ásaþór, sagði Helgi, og fleira sagði hann ekki við Heiðbæs allan tímann se þeir höfðu samdvöl.”

nation, it was conceivable that changing times would not care overly much about cows in a cowshed and sheep out in the heath.<sup>458</sup>

Hallberg goes on to say that this authorial interjection appears askance in the context of the story as a whole, its thematic focus, tone and the ideological position of the narrator in virtually every single paragraph aside from this one. All the trappings of the story, rivalries in love, the city pitted against the country, an erupting volcano, earthquake, lava threatens), Laxness is in cinematic terms going for the Cecil B. DeMille melodramatic epic with however only the tools of someone like Ed Wood at hand, a lonesome angora sweater. While the other stories in the collection can all be placed on a scale that runs from the bad to the awful — with one exception that we will touch on below — “Heiðbæs” is still in a class of its own, and that is why we bring it up, since it is such a transparent vehicle for ideology. It demonstrates clearly the immense shift that occurs between the publication of *Nokkrar sögur* in 1923 and the appearance of “Unglingurinn í skóginum” two years later.<sup>459</sup>

## 2.4 Cultured Stylization

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<sup>458</sup> Laxness, “Heiðbæs,” p. 54. In the original: “Ísland reynir Íslendinginn, Ísland og ekkert annað; var ofmikið sagt að hann hefði ekki staðist raun sína? Eftilvill. Kanski var hann framtíðarmaðurinn, sá er heill hins unga Íslands átti eftir að hafa að undirstöðu, og vera má að nýir tímar kæri sig lítt um kúr í fjósi og kindur í högum.” See also Peter Hallberg, *Vefarinn mikli I*, p. 33.

<sup>459</sup> Indeed, it is in his subsequent essays on the state of Icelandic culture that the point of view promoted by “Heiðbæs” would most firmly be refuted and criticized. Articles such as “Úr circus menningarinnar, and “Af íslensku menningarástandi,” “Ferðasaga að austan” (Travelogue From the East, 1926), Raflýsing sveitanna (Electification of the provinces, 1927), as well as the essays that make up *Alþýðubókin*, expressed Laxness’ belief that it was imperative for Icelanders, particularly the slowly urbanizing culture of Reykjavík but also the countryside, to shake off the remnants of a backward, poverty stricken, locally based, self-sustenance oriented agrarian economy. The essays thus partook of a wide-ranging social debate occasioned in part by the appearance in Iceland of several of modernity’s signature features.

In “Af íslensku menningarástandi,” perhaps the best known of Laxness’ essays from this period, the bulk of the modernization–based critique is communicated through meditation on everyday practice. That is, the common behavioral and consumption patterns that give shape to the daily existence of ordinary people provide the conceptual framework of the essay. What emerges as perhaps the essay’s key concept, serving as an analytical tool, aesthetic invocation, and thematic binding, is the notion of “cultured stylization”.<sup>460</sup>

“Cultured stylization” refers to everyday life patterns, the activities and experiences that give shape to the lives of common folk, farmers and a slowly emerging urban middle class, the latter perhaps being more a promise than a presence at this point. Laxness employs the meanings invoked by the notion of “cultured stylization” to argue that the daily conduct of individuals is closely related to, even indicative of, the general state and health of the culture, with the important caveat that proper comprehension of the cultural situation depends on the historicization of material conditions. Needless to say, the concept also encompasses the subjectivity of the individual, being the finest barometer possible as to somebody’s worth. Thus, the notion involves the imperative or demand that public and private life should be led with a degree of grace and refinement. This is not “mere” dandyism,<sup>461</sup> nor is it a social hygiene crusade.<sup>462</sup> It is indicative of a stance towards culture that is the polar opposite of, for example, the one associated with Matthew Arnold, holding that culture is

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<sup>460</sup> Laxness, “Af íslensku menningarástandi,” 11 July, p.3. In the original: “siðmenningarleg stílatríði”. The notion of cultured stylization is tied closely to one of Laxness’ most important reference points in this period, the concept of fashion, which will be discussed more closely below.

<sup>461</sup> In the context of Baudelaire, there is nothing “mere” about dandyism, to give one example.

<sup>462</sup> Although Laxness was certainly not above engaging in a social hygiene crusade, as his essay on the brushing of teeth and personal hygiene in *Alþýðubókin* demonstrates.

“sweetness and light,” secular divinity, the best that has been thought and said — and something that is most certainly the property of the upper classes.<sup>463</sup>

Laxness contends, rather, that culture belongs, or should belong, to the masses, that it is to be found in the street and in shops and work areas, and that the human body, properly cared for and attired, is an integral part, even starting point, for culture understood as artistic work and aesthetic appreciation.

Elevating the essay far above the routine polemic is the variety of topics and positions that Laxness tackles as he moves from considering the township of Reykjavík to the countryside, from politics to fashion, and from drinking etiquette to tonal counterpoint in folk singing. Laxness starts by celebrating the “cultural revolution” that is a recent occurrence but one of considerable significance:

But a revolution has taken place and unbelievable things occurred. An aged Icelander has lived a greater social revolution in the fullest understanding of the word than any Russian farmer. Men, who in childhood received fish broth in their chewing cloth and grew up in the smoke from the hearth, in the time when Reykjavík was no more a city than that it was considered newsworthy if a man owned a coat, these men now walk the asphalt of Austurstræti in the evening, in the boxed calf boots from Lárus Lúðvigsson, enveloped in the glow from the shop windows of Haraldur Árnason and Egill Jakobsen. The coat that not many decades ago sheltered only the shoulders of the governor, the bishop and a few prestigious figures besides, on cold days of national note, has now become not only an everyday item of clothing for the shop assistant, whenever he is seen on the street, ten months a year, if not twelve, but

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<sup>463</sup> Matthew Arnold. *Culture and Anarchy. An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*. Ed. by Ian Gregor. Canterbury: University of Kent, 1971. In particular the chapter “Sweetness and Light,” pp. 33–58. As to Arnold and class, the following quote from *The Popular Education of France* is indicative of his stance: “It is of itself a serious calamity for a nation that its tone of feeling and grandeur of spirit should be lowered or dulled. But the calamity appears far more serious still when we consider that the middle classes, remaining as they are now, with their narrow, harsh, unintelligent, and unattractive spirit and culture, will almost certainly fail to mould or assimilate the masses below them [...] They arrive, these masses, eager to enter into possession of the world, to gain more vivid sense of their own life and activity. In this their irrepressible development, their natural educators and initiators are those immediately above them, the middle classes. If these classes cannot win their sympathy or give them their direction, society is in danger of falling into anarchy.” Matthew Arnold. *The Popular Education of France, With Notices of That of Holland and Switzerland*. Los Angeles: General Books LLC, 2012. The quote is taken from Terry Eagleton. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1983, p. 24.

also the warehouse hand; it has even become something the dock worker owns and can do on Sundays. This is remarkable evidence of a national revolution that is equivalent to nothing less than Reykjavík shifting its place on the map, moving about 25 degrees southwards.

Until the latter half of the century that passed, Reykjavík was like any other poverty stricken village (a few cottages huddled together and the sea the only sustenance), the only difference being that a few government officials were stationed there, and with them a few public institutions, doing nothing and having nothing. In the blink of an eye, the town has changed its appearance to such a degree that a middle aged inhabitant of Reykjavík has become a foreigner in his own town. Everything has become new.<sup>464</sup>

Laxness' irreverence towards the hard-line left and Bolshevism is evident both in how he co-opts the concept of revolution and employs it in a very unorthodox fashion, or so Einar Olgeirsson and various other contemporaries would have pointed out, and his jovial comparison in the opening movement of the passage between an inhabitant of Reykjavík and a Russian farmer after 1917.<sup>465</sup> Indeed, for quite some time, even once he'd moved closer to the Marxist line and might even be considered a Communist, Laxness frequently did not do much more than gesture in a vague fashion towards Marxist theories.

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<sup>464</sup> Laxness, "Af íslensku menningarástandi," 11 July, p. 2. In the original: "En það hefur orðið bylting og ótrúlegustu hlutir gerst. Roskinn Íslendingur hefur lifað meiri þjóðfélagsbyltingu í orðsins fylsta skilningi en nokkur rússneksur bóndi. Menn, sem í bernsku fengu grásleppuhrognast í dúsuna sína og upp voru aldir í hlóðabrælu, í það mund sem Reykjavík var eigi meiri heimsborg en svo, að tíðindum sætti ef maður átti frakka, þeir hinir sömu tjáka nú á malbikinu í Austurstræti að kvöldi dags, á boxcalfstígvjelum frá Lárusi Lúðvigssyni, vafðir ljómanum úr búðargluggunum hjá Haraldi Árnasyni og Agli Jakobsen. Frakkinn, sem fyrir fæstum áratugum skýldi ekki annara herðum en landshöfðingjans, biskupsins og fárra höfðingja annarra, á köldum tillidögum, er nú ekki að eins orðinn hversdagsflík innanbúðarmannsins, hve nær sem hann sjest á strætinu, tíu mánuði ársins, ef ekki tólf, heldur einnig utanbúðarmannsins, og meira að segja orðin sunnudagaflík verkamannanna á eyrinni. — Þetta er talandi vottur um þjóðfélagsbyltingu, sem samsvarar hvorki meira nje minna en því, að Reykjavík, hefði flutst til á hennintum c. 25 gráðum sunnar. Fram á seinni hluti aldarinnar sem leið, var Reykjavík eins og hvert annað fátækraþorp (nokkrir kotrassar, hver ofaní öðrum, og sjórin lífsvon íbúanna), að öðru leyti en því, að þar höfðu nokkrir embættismenn verið settir niður, og við þeirra hlið fáeinir opinberar stofnanir, snöggar og snauðar. Í einu vetfangi hefir bærinn tekið þeim stakkaskiftum, að miðaldra Reykvíkingur infæddur, er nú orðinn sem útlendingur í sínum eigin bæ. Alt er orðið nýtt."

<sup>465</sup> Einar Olgeirsson was a prolific editor and writer for numerous magazines, newspapers and journals. He was also a preeminent figure in the Communist movement in Iceland, holding a seat in parliament for the Communist Party of Iceland, Sósíalistaflokkinn, and finally Alþýðubandalagið from 1937–1967. Olgeirsson was also notable for his translation work, among which is Marx and Engel's *The Communist Manifesto*.

But while the above passage would seem to celebrate the modernization of Reykjavík without hesitation, such an upbeat tone does not turn out to be the dominant mode of the essay. As a matter of fact, the discourse shifts and the very milieu celebrated as having undergone a “revolution” is criticized harshly, extensively, and painfully, “the ‘Parvenu’ culture is everywhere, immature and unsophisticated,” Laxness notes and is just warming up.<sup>466</sup> Thus, the compliments come to a quick stop. Reykjavík’s recent cultural advancements, which, while certainly a step in the right direction — a point Laxness makes through the strategic invocation of the economic miseries of the immediate past — still do not alter the fact that the town remains a rudely backward outpost from the continent where a civilized disposition is bound to exist in a state of constant shock and exasperation.

Reykjavík does not even manage to contain the extent of Laxness’ critique as it develops and expands to encompass the entire country and its history: “The settlement is a tragic endeavour from several perspectives. For a thousand years, the country itself was the nation’s worst enemy, doing its utmost to wipe out as many of its children as possible [...] The most deplorable mistake in Iceland’s history is that they failed to found a colony in Vineland the Good. Had they succeeded in setting down roots there, Iceland would not have been heard of further”.<sup>467</sup>

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<sup>466</sup> Laxness, “Af íslensku menningarástandi,” 11 July, p. 2. In the original: “‘Parvenu’-menningin, nýgræðingshátturinn lýsir sér á hverju strái.”

<sup>467</sup> Laxness, “Af íslensku menningarástandi,” 26 September, p. 2. In the original: “Landnáma er frá ýmsum sjónarmiðum sorglegt æfintýr. Landið sjálf var í þúsund ár versti óvinur þjóðarinnar, það neytti allra bragða til að koma sem flestum barna sinna fyrir kattarnef [...] Sorglegasta villan í sögu Íslendinga er sú, að þeim skyldi hafa mistekist að stofna nýlendu í Vínlandi hinu góða. Hefði þeim tekist að festa þar rætur, mundi Íslands ekki hafa verið getið framár”.

The initial positive stance serves a twofold purpose in this case, on the one hand it allows Laxness to ease into his critique and, on the other, it does create a space where Reykjavík's achievements, such as they are, can be pointed to and held aloft. This becomes important when Laxness moves his sights out into the countryside and the provinces and then needs Reykjavík as a modern point of comparison.

But if we return for a moment to the extensive quote above, what may stand as its most notable feature is that the entire narrative of the "revolution" is told through the prism of an item of clothing, the overcoat to be more precise. This, one might contend, represented the epitome of cultural stylization as it combines the aesthetic dimension, this being after all clothing worn by governors and bishops in days past, and most certainly a huge step up from the woolen sweater that bordered on being the uniform of the working classes. Secondly, there is a humanist, progressive dimension embedded in the overcoat as well — which we can now take as emblematic of warm, sheltering clothing — because it is the carrier of historicity, in Laxness' rendering we witness increased social prosperity in Iceland through the expanding class parameters of those who could claim a coat for themselves. In the span of several decades we see the coat move from being an absolute rarity ("it was considered newsworthy if a man owned a coat") and marker of privilege to being something that the working classes could lay claim to, no doubt a good coat would be worn with pride. The practice of everyday life is employed to tell an economic narrative. A final bit of inventive imagery is used to emphasize the practical aspect of Laxness' story. Owning a coat, a working man, cold and harried through most of his life, is now transformed as he can withstand the brutal weather, a shift that is equal to the



country's landmass taking a fairly extensive trip southwards, to warmer climes, that is, the coat represents "a national revolution that is equivalent to nothing less than Reykjavík shifting its place on the map, moving about 25 degrees southwards").<sup>468</sup>

#### *2.4 Eye of the Observer*

The supremely confident way in which Halldór Laxness, a newcomer to the world of literature and the cultural debate in Iceland, passed value judgments on aesthetic matters, local and foreign, in a remarkable spurt of essays is what initially drew attention to him and subsequently his writings in a wider context, that is, him as an author, rather than one of the myriad opinion dispensers who wrote to the newspapers and journals as concerned citizens and culture enthusiasts but were by no stretch of the imagination actual writers. Indeed, this matter of the position of the writing subject is of considerable interest when reading many of Laxness' essays, not least "Af íslensku menningarástandi" as the author is careful not to subsume himself in the subject matter but instead he remains a controlling and somewhat distanced textual consciousness — expressing his concerns, pet theories and extensive critiques in a much more considered fashion than the heated polemics that in fact are on offer would suggest.

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<sup>468</sup> Laxness marshals forth the discourse of the reformer but a somewhat peculiar reformer, one whose thinking encompasses solid (even traditional) ideas of economic and social modernization but is also greatly concerned over the selection of costumes at Reykjavík's theater company, the quality of the verses and poetry that emerge from the dominant agrarian culture, and the fact that a cinema has arrived in Reykjavík. These latter items are seemingly just as good a measure of Icelandic modernity as the fact that living and working conditions have improved and consumer goods become more plentiful.

Laxness is in other words careful not to place himself wholly (or “speak”) on terms set by the vernacular culture, rather, there is a trail of rhetorical steps that one can follow, the destination being a space where, as noted above, Laxness can separate himself slightly from the glowingly creative textual flow that tempts any writer to simply go with it — rather than doing that he has found a tiny control booth somewhere off to the side of the most sizzling sections of the textuality that surrounds everything in these linguistic environs. This is not meant to suggest that Laxness is a retiring figure in his own text, far from it, but these maneuvers allow him breathing space to present himself as he wants to be viewed, to smooth out his image in other words. As in the prologue to “Unglingurinn í skóginum” Laxness again figures himself as a representative of the modern. That means that rather than just offering objective evaluations and conclusions, he reveals some of the artistic trappings that go into an ambitious essay, and he attempts to delineate the place from where he speaks or, perhaps more accurately, the vantage point from where he looks. In part, he is grappling with the repercussions, and simply what it means to engage in what could be described as an ethnographic investigation of his fellow citizens. But by doing so, of course, he comes to the forefront and the ostensible subject matter recedes (as if from that tiny control booth we mentioned he could project images of himself out into the world).

This is a worthwhile gesture in many ways. The politics of the gaze and the role of the observer are issues that are all too frequently elided in writings on culture and although such reflections are perhaps not explicit in the majority of the essays of the period, they are touched upon regularly enough for the matter to constitute a running theme. What is of primary interest in the present context,

however, is the fact that it is possible to read Laxness' reflections on the writer's subjective positioning, including his spatial and temporal placement, that is the urban/rural dichotomy on the one hand and binaries such as past/present, present/future, culture/non-culture, and youth/experience on the other, as rhetorical devices, methods of figuration that performatively constitute the author as a modern figure.

In the opening of the essay, Laxness' delineates his observational position and indicates that it involves two interrelated properties. First he identifies himself as a liminal figure whose ambiguous relationship to the concept of nation inflects his perceptual approach. Secondly, he distinguishes an aesthetic and an ethical dimension to the perceptual framework that grounds his cultural investigation

I like to think that a particular set of circumstances have given me the opportunity to observe in an objective fashion, as I stayed in the country half as a guest and half as a native, enjoying the sharpness of the guest's eye and the knowhow of the local [...] The arbitration of the artist is without mercy, and he will spare nothing (if he judges at all); the ethicist is a brutal dictator if he is allowed to be in charge.<sup>469</sup>

Addressing the notion of liminality, Laxness emphasizes his cosmopolitanism and transnational lifestyle, the notion that his ties to the national have in the course of many years of wandering become frayed without completely rupturing, leaving his national self-identity not so much adrift as it is simply in-between, or, as he puts it, he is "unbound by place".<sup>470</sup> Distancing himself thus in part from the traditional way of portraying the individual subject as shaped (and

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<sup>469</sup> Laxness, "Af íslensku menningarástandi," 27 June, p. 2. In the original: "Jeg þykist hafa haft ýmis skilyrði til að gera óhlutdrægar athuganir, þar eð jeg dvaldi á landinu hálf sem gestur og hálfvegis heimamaður, með auga gestsins og kunnugleik heimamannsins [...] Dómar listamannsins eru miskunnarlausir og hann sjest hvergi fyrir (ef hann dæmir á annað borð), siðferðistpostulinn er hinn grimmosti harðstjóri, ef hann fær að ráða".

<sup>470</sup> Laxness, "Af íslensku menningarástandi," 27 June, p. 2. In the original, "hafði eingan þann starfa með höndum *er staðbindi mig*".

surrounded) by a series of increasingly abstract ideological institutions, ranging from the family to the nation, Laxness implies that his perception and analytical abilities are unclouded by the veil of patriotism and solipsistic conventionality that constitute the psychic mechanisms employed by national subjects to make the communal cultural horizon safe and comfortable, while still not associating himself completely with the foreign, indicating that he is thus not subject to the limitations of the visitor's inevitable unfamiliarity with the deep substrate of social codes that ultimately determine cultural signification.

Acknowledging that he is a “flawed observer”, Laxness holds up Indian mystic and writer Rabindranath Tagore, whose ability to distance himself from earthly concerns and accumulated psychological debris allows him to open his consciousness to a full and undistorted vision of the world. Although an admirer of Tagore, Laxness' invocation of the Bengali polymath still strikes a peculiar note in the context of the introductory passage, which, admittedly, is concerned with ways of justifying the validity of the perspective that is going to be construing the narrative that is about to commence, but, nevertheless, the spiritual plenitude and cosmic peace that Laxness brings into the conceptual constellation already in play by way of this move changes the entire dynamic. Tagore, who refuses to make distinctions, or categorize, let alone hierarchize, deems the entire world “incomparable” in beauty. This perspective points forward to some of Laxness' later protagonists — the organist in *Atómstöðin*, Ibsen Ljósdal in *Prjónastofan Sólin* (Sun Knitting, 1962), and Jón Prímus in *Kristnihald undir Jökli*, to give just random sample — but in the present context it must come into contention with the moral, cognitive and aesthetic schemata that Laxness, as if invoking the Kantian spheres of value directly, which are grounded

in the imperative to make judgments, indeed, Kant's third critique was precisely the critique of judgment.

In light of the content of the essay that follows the introductory chapter, it is safe to say that nobody is less appropriate than Tagore to take on the role of a Virgil to Laxness' "half a guest, half a native" and guide him along the journey that he is about to undertake. It is useful here to recall the nature of the flaws that Laxness admits to being burdened with, namely an ethical viewpoint and an aesthetic disposition.<sup>471</sup> These "faults" affect perception by making social injustice and cultural "defects" (ranging from unseemly personal conduct to bad art) terminal distractions in his attempts to be open and receptive to his environment, blights that quickly overshadow the "glory that shines from material appearances", a phrase that would famously be repeated in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*.<sup>472</sup> This however only means that he is capable of undertaking the project of modernity and what the founders of the Enlightenment envisioned: to head into the darkness, armed only with his faculties of reason, morality and sense of beauty, and with these shed a light.

In this way, Laxness attempts to account for the basic perceptual model that shapes possible knowledge and understanding in an observational project such as the one he is undertaking. Although placing his aims within a narrow

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<sup>471</sup> That Laxness was in general not shy when it came to public backlash, one may assume that the admittance of a "flawed perspective" was not necessarily meant to disarm the subjects of his critique beforehand. A more likely explanation might be that the figure of a modest narrator, one that is aware of his limitations, is going to be even more persuasive than a typical, unselfconscious narrator who speaks as if his authority were self-explanatory and he infallible.

<sup>472</sup> Laxness, "Af íslensku menningarástandi," 27 June, p. 2. In the original: "nýtur að hálfu þeirrar dýrðar er felst í ásýnd hlutanna."

context, he explicitly suggests much broader implications through the apparent conjunction or interrelated function of rationality, ethics and aesthetics.<sup>473</sup>

However, it is important to note as well that the interfacing between Laxness' cosmopolitan background and the type of rationality that he identifies as the condition of possibility for his liminal status speaks directly to his self-figuration as a modern artist and representative of modernity. That is, on display is a variation on the discourse of learned sophistication that characterizes Laxness' discussion of his poetry with *Morgunblaðið*, and the rhetorical strategy used in the preface to activate the avant-garde connotations of "Unglingurinn í skóginum". His observational position is ultimately never problematized; instead great care is taken to posit it as uncontaminated and pure, and his values are fundamentally secured by foreign experiences, knowledge of esoteric arts, and transnational subjectivity.

## 2.6 "Poetry Within History"

In the essay "Úr circus menningarinnar" (From the Cultural Circus, 1924), Laxness is ostensibly addressing a recent work on Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky by Danish theologian and cultural commentator Conrad Dihm

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<sup>473</sup> The perceptual "flaws" that Laxness identifies in the opening of "Af íslensku menningarástandi" are a rendering of the ideological framework within which he operates. Acknowledging the aporias that must inhere in constructions of one's own ideological horizon, and keeping in mind that Laxness' use of a narrating voice is highly self-conscious, it is nevertheless tempting to point out that the combination of the aesthetic and the ethical, the life of the committed artist and the utopian hope for social progress and justice that grounded political engagement, would as a matter of fact characterize Laxness' career for the next three decades. The valences would of course shift but the interplay and tension between the two poles, observation and participation, art and politics, imitating life or affecting it, constituted an important aspect of the immense force that catapulted Laxness to his position of centrality in Icelandic culture, and held a continual interest for readers and commentators alike.

Simonsen.<sup>474</sup> The focus quickly shifts away from the great Russian writer, however, and towards a certain character type, given voice in Dostoevsky's fiction but prior to that, the author is careful to note, an object of conceptual analysis in Laxness' ongoing engagement with modernity: this character type is "the modern man".

"The modern man" is presented as emblematic of a shift in subjective experience and even the constituent factors of the subject itself, and in Laxness' impassioned rendering of the implications of the cross-fertilization between literature and life, the reader of modern literature is offered the chance to discover what amounts to the disturbing core of modernity, which is that there is no core. The modern man is characterized by a Freudian-inflected awareness of the non-identity of the self, he reduces the Cartesian ego to performativity and haphazard fragmentation on a social stage lacking any substantive foundation: "The modern man has a hundred and fifty different views on life, but none of them truly belongs to him. A world view of his own is the only thing that he lacks."<sup>475</sup>

The historical and philosophical context thus invoked by Laxness transcends the immediate aftermath of war. The features that constitute the interiority of the modern man are nihilistic playfulness that result in drastic shifts between opposing values, a sense of unbounded license and sexual freedom that takes on a Sadean veneer, as well as the deep existential despair

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<sup>474</sup> This is how Laxness spells the name of the Danish author. It is possible that "Dihm" is a religiously motivated middle name, much like Laxness' own "Kiljan" but aside from that it seems that a more conventional version of the first and last names is Konrad Simonsen.

<sup>475</sup> Halldór Laxness. "Úr circus menningarinnar." *Morgunblaðið*, 14 December, 1924, p. 2. In the original: "Núttímamaðurinn hefur hundraðogfimmtíu lífskoðanir, en eingin þeirra er hans eigin. Hans eigin lífskoðun er hin eina sem hann ekki hefur."

that follows from the knowledge that there is nothing outside the self that ascribes value to action. The “modern man” thus formulated is acting out and working through the crisis that ensued once the normative force of tradition was abandoned and, although not conscious of the fact, he is unable to come to terms with the non-transcendental form of modern rationality. These deep seated modern anxieties are brought out through Laxness’ invocation of psychology and, although not mentioned directly but referenced implicitly through the notion of the unconscious, its seminal manifestation in the new science of psychoanalysis.

By invoking the conception of the “modern man,” Laxness engages with a tradition that goes right to the heart of conceptions of modernity, that is, although Laxness is concerned with the *fin de siècle* and nihilistic version, these in turn arose in response to yet earlier conceptualizations and representations of the new individual in modernity who has to come to terms with a world where values are not inherited nor vetted by religious authorities. It is in this way that thinking about modernity is intrinsically concerned with the individual subject’s relationship with the discursive category of experience, now understood to constitute something historically unprecedented.

In fact, this orientation traces its roots to what may stand as the inaugural text of modernity, Immanuel Kant’s essay “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?” (An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’, 1784), which focuses on the experiential problems and wider social context of a subject faced with a new world picture. Assuming the “spirit of freedom” to be a given, a prize won by the struggles of the Enlightenment, Kant ponders how a newly



emancipated subject can be expected to relate to the social world as a rational, free and ethically sound being.<sup>476</sup>

His conclusion is a view of society where the public use of reason is unfettered, indicating a consistent and reflective relationship with present social conditions, and also assuming that the process of rational public debate will lead to progress and change. Importantly, this developmental logic is devoid of a conclusive or a final state. Placing an ordained, teleological end within the horizon of expectations would render the conception of progress inoperative, or, as Kant puts it, would tie the hands of “later generations” who, in line with the progressive schemata of the Enlightenment, are expected to progress farther than their ancestors.<sup>477</sup> Kant’s essay is thus grounded in a rift from the past, an attempt to theorize the present and an implacable faith in the future and progress. These grand schemes are however dependent on the individual, and the ability “to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another.”<sup>478</sup>

In other words, Kant is describing a historically unprecedented experience, grounded in the individual subject and refers to new demands that follow from the freedom of modernity. As mentioned, the public use of reason is what grounds the notion of progress, but the provision of the “public use” of reason also implies its “opposite,” or a countervailing concept, namely the “private” deployment of reason, which for Kant means submitting to the demands of social structures and institutions — a dichotomy that Habermas will

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<sup>476</sup> Immanuel Kant. “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” *Kant’s Political Writings*. Trans. by H.B. Nisbet. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 54.

<sup>477</sup> Kant, “An Answer to the Question,” p. 57.

<sup>478</sup> Kant, “An Answer to the Question,” p. 54.

refashion into his theory of the public sphere and intermediary bureaucratic institutions.

The portrayal of a modern man, one who is free from the cognitive limitations of domination and myth, and who employs reason, a faculty that is also universally shared, thus creating a form of a social bond and grounds for inter-subjective agreement, to navigate the open and public domains of society while also participating in its institutional mode, is at the same time a portrayal of the new experience of modernity. It is tempting to look to Baudelaire at this point and his essay “The Painter of Modern Life,” where a figure that the poet refers to as the “man of modernity” is described — one who is very different from Laxness’ “modern man”. This segment of the text is, as a matter of fact, of great interest in the present context, and speaks in a direct fashion to Kant’s notion that the experience of modernity involves a task and a new attitude towards life:

And so away he goes, hurrying, searching. But searching for what? Be very sure that this man, such as I have depicted him — this solitary, gifted with an active imagination, ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert — has an aim loftier than that of a mere *flâneur*, an aim more general, something other than the fugitive pleasure of circumstance. He is looking for that quality which you must allow me to call ‘modernity’; for I know of no better word to express the idea I have in mind. He makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory.<sup>479</sup>

Baudelaire’s “man of modernity” is clearly a creature more aesthetic in nature than Kant’s more serious and ethically imbued figure, but shared is the notion that a new form of experience has enveloped the human condition; the present is not merely a repetition of the past, or a pale shadow of classical models, but

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<sup>479</sup> Charles Baudelaire. “The Painter of Modern Life.” *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. Trans. by Jonathan Mayne. London and New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2006, p. 12.

“poetry within history”. It is precisely through a combined reading of Kant and Baudelaire that Foucault suggests that we “envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history.”<sup>480</sup> When Laxness notes that “the world thinks in different images, speaks in different ways” and then aligns himself with the “faction that has always been just about to drive the world to the edge of collapse” (in the opinion of respectable and settled civic elders), he is expressing precisely an *attitude* of the sort that Foucault envisions.<sup>481</sup>

Keeping in mind how Laxness constructed an observational position for the authorial figure and the text’s narrating voice in “Af íslensku menningarástandi” by accentuating his liminal status as a cosmopolitan, and then endowing his documentary project with additional weight by invoking his aesthetic sensibility and political awareness, it is interesting to note how he now recalibrates his role as a novelist, formulated as a calling that entails studious observation of social phenomena, by associating it with the another emblematic figure of modernity, one less vague than “the modern man” but who shares the drive and determination of Baudelaire’s “man of modernity” to “ceaselessly journey[...] across the great human desert,” namely the “psychologist”. In popular renderings of the psychoanalytic process, a bespectacled figure, requisite pipe in hand, sits out of sight and observes, calibrates and interprets mental content codified by secondary processes in order to reveal unconscious truths.

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<sup>480</sup> Michel Foucault. “What is Enlightenment?” *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. by Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984, p. 39.

<sup>481</sup> Halldór Laxness. “Drengjakollurinn og íslenska konan.” *Morgunblaðið*, 9 August, 1925, p. 5. In the original: “sá hluti mannfjeldagsins, sem hefir verið að steypa heiminum í glötun”.

In “Úr circus menningarinnar,” the “psychologist” becomes the custodian of objective truth through the invocation of a certain type of expertise, the ability to decode surface appearances through the practice of depth hermeneutics. It is thus the psychologist who reveals the underlying emptiness and nihilism of the “modern man” in an analytical gesture that reminds us of Kant’s celebration of the deployment of reason.

This corresponds in a fundamental fashion to the way in which the non-visitor who visits Iceland in “Af menningarástandi” carefully rationalizes his truth claims as being subject neither to irrationality nor ignorance, but resulting from objective observation and the thoughtful engagement with psychological and cultural codes. That is, if the native and the foreigner represent untenable subject positions as they block venues important to the acquirement of knowledge, leaving the cosmopolitan position as the only logical alternative, the figure of the psychologist is invoked as the logical counterpoint to the rampant subjectivity of the modern man.

“Úr cirkus menningarinnar” thus highlights Laxness’ “discovery” of an archetypal figure that represents what he sees as modernity’s rupture from the past, and his perspective is endowed with scientific authority by invoking a psychoanalytical apparatus that did indeed enact a paradigm shift, revealing the manifold delusions and haphazard object investments that ground consciousness and ego formation. Simultaneously Laxness enacts the central contradiction of the psychoanalytical viewpoint, namely that bourgeois categories of rationality are being employed to reveal the irrational function of bourgeois reason, without however acknowledging the self-awareness

manifested in the psychoanalytical movement's insistence that the analyst be subject therapy and analysis.

In “Úr circus menningarinnar” the “modern man” is pathologized and presented as symptomatic of tendencies in modernity that are, in their essence, irrational, volatile, irresponsible, destructive and unethical, but can also, as indicated above, be subjected to analysis and thus explained, categorized, rendered controllable and acclimatized to a larger vision of modern rationality. In the tug of war between reason and irrationality, a fundamental schism in all conceptions of modernity, Laxness at this point in his writing career comes down on the side of the optimists, at this stage he is a firm believer in the capacity of enlightened rationality to contain deviations, irruptions and the manifold subjective and social crisis that a non-substantive and disenchanting world view fosters in the individual and brings out in communal practice. Indeed, all this cannot but fascinate the young author who describes the role of the novelist at one point in terms very much like those employed to describe the psychologist: “A novelist, who evaluates men depending on how fit their interiority is for a psychological novel, enjoys nothing half so much as the modern man. What can be a more pleasurable predicament, what puzzle more comical, than just this chameleon, this magnificent monster”.<sup>482</sup>

### ***3. Dispatches From the Circus***

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<sup>482</sup> Laxness, “Úr circus menningarinnar,” p. 2. In the original: “Sagnaskáld, sem metur menn eftir því hversu hæfur innmatur þeir eru í sálræna skáldsögu, hefur ekki hálfu unun af neinu á borð við nútímamanninn. Hvað er ánægjulegra úrlausnarefni, hver ráðgáta hlálægri en einmitt þetta kamelón, þetta glæsilega skrísml”. I should mention that my attention was initially brought to bear upon the figure of the psychologist by Ástráður Eysteinnsson who in his article “Fyrsta nútímaskáldsagan og móðernisminn” (*Umbrot*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1999) discusses the figure, albeit in a different context from the present one.

Halldór Laxness has been discussed so far in two registers. On the one hand there is the progressive literary experimentalist, the prototypical modernist who was fully engaged with the aesthetic dimension of the modern in this period and subsequently became what amounts to the official spokesperson for the avant-garde in Iceland, as well as something of a media figure. On the other hand we have gotten to know Laxness the proselytizer for modernization and societal improvement, the one who impatiently demanded change and would not take no for an answer (well, he had to do that most of the time, but he was extremely persistent); he knew that things did not have to be like this, that it was not decreed from above that Iceland should remain an isolated, obsolete, archaic, primitive, backwater outpost populated by temporal throwbacks in human form and governed by fossilized cultural policies and ideas.

There is a way in which all this activity proved beneficial to each other; to employ a concept dating back to the days just before the onset of the current dark age of brutish free-market domination, the very early 1980s in other words, and the concept in question is “synergy” — one might argue that a cross pollination of dynamic effectivities came into being when Laxness’ modernization discursive efforts, his public criticisms of age old pieties and firmly entrenched power structures, in addition to his self-figuration as a delegate of the modern, firmed up the modernist credentials of his literary output. At the same time his intense personal engagement with the major artistic trends of the time, as well as his extended stays in metropolitan centers of modernity shored up his authenticity when pushing back against the senseless worship of vicious forms of superstition, long discredited by reason and science, and social and institutional structures that were inhuman and cruel. This came to

an end, however, when Laxness abandoned the modernist mode for social realism and epic narrative novels.

The fact that Laxness turned so decisively against experimental literary forms may have played a role in modernism not gaining a foothold and not in fact becoming a sustained literary practice until the 1960s (earlier in poetry). It is also clear however that the historical circumstances were not optimal for the breakthrough of modernism. In the 1920s, the country was very much concerned with what many hoped was its impending independence, Iceland having achieved home rule in 1918; economic repercussions of the First World War were wrecking havoc on monetary policies and the price of food and consumer goods; thirdly, those who were not willfully looking away could see the clouds of an impending class struggle gathering on the horizon. The working class in Reykjavík was growing by leaps and bounds; a Socialist political party was founded in 1916 and The Communist Party of Iceland would come into being in 1930. While there are clearly no paradigms or rules for how and when innovative literary movements come to the fore, this at any rate is not a particularly fruitful soil. The demand for realism, direct political engagement, debate about social issues, seems almost to be in the air at such times.

### *3.1 Angel of History*

That fashion should be lodged so firmly and prominently in the title of Laxness' essay "Tíska og menning" (Fashion and Culture, 1925) is in part a playful provocation — Laxness is quite aware of the fact that the cohabitation of these two distinct conceptual vocabularies is likely to invoke contestation as well as

consternation — but he is also making a serious point, indicating that the concepts of “fashion” and “modernity” may have more in common than at first meets the eye, including their dependence on temporality and periodization and the unavoidable feeling that there is something fleeting and ephemeral about the amorphous thing that they invoke. The modern moment never seems to last and few things repulse the genuine creature of *haute couture* like the fashion lines of yesteryear. Thus, fashion and modernity must by definition always be of the moment, be modern, evince and be emblematic, not of yesterday, not the past, but the sensibility that is the precise counterpart to the social and cultural forces that inflect the current moment and provide modern subjects with the conceptual framework and tools within and with which they make the meaning of their lives.

Then there is the issue of periodization, of breaks and starts. For Frederic Jameson, for example, it is this instauration of a “break” in the form of a beginning that proves to be the central element in the narrative of modernity, while simultaneously being its most fragile moment because the originating instance remains opaque and obscure to the historicizing gaze. Jameson thus emphasizes that there is no consensus as to when the West “turned” modern but for him there is more at stake than a temporal marker, or indeed causality as such, rather, the inherent ambiguity of the process, and the malleability of related concepts such as modernization and modernity, as well as the multiplicity of narratives that emerge as soon as they are invoked, raise questions of ideology and values. Deciphering the narrative of modernity through the excavation or reclamation of historical alternatives points towards modernity itself being a particular mode of reading cultural texts, of constructing



contexts. The narrative point of view turns out to be crucial. That is, rooting modernity in genocide, colonialism, repression and the economic expansion of emerging empires, rather than philosophical or scientific revolutions, Enlightenment progress (education, secularization) or the French Revolution (the “birth” of democracy), technology (material prosperity), dramatically shifts the tonal inflections in the narrative of modernity, and problematizes claims of progress made on its behalf.<sup>483</sup>

There is another feature of the process of periodization that should be mentioned. Picture a figure hurrying up to a sizeable building in Wittenberg, Germany, in the year of Our Lord 1517. Whoever it is clearly employs the darkness of the night to go about his business unseen. He, and the figure proves indeed to be a man, is carrying an unwieldy hammer. Furtive but with surprisingly assured movements, he nails a scroll to the door of the building.

This is of course Martin Luther and the document in question is his *Disputatio pro declaratione virtutis indulgentiarum*. This event is commonly seen as marking the beginning of the Reformation, with the “hammer strokes [...] echo[ing] throughout all of Europe,” as self-help guru Vincent N. Paul puts it his inspirational retelling of the nailing-onto-door story in a 2005 book, while the online collection of falsifications, legends, misquotes and distortions regarding Martin Luther (“Legends about Luther: Nailing the 95 Theses”) also features that same apocryphal tale, and that same phrase, word for word, but noting that the modern scholarly consensus is that the incident never took place.<sup>484</sup> In other

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<sup>483</sup> Jameson. *A Singular Modernity*. p. 82–95.

<sup>484</sup> Vincent N. Paul. *Persistence Works!* Maitland: Xulon Press, 2005, p. 160. See also “Legends about Luther: Nailing the 95 Theses,” on the website *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* (<http://www.luther.de/en/> — page retrieved on 9 July 2014).

words and in this particular instance, the “break” that marked the instauration of the Reformation never happened. Thus the modern break can be grounded not only in events that have been transformed quite a bit by rhetorical flourishes and the manifold temptations of narration — to make the story better — but the monumental incident can also trace its roots back to a purely imaginary event.

Let us briefly now look at one of the signal events of twentieth-century fashion, Coco Chanel’s introduction of flat chested grey and blue fashions (these were traditionally masculine colors) in the early 1920s, with the result that hourglass shaped dresses, fashionable only moments before, became instant relics, and thus a new epoch in fashion was instaured.<sup>485</sup> In comparison to the Martin Luther story, this one has the clear advantage of being empirically verifiable. On the downside, the subject is fashion, a system that Hans-Georg Gadamer defines as that which regulates only those things that could have been completely different.<sup>486</sup> We’ll be returning to the concept of fashion shortly but the interesting thing here is that Gadamer is coming up somewhat harshly against Jameson’s above point about historical narrativization, in that anything can be completely different, if looked at from a perspective different from the one that a subject is familiar with. Of course there is no good reason why a pink dress with cartoon turtles on the back and a three foot long tail should not have caused the plateaus of the fashion world to shift in the 1920s, instead of the items of clothing produced by Chanel. Similarly, there is no good reason why

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<sup>485</sup> Lisa Chaney. *Coco Chanel: An Intimate Life*. New York and London: Penguin, 2012, pp. 159–181.

<sup>486</sup> What Gadamer says is, “The very word ‘fashion’ (Mode) implies that the concept involves changeable law (modus) within a constant whole of sociable demeanor. What is merely a matter of mode has no other norm than that give by what everybody does. Fashion regulates as it likes only those things that can equally well be one way as another.” Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Truth and Method*. Second Revised Edition. Trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. New York: Continuum, 2002, p. 37.

Westerners have been employing maps derived from mathematical formulas dating back to the sixteenth century that show Greenland as big as Africa, while the latter is in fact 14 times larger.<sup>487</sup>

Of course the social dynamics when discussing the emergence of modernity are more complicated; mapping the connection between the concept of modernity, the notion of unrepeatable time, and Christianity — an important sub-category in modernity studies — involves a host of social, cultural, historical and political intersections and conjunctions, as well as conflicts and tensions, but getting an overview of all this, and comprehending the causal factors, and keep in mind, this represents just one facet of the modernity break, quickly starts to seem a very daunting task indeed. We thus have the fact that major moments in the emergence of modernity may be utterly imaginary, and others so riven by contrasting interpretations as to make any historical consensus hard, if not impossible, to achieve (the “manifest destiny” of the settlers in North America to expand over the continent and thus “build a new heaven” versus the manifest destiny of the nations already living there to die),<sup>488</sup> but now in addition we have historians telling us that the level of complexity quickly becomes insurmountable, the point of origin proving impossible to find and causal connections hard to prove.<sup>489</sup>

And, anyway, the new period only comes into being when somebody powerful enough announces it — calls it forth — or, as may be just as likely an

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<sup>487</sup> All maps are inaccurate to a degree, the world is spherical, a map is flat, and that is that. The “Mercator projection,” which is system referenced above, was designed by Flemish geographer and cartographer Gerardus Mercator in 1569. A variant of the “Mercator projection” is now used by companies and services such as MapQuest and Google Maps.

<sup>488</sup> Frederick Merk and Lois Bannister Merk. *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1963, p. 3.

<sup>489</sup> Peter N. Stearns. “Modernization.” *Encyclopedia of European Social History. From 1350 to 2000. Vol 1*. Ed. by Peter N. Stearns. New York and London: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2001, pp. 3–8.

outcome, the new period doesn't arrive when needed, and nobody really knows why. Thus, at one time there was no need for the concept "modern" but later, due to a complex of developments, the concept is sorely sought. That however may not be enough. As Matei Calinescu notes: "The older Antiquity became, the more a word for 'modern' was needed. But the word 'modernus' was not yet available. The gap was filled by 'neotericus' [...] Not until the sixth century does the new and happy formation *modernus* [...] appear".<sup>490</sup> — "Happy formation" indeed.

Furthermore, when we look at the concept of the "modern break" we note that its reach is considerably more extensive than first thought. Within itself it carries the entire period it demarcates, as well as motivating the creation of another "new" period that is immediately relegated, or displaced, into the past. Thus, as a break separating "modernity," which has just entered into view, from what came before is designated, a step towards endowing the "present" with a definitive outline is taken but, in addition, a whole new period of the past is summoned forth, in this instance the middle ages, a previously unnamed and unconceptualized entity.<sup>491</sup>

In this way we may perhaps venture to say that despite all the uncertainties that accompany the historiography, the concept of the break is at any rate the foundational concept as we speak of epochs; there is always a continuity that is ruptured — much as Coco Chanel interrupted a long-running fashion dominant, creating a rupture — but that very continuity is of course no less important than the break that heralds its beginning, or end. And modernity announced itself like

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<sup>490</sup> Matei Calinescu. *Five Faces of Modernity. Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1987, p. 14.

<sup>491</sup> For more on this, see Frederic Jameson's chapter on the dialectic of the break and period in *A Singular Modernity*, pp. 17–30.

no epoch before it had done. “The key historical events,” Habermas tells us, include “the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution [...] Then, too, the Declaration of the Rights of Man the Napoleonic Code” in addition to the fact that now “all miracles were disallowed.”<sup>492</sup> This, as we have seen, is one variant of the story, a very powerful one but still only one variant.

As Laxness’ article is integrally concerned with modernity, the reader would be well justified in wondering if he will include the concept of the break in whatever narrative of the modern he plans to communicate; this being the single trope that is utterly irreplaceable in narratives of modernity. And, indeed, Laxness does have a “break” in place, the event that James Joyce referred to as “the ruin of all space”:<sup>493</sup>

Literary works that carry with them a pre-war sensibility already sound shrill; literature in the spirit of the turn of the century, up until 1914, is meaningless and *démodé*, practiced for those who have no interest in following. The song that was played may have been the most beautiful but it has come to an end and a new song has commenced, with a new melody.<sup>494</sup>

Indeed, an entire world that had seemed eminently stable was gone, almost as if it had never been. Stephen Kern has an astute observation in this context, one that speaks to Laxness’ observation above:

Prewar evaluation of the past emphasized its continuous and profound impact on the present. Historians, psychologists, and philosophers embraced the generic approach for understanding human experience; and even those who, like Nietzsche, Ibsen and Joyce, were suspicious of the enervating effect of an excessively influential past believed that its impact was enormous,

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<sup>492</sup> Jürgen Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Trans. Frederick Lawrence. London and Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990, p. 17.

<sup>493</sup> James Joyce. *Ulysses*. London and New York: Penguin, 2000, pp. 28, 683.

<sup>494</sup> Halldór Laxness. “Tíska og menning. Um ljóð.” *Morgunblaðið*, 21 May, 1925, p. 6. In the original: “Skáldverk með forstríðsbrag gjalla þegar hjáróma; skáldskapur í anda aldamótanna, framm að 1914, er tilganglaus afturúrlist, iðkuð fyrir daufum eyrum. Lagið sem á undan var leikið má hafa verið það fegursta, en það er á enda og nýtt lag hafið í nýrri tóntegund.”

though negative. But the war ripped up the historical fabric and cut everyone off from the past suddenly and irretrievably.<sup>495</sup>

Kern's descriptive passage is reminiscent of Benjamin's "angel of history," who is hurled into the future, to which he has his back turned as he looks helplessly on the catastrophes of the past, the constituent factors of the storm that has him in its grip: "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise".<sup>496</sup> In Benjamin, the storm is progress; here we may posit it as the war, at that point the greatest catastrophe in human history, and surely enough to render more than a few angels helpless.

Kern is perhaps however allotting too much weight to the past and history within the conceptual framework of modernity; to not be stifled and constricted by the past, by strictures that had always been in place and were unquestionable, to not look to Plato for medicinal advice 1700 years after his passing, this was to be modern — the opposite of being oppressed by history. Modernity as Habermas notes, "can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; it has to create its normativity out of itself."<sup>497</sup>

The very causal relations that Kern invokes to depict the shackles of the past (history, psychology) can just as well be read as inscribing freedom and agency into history, there always being a choice when the progression is rational and centered around human agents. The pre-modern world was wholly

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<sup>495</sup> Stephen Kern. *The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1918*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 290.

<sup>496</sup> Walter Benjamin. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*. Trans. by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, p. 257.

<sup>497</sup> Habermas *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 7.

unalterable, the world picture remained unchanged for millennia, and this was reflected in social strata that in turn were set in stone. Nevertheless, the strength of the image Kern presents when the modern subject, used to being able to at least look to history for precedents, lessons or solutions to what predicament was being faced in the present, the presence of the past always being taken for granted: the shock when it is torn asunder must indeed have registered with terrific force.

Such terrific, destructive force is often conceptualized as the “rupture” that brings modernity forth or marks its pivotal moments; above we saw Habermas include the French Revolution on his list of historical markers; the conquest of the Americas is sometimes pointed to as the moment that marked the emergence of modernity, with the multiple genocides that followed.

Laxness, who was twelve when the war broke out, and living in Iceland which mostly “missed” the entire thing, would not have experienced much of this however. In that sense, his strenuous prescriptive message that one must internalize the meaning of 1914 in order to create art that is of relevance is hard to take entirely seriously. And that holds when Laxness continues to describe the paradigmatic shift that occurred, “The last decade has brought with such an enormous rupture and transformation in the world of ideas and concepts that it can be compared to entire centuries. The world thinks in different images, speaks in different ways.”<sup>498</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that Laxness does not in fact elaborate on the formal revolution demanded by the historic year of 1914, nor does he really discuss the new imagistic vista that befits the modern man, as

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<sup>498</sup> Laxness, “Tíska og menning,” p. 7. In the original: “Seinasti áratugurinn hefur skapað slík straumhvörf og umbyltingar í hinum andlega heimi að jafngildir helium öldum. Heimurinn hugsar í öðrum myndum, talar í öðru formi.”

he was himself in the midst of writing his most important modernist works at this point.

What makes the whole invocation risk appearing slightly histrionic and affected is the fact that the trauma that devastated the European continent and toppled empires left Iceland largely untouched, as noted earlier; the prescriptive poetic demand to work through the historical trauma of World War One was thus literally impossible for Icelandic writers. Second, Laxness' manifesto arrives in nothing if not a belated fashion. Hitler published *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) the same year Laxness published the essay. As the first rumblings could be heard, announcing the second part of the historical travesty that laid waste to European culture, Laxness had his eyes firmly on the rear-view mirror; not that the First World War had been "covered," "transcended," or "overcome," that there was nothing more to say on the subject. Far from it, after all, its conclusion was only seven years in the past, but Laxness does not seem at any rate to be quite as successful in calculating the quickly shifting cultural winds of his time as the author of an article on that very subject might perhaps be expected to be.

As noted, Laxness' essay is prescriptive, very much so, but not very descriptive when it comes to the formal innovations the new historical situation demands. There is however a moment when he pokes (relatively) gentle fun at a fellow poet, Tómas Guðmundsson, and his recently published poetry collection (that the book is of recent vintage we know because Laxness mentions it without however naming the book) for not being of the moment, for not being in other words fashionable. And while being clearly admiring of Guðmundsson's talents — with the benefit of hindsight it may be mentioned that Guðmundsson remains



one of the most celebrated poets of the twentieth century in Icelandic literature — Laxness mixes his compliments with admonitions that have not only Tómas Guðmundsson as their intended target but the entire contemporary literary scene and Icelandic culture in general: “Those who know Tómas the best know he counts as among the most intelligent of men, and that is why we must mourn the fact that he should have acquiesced to the self-made hell of having his education constrained on a remote Atlantic rock where the very air is heavy with the stench of entombed fashion.”<sup>499</sup> That should drive the point home.

But Laxness then quotes a single stanza:

Og þig fer að dreyma. Við svanasaungva	And you begin to dream. Soothed by the song of swans
sál þín líður um kvöldblá fjöll	your soul glides among eveningblue mountains
þangað sem rís yfir rauðan skóg	thereto where above a red forest rises
riddarans tigna höll	the knight's splendid palace <sup>500</sup>

Taking his time, Laxness then picks one by one the tropes and images that he feels to be stultifying and antiquated: the song of the swans gets a failing grade, so do eveningblue mountains and red forests; when he comes to the knight and the palace, it is as if he cannot believe what he is reading. “I would be most curious to know where on earth this poetic stitching of old mid-European poets would be deemed palatable except in Iceland.”<sup>501</sup>

Frederic Jameson has observed that invoking terms such as “modernity” and its related roster of conceptual and discursive descendants (“enormous

<sup>499</sup> Laxness, “Tíska og menning,” p. 7. In the original: “Hitt vita þeir sem Tómas þekkja best, að hann ere inn hinna gáfuðustu manna, og því meir að haram að hann skuli hafa selst því sjálfskaparvíti að láta mentun sína markast þar á útskeri sem andrúmsloft er þrungið dauni kistulagðrar tísku.”

<sup>500</sup> Laxness, “Tíska og menning,” p. 7.

<sup>501</sup> Laxness, “Tíska og menning,” p. 7. In the original: Hitt þætti mér fróðlegt að vita, hvar í heiminum enn væri notaður þessi ljóðræni útsaumur gamalla miðevrópuskálða annars staðar en á Íslandi.

rupture,” “transformation in the world”) “always means setting a date and positing a beginning,” thus providing a ground for the logic of historical causality and the definition of the unique epoch (modernity) as a period in its own right.<sup>502</sup> It is notoriously difficult to assign a date and a year to the emergence of modernity, and the twentieth century is not a player in that particular game. Nevertheless, there can of course be breaks, shocks and ruptures without these signaling the start of a new historical epoch. But the tendency, the requirement, that Jameson identifies in the context of modernity — one must always narrativize it, posit a beginning — is also applicable to these “lesser” moments of historical trauma and transformation, and what Laxness does articulate, quite simply and elegantly, if belatedly, when he states that the “song that was played may have been the most beautiful but it has come to an end and a new song has commenced, with a new melody,” is that just as the map of Europe had been redrawn in the wake of the war, if not from scratch, then nearly so, the task of artists was to pick up the pieces, the fragments of history that were still left to them, and start their own cartographic endeavor, outlining their own new map.<sup>503</sup> Such recalibration had of course been going on for close to a decade, longer if we take into account the very furthest temporal edges of modernism,

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<sup>502</sup> Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, p. 29.

<sup>503</sup> Famously, Virginia Woolf identified an entirely different date as the pivotal one: “On or about December 1910 human character changed,” she noted, it clearly taking enormous chutzpa to ignore the First World War in the way that she does. What was going on in 1910? One should not feel ashamed to ask. Nowhere is 1910 a particularly pivotal year, as far as I know. Tolstoy died, without a Nobel Prize from Sweden, despite the Academy’s ten-year window to do the right thing. Stravinsky opened “The Firebird” in Paris, Freud was becoming really famous, and Cubism was all the rage in the French art world. In England King Edward VII died and Roger Fry organized the art exhibit “Manet and the Post-Impressionists.” Admittedly, coining “post-impersonism” was a nifty move, but still, all he added was a single “post”. One must wonder if Woolf was being willfully contrarian as this date, really, seems to have very little going for it, and, to top it off, Woolf offers it up in 1924, two years after the seminal year of 1922. Virginia Woolf. “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” *Modernism. An Anthology of Sources and Documents*. Ed. by Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman and Olga Taxidou. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p. 394.

but the war then served as an impetus and infusion of desperate and manic energy.<sup>504</sup>

### 3.2 Quarrel Between the Moderns and the Ancients

“Truly beautiful, definitively beautiful clothing would put an end to fashion [...] Fashion continually fabricates the ‘beautiful’ on the basis of a radical denial of beauty, by reducing beauty to the logical equivalent of ugliness.”<sup>505</sup> French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, indebted to Thorsten Veblen’s critique of fashion in his treatise on conspicuous consumption, certainly throws down the gauntlet.<sup>506</sup> Fashion is a widely unloved industry, especially in academia it seems. Employing an entirely different theoretical approach, Roland Barthes also comes to a negative, if seemingly more socially aware conclusion, noting that the discourse of fashion “describes certain types of work for women [...] women’s identity is established in this way, in the service of Man [...] of Art, of Thought, but this submission is rendered sublime by being given the appearance of

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<sup>504</sup> Christopher Butler. *Early Modernism. Literature, Music and Painting in Europe 1900–1916*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.

<sup>505</sup> Jean Baudrillard. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Trans. by Charles Levin. St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981, p. 51. One might say that Baudrillard is echoing Oscar Wilde’s saying, “Fashion is a form of ugliness so intolerable that we have to alter it every six months.” Evan Esar. *The Dictionary of Humorous Quotations*. New York: Bramhall House, 1949, p. 187.

<sup>506</sup> In his chapter “Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture,” Veblen notes of fashion: “But the principle of conspicuous waste requires an obviously futile expenditure; and the resulting conspicuous expensiveness of dress is therefore intrinsically ugly. Hence we find that in all innovations in dress, each added or altered detail strives to avoid instant condemnation by showing some ostensible purpose, at the same time that the requirement of conspicuous consumption prevents the purposefulness of these innovations from becoming anything more than a somewhat transparent pretense. [...] It’s futility presently becomes as odious as that of its predecessor; and the only remedy which the law of waste allows us is to seek relief in some new construction, equally futile and equally untenable. Hence the essential ugliness and the unceasing change of fashionable attire.” Thorsten Veblen. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: The Modern Library, 2001, p. 130.

pleasant work, and aestheticized.”<sup>507</sup> There are, however, opposing voices, naturally, and Laxness would count among them, although in order to align him with a “side” it would be necessary first to delineate quite stringently and in a detailed way what he means by the concept “fashion.” This, as a matter of fact, will be done shortly. First, however, it is useful to get our bearings by looking around in the mainstream, or what counts as the mainstream in academic discourse: a defense of the fashion industry.

Thus, the first question would seem to be, what is fashion? Elizabeth Wilson replies:

Dress in general seems to fulfill a number social, aesthetic and psychological functions; indeed it knots them together, and can express all simultaneously. This is true of modern as of ancient dress. What is added to dress as we ourselves know it in the West is fashion. The growth of the European city in the early stages of what is known as mercantile capitalism at the end of the Middle Ages saw the birth of fashionable dress, that is of something qualitatively new and different [...] To dress fashionably is both to stand out, to merge with the crowd, to lay claim to the exclusive and to follow the herd [and it can furthermore be seen as] a kind connective tissue of our cultural organism.<sup>508</sup>

For Wilson, dress functions as language does, it mediates between the natural (our bodies), and the cultural and social. None of this, of course, responds to the points made by Baudrillard and Barthes in the above quotes. Baudrillard points to the inherent irrationality of fashion, the question of why on earth anybody should bother chasing after the momentary whims of corporate lackeys with scissors and a measuring tape. Neither is the larger point by Barthes addressed by Wilson’s avuncular description, namely that fashion is one of the many ways in which men have found to oppress women; the spectrum ranges from the

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<sup>507</sup> Roland Barthes. *The Fashion System*. Trans. by Matthew Ward and Richard Howard. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983, p. 261.

<sup>508</sup> Elizabeth Wilson. *Adorned in Dreams. Fashion and Modernity*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1985, pp. 4, 6, 12.

obvious function of the burqa to signify enslavement to the much more subtle — and humane — function of *haute couture* and women spending a substantial portion of their energy, anxiety reservoirs and cognitive capacity in putting together the right outfit — being still, and always insecure about their outfit, looks and whether they are living up to the myriad of standards set by the beauty industry.<sup>509</sup> In a book defensive of the fashion industry by Cheryl Buckley and Hilary Fawcett, precisely this point is taken up, the iron-like grip fashion exerts on its victims, but articulated as a new form of freedom:

Uniquely among cultural industries, fashion offers the opportunity for both public and private pleasures. It has been an arena in which women, in particular, have accrued power, although at the same time it has been a source of anxiety. To be ‘fashionable’ can be simultaneously delightful and cruel, attracting admiration as well as ridicule. The very process of being ‘in fashion’, ahead of the crowd, but part of it; of possessing a much admired pair of shoes or jacket; of knowing that the cut, fabric and colour of a specific outfit feels just right; and being able to put it all together to create a certain style; these are part of the pleasure and pride of fashion.<sup>510</sup>

What Buckley and Fawcett describe as “the opportunity for both public and private pleasures” most resembles work; the work of fashioning the feminine, which, as they note, is a “process” that can be a “source of anxiety” as well as “cruel”. In addition, as Buckley and Fawcett make quite clear, there is nothing more emblematic of late capitalistic consumer society than fashion, utterly vacuous consumption and spending, frequently engaged in with rare passion, far exceeding the functional, the realm of the hobby or interest; indeed the notion of connoisseurship hardly captures it. A female audio buff may not feel as if her life depends on getting the latest Bang & Olufsen subwoofer, but fashion becomes, it seems, a matter of life and death at times. Plus, a lot of fashionable clothing is

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<sup>509</sup> The still classic work on this is John Berger. *Ways of Seeing*. New York and London: Penguin, 2009.

<sup>510</sup> Cheryl Buckley and Hilary Fawcett. *Fashioning the Feminine. Representations and Women’s Fashion from the fin de Siècle to the Present*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2002, p. 6.

painful, and always has been.<sup>511</sup> Not to mention the human rights abuses that routinely take place in the making of the garments.<sup>512</sup> Why wear the stuff?

Wilson does try to meet some of these points of criticism:

It was easy to believe that the function of fashion stemmed from capitalism's need for perpetual expansion, which encouraged consumption. At its crudest, this kind of explanation assumes that changes in fashion are foisted upon us, especially on women, in a conspiracy to persuade us to consume far more than we 'need' to. Without this disease of 'consumerism' capitalism would collapse. [...] This is simply not true of the fashion industry, since the men's tailoring trade, where fashion changed more slowly, has proved far more stable than the fluctuating women's fashion market, where undue risks have to be taken since it is never known in advance which fashions will catch on and which will expire as fads.<sup>513</sup>

As if responding to Baudrillard's point that fashion is simply a long line of ugly and pointless stylistic oddities,<sup>514</sup> Wilson says that criticism that focuses on waste and ugliness, "cannot account for the form that fashion changes take. Why

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<sup>511</sup> In an 1886 critique, "Why Women Do Not Reform Their Dress," Charlotte Perkins Gilman notes: "The present style of dress means, with varying limits, backache, sideache, headache, and many other ache; corns, lame, tender, or swollen feet, weak clumsy, and useless compared to what they should be; a crowd of diseases, heavy and light; a general condition of feebleness and awkwardness and total inferiority as an animal organism; with a thousand attendant inconveniences and restrictions and unnatural distortions amounting to hideousness. But it also means the satisfaction of the social conscience; gratification of pride, legitimate and illegitimate; approbation of those loved and admiration of those unknown; satisfaction of a sense of beauty, however false; and a general ease and peace of mind." Charlotte Perkins Gilman. "Why women do not reform their dress." *Quotidiana*. Ed. by Patrick Madden. 3 June, 2008. ([http://essays.quotidiana.org/gilman/why\\_women\\_do\\_not\\_reform/](http://essays.quotidiana.org/gilman/why_women_do_not_reform/) — page retrieved on 9 July 2014).

See also Gilman's 1915 volume *The Dress of Women: A Critical Introduction to the Symbolism and Sociology of Cothing*. Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 2002.

<sup>512</sup> Nichole Jankowski. "Toxic dyes and mercury-laced hats: Exhibit looks at the dark side of fashion." *The Globe and Mail*, 11 June, 2014; Bernard-Henri Lévy. "The Fashion Victims of Bangladesh." *The Daily Beast*, 8 May, 2014 (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/05/08/the-fashion-victims-of-bangladesh.html> — retrieved on July 7, 2014),

<sup>513</sup> Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, p. 49.

<sup>514</sup> There are obviously different ways of coming to grips with the concept of fashion, and varying methodologies. A useful alternative to the one above articulated by Wilson is offered by Patrik Aspers and Frédéric Godart who start by distinguishing the concept of fashion from the notions of fad, innovation, style and trend. Their ultimate definition is stretches over three pages but to summarize, fashion requires free agents, it is a process and thus extended in time, it is inherently relational, it is simultaneously inclusive and exclusive and it is public. "Sociology of Fashion. Order and Change." *Annual Review of Sociology*. 2013, p. 173, 185–187.

did the bustle replace the crinoline, the leg of mutton sleeve the sloping shoulder?"<sup>515</sup>

Wilson's response is fairly weak. Regarding the point that men's fashion is more "stable" than women's, it suffices to examine the Bureau of Labor Statistics to see that women spend several times the amount men do in an average year on clothes and apparel.<sup>516</sup> As to the question why fashion lines change over time, a theory or a critique examining the social role and institutional structures of the fashion industry is not really required to address that issue. It might also be pointed out that Baudrillard already has, in the quote above.<sup>517</sup>

Where Baudrillard can be said to make a misstep is in the way in which he frames the concept of beauty, speaking of "truly beautiful" and "definitively beautiful" clothing, as if standards of beauty were fixed and immutable and that judgments like these could be made unreservedly, and without problematizing their grounds. What is at stake here can be traced back to the famous "Quarrel Between the Moderns and the Ancients" in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a discursive moment whose significance lies in the attempt to question the blind veneration of antiquity, in particular employing models

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<sup>515</sup> Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, p. 52.

<sup>516</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Average Annual Expenditures on Apparel, Footwear and Related Products, 1985–2010." (<http://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2012/fashion/> — retrieved on 7 July, 2014).

<sup>517</sup> Another way to respond would be to introduce the notion of commodity fetishism and alienation: "the commodity form, and the value–relation of the products of labor within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of it. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things." Karl Marx. *Capital*. Volume 1. Trans. by B. Fowkes. London: Penguin, 1976, pp. 164–165.

from antiquity as standards of beauty, and, in a way, to shrug off the weight of the past by applying scientific notions of progress to literature and art.<sup>518</sup>

In his essay on fashion and culture, Laxness is concerned with the existential problem of living in the moment and being of the historical moment: “A poet, who is not the spiritual progeny of the time in which he lives, belongs to no place.”<sup>519</sup> It should come naturally to the modern poet to channel and convey “the quintessence of the culture that surrounds them.”<sup>520</sup> This is not easily accomplished in Iceland, which Laxness notes is characterized first and foremost by the belated arrival of new cultural movements and artistic ideas. An intellectual is not to be found, he adds, that is not “at least twenty years, if not half a century, behind the times”.<sup>521</sup> This matters because the “time in which” the poet lives is not wholly under the sway of maps, borders and national entities. For Laxness, the writer who is the true “spiritual progeny” of his moment is someone much like himself who has traveled widely, reads several languages and follows the latest news in the world of literature and culture through, for instance, energetic correspondence with friends in different countries. Being attuned to what is going on in Reykjavík is by no means the subtext of Laxness’ prescribed methodology.

In “Tíska og menning,” Laxness activates the momentous events of 1914 to signify not only a general rupture or break in the culture of modernity but also to announce the rift that exists between him and other Icelandic authors. As noted

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<sup>518</sup> Almennt um the quarrel? Taka inn punktana hér að ofan í ngrein 37. Matei Calinescu, finna staðina sem ég er að vinna með hér.

<sup>519</sup> Laxness, “Tíska og menning,” p. 6. In the original: “Ljóðskáld, sem er eigi andlegt afkvæmi tímans sem hann lifir á, er hvorki lands né lagar dýr.”

<sup>520</sup> Laxness, “Tíska og menning,” p. 6. In the original: “tala í anda þeirrar menningar er um þá hverfir.”

<sup>521</sup> Laxness, “Tíska og menning,” p. 6. In the original: “Er hér enda leitun á mentamanni sem eigi sé að *minstakosti tuttugu til fimtíu árum á eftir tímanum* í allri hugsun og hátterni.”



above, demanding of Icelandic part-time writers that their interiority be shaped by events they read about in newspapers but never touched their lives directly (except perhaps when it come to the pricing of imports and exports) is like positing thorough familiarity with events in Scandinavia as a requirement for American authors to be taken seriously. In both cases the insularity and cultural isolation of the respective class of writers is just too great for such a scheme to make sense.

More important, however, is Laxness' contention that "the primary requirement for any man of letters to rise above the culture of his time is for him to be the child of his time. Geniuses and men of profundity have always been the children of their own time, first and foremost."<sup>522</sup> The first time the concept of fashion is mentioned in the essay is when Laxness notes that what he is saying should by no means be taken to mean that people should "chase fashion, because if their growth to maturity is flawed enough" for them not to be instinctively aligned with the currents of their age, then there is simply nothing to be done:<sup>523</sup>

Each cultural epoch plays all of its songs, if I allow myself to speak in imagery, in its own harmony, and anyone who wants to be heard, but cannot find a place in that choir, will sound bereft and shrill. His song may be quite good, in and of itself, his technique flawless ... — but if he sings in a different tonal register from the others he is unwanted. Should someone write *Divina Comedia*, *Hamlet* or *Werthers Leiden* in our day and age, he would be addressing himself to deaf ears. These are all masterpieces, each from its era, voices from the choirs of bygone fashions, played in harmonies that do not fit ours.<sup>524</sup>

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<sup>522</sup> Laxness, "Tíska og menning," p. 6. In the original: "að fyrsta skilyrðið til þess að nokkur andans maður skari framúr samtíð sinni er það að hann sé barn samtíðar sinnar. Snillingar og miklir men hafa allir verið born síns eigin tíma, fyrst og fremst."

<sup>523</sup> Laxness, "Tíska og menning," p. 6. In the original: "Með þessu er þó eigi verið að brýna fyrir ungum höfundum að fara í *eltingarleik við tískuna, ef uppeldi þeirra er á einhvern hátt svo ófullkomið* að þeir eru ekki men til að tala í anda þeirrar menningar er um þá hverfir."

<sup>524</sup> Laxness, "Tíska og menning," p. 7. In the original: "Hvert menningartímabil leikur lög sín öll, svo að ég tali í myndum, í sinni eigin tóntegund, og hver sem þar vill láta til sín heyra, en ekki kemst undir í því kóri, hann er hjáróma rödd. Saungur hans getur verið fullgóður útaf fyrir sig, leikni hans má vera gallalaus ... — ef hann syngur í annarri tóntegund en hinir, þá er honum

Laxness then shifts his discourse slightly, addressing himself to the cultural conservatives who are too old to be in touch with or understand “the children of 1914,” yet he emphasizes that he harbors no ill will towards these individuals. The fondness they have for bygone movements and writers of an age that is now past is fully as justified, he says, as his passion for the new. “I have absolutely no belief in any fashionable artist who can not kneel before the achievements of the past, and I do not think that the greatness of modern arts is in any way higher or greater than the genius of the past; the difference has nothing to do with quality, as I see it, but subject matter, methods and fields of interest.”<sup>525</sup> Laxness concludes the essay by noting that the writers of the Sagas were men of fashion in their time; otherwise these works would not have stood the test of time.

### *3.3 Modern Girl*

“As I have mentioned elsewhere, fashion is the name for the visible features of the spirit of the age,” Laxness notes in “Drengjakollurinn og íslenska konan” (The Bobbed Cut and the Icelandic Woman, 1925), published little more than two months after “Tíska og menning”.<sup>526</sup> Motivating the article is the “furor” caused among the upright citizenry of Reykjavík by the emergence of the bob cut, a hairstyle made famous in German and American films in the 1920s and virtually synonymous with the “jazz age,” “flappers,” youth. In one of his very best essays,

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ofaukið. Maður sem yrti Divina Comedia, Hamlet eða Werthers Leiden á vorum dögum, fengi býsna litla áheyrn. Öll eru verk þessi meistarastykki, hvert frá sínu skeiði, raddir úr kórum fornra tískna, leikin í tóntegundum sem ekki hæfa vorri.”

<sup>525</sup> Laxness, “Tíska og menning,” p. 6. In the original: “Ég er fyrirfram trúlaus á þá tískulistamenn sem ekki geta kropið fyrir snild fortíðarinnar, og ég alit snild nýu listanna ekki hóti æðri hinni fornu snild, munurinn ekkiá gæðum í mínum augum, heldur á viðfangsefnum, aðferðum og sviðum.”

<sup>526</sup> Laxness, “Drengjakollurinn og íslenska konan,” p. 5. In the original: “Eins og jeg hefi tekið fram einhverstaðar áður, og enda allir vita, þá er tíska nafnið á hinum ytri einkennum aldarfarsins.”

Laxness sashays forth with immense vigor and holds forth with an argument that encompasses and addresses the inevitable cultural backlash to societal modernization, why nothing less was to be expected since the women's liberation movement was an enormous threat to a veritable multitude of entrenched interests, and finally that it was very unlikely that the conservative commentators would be successful in turning back the clock. What is particularly notable about the essay is how such deep and resounding social shifts and contestations are manifested and emblemized through fashion. Thus, in full battle mode, Laxness states (or shouts):

The short hair is nothing less than the outer sign of the revaluation of all values when it comes to the modern woman. We are faced with an all-encompassing revolution. Each choose a side.<sup>527</sup>

Laxness goes on to note that hardly is it possible to glance through a European newspaper without coming across this debate. The same was as a matter of fact the case in Icelandic ones as well, where there were advertisements for the “bobbed cut,” done according to the latest “foreign fashions”. People nowadays are, although not for the first time, divided into two opposing groups, Laxness says. On one side there are the reactionaries and on the other, the revolutionaries. While the former grouping is intent on maintaining the status quo, the observer will, in the ranks of the latter, find “those that have been undermining the very foundations of civil society since time began,” namely the impatient and unruly representatives of the future, the young generation.<sup>528</sup>

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<sup>527</sup> Laxness, “Drengjakollurinn og íslenska konan,” p. 5. In the original: “Stutta hárið er hvorki meira né minna en ytra tákni um endurmat allra gilda í viðhorfi nútíðarkonunnar. Vjer stöndum frammi fyrir gerbyltingu. Hver og einn velji sína aðstöðu.”

<sup>528</sup> Laxness, “Drengjakollurinn og íslenska konan,” p. 5. The passage quoted from above reads in full: “Hinn flokkinn fyllir sá hluti mannfjelagsins sem hefir verið að steypa

There is not the slightest doubt which side Laxness favors, or, for that matter, where he sees himself.

Among the causes Laxness championed early on was the importance of a new youth culture and the gradual emergence of a new urbanized cultural space. Indeed, one might point to the manner in which ideas concerning social and cultural mobility are encapsulated in the very title of a talk Laxness gave upon arriving in Canada in 1927, “Frá arninum út í samfélagið” (From the Hearth into Society).<sup>529</sup> The somewhat constricting environs of the traditional family home no longer limit the horizons of young people, Laxness maintains, nor does the home, as the locus of traditional values, serve as the regulating force in society it once was. The functions formerly fulfilled by the home have now been dispersed into a larger urban social body.<sup>530</sup> Laxness’ talk emphasizes how the dissemination of youthful energies across an urban environment is a sign of a vibrant culture. Indeed, Laxness’ suggestion that important attitudinal and operational shifts in the role of the home can be traced in the very form of modern architecture chimes remarkably well with literary scholar David Spurr’s social mapping of the modern home. Spurr discusses the historical shift that the twentieth century has seen in the organizational principle of the home and maintains that it is perhaps most clearly discernable in the “decenter[ing of]

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heiminum í glötun, að álitum allra skynsamra og ráðsettra manna, frá því á dögum Metúsalems, þ.e.a.s. æskan, fulltrúar nýja tímans.”

<sup>529</sup> Halldór Laxness. “Frá arninum út í þjóðfélagið.” *Alþýðublaðið*, 1 September, 2 September, 3 September, 1927.

<sup>530</sup> The talk is given in Canada and references a somewhat abstract notion of an urban center. In relation to the Icelandic context, we should keep in mind that as late as 1900, Reykjavík counted only upwards of 6000 inhabitants. However, during the next several decades, the country went through the strains informing the transition from a geographically dispersed agrarian and seafaring culture to an urbanized society, and this was a change that Laxness would follow closely and chronicle in various ways. When Laxness gives his talk in Canada, the exodus from the countryside has certainly begun although his point of view is both cosmopolitan and temporally anterior to conditions in Iceland at the time.

axial order,” which moves “the dweller away from the hearth and [places] him at the window, where his or her gaze is naturally directed outward.”<sup>531</sup> The resulting cultural shift, manifest in the outward look and the opening up of urban space, naturally proved disconcerting to segments of the population, but Laxness accentuates its emancipating potentialities.

Anxious conservatives deemed the future engendered by irresponsible youth whose very irresponsibility was manifested in a bizarre combination of fashion and behavior. The situation was not unique to Iceland and this is how an early but extensive study by Paula S. Fass of youthful rebellion in precisely this period in the United States summarizes the social crisis:

The young had come to represent the unhinging of the social order, and the journals of the twenties were filled with an image of youth out of control, of energy released from social restraints, and of raw forces unleashed [...] Not surprisingly, traditionalists equated the unharnessed energies of youth with license, and sexual licence above all became the most powerful bogeyman of the twenties. Youthful sexuality was at once the sign of social demoralization and a continuing threat to social order. Sexuality symbolized both disorder and rebellion: disorder because it meant energy unrestrained, and rebellion because it was the most obvious line of attack in the onslaught against the pretensions of prewar morality.<sup>532</sup>

Fass continues and points out that the peeling away of genteel manners, ethics, values, tradition, what makes “us” human, was only the first line of attack.

Clothing styles, especially for women, were the next cultural sphere to become the stage for the demoralization of their elders as “bobbed hair” and “shirt skirts” made their inroads.<sup>533</sup>

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<sup>531</sup> Spurr, David: *An End to Dwelling. Reflections on Modern Literature and Architecture. Modernism*. Volume 1. Ed. Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company 2007, p. 475.

<sup>532</sup> Paula S. Fass. *The Damned and the Beautiful. American Youth in the 1920s*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, pp. 20–21.

<sup>533</sup> Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful*, pp. 21–22.

As a threat to social order, female emancipation was not to be taken lightly, and Icelandic anxieties ran high. In a highly ironic summary of these views, Laxness points out that yes, the bobbed cut travesties female nature, devalues motherhood, makes a joke out of marriage, leaves children derelict, turns women to smoke and drink and makes them argue with men about politics. Worst of all, affected by the masculine look of the hairstyle, women will now make the first move when flirting. Not bothering to respond to the above perspectives further, Laxness simply encapsulated these positions and expresses their constitutive core prejudice, and then, by listing them side by side, which turns out to be a highly effective method of parody, mocks them. This is not to say that Laxness takes the issues at stake lightly, far from it, he points out that the bobbed cut has come to represent the modern woman, or the “new woman” as this figure was often called. Again and again in the essay, fashion is associated with freedom, the emancipation of women, and modernity. Modern women are “daughters of fashion” and they “accuse the past of having disgraced women’s nature and humiliated and treated her as a being without soul. The past groomed women for a **sexual role** and nothing else, a contraption to manufacture babies.”<sup>534</sup>

### *3.4 Ringleaders of the Circus*

When discussing the writers that belong to the post-1914 era, Laxness emphasizes that the primary hindrance for someone to genuinely be of their

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<sup>534</sup> Laxness, “Drengjakollurinn og íslenska konan,” p. 5. In the original: “Hún leggur stórhuga dóminn á alt þetta vel hugsaða afturhaldsstrit. Hún sakar fortíðina um að hafa lítilsvirt eðli konunnar og niðurlægt og meðhöndlað hana eins og sálarleysingja. Fortíðin ól konuna upp upp sem **kynferðisveru** einvörðungu, þannig, að hún yrði sem útgengilegust barneignarvjel.”

moment, and thus being able to join the rank of those who can truly grapple with the current situation — and it is only them — is a subjective stance, the poet's interiority and whether or not it is fused with the temporal currents of culture as they ebb and flow across the urban landscape. If not, there is not much that can be done. Interestingly, the issue at stake does not revolve around talent or even practice, the professionalization of writing being one of Laxness' major concerns, as noted above, but rather the realm of experience and subjective interiority and the way in which a person carried himself or herself in the social milieu of modernity. Aside from an initial moment that appears to depend somewhat on the luck of the draw, the picture thus presented is one of immense freedom and, even more importantly, the historically unprecedented notion that one was of an age, that the winds of change and progress that were blowing through society were not to be feared or resisted, rather they belonged to the modern subject, just as the shared sensibility of the "children of 1914" and would thus also, if allowed, lift one up and carry one along to meet the future with confidence and curiosity — not grasped furiously and forced, immobile, to face the catastrophic history of mankind, as the angel in Benjamin's essay.

The attitude towards the modern expressed by Laxness needs to be historicized because it is imbued with fascinating correspondences and conjunctions with pivotal moments in the development of modernity and the discourse of romanticism in the nineteenth century. Matei Calinescu, for example, looks to the opening decades of the nineteenth century when he describes the originary moments of the historic shift when experiential immediacy and presentness became the constitutive factors of the experience of modernity, which thus became a whole new conceptual field and opened up

previously closed-off vistas for exploration — including human interiority and the value of subjectivity. “To be of one’s own time, to try to respond to its problems became more than an aesthetic — it became almost a moral obligation.”<sup>535</sup> In Calinescu’s account, Stendhal is the first major European writer to term himself a romantic — at the time a synonym for “modern” — and to “understand by romanticism not a particular period (longer or shorter), nor a specific style, but an awareness of contemporary life, of *modernity* in its immediate sense.”<sup>536</sup>

Furthermore, while works of the past were being rejected in increasing numbers, they caused “the nineteenth-century Frenchman to yawn,” Stendhal was firm when it came to upholding the value of Sophocles, Euripides, Racine, saying that in their day, they were romantics. Racine for example exemplified the “extreme dignity that was fashionable” under Louis XIV.<sup>537</sup> Just over a century later, opinions very similar to these would form Laxness’ manifesto-like declaration of his own modernity and the corresponding lack of it in Icelandic culture, by and large.

No depiction, however, of the new experiential field of modernity is as instantly recognizable as Baudelaire’s, whose intervention in conceptualizations of the modern has proven paradigmatic to such an extent that virtually every publication on modernity finds it necessary to address his depiction of modern life, and his definition of modernity as “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.”<sup>538</sup>

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<sup>535</sup> Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 38.

<sup>536</sup> Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 38.

<sup>537</sup> Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 39.

<sup>538</sup> Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” p. 12.



It is certainly possible to find affinities between the first half of Baudelaire's definition of modernity and fashion, always in historical flux and with an expiration date imprinted invisibly on every single garment. The figure of the dandy is the perfect example here, that mysterious urbanite whose "solitary profession is elegance" and who walks the city streets, observing but not participating in the life around.<sup>539</sup> Baudelaire does however infuse the figure with something of a political dimension, albeit a rather inscrutable one:

Dandyism appears above all in periods of transition, when democracy is not yet all-powerful, and aristocracy is only just beginning to totter and fall. In the disorder of these times, certain men who are socially, politically and financially ill at ease, but are all rich in native energy, may conceive the idea of establishing a new kind of aristocracy, all the more difficult to shatter as it will be based on the most precious, the most enduring faculties, and on the divine gifts which work and money are unable to bestow. Dandyism is the last spark of heroism amid decadence [...]<sup>540</sup>

This same period serves a pivotal function for Anthony Giddens and the emergence of what he calls — undoubtedly with a nod to the dandy — "the reflexive self."<sup>541</sup> What was touched on above as the new freedom of subjective experience and human interiority is what Giddens has in mind; a moment in history when social structures, historical strictures, tradition and convention do not "give" a person his or her identity but it can be freely chosen. As Joanne Entwistle points out, dress and fashion become of pivotal importance here, often being the initial domain where the new-found freedom can be exercised. Fashion is:

The means by which identities are marked out and sustained [...] Modernity opened up new possibilities for the creation of identity: it unfixed individuals from traditional communities, placing them in the "melting pot" of the city and it extended the commodities available for purchase to an ever widening

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<sup>539</sup> Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," p. 26.

<sup>540</sup> Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," p. 28.

<sup>541</sup> Anthony Giddens. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, pp. 8–14.

circle of people, thereby providing the necessary “raw material” for the creation of new identities.<sup>542</sup>

While no doubt the strongest argument for the social significance of fashion, understood simply as a business in new garments, a troubling conflation occurs in Entwistle’s conception of “raw materials”. Fashion still remained, one imagines, quite the rarified field and meanwhile, in terms of dressing to reflect individuality and one’s self image, there must have been a considerable difference between a new ability to buy consumer goods that were not strictly necessary for the needs of the day and a willingness to do so.

When speaking of new identities in modernity, the question is how far back to go, and which concepts to include. Identity is a given, then there is consciousness and self-consciousness (the latter emerging in scholarly writing around 1700), and finally person — deriving from the Latin term “persona” (mask) which itself was a translation of the Greek “prosopon” (face) — and was initially a borderline legal term.<sup>543</sup> In recent times, subjectivity has taken on a wide range of meanings, the most obvious perhaps being human self-centeredness but in psychology it may also refer to egotism while the epistemological context invites readings of relativism and solipsism. German idealism makes subjectivity transcendental. What is of particular interest to us however is the notion of self-*fashioning* — which brings into play yet another connotative scheme of the concept of fashion — partly as made famous by Stephen Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980). Greenblatt argues that the conscious construction of identity was something that was pursued

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<sup>542</sup> Joanne Entwistle. *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000, p. 117.

<sup>543</sup> Udo Thiel. *The Early Modern Subject. Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 26–27.

arduously during the Renaissance by the upper classes; one was supposed to cultivate one's interiority by being well versed in matters of the arts while also conducting oneself with impeccable posture in real life. Describing Thomas More's grand theatrical lifestyle, he notes that his life is "lived as histrionic improvisation [where] the category of the real merges with that of the fictive."<sup>544</sup> "Histrionic" may not suggest impeccable composure at all times but the key word here, however, is "fictive" — real life merges with the fictive. When endowing deeds with a poetic ambiance or an aesthetic function, the first action that needs to be undertaken involves addressing the sense of randomness and lack of an intelligible shape and meaningful patterns that characterizes the lives most of us lead. In art, no single element is unimportant, an idea of cohesiveness tends to be foregrounded, what Nabokov referred to as the mysterious synchronicity in the texture of time that fiction allows for.

It so happens that the most profound thinker on the issue of the artful life is a philosopher frequently invoked by Laxness, Friedrich Nietzsche. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche asks questions about the value of various life "strategies," or attitudes towards life; he posits life as something that can be squandered or prized, and he highlights the manner in which a true love of life can be expressed. "What is the history of your everyday?" he asks.<sup>545</sup> "Consider the habits of which it consists: are they the product of innumerable little cowardices and lazinesses or of your courage and innovative reason?"<sup>546</sup> Essentially,

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<sup>544</sup> Stephen Greenblatt. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning. From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 31.

<sup>545</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Gay Science. With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. Trans. by Josefine Nauckhoff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 175.

<sup>546</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 175. The word "habit" might seem to strike an incongruous note in this context, but this is precisely where Nietzsche's distinction between "brief" and "enduring" habits is important. Making something a "brief habit" connotes passionate immersion in a

Nietzsche is calling for a life practice that does not allow itself to be limited by imposed constraints (by way of cultural expectations, customs or peer review), but seeks out the new, the fresh and the challenging in the world. If one wants to love life, one must shape one's life in a fashion that affords the capacity for such love — and once that stage has been reached, the world rewards your love by revealing more fully its magnificence.<sup>547</sup> How a subject sees itself must therefore be of paramount importance. Indeed, a notable imperative in *The Gay Science* is “to “give style” to one's character.”<sup>548</sup>

The methods and mechanics, the philosophical reflections and the self-discipline involved in the stylization of the self, these things are always referred to as “art” when Nietzsche speaks of the matter. It is an art that is “practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses that their nature has to offer and then fit them into an artistic plan until each appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. Here a great mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of first nature removed — both times through long practice and daily work at it.”<sup>549</sup> Laxness could not accuse Nietzsche of confining his aesthetic sensibility to the literary, a perspective deemed by Laxness short-

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particular subject or way of life that still allows the participant to avoid being stuck in a particular rut, which is where a brief habit turns into an enduring one. Important as well is the connotation of the unconscious; “habit” implies mastery that no longer requires conscious deliberation. See pp. 167–168.

<sup>547</sup> See for example section #324: “No, life has not disappointed me. Rather, I find it truer, more desirable and mysterious every year,” and #326 where Nietzsche points out the contradiction between the articulation of a pessimistic attitude and life strategies that indeed indicate that life is not so “hard to endure,” and finally when he states in #329: “How frugal our educated and uneducated have become concerning ‘joy’! How they are becoming increasingly suspicious of all joy!” Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, pp. 181, 182 (emphasis original), 184. An interesting biographical context to these assessments of the value of life is Nietzsche's physical condition at the time he wrote the book, which has been described by one biographer as “agony”: see Ronald Hayman. *Nietzsche: A Critical Life*. London: Phoenix, 1995, pp. 214–232 & 311. For more on this, see Ivan Soll. “Attitudes Toward Life: Nietzsche's Existentialist Project.” *International Studies in Philosophy*. 3/2002.

<sup>548</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 163.

<sup>549</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 195.

sighted and mundane, as we saw above. Nietzsche strongly suggests that a subject should approach the shaping of its life with utmost seriousness, dedication, indeed, nowhere put in less exertion than an artist would do, if embarking upon what he or she knew with absolute certainty would be the crowning achievement of their career.

Explaining how Nietzsche, in opposition to philosophers of consciousness (and intellect), such as Descartes who posited the self as stable entity, unified through time, emphasized a view of the self that privileged not the fact that it thinks but, rather, what it thinks, wants and does. Summarizing Nietzsche's position, Nehamas notes that "what we think, want and do is seldom if ever a coherent collection. In this view, there is no such thing as a unified self, but if something resembling a whole is to be found at all, it is in the very organization and coherence of the many acts that each organism performs through its life: It is the unity of these acts that gives rise to the unity of the self."<sup>550</sup> In this sense, the self, or at least an admirable self, is one whose acts are not haphazard, whose thoughts, desires and actions are, to the contrary, connected in a manner that indicates the presence of style.

We are raising the issue of "self-fashioning" and "stylization of the self," because these concepts, and the perspectives which they represent on subjectivity, have considerable relevance when Laxness' life is configured on paper. We have already addressed several manifestations of Laxness' conscious self-figurations. The way he positioned himself in the prologue to "Unglingurinn í skóginum" and, more generally, how he strategically incorporated signifiers of

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<sup>550</sup> Alexander Nehamas. *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1985, p. 180.

the modern to shore up his own figuration as the foremost representative of modernity. In his supposedly “objective” non-fiction articles we noted consummate manipulations taking place. While these are all textually based self-representations it must be noted as well that it would be impossible to divorce Laxness’ literary activity from his “life.” In addition, his literary maneuvers involved and required constant maintaining; Laxness performed in interviews, and he was aware that undertakings such as those he engaged in with regard to the monastery in Luxembourg on the one hand and Hollywood on the other would most certainly not go unnoticed.

Indeed, it would be a mistake to assume that Laxness’ reputation as the harbinger of the new was the inevitable reaction to his literary practice, progressive and unusual for the time as it was. It is also difficult to equate his status as a modern figure with a particular set of life experiences — this is not to take anything away from their unique nature, rather the point is being iterated that meaning is not intrinsic to events; one can easily picture someone else having the same experiences and never becoming the subject of newspaper profiles, or being interested in such publicity — and it would not do either to posit his reputation as the natural extension of his unmediated subjectivity. Awareness of what Hayden White has termed “emplotment,” and Nietzsche refers to as “style,” namely the powerful role narrative plays in the shaping of social reality as it discursively “activates” information and historical facts, endowing them with “formal coherence,” is imperative in this instance.<sup>551</sup> The

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<sup>551</sup> Hayden White. *Figural Realism. Studies in the Mimesis Effect*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000, p. 8. White distinguishes between two types of discourse, on the one hand there is strictly informative and fact-based texts, which are essentially non-meaningful, and, on the other hand, everything else, discourse that aims at the synthesis of disparate elements through “emplotment”.

modern figure that subsequently emerges depends however on such an immense multitude of events, details and, essentially, a cascading, probably, infinite number of life “moments” that a detailed analysis is out of the question.

Nevertheless, at various points, even if not always or even consistently, the careful placement of factual matters within a particular storyline must have taken place, with certain things being foregrounded while others are sidelined.

To conduct such a life is, in practice, obviously impossible, and conceptualizations such as the Eternal Recurrence are in essence figurative pathways to get behind the denial mechanisms that we have all erected to protect our vulnerable self-images. When approached by Zarathustra’s animals the hidden flaws, the repressed wants, the unhappily indulged desires, may come to the forefront, resulting in a hesitant “no”. Being able to respond with a resounding YES is of course a fine goal and if accomplished, and if honest, would constitute just the glorious affirmation of life that Nietzsche sought. What Nietzsche knew — and we know this if only through his extensive writings on the death of Socrates — and Byron as well (dying fighting for Greek independence amounted to a martyr’s death in the nineteenth century, in addition to supporting the conflation of the biographical and the literary, Byron and Childe Harold, Don Juan, etc.), is that the meaning of a life does not necessarily come down to a full existential accounting but, perhaps, singular events, spectacular deeds, or vertiginous mistakes.<sup>552</sup> In the image and celebrity

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<sup>552</sup> A point nicely made in Martin Scorsese’s film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, based on novel of the same name by Nicos Kazantzakis. Jesus, on the cross, does not, as the gospels would have it, resist Satan’s last temptation. Rather, he accepts the offer of release from suffering and an earthly life with Maria Magdalene. The audience is then shown, in a flash-forward, Jesus as an elderly family man when, by coincidence, he meets one of his former disciples who now travels the land preaching the word of god as brought forth by his one, true son, Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for the sins of man. Jesus, who is quite understandably surprised, knowing very well that he

culture of the twentieth century this particular logic has become clearly visible not least when spectacular deaths of young stars prevent them from ever becoming less than what they were at their peak, and thus also, if entirely falsely, endow their lives with meaning (tragedy).

### *3.5 Army of One*

In “Inngangur að ritdómum” (An Introduction to Book Reviews) Laxness’ essayistic offense against romanticized notions of the authorial figure, there is a final section that was not addressed during our initial discussion of the article. At the time, the reason was Laxness’ abrupt shift of tone and subject matter as the essay drew to a conclusion. This is however an immensely suggestive part of the text, and in many ways original and challenging. Without any warning Laxness redefines the terms that he has been employing throughout, in particular the category of literature.

Laxness begins innocently enough, mentioning the immense creative capacity that is on display when children play. Then he mentions Leo Trotsky, saying that Trotsky apparently always had dreams of becoming a writer. He is a fine writer, Laxness hurries to add, and his essays are highly recommended — but he’s not what you might call an author, although:

he has accomplished the most poetic things. They say that he was a waiter in America before the revolution. Within a year of leaving that employment he

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was spared the trial of the cross, starts speaking with the man, and explains who he is. However, and this is the twist, Jesus is, basically, rebuffed and it is explained to him that as a common man, no matter that he is the same “son of god” who preached the holy word and performed miracles, he is worthless. But as the savior who died a martyr’s death on the cross he is priceless. That way, the narrative functions much better, so that is the way it is going to be. In turns of significance, and in an aesthetic sense, it was a mistake to step off the cross, the text tells us, but the greatest irony is that it doesn’t matter that he did. The power is in the hands of his disciples (interpreters), who alter such details for a more effective whole (narrative).



had consummated one of the greatest military feats in world history: put together an army of five million, the red army. It is doubtful whether he had ever seen a gun before he became commander in chief of the most terrifying military force of the continent. This is among the most poetic things I have heard in my life.<sup>553</sup>

Laxness continues and says that the story about Trotsky reminds him of the words of a notable Icelandic poet, heard in conversation several years ago. “If we were kings,” he said, “we would never write again. We would only hold dominion.”<sup>554</sup> Laxness responds by saying that the fantasy life of the poet is at least sufficiently in line with Nietzsche’s philosophy of *Wille zur Macht* (Will to Power). In different context and a few paragraphs later, Laxness adds, in English, “there is not only the poetry of words, but a poetry of deeds.”<sup>555</sup> This is important, indeed, pivotal, because the conversation with the poet turned out to be somewhat limiting. To rule, or hold dominion, is nothing special. Innumerable non-entities have found themselves in such positions by accident of birth. Trotsky, in Laxness’ earlier account, did not just command an army — again, that is not newsworthy. Rather, his story has flair, it has style, it is, in fact, a narrative that is imbued with the aesthetic patterning that makes Laxness’ fascination seem plausible (“This is among the most poetic things I have heard in my life”); even though one may happen not to share his opinion, it is easy to see where he is coming from. Furthermore, such a stylized and mythic life is not the result of luck smiling down on you; rather it is the result of great effort. Nobody doubts

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<sup>553</sup> Laxness, “Inngangur að ritdómum,” February 5, p. 2. In the original: “Samt hefir hann gert hina skáldlegustu hluti. Það er sagt, að meðal annars hafi hann verið veitingaþjónn í Vesturheimi fyrir byltinguna. Ári eftir að hann lét af því starfi, hafði hann unnið eitt hið sögulegasta hernaðarþrekvirki, sem þekt er í heiminum: sett upp fimm milljóna her, rauða herinn. Það er vafasamt, hvort hann hefir nokkurn tíma hefir nokkurn tíma séð byssu, áður en hann varð yfirforingi ægilegasta herjar álfunnar. Þetta er með því skáldlegasta sem ég hefi heyrt á æfi minni.”

<sup>554</sup> Laxness, “Inngangur að ritdómum,” February 5, p. 2. In the original: “Ef við værum konungar, sagði hann, þá myndum við ekkert yrkja framár. Við myndum aðeins stjórna.”

<sup>555</sup> Laxness, “Inngangur að ritdómum,” February 5, p. 2.

that the feats that Laxness describes with such illustrious brevity and clear enjoyment must have cost superhuman effort, constant vigilance and immense self-discipline, to name only a few ingredients in a life-recipe that will always remain a mystery.

Laxness continues to dwell on the subject, and quite astutely associates the issue at hand with a literary sensibility although the materials being employed to sculpt the artwork are unusual:

I happen to be of the mind that there is a lot amiss in the veneration of those who only admire poetry if it is confined to the form of the literary. It is wonderful to write beautiful poems and construct deep novels about the great expanses of human life, but a waiter who puts down the ornamental cloth and puts up an army of five million, or a poetry loving university student who stands up from his desk, wipes the ink of his fingers and then becomes an inhabitant among the aboriginal natives of a polar region, all in order to extend the domain of science — that is also something.<sup>556</sup>

In a way, the key phrase so far is “poetry of deeds,” Laxness is expressing how the aesthetic function commonly aligned with works of art can be applied to the domain of existence as well. This, in fact, is not a stretch for Laxness, his notions of “cultured stylization” and “fashion” involved the intersection between value spheres that are often kept separated. What is remarkable however is the fact that he references Nietzsche while reflecting on these matters, but then, that is hardly an accident. When endowing deeds with a poetic ambiance or an aesthetic function, the first action that needs to be undertaken involves addressing the sense of randomness and lack of an intelligible shape and meaningful patterns that characterizes the lives most of us lead. In art, no single element is

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<sup>556</sup> Laxness, “Inngangur að ritdómum,” February 5, p. 2. In the original: “Hversu litla trú sem men kunna að hafa á skáldleik yfirleitt, en mikla á höfundarlistinni sérstaklega, þá finst mér jafnan að mikið sé andhverft í aðdáun manna á skáldskap ef hún er bundin aðeins við bókmenntalegt form. Það er dásamlegt að yrkja fögur ljóð og semja djúpúðugar skáldsögur um víðerni mannlífsins, en veitingamaður sem leggur frá sér pentudúkinn og setur upp fimm miljóna her, eða ljóðelskur háskólamaður sem stendur upp frá púlti sínu, þurkar blekið af fingrum sér og gerist srkælingi til að innlima heimskautþjóðir undir krúnu vísindanna — það er líka eitthvað.”

unimportant, an idea of cohesiveness tends to be foregrounded, what Nabokov referred to as the mysterious synchronicity in the texture of time that fiction allows for. But as noted, all this tends to be lacking in the existence that takes place within the framework of reality.

As was discussed in the Introduction, the Nobel Prize is the defining event of Laxness' life in terms of his career and authorial image, functioning like the gravitational pull around which and towards which everything else revolves. As Jón Karl Helgason has discussed, however, the events around the turn of the millennium when steps were taken to found a Laxness archive at *Þjóðarbókhlaða* — *Háskólabókasafn* (the National Library — University Library) and the home his surviving wife, Auður Jónsdóttir, had shared with Laxness for almost half a century, Gljúfrasteinn, was sold to the state in order for it to be turned into a Laxness museum, are also highly significant when biographical constructions of Laxness are discussed, in particular the issue of the stylization of his life, in this case, his posthumous existence as a “cultural saint.”<sup>557</sup>

With Gljúfrasteinn came the interior household items and a large portion of the private holdings. Going upstairs to the author's bedroom, a visitor can note that Laxness kept volumes by Adorno close to the nightstand. His famous Jaguar is still proudly parked in the driveway, visible from the road to Þingvellir that passes Gljúfrasteinn, and the outdoor swimming pool is often kept invitingly filled to the brim. Cultural events regularly organized in Gljúfrasteinn, with particular emphasis being placed on academic and artistic work being done on Laxness or inspired by him. Literary readings are common, especially in the fall

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<sup>557</sup> Jón Karl Helgason. “Relics and Rituals: The Canonization of Cultural ‘Saints’ From a Social Perspective.” *Primerjalna književnost*, 1/2011.

and around Christmas, which is when book publishing and sales reach their heights. Concerts are also held in Gljúfrasteinn, as was Laxness' wont as not a famous person traveling across the Atlantic had a layover in Iceland in the second half of the twentieth century without a government official — or someone concerned with the figure in question — bringing him to Gljúfrasteinn.

While undoubtedly at times a strain, this also meant that Laxness' somewhat rural abode, if large and luxurious, which during the period of gravel roads, a serious lack of road signs, and slower cars, was an hour's drive at least from Reykjavík, became a strange sort of cultural center where figures of influence in Iceland, the cultural cognoscenti, Laxness' close friends and family and world famous artistic figures would mingle, the evening often being rounded off by a performance of some sort.

While we can clearly see an author reaping the rewards of a lifetime spent in the service of art, great swaths of which in relative poverty, it is still difficult to make the biography cohere at this point. That is, the aesthetic sensibility and the regulatory ideal — the latter a concept borrowed from Nietzsche in order to articulate a single overarching mechanism that generates biographical meaning — have all but disappeared from view. The reasons have already been touched upon; car, pool, house, particularly the former two. What, somebody might ask, could possibly be wrong with these, admittedly, luxurious but well deserved items?

While always known for a fine taste in clothes, Laxness might even skip a meal or two in order to be able to afford a particularly desirable item of clothing during his youth — this being of course in part vanity but also a belief, many

times expressed in writing, that culture and the proper care of the self included taking pride in one's appearance ("cultural stylization").

Nevertheless, there is something that approaches the absurd when it comes to the extravagance of Laxness' late lifestyle and conspicuous consumption. Having a Jaguar, one of the more expensive motor vehicles on the planet, going for roughly 8–10 times the cost of a respectable sedan,<sup>558</sup> a vehicle that furthermore must also have been shipped to the author personally as there were no dealerships in Iceland, represents an astounding feat of showboating. Sports cars were not very practical in Iceland at the time as, for one thing, there were no places where they could be driven fast and, second, there weren't all that many places that they could be driven, period. Roads always having been a problem in Iceland, Laxness would have been driving a gravel road for a large portion of the way to Reykjavík, something that makes a vehicle made for British motorways and continental highways and high speeds a ridiculous anomaly and an entirely impractical device.

As to the swimming pool in the garden, the idea perhaps deriving from his California days, it remains to this day a unique experiment. Although outdoor public swimming pools are popular in Iceland, having one outdoors at home is completely unknown, somewhat as if a California writer, flush with cash, decided to have an encased arena for camel wrestling built in his back yard.

At stake, of course, are not some crude notions about "authenticity" — that there was an onus on Laxness to live in any particular fashion, or do

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<sup>558</sup> "Það var okkar að vera á flottasta bílnum." *Dagur*, 21 June, 1988. This is a reprint of an article from 1970 where the owner of a Jaguar is interviewed. The Jaguar type in this instance, the owner reveals, retails for around 840.000 ISK while a "normal" car might cost around 100.000 ISK.

anything other than what he himself pleased. In other words, the contention is not that the stay in the monastery was a necessary prelude to *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* or that in order to write *Sjálfstætt fólk* Laxness had to live in a hovel, subsist on a starvation diet and work himself half to death. The fact remains, however that he had spent the largest portion of his working life denouncing the systematic disenfranchisement and the inherent brutality of the economic order that made income disparity and wasteful consumption of the sort that he had now become a poster boy for, possible.

It is particularly interesting in this context that Laxness' late works, especially the plays, are extremely anti-materialistic. Frequently read as celebrations of humble modesty, simple people, and old fashioned values. *Pressarinn* in *Dúfnaveislan* is the most famous of these; he finds money a nuisance, stuffs it in cracks and crevices to get it out of view, preferring to work for free or at least for those who can only pay a fraction for his services, finding his fulfillment in a task well done. When Nietzsche reflected on the "stylized" life, the point was not to be flashy but rather to affirm life by demonstrating one's love for it; in part through artful existence. Care was to be taken regarding what came to define the "history" of one's everyday life. The services of a venerable nineteenth-century German philosopher are however not really required; any PR person might have alerted Laxness to the fact that this might be seen as a hugely incongruous move by his public. Why should his consumption patterns be even more conspicuous than those of the really rich? Iceland was and is a homogenous society unused to spectacular displays of wealth. However, nothing happened. For the moment it seemed as if the Nobel Prize could shield Laxness from anything. That, however, would turn out not to be the case.

### 3.6 Vera Hertzsch

Taking a robust temporal step forward allows for an examination of perhaps the most notable instance of when Laxness' "actions" were not connected "in a manner that indicates the presence of style;" and how White's notion of "emplotment" functions in relation to Laxness' biography, both in terms of self-figuration and the "unexpected" situation that comes into being when textual meaning proves difficult to contain. The event in question is the publication of Laxness' 1963 autobiographical essay collection *Skáldatími* (A Poet's Lesson). *Skáldatími* is Laxness' only essay collection, along, possibly, with *Alþýðubókin* (The Commoner's Book, 1927) — all in all he published seventeen such collections — whose importance within the oeuvre is comparable to his most highly regarded novels. The two texts, *Alþýðubókin* and *Skáldatími*, also stand in a curious dialectical relationship with each other on biographical and discursive grounds, as both have a declarative function that marks a break in the life of the author. The former declares Laxness' renouncement of religious orthodoxies and his embrace of socialism.<sup>559</sup> *Skáldatími* represents an almost exact reversal as Laxness' renounces his support for the Soviet Union and communism and although he doesn't "return" to the Catholic Church, the philosophical and

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<sup>559</sup> By the early 1930s Laxness was a supporter of the Soviet Union and his politics were more or less in line with orthodox Communism. Indeed, aside from his literary practice, Laxness' politics were the most important aspect of his public image, both in terms of his own self-figuration and the depiction of him by opponents, for the quarter century after the publication of *Alþýðubókin*, or until he became the recipient of the Nobel prize in 1955, at which point evaluative discourse was in a sense rendered irrelevant.

religious tradition of Taoism had by this point filled the space within him that seemed to require some form of systematic outlook on the world.<sup>560</sup>

Given Laxness' stature at the time of the publication of *Skáldatími* and his long standing role as the nation's most influential, by quite a distance, spokesman for left-wing politics and ideology, the fact that he retreated in a public fashion from the political position he had defended for decades was newsworthy. Indeed, *Skáldatími* became an immense and immediate bestseller. Old allies, however, felt betrayed and the book quickly became a source of considerable controversy. On the surface of it however *Skáldatími* may not have appeared all that different from some of Laxness' earlier collections, albeit endowed with a more obvious biographical dimension. As was most often the case, a number of essays address cultural matters and overall the tone is light, even humorous, and the ways in which Laxness portrays past experiences resonate with substantial force.

Proportionally, the extent of the book devoted to Laxness' ideological development, or, more precisely, his political "turn," is negligible. And Laxness himself was surprised and disappointed by the focus on the political chapters in the book's reception.<sup>561</sup> His reaction is to a degree reasonable. As Halldór Guðmundsson points out, those following Laxness' public life and statements and writings on politics in the years preceding the publication of the collection should not have been entirely surprised by its contents.<sup>562</sup> It borders on the naïve, however, to think that essays on Marcel Proust, Upton Sinclair or James

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<sup>560</sup> Significantly, *Skáldatími* was also Laxness' first work in over three decades where his assumed Catholic middle name "Kiljan" was dropped. See Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, p. 677.

<sup>561</sup> "Enginn bókmenntaáhuga hér, aðeins stjórn málaegur." *Morgunblaðið*, 12 October, 1963, p. 1.

<sup>562</sup> Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, p. 677.



Joyce would be considered as anything but secondary when Laxness, for the first time in public, voiced not only his disappointment with the Soviet Union but also his conviction that the utopian project of communism had failed, irrevocably and totally.

Alda Björk Valdimarsdóttir, Halldór Guðmundsson and Jón Ólafsson are among the scholars who have pointed out the importance of *Skáldatími* in terms of the figuration of Laxness' career as a whole, some going so far as to maintain that the book, in a singular fashion, compromises not only biographical constructions of the author (in the sense of placing earlier figurations under negative reevaluation) but also the integrity of the entire edifice of Laxness' body of work. Such statements, being anything but modest, invite a degree of wonder regarding the assumed signifying capacity of the complex of elements that are at work in the text in question, its explosive connotative range. It might be useful to keep in mind at this point that textual meaning and significance has as much to do with cultural context as it does content, much like Derrida's example of Nietzsche and the umbrella note demonstrates, and meaning comes into being through the interaction of a text with a reading subject.<sup>563</sup> Much as Nietzsche's memo to himself would have been unlikely to strike his contemporaries with the significance it does Derrida, *Skáldatími's* destabilizing force simmered and made itself felt at various points but it took decades for it to reach "maturation" so to speak, for its presence on "the social horizon" of Icelandic twentieth-century culture to grow to an immense size, and become extremely acute.

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<sup>563</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Spurs. Nietzsche's Styles*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979.

Of course, such “radical” new readings are grounded in a shift in the conceptual and historical horizon that grounds the inter-subjective relationship between members of a reception community. Emblematic of the historical shift is the way in which the essay that addresses Laxness’ disillusionment with the Soviet Union and Stalinism was the one that garnered the most attention at the time of publication, “Hver veit nema Eyjólfur hressist” (Who knows, Eyjólfur might get better), and was widely seen as belonging either to the thematic category of the insidious betrayal or the unexpected windfall (depending on the position of the reader; a former fellow traveler or a former political opponent).

From a contemporary perspective, however, Laxness’ revelation and experiences replicate what has come to be seen as a narrative common to Western intellectuals of the period. Support of the Soviet Union, unquestioning and unapologetic and, during the Second World War, rationalized as the only alternative to fascism.<sup>564</sup> Then it slowly gave way to doubt, disillusionment, disappointment and finally, in some cases, horror.<sup>565</sup> The current scholarly discourse revolves around another essay, however, one that is slighter and more personal, straightforwardly entitled “Vera Hertsch.” Although its implications, as noted above, were immediately obvious, and the essay was widely discussed, it was not foregrounded as a dominant in the understanding of Laxness’ entire career and life, as it would later. Author Hallgrímur Helgason refers to the chapter on Vera Hertzsch “as the darkest moment in our literary history,” and

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<sup>564</sup> See for example, Gerd-Rainer Horn. *European Socialists Respond to Fascism. Ideology, Activism and Contingency in the 1930s*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

<sup>565</sup> Arthur Koestler. *Darkness at Noon*. London: Macmillan, 1940; Ludmila Stern. *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920–40. From Red Square to the Left Bank*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007.

Valdimarsdóttir has addressed its slowly shifting reception framework, which has now culminated in what she describes as the “Laxness trial”:<sup>566</sup>

Although Vera’s story immediately raised great interest its importance has grown with time and now it is a more substantial part of Laxness’ oeuvre than he could possibly have foreseen while writing it. [...] Laxness’ trial is not over. How do people defend the writings and actions of the Nobel laureate? [...] Does Halldór’s guilt affect the stature of his works [and is it possible that this] will overturn his long preeminent status as an author[?]<sup>567</sup>

The short essay has “developed” into an immensely problematic force in terms of Laxness’s life and works. Jón Ólafsson notes that the “propagandist risks everything,” which is an astute if also a somewhat ominous point, since Laxness has clearly lost in this instance (does that then entail losing “everything”?).<sup>568</sup>

“Vera Hertsch” describes an evening visit Laxness paid to a German emigree, Vera Hertzsch, who was the fiancée of Benjamín Eiríksson, Laxness’ friend at the time, during the final days of Laxness’ second visit to the Soviet Union in 1938. Hertzsch was a recent mother and Laxness’ friend was the father. In addition, Hertzsch was a committed Communist. In light of the fact that Laxness had already written a book propagandizing for the Revolution and would a little while later write another one based on the experiences of the journey that was just coming to a close, the expectation that the two would, if not necessarily connect on a deep level, at least share a pleasant evening together was not unreasonable.

<sup>566</sup> Pröstur Helgason. “Tek mér Laxnessleyfi.” *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, 24 November, 2001. Citation is from Alda Björk Valdimarsóttir. “Vera Hertzsch. Dæmisögur um siðferði skálds.” *Skírnir* 1/2007.

<sup>567</sup> Valdimarsóttir, “Vera Hertzsch,” pp. 37, 54. In the original: “Þó að saga Veru hafi vakið mikla athygli á sínum tíma hefur vægi sögunnar vaxið með tímanum og hún er oðin veigameiri þáttur í höfundarverki Halldórs Laxness en hann hefði eflaust nokkru sinni órað fyrir að hún yrði þegar hann setti hana á blð. [...] Réttarhöldunum yfir Halldóri Laxness er ekki lokið. Hvernig verja menn skrif og gjörðir Nóbelskáldsins? [...] Hefur sekt Halldórs áhrif á vægi verka hans [og er það mögulegt að þessi atburður geti] ógnað ægivaldi hans sem höfundar[?]”

<sup>568</sup> Jón Ólafsson. “The Propagandist Revisits Himself. Laxness About Laxness in the Soviet Union.” *Laxness und die europäische Moderne*. Ritstj. Stefanie Wurth and Benedikt Hjartarson. Tübingen: Francke Verlag (forthcoming), p. 17.

What Laxness however describes is a stilted and guarded, if polite, conversation that veers into the realm of the uncanny at the mention of Hertzsch's co-workers at a newspaper having been arrested and the implicit assumption that a similar fate might await her. Then, as if on cue, Stalin's secret police arrives, personified in the essay in the figure of a grey and stooped bureaucrat, someone who, as Jón Ólafsson has pointed out, seems to personify Hanna Arendt's notion of the banality of evil.<sup>569</sup>

While Laxness' essay is not the only available testimony regarding what took place this Moscow evening, it remains by far the most vivid and important. Nevertheless it is not a historical document and is thus unreliable in fundamental respects; indeed, scholars have increasingly been focusing on tropological issues, thematic and narrative structuring, the position from which the narrator (Laxness) speaks, how he is presented and how much he knows and just what he understands. All this in spite of the fact that the narrative is quite brief, a series of exquisitely thought out set-pieces, indeed when one notes the care Laxness takes in order to position his figure in a strategic fashion within the "diegetic" world of the remembered narrative, his capacity as a master writer of novels and short stories comes to the fore. We know that the Russian official is not in a hurry and that Laxness' presence complicates things. Laxness' credentials and official documents must be checked, and so the process of disappearing an individual into the Gulag, an event usually accomplished quite efficiently, at least in the early stages of the "Great Terror," is drawn out over an hour or more, and Laxness is a witness to the whole thing. He describes how

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<sup>569</sup> Jón Ólafsson. *Appelsínur frá Abkasíu. Vera Hertzsch, Halldór Laxness og hreinsanirnar miklu*. Reykjavík: JPV útgáfa, 2012, p. 20.

Hertzsch, quite calmly, asks what will happen to her infant daughter and that the bureaucrat, without much thought but in an equally normal tone of voice, answers that the Soviet system is kind to orphans.

It is clear that Laxness' situation is complicated beyond the standard narrative of the Western intellectual who comes slowly and hesitantly to distance himself from early political commitments, to renounce communism and revolution. There are three factors at stake. Unlike most foreign supporters of the Soviet Union, Laxness not only visited but also came into direct contact with the Stalinist state machine at its murderous worst — during the same trip Laxness was present at the show trial of Nikolai Bukharin — and he survived, which was no mean feat.

Laxness then went home and wrote a travelogue, *Gerska æfintýrið* (Russian Adventure, 1938), which not only valorizes the Soviet Union and promotes its interests but goes out of its way to deny the reality of the terror of Stalin's policies and the Great Cleansing that was going on during his stay — as he was allowed uniquely to understand. Third, Laxness kept quiet for twenty-five years about Hertzsch's arrest. The combined hermeneutical effect of the triumvirate is the above-mentioned destabilization of many conventional "truths" about Laxness, an academic and cultural event that is grounded on a new way of reading *Skáldatími*. Put differently, elements previously accepted as pivotal in terms of Laxness' self-figuration were relegated to the background and others, specifically the tale of the arrest of Vera Hertzsch, became dominant.

It should be becoming apparent why Laxness' authorial figure, in all of its connotative dimensions, is put at risk by the new hermeneutical emphasis on the

episode in *Skáldatími* involving Vera Hertzsch, a historical figure who through a strange twist of fate has achieved an almost mythological status in a small and obscure Nordic country, while elsewhere, presumably, having a posthumous existence much like the other victims of Soviet totalitarianism, mourned, quite certainly in an abstract fashion and possibly in a personal context, but also a statistic in the historical encounter with Stalinism. In Iceland, however, she has become a tremendous force in contemporary understanding of Laxness, indeed, Halldór Guðmundsson, employing Roland Barthes' notion of "crosspoint," assigns to her the pivotal function of a historical force that will virtually determine the meaning of Laxness' life.

How could Laxness, having seen what he did, continue on his path of Soviet propagandizing? How could he mount an elaborate defense for Stalin's show trials after seeing an innocent person disappear into the vortex of the Soviet Gulag? Questions such as these proliferate endlessly and bring into question Laxness' ethics, his character, integrity, reliability, intelligence, even his very humanity. And by extension, if all these aspects of the authorial figure have become unmoored, what happens to a body of work, which, despite the much-ballyhooed "death of the author," remains tied to the authorial concept in terms of meaning, cultural hierarchy, and basic commercial and organizational imperatives?

In a strange twist of fate, Laxness, if read in an ontological fashion, has inched closer to the abyss. If activated negatively, authorial ontology can be a powerful force. A good novel by Saddam Hussein? Kim Jong-Il's contribution to film theory a serious effort? A single word written by Nietzsche on a scrap of

paper not important? At stake is not the unlikely possibility that Hussein was really quite a talented novelist, that Jong-Il's insights were productive and suggestive or that Nietzsche's note to self reveals anything new — if so we would be faced with an epistemological issue — but rather that in each of these instances the index of the authorial figure, the index in this instance being the signature of the proper name, determines the meaning and signifying range of the artifact — now the oeuvre and the biographical meaning — in question prior to any cognitive engagement. It is in light of considerations such as these that Laxness' description of his brief meeting with Vera Hertzsch becomes of highest significance in terms of his entire career and, by extension, the importance of figuration as such is clarified.

The contestation between authorial intention, understood here as the manner in which textual meaning is not “relative,” whatever that might mean, but endowed with certain structural elements internal to the material totality in question, namely the “text,” which provides it with a hermeneutic framework that is malleable but not random, and the conceptual, historical and social horizon that constructs the “opposing” framework, namely the contextual realities of reception and interpretation, has become not only tense but oppressive in Laxness' case. And in terms of Laxness' essay on Vera Hertzsch, figuration, understood in this fashion, serves to move our attention away from the ethical dilemmas articulated above, important as they are, to the way in which, on the one hand, Laxness as a narrating consciousness that relates a past event by way of language, that is, a medium whose inbuilt artifice and functional mechanisms he, as a biographical subject, had spent his life mastering, and, on

the other, how, in the absence of absolute truths, a variety of social “facts” shapes the reception, dissemination and understanding of texts, including this one.

In terms of bringing out these “aspects” of complex debates that erupted around Vera Hertzsch, the work of Alda Björk Valdimarsdóttir has been pivotal. In her reading of the essay and the cultural constructions involved in determining its meaning(s), Valdimarsdóttir has emphasized the performative aspect of the narration how, in the very act of coming to terms with a problematic part of his life, Laxness “stages himself” and construes the progression of the narrative, the signifying codes, much as authors are supposed to do when telling “stories” but remains a problem in the domain of non-fiction and the mediation of knowledge that has a real referent. But by shifting the focus thus, from a debate grounded on a value judgment (Laxness’ ethical catastrophe, or, conversely, his heroism in coming to terms with his past in a forthright manner; both narratives suggest themselves), to a reading that focuses on representational strategies and how Laxness figures himself in the text and, then, how the history of the reception of the essay enters into its meaning generation.<sup>570</sup>

In so doing, Valdimarsdóttir does not in any sense obscure the moral dimension at stake, rather, she manages to elevate the discussion to a place where, instead of debating symptoms (the good/bad dichotomy), what is being examined are the “causes,” the structural mechanisms at play that produce such

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<sup>570</sup> That Laxness’ self-figuration in this instance may be flawed, rendered ineffective by history itself, does not detract from the sophistication of the performance. As Valdimarsdóttir argues, Laxness positions himself, or the early, younger version of himself, quite precisely in the context of the narrative. Instead of being a committed Communist whose value and eminence was confirmed beyond doubt by the fact of his invitation to the show trials, he becomes an ideological innocent in contrast to Vera’s fervent political beliefs and entrenched position within the Soviet system. His distance, in other words, from the systematic failure of Stalin and the Soviet Union is subtly underlined.



effects (happiness might make us feel good while illness produces the opposite feeling — the exact definition of the concept of feeling being left unexamined, much as, when everything comes down to it, no substantive ground exists for values, except perhaps that some things feel right while others do not and that these feelings seem to be shared species-wide).<sup>571</sup> Of course, in the present context, instead of the neuro-cognitive field of emotional structures or the scientific field of the physiological, what is being pursued are the effects of language; its metonymic and metaphorical functions, to reference Jakobson's shorthand for how language works.

#### **4. Frontier of Modernity**

Discussing the emigration of film talent from the Nordic countries in the first decades of the twentieth century, Hans J. Wollstein notes that few destinations could equal the luster and promise of Hollywood.<sup>572</sup> Particularly interesting, however, is Wollstein's suggestion that Hollywood's drawing power was not solely dependent on the industrial preeminence of American film production in the wake of the First World War, although, clearly, this was of pivotal importance. In addition to the stable and profitable economics of the industry,

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<sup>571</sup> Valdimarsdóttir identifies one trope in particular as dominant, that of the tragic, and shows how Laxness, with considerable artistry, endows his historical/autobiographical/confessional narrative with the connotations of the generic logic of tragedy. That is, when Hertzsch calmly asks the bureaucrat about the fate of her child, the narrator of the essay has achieved the twin goals of establishing a narratological distance from the diegetic run of events, with young Laxness resembling the chorus, having by this point shifted from a curious visitor to a strangely silent and disinterested observer, and Vera being cast in the role of tragic heroine, sacrificing herself while retaining belief in a system of values that transcends the mundane, much like Antigone outside the city walls of Athens at the end of Sophocles' play.

<sup>572</sup> Hans J. Wollstein. *Strangers in Hollywood: The History of Scandinavian Actors in American Films from 1910 to World War II*. New Jersey and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1994, pp. v–xi. See also Graham Petrie. *Hollywood Destinies: European Directors in America. 1922–1931*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.

Wollstein points to the significance of the careful utopian construction of the image of California; the way in which magazines, municipalities and real estate boosters promoted the state as combining unblemished nature and urban living, depicting the “Golden State” as, simultaneously, an unsullied natural habitat, the last unsettled piece of the “frontier” (with the added benefit of being safe), and a metropolitan hub with all of the cosmopolitan sophistication expected by the demanding modern consumer and citizen.

According to Wollstein, the promotional discourse in general as well as specifically directed advertising campaigns made much of the movie industry, associating the state with the white lightning wattage that could be harvested from Hollywood stars with all the concomitant associations of charm, success, celebrity, happiness and good looks. The relationship was of course mutually beneficial. At no cost to itself, Hollywood was being promoted as a sanctuary unique in its hospitable climate and as a dynamic site of unparalleled opportunities. Along with those hungry for the silver screen, this ensured a steady stream of electricians, carpenters, technicians and all the other vocational categories that the already immense operations of the studios required. Thus movie industry glamour, picturesque landscapes, eternal sunshine and the prospect of career opportunities came together to endow the state and particularly the city of Los Angeles with a paradisiacal image.

Halldór Laxness was twenty-five years old when he arrived in Los Angeles in the fall of 1927, and the movies, and they were the reason he came, were not much older. It is no coincidence that the aspects of California that he enthusiastically relates in his early correspondence reflect to a large degree the

discourses identified by Wollstein, so pervasive were they at the time.<sup>573</sup> Laxness was serious about what he hoped would become a screenwriting career in Hollywood. His letters, especially from the first half of his stay, offer insights into the mind of a very determined young man, one who seems to take it in stride, if not as his due, to be mingling with the likes of Charlie Chaplin within a few months of his arrival.<sup>574</sup> “I am convinced that nothing will suit me better than the motion picture,” he wrote to a friend.<sup>575</sup> Laxness was heading away from the familiar and toward the new and the modern as represented by the movies, and he was optimistic regarding his opportunities and curious about the culture that greeted him. About a month into his stay, Laxness describes how “the first thing I did upon arrival was to familiarize myself with the best this town has to offer, namely film making. My energy and intellect have been completely dedicated toward this goal”.<sup>576</sup>

While the branding of California was largely successful, as Wollstein notes, the representational dynamics were not entirely uncontested. According

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<sup>573</sup> See also Kevin Starr. *Material Dreams: Southern California Through the 1920s*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

<sup>574</sup> The best selection of Laxness' letters in book form from this period is *Skáldið og ástin. Halldór Laxness: Bréf til Ingu 1927–1939*. Ed. Halldór Guðmundsson and Einar Laxness. Reykjavík: Forlagið – JPV útgáfa, 2011. For a discussion of Laxness' correspondence from this time, as well as his stay in California, see Helga Kress. “Imanskógar betri landa. Um Halldór Laxness í Nýja heiminum og vesturfaraminnið í verkum hans.” *Þar ríkir fegurðin ein. Öld með Halldóri Laxness*. Ed. by Einar Sigurðsson. Reykjavík: Landsbókasafn Íslands – Háskólabókasafn, 2002; Peter Hallberg. *Hús skáldsins I. Um skáldverk Halldórs Laxness frá Sölku Völku til Gerplu*. Trans. by Helgi J. Halldórsson. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1970, pp. 39–78; Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, pp. 215–263. Laxness is deliberately vague about the exact circumstances, or the nature of the social gathering, where he “met” Chaplin, but he does claim to have listened to him personally tell a humorous story. See Halldór Laxness: *Alþýðubókin*. Önnur útgáfa. Reykjavík: Helgafell, pp. 149–50. Laxness' energetic socializing also included an acquaintanceship with Victor Sjöström and a friendship with novelist and social activist Upton Sinclair. It should be noted that the second edition of *Alþýðubókin* is referenced solely in the context of “Kvikmyndin ameríska 1928,” in all other cases it is the first edition that is being used.

<sup>575</sup> Peter Hallberg, *Hús skáldsins I*, p. 52. In the original: “Ég er sannfærður um að ekkert liggur eins fyrir mér og kvikmyndin.”

<sup>576</sup> Halldór Laxness. “Letter to Ragnar Kvaran, dated 19 November 1927.” LBS 200 NF, Landsbókasafn Íslands–HBS, handritasafn, HKL bréfaskipti, section A/B.

to cultural historian Mike Davis, counter discourses emerged early and remained firmly in place for the first half of the twentieth century, if not longer. The discourses in question ranged from recounting the communal and political activities of socialists and union organizers in the mid-teens to the “existential” critique that was embedded in the work of several of the more prominent *noir* writers; not to mention the emigration, arrival and work of the Frankfurt School.<sup>577</sup> Davis notes how Los Angeles, despite its role in the popular imagination as a “city built on sunshine,” was also viewed as “peculiarly infertile cultural soil,” seducing talents before trivializing and wasting them.<sup>578</sup> In this version of the narrative, Los Angeles was a site of defeat and depletion and Hollywood represented the reification of culture. To move to “Lotusland,” writes Davis, was to “sever connection with national reality” and to “surrender” all semblance of “critical distance” towards the culture at large.<sup>579</sup>

The two portraits are polar opposites. Those partial to Adorno and the Frankfurt School would for example be likely to find the second position more to their liking.<sup>580</sup> It is useful nevertheless to keep in mind countervailing

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<sup>577</sup> For more on the Frankfurt School in America, see Anthony Heilbut. *Exiled in Paradise. German Refugee Artists and Intellectuals in America From the 1930s to the Present*. Berkeley, London and New York: University of California Press, 1997, and David Jenemann. *Adorno in America*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, and Stefan Müller-Doohm. *Adorno. A Biography*. Trans. by Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005, pp. 169–324.

<sup>578</sup> Mike Davis. *City of Quartz. Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. London and New York: Verso 1992, pp. 49, 17.

<sup>579</sup> Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 18.

<sup>580</sup> Generalizations are easy to make but difficult substantiate and should therefore be avoided. Yet it seems that works produced within the environs of the culture industry, and thus at times springing directly from Hollywood, tend quite frequently to take a rather dim view of the industrial apparatus that is responsible for their being in the world. The same can be said of novels that depict the workings of Hollywood and the dream factory. In terms of cinematic representations, Cecile B. DeMille’s silent version of *Chicago* (1927) is an early example of the mass media putting forward a critique of the logic of mass media. Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Blvd.* (1950) and *Kiss Me, Stupid* (1964) should be mentioned. Both are brutal deconstructions of celebrity and the trappings of fame; the latter is also surprisingly frank in its depiction of the intersection of fame and sexuality. *Barton Fink* (1991) by Joel and Ethan Coen is another noteworthy example. The film depicts the horrors that selling out entails as the playwright of the

viewpoints such as André Bazin's conception that the historical forces that came together to make the classical studio system represent one of the most fortunate cultural junctures in the history of art. Nowhere else and at no point in history had so much economic power, such vast industrial forces, such a technological banquet been put at the disposal of artists, Bazin suggests.<sup>581</sup>

Halldór Laxness was initially under the sway of somewhat utopian projections of Hollywood, as well as his own considerable ambition. Otherwise he would hardly have sailed between continents and risked pretty much all he had, including his incipient career as a writer, to start from scratch in unknown circumstances.<sup>582</sup> The sun, palm trees and glitter nevertheless did not prevent him from facing certain realities; indeed, he may have been prodded in that direction by his own strained financial reality. At any rate, he concluded that the studio system was, first and foremost, a "business apparatus" where the artistic

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title leaves New York for Hollywood, and then turns the loathing that is in fact invoked by Hollywood inward at himself and thus slowly going mad. A list like this could go on for a bit. Coming up with a similarly well staffed list but from the opposite point of view is however much more difficult. When it comes to fiction, classics range from Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust* (1939) to Bruce Wagner's more recent works such as *I'm Losing You* (1998) to Bret Easton Ellis' entire body of work. Again, while the list of novels could continue, the opposite lane remains empty. As a matter of fact, the next point of conversation could perhaps be writers that Hollywood allegedly destroyed, Fitzgerald and Faulkner being among the leads.

<sup>581</sup> Narrowly speaking, Bazin was responding to "auteur" theory as it was being developed by his protégé François Truffaut and others but the wider reference of his discussion of the "genius of the system" rests on fundamentals like the ones listed above. André Bazin. "On the Politique des Auteurs." *Cahiers du Cinéma*, I: *The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood*. New Wave. London: Routledge, 1985, pp. 257-258.

<sup>582</sup> Ólafur Haukur Símonarson wrote a play based on Laxness' experiences in Hollywood, *Halldór í Hollywood*, which premiered in the fall of 2005 in *Þjóðleikhúsið* (The National Theater). The play relied on Peter Hallberg's study, *Hús skáldsins*, for details and narrative material and has not been published. The initial press release for the premier has been preserved on *Leiklistarvefurinn* (The Theatrical Website) and the plot description suggests that the playwright had certainly managed to find ingredients for drama in Laxness' experiences in California: "Ólafur Haukur's play reveals how Halldór's stay in America proved first and foremost to result in him finding Iceland again and became an Icelandic writer." In the original: "Í leikriti Ólafs Hauks sjáum við hvernig dvöl Halldórs í Ameríku varð fyrst og fremst til þess að hann fann Ísland á ný og gerðist íslenskur rithöfundur."

([http://www.leiklist.is/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=317:hald-hollywood-frumsg&catid=35:allar-frir&Itemid=128](http://www.leiklist.is/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=317:hald-hollywood-frumsg&catid=35:allar-frir&Itemid=128) — retrieved on July 4, 2014)

concerns of its participants were frequently, even invariably, marginalized.<sup>583</sup> Laxness' appraisal of Hollywood did not get kinder with time, and he will thus join the ranks of Davies' cultural critics in due course. The discovery of the economic motor of Hollywood was not enough however to discourage Laxness' attempts to break into the film industry. And, for a while, things did seem to be going well. One of the two script treatments he completed, *A Woman in Pants*, came close to being produced by MGM; close enough, at any rate, that plans to send a crew to Iceland were apparently being discussed, and during the discussions Laxness is likely to have petitioned the studio to have Greta Garbo featured in the lead.<sup>584</sup>

As plans to film Laxness' treatment were postponed, and then seemed to fall by the wayside, the author grew increasingly disillusioned with Hollywood and his energies started to be invested in other projects, among them attempting to have *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (The Great Weaver of Kashmir, 1927), his early modernist novel, translated and published in America.<sup>585</sup> However, Laxness'

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<sup>583</sup> Laxness, "Letter to Ragnar Kvaran." "business apparatus" is the phrasing employed in the letter.

<sup>584</sup> Halldór Laxness. "Some outlines of a Motion Picture from Icelandic Coast-Life." *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 1/2004, p. 11-18; Björn Ægir Norðfjörð. "Adapting a Literary Nation to Film: National Identity, Neoromanticism and the Anxiety of Influence." *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies/ Études scandinaves au Canada*, 19, 2010, pp. 12-40, esp. pp. 26-29. See also, Halldór Guðmundsson: Halldór í Hollywood: Kvikmyndahandritið 'Salka Valka' birt í fyrsta sinn. *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 1/2004, p. 7-10. It should be stressed, however, that not much is known for certain about Laxness' interaction with the American film studios. Neither is much known about the precise reason(s) why plans to film *A Woman in Pants*, if they did indeed proceed as far as Laxness indicates, were canceled. See Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness: Ævisaga*, pp. 242-243. Laxness' own brief account of his adventures in the movie industry is offered in the postscript to the second edition of *Salka Valka*. These reminiscences have not been considered wholly reliable. See Halldór Laxness. "Eftirmáli." *Salka Valka*. Önnur útgáfa. Reykjavík: Helgafell 1951, pp. 475-476.

<sup>585</sup> A lively and fascinating account of Laxness' stay in California is to be found in the recollections of his friend and collaborator on the translation, the artist Magnús Á. Árnason. See Magnús Á. Árnason. "Kiljan í Kaliforníu." *Gamanþættir af vinum mínum*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1967, pp. 51-65.

literary ambitions, much like his hope for a film career, were frustrated and in the end came to nothing.<sup>586</sup>

Halldór Laxness did however arrive in the United States during an eventful decade. The 1920s opened with two historic events; one was the passing of the Volstead act, a constitutional amendment prohibiting the sale and all handling of alcoholic beverages; the other was the achievement of women's suffrage. Historians also point to the 1920s as a cultural turning point, when the nineteenth-century work ethic gave way to a new and different ethic of leisure and consumption.<sup>587</sup> For women, the changes were particularly dramatic, as testified to by the emergence of the "New Woman" and the slackening of restrictive gender roles; Victorian attire was abandoned for more comfortable clothing and new fashions, most famously the bobbed haircut. Most American girls received a high school education at this point and represented a third of all college students. Employment opportunities were easy to come by for women after college, although not in high paying jobs and often only until marriage.<sup>588</sup>

However, a part of what was happening was that youth was "acting out," carving out space for themselves in urban culture, and thus behaving scandalously in the eyes of the older generation. Never before had there been a

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<sup>586</sup> When Laxness returned to Iceland in the late fall of 1929, one might consequently ask whether his lengthy sojourn in the United States had amounted to much beyond a series of professional failures. But this would be an overly negative view. The time Laxness spent in California was characterized by notable accomplishments and important shifts in his personal world-view and political beliefs. Significantly, he wrote *Alþýðubókin* (*The Commoner's Book*, 1929) during his stay, the work that would make him (in)famous in Iceland and, in the sense that he only turned seriously to the writing of the socially engaged essays that constitute the book when his hopes of success in the movies had grown dim, it is possible to maintain that the book's very existence is grounded in Laxness failure in Hollywood. It should be noted that a similar point was made in Guðmundsson, "Halldór í Hollywood," p. 10.

<sup>587</sup> Glen Gendzel. "1914–1929." *A Companion to 20th-Century America*. Ed. By Stephen J. Whitfield. Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2004, pp. 27–28.

<sup>588</sup> Jane Bingham. *A Cultural History of Women in America. The Great Depression: The Jazz Age, Prohibition, and Economic Decline 1921–1937*. New York: Chelsea House, 2011, pp. 9–16.

greater plurality of entertainment choices, with dance halls, movies, and popular music that was in fact made with the young in mind. A couple could even choose to stay home and listen to music in privacy, as record players were showing up in more and more places.<sup>589</sup> There was drinking, new, saucy language, women were smoking and the suggestion that they were engaging in premarital sex even made it into Webster's Dictionary, which defined "flappers" as young women "somewhat daring in conduct."<sup>590</sup>

Indeed, a brief sketch in Aubrey Malone's book on film censorship sums up a not uncommon view of the period and women's role in it:

Women owned the twenties. Prohibition was introduced at the beginning of the decade but they still managed to make their spirits soar. The flapper was born. Dress sense became adventurous. Women smoked, danced, cut themselves loose from the shackles of convention. They also became sexually free.<sup>591</sup>

Pioneering feminist historian, Estelle B. Freedman, has however pointed out that while the conventional picture of the "roaring twenties," one that features speakeasies, flappers in form-fitting short dresses, hedonism and the lost generation, does seem to emphasize a new, freer female lifestyle, it is still a problematic decade in the history of women. Indeed, at the time she wrote her article in the mid-1970s, no decade in the twentieth century had received as little attention from the perspective of women's studies as the 1920s. Freedman wonders if this might perhaps be explained by the fact that the political goal of suffrage had been achieved shortly before, with the 1920s thus sandwiched in

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<sup>589</sup> Steve J. Wurtzler. *Electric Sounds. Technological Change and the Rise of Corporate Mass Media*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, pp. 121-169.

<sup>590</sup> Fass. *The Damned and the Beautiful*, pp. 94-110, 193-215. The *Webster's Dictionary* quote is from Gendzel, "1914-1929," p. 28. See also Kelly Boyer Sagert. *Flappers. A Guide to an American Subculture*. Santa Barbara, Denver and Oxford: Greenwood Press, ABC Clio, 2010.

<sup>591</sup> Aubrey Malone. *Censoring Hollywood. Sex and Violence in Film and on the Cutting Room Floor*. North Carolina and London: MacFarland & Company, 2011, p. 11.



between one of the great victories of the women's right struggle and the economic collapse in 1929.

Furthermore, when Freedman goes out and fact-checks the archival work that lies behind the constantly repeated narratives of the "Jazz age," she finds nothing. It's all based on impressionistic and angry, and often misogynistic newspaper and journal articles from the period, as well as of course Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s* (1931), a fun but notoriously unreliable source: "no new questions have been asked about women in the 1920s since the initial impressionistic observations were made," more than forty years ago, she notes, quietly scandalized.<sup>592</sup> Why is nobody asking why feminism and the organized woman's movement virtually disappeared in the 1920s? Why did the struggle for equality cease during this period? While silence greets questions of this sort, depictions of the flapper and the New Woman remain alive and kicking, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) doing quite a bit to set the legend in place.

Freedman clearly does not agree with the statement that "[w]omen owned the twenties," but what is of particular note for us in the present context, aside from the fact that the 1920s is the decade of Laxness' stay in California, is how Freedman's revisionist historical work encapsulates the workings of the endlessly recycled images in modern mass media, and how "truths" that in fact are often either unfounded or downright lies, but put forward within incredibly efficient representational frameworks, have colonized the consciousness of many when it comes to the 1920s — did we not recently watch Leonardo

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<sup>592</sup> Estelle B. Freedman. "The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s." *The Journal of American History*. 2/1974, p. 372-373.

DiCaprio charm his way through a version of *Gatsby*? And although the Baz Luhrmann baroque-maximizing aesthetic gave the 1920s iconography an extra boost or ten, all the usual suspects were present.

For the movies, the decade could not have started out any worse than it did as one of the biggest stars of period, slapstick comedian Fatty Arbuckle, Jr., was put on trial for murdering a young woman. Not only had the crime occurred during an orgy, or so they whispered, but what killed her was an act of a sexual nature. Then Mary Pickford, formerly “America’s Sweetheart,” scandalized the nation when she got divorced in order to marry Douglas Fairbanks. And Chaplin was in trouble again, and again with a young, really young, girl. Degenerate, decadent, debauched, degraded, depraved: take your pick of adjectives, Hollywood was about to be raked over the coals in the national media: “Enough happened in the early twenties to provide adequate ammunition for those who maintained that Hollywood was the Sodom and Gomorrah, to say nothing of the Babylon, of the world,” a writer noted at the time.<sup>593</sup>

Film historian Robert Sklar articulates what may ultimately have been the root of the perceived scandal that was Hollywood:

Where in American culture could one learn about love-making techniques? Not from the daily newspapers, certainly, nor from magazines and books, and rarely from watching others do it, as one might learn some other sport or skill. Before the movie, the act of love played almost no part in the culture’s public curriculum. In movies, however, it became the major course of study.<sup>594</sup>

Yes, Laxness found himself in quite a place when he arrived in Los Angeles in 1927.

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<sup>593</sup> Quoted in Malone. *Censoring Hollywood*, p. 14.

<sup>594</sup> Robert Sklar. *Movie Made America. A Cultural History of American Movies*. Revised and Updated. New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p. 137.

#### 4.1 From English to German to Icelandic: The Travails of an Essay

When Laxness left for America, he was the author of a collection of short stories and three novels, the latest of which, *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* stands as perhaps the first modernist novel in Icelandic letters.<sup>595</sup> *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* had caused a furor in literary circles and so had Laxness' experimental poetry where expressionistic and surrealist influences abounded.<sup>596</sup> In other words, Laxness had already established himself as the most notable novelist of his generation when he decided to shift gears and embark on an artistic career in a foreign country and in a new medium. It is of central importance to note in this context that the modernist innovations of Laxness's third novel and poetry, his passionate investment in social modernization and the interest in cinema that catapulted him to Los Angeles can be seen to stem from the same root. In all three instances we see tradition being questioned and probed in a radical fashion, in some instances even discarded.

Rather than participate straightforwardly in a literary scene that was inflected on the one hand by monolithic pastoral notions of social experience and on the other by nationalistic celebrations of the Sagas and of the literary heritage, Laxness chose in his breakthrough novel to engage with recent pan-European debates on aesthetic, social and philosophical matters.<sup>597</sup> When it came to interventions in the social terrain, he challenged the conservative

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<sup>595</sup> The earlier two novels were *Barn náttúrunnar* (Child of Nature, 1919) and *Undir Helgahnúk* (Under the Holy Mountain, 1924). The short story collection was entitled *Nokkrar sögur* (A Few Stories, 1923).

<sup>596</sup> See here Ólafsson, "Framúrstefna Halldórs Laxness" and Þorsteinsson, "Mig dreymdi ég geingi úti skóg."

<sup>597</sup> See here Hallberg, *Vefarinn mikli* I and II; Guðmundsson, "Loksins, loksins".

intellectual elite as well as political interests ranging from the urban business class to the traditional farming power base. Cinema, in its turn, spoke to Laxness in way similar to that of the progressive art movements: it indexed the exciting flux of the moment and the promise of the future, rather than the past and its cumbersome disappointments.

That cinema's revolutionary capacity to reach and speak to a mass audience – including a working-class audience — captured Laxness's imagination was in keeping with his political orientation at the time.<sup>598</sup> Not least, movies represented something radically non-Icelandic, perhaps even an escape route from a confining cultural context. As a consistent practice, national film production was a distant dream in Laxness's home country, yet movies stood as one of the paramount symbols of modernization and the modern in the cultural landscape of the time. By relocating to Hollywood, Laxness became a participant in a modern adventure and experiment unthinkable in Iceland.<sup>599</sup>

Although intent on writing script treatments, Laxness nevertheless also began a non-fiction piece on Hollywood and the film industry shortly after his arrival in Los Angeles. Within a few weeks he had finished an essay in English entitled "Cinematography and Creative Art," but may have been dissuaded from having it published by friends who worried that doing so would prove harmful to his career prospects.<sup>600</sup>

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<sup>598</sup> Halldór Laxness. "Cinematography and Creative Art." 1927, manuscript held in Einar Laxness's private collection.

<sup>599</sup> For more on the "modern experiment" mentioned above, see Kristen Whissel. *Picturing American Modernity: Traffic, Technology, and the Silent Cinema*. Durham, and London: Duke University Press, 2008.

<sup>600</sup> Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, p. 226. The essay did appear in English, roughly eighty years behind schedule, as it was published in my translation in *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* (volume 1, number 2).

The essay did however appear, greatly altered but safely removed from Hollywood, in the Austrian Catholic journal *Das Neue Reich* in August 1928 as “Kunst und Künstlichkeit im Film” (Art and Artificiality in Films).<sup>601</sup> Two further essays on film were published in the journal, “Dollarfilme” (Dollar Films), in February 1929 and “Chaplin, Jannings und andere Stars” (Chaplin, Jannings and Other Stars) the following month. For his extended essay on Hollywood, “Kvikmyndin ameríska 1928” (The American Film in 1928), included in *Alþýðubókin* (The Commoner’s Book), an essay collection that was published in Iceland upon Laxness’ return from America in 1929, he reworked the three essays published in German while incorporating aspects of the initial English draft as well as adding new material.<sup>602</sup> When a second edition of *Alþýðubókin* was published in 1947, the article was revised yet again so the text can be viewed as existing in something resembling a transitional state for two decades.<sup>603</sup> The ramifications of this textual fluidity will be discussed as we engage with Laxness’ essay.

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<sup>601</sup> It is virtually impossible to come to *Das Neue Reich* without associations with National Socialism springing to mind. There are however absolutely no links between the two.

<sup>602</sup> The concept of the “culture industry” is clearly not original to Laxness and even stands as something of an anachronism in the present context, seeing how it was coined roughly two decades after he left America. And that would have been in the work of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the concept being featured prominently in their *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Dialectic of Enlightenment, 1947). It is my contention however that Laxness is so close to the Frankfurt pair in spirit that such temporal dissonances can safely be ignored; there is even the matter of whether or not Laxness can be said to have even pre-empted some of the argumentative and critical models of Adorno and Horkheimer; this would include an ideological and institutional analysis that does not rest on its laurels once a movie has been “evaluated” and found either lacking or to one’s liking, indeed, something completely different has been occupying us, namely an inquiry into the less obvious signficatory practices of the visual language of the film and just what political messages are thus communicated. The workings of ideological interpellation are at this point not tied to individual directors or auteurs but the studios and, much more importantly for Laxness, the international corporate combines that own the studios (attention focused on New York, not California). In other words and to sum up, I am sure Laxness would have employed the concept himself, and done so gratefully, had it been available to him when writing the essay.

<sup>603</sup> Laxness altered the article slightly in subsequent editions of *Alþýðubókin*, as was his wont, even making one interesting addition regarding Chaplin in the third edition, but the main

The essay focuses on the early American studio system, particularly the manner in which economic and market logic inflects the ideological position of film narratives. Laxness is interested in how spectacle interrupts narrative structures in the “typical” Hollywood film, and how conspicuous consumption (production values, behavior of particular film characters) ties into the enjoyment of working class audiences. For Laxness, cinema is a wondrous invention, one that epitomizes modernity, but the subservience of the “dream factory” to the financial establishment ensures that its products serve the interest of power and capital. Importantly, Laxness does not write Hollywood off as mere smoke and mirrors, spectacle and fraud, nor is he aiming at a satiric or titillating expose of life in the movie world (a genre in itself), rather, he addresses the function of the film industry as an ideological apparatus.

The circuitous way in which “Kvikmyndin ameríska 1928” achieved its “final” form represents in fact a very interesting publication and gestation history. In terms of how many and substantial public revisions the essay underwent it stands apart from the other contributions in *Alþýðubókin* and tracing this history, as well as examining an unpublished early draft of the essay, affords us a unique glimpse into Laxness’ increasingly conflicted stance towards modernity and some of the institutional structures that are emblematic of modernization.

“Kvikmyndin ameríska 1928” deserves and requires extensive discussion and analysis for several reasons. Not only does it represents Laxness’ most direct

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alterations, roughly forty in number, occur between the first and second editions. Laxness’ changes are minor, involving stylistic fine-tuning and condensation, with one exception that will be touched on below. In the present context, we will be referencing the text as it appeared in the second edition. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Icelandic are translated by the author.

engagement with cinema and the industrial production of films, a mode of cultural practice that stood as a central marker of modernity for writers and thinkers ranging from Apollinaire to Adorno, but it also encapsulates a key moment in Laxness' own relationship with the modern. In a sense, it is not surprising that someone who had come recently to Socialism with fervor would turn against Hollywood. It might also be tempting to draw conclusions of a certain kind from the fact that Laxness was unsuccessful in his engagement with the studios. However, when looking at the very earliest draft of the essay, written while Laxness was still hopeful about his chances, it is apparent that his critical attitude was not a late addition but, rather, an integral part of the text from the beginning (which is presumably the reason he was dissuaded from publishing).

In addition, the essay is in many ways extremely successful and penetrating; a significant contribution to the history of silent cinema and the discourses that shaped the intellectual environment of the new medium. It will be argued that Laxness' methodology requires a close look and that it is in fact rather unique for its time. Roughly two decades later a commentator, sitting at a table in a library, who has just finished reading the essay — the library is a British one, let's say, perhaps even the big one in downtown London, the pride of British cultural governance, but in that case it is also most severe, with guards passing the innocent reader by at regular intervals — and he simply cannot help himself, so taken aback is he by this obscure essay, that he whispers to his colleague sitting beside him, "well, I'll say, this Laxness fellow, there certainly are striking affinities between him and the Frankfurt School."

The intuition of my library patron turns out to be quite solid, perhaps not a surprise given the context. The fortunes of the Frankfurt School and the central figures of its first generation, scholars such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Leo Löwenthal, have fluctuated somewhat in the English speaking world, reaching a nadir of sorts during the heyday of postmodernism and the valorization of popular culture. Adorno in particular became something of a straw man for those in need of a wicked European elitist to kick about, his famous disdain of jazz and the discussion of the culture industry providing ample ammunition. It is telling however that Lambert Zuidervaart titles one of the chapters in his recent book on Adorno, “Going after Adorno,” referring to his critics, yes, but mostly he is gesturing towards the substantial revival in interest that the last fifteen years or so have seen; going after Adorno in that context means following in his footsteps and/or rescuing him from neglect — for some, it means rescuing him from Habermas.<sup>604</sup>

Whatever one may think of the current applicability of its theories, the importance of the Frankfurt School in the history of sociology for pioneering work on mass culture, starting in the 1930s, is extremely difficult to deny, seeing how nobody else was giving popular culture (movies, TV, soap operas, magazines, pop music) serious scholarly attention at the time. It is within the framework of popular culture that Douglas Kellner has argued that the Frankfurt School provides media studies with a model that bridges the empirical/textual analysis divide and is therefore of immense value.<sup>605</sup> This model, Kellner

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<sup>604</sup> Lambert Zuidervaart. *Social Philosophy After Adorno*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 6–11.

<sup>605</sup> Douglas Kellner. “Critical Perspectives on Television.” *A Companion to Television*. Ed. by Janet Wasko. Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pp. 30–32.



explains, is made up of four parts. The first addresses the production framework of the cultural artifact, next the dimensions of political economy are investigated, then a close reading is performed, and finally there is research on the reception and audience of the cultural artifact in question.

Quite remarkably, all these four areas are present in Laxness' essay, it will be argued, although the audience/reception research is limited to his circle of friends and acquaintances and the reading of newspapers. It is a remarkable fact that Laxness was as a matter of fact quite removed from the major currents of film studies and film theory in the 1920s, being rather interested in analyzing the relationship between the cultural product, its producers, the economy, the state, society and everyday life. What he offers in "Kvikmyndin ameríska 1928" is in fact a nascent psychoanalytic/Marxist critique of the "culture industry." The essay is among the best in the book and stands today as the most rigorous and original contribution to film studies produced in Iceland — and, as suggested above, in many ways it is a seminal piece in an even wider context.

Essay collections vary in tone, theme, structure, outlook and intent — at times all within the span of just a few essays in the same book. From a work cohesive and unified in thought, philosophical outlook and design, such as Montaigne's *Essais* (Essays, 1580–1595), we can move to a volume whose internal coherence rests upon a shared cultural milieu and a zeitgeist-capturing attitude, such as Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968). Then there is the type where the essays all revolve around the same thing; brilliantly as in James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), or embarrassingly, as would be the case with *The Second Plane* (2008) by Martin Amis. Some collections even seem

to promise a valuable lesson by way of an enticingly phrased statement or question; *How to Be Alone* (2011) by Jonathan Franzen can serve as an example here.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, however, are those volumes that do not really seem to have much purpose beyond seeing to it that a number of occasional pieces end up in print. Unfortunately, this came to characterize Laxness' essay collections in the post-Nobel period; all in all he published no less than seventeen, with decidedly diminishing returns. It almost seemed as if nothing insignificant enough not to be printed, published and preserved could leave his lectern; with pieces like the two page response to a quirky reader (quack would suit him better), who in the section of *Morgunblaðið* set aside for brief letters from readers, had put forward a critique of *Gerpla* that in its fixation on a ludicrous detail was simply goofy.<sup>606</sup> That Laxness should respond is of course his prerogative; that he should think this exchange belongs in a book is however a bit strange.<sup>607</sup>

*Alþýðubókin* is an entirely different animal, written with passion, drive and wit — and daring. The social critic and feminist we met in “Drengjakollurinn og íslenska konan” has not gone anywhere, his rhetoric style has only grown more assured and his thinking is presented in a clearer and more concise fashion than before. His essay on Hollywood is a case in point. Far from having turned

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<sup>606</sup> Halldór Laxness. “Svarað leiðréttingu um sól og túngl.” *Gjörningabók. Ýmsar athuganir*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1971, pp. 106–107.

<sup>607</sup> Occasionally these volumes would nevertheless include a truly wonderful essay, often about the Sagas or medieval literature, that simply hit all the marks, wittily written, extensive in scope, well researched and informative. This tended however also to highlight what dreck the rest of the volume was likely to be.

into historical or cultural curiosities, a substantial portion of the essays in the book remains vibrant, challenging and immensely fun to read.

In his discussion of *Alþýðubókin* Peter Hallberg emphasizes that it represents Laxness' final break with Catholicism and the philosophical/aesthetic position that had informed *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*: "Halldór now turned his back on the solipsistic individualistic problems of Steinn Elliði. In their place we find issues of fundamental importance, with the common people clearly foregrounded, as are social problems."<sup>608</sup> What unifies an essay collection whose interests are diverse enough to include agriculture and problems with regard to rural living, hygiene and living conditions, matrimony, with noted emphasis on sex and female sexuality, the causes of crimes, nationalism, literature, movies, technology, photography and art, and religion, is "the socialist view of the world, which characterizes basically every single essay."<sup>609</sup>

As we go forward, we will start by addressing *Alþýðubókin* in the context of its reception, and as an essay-collection, not just the vehicle for Laxness' analysis of Hollywood. We then move on to a discussion of the various "versions" of the text that would eventually become "Kvikmyndin ameríska 1928," paying particular attention to the way in which Laxness' analytical method and approach to modernity shift between an initial English draft, the way in which that draft was reworked for publication in German, and, finally, the essay's appearance in Icelandic. We finish by looking at the essay as an example of

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<sup>608</sup> Peter Hallberg, *Halldór Laxness*. Trans. by Njörður P. Njarðvík. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1975, p. 96. The Icelandic translation goes like this: "Nú sneri Halldór baki við sjálfhverfum eisntaklingsvandamálum Steins Elliða. Í staðinn koma grundvallaryfirlýsingar með skírskotum til almennings, til þjóðfélagsvandamála."

<sup>609</sup> Hallberg, *Hús skáldsins I*, p. 80. In the original translation: "Það sem tengir þessa sundurleitu þætti saman í eina heild er hin sósíalíska grundvallarskoðun, sem er meira eða minna ríkjandi í þeim öllum."

ideology critique. First, however, the conceptual constellation that inflects the essay and includes new technologies, that new and sometimes threatening social formation, “the masses,” and the industrialization of culture, needs to be looked at briefly. Laxness’ essay on Hollywood should indeed not be read in isolation, it is part of an important discursive history that reaches back centuries, as well as being a contribution to the early reception of mass communication technologies, one of the signal revolutions of the twentieth century.

#### *4.2 The Culture Industry*

“Mass culture as we know it in the West is unthinkable without 20<sup>th</sup> century technology — media techniques as well as technologies of transportation (public and private), the household, and leisure,” notes Andreas Huyssen in his discussion of the contested relationship between avant-garde art and mass culture in the first half of the twentieth-century.<sup>610</sup> The technological advance that he invokes was also the historical force that laid waste to the avant-garde dream of bridging the gulf between art and life and sealed the outcome described later in Huyssen’s chapter, namely that it would turn out to be the culture industry, not the briefly flourishing experimental arts, that changed the shape of the twentieth century. And it is quite correct that contemporary mass culture and the advance technological state of the West go hand in hand — indeed, the concept “culture industry” is a simple and elegant way to capture just that relationship.

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<sup>610</sup> Andreas Huyssen. *After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986, p. 9.

Although frequently excerpted and read as a stand-alone article, the chapter on the culture industry is in fact a chapter, a part of a larger whole, which, as the title indicates, addresses the Enlightenment through its “dialectic,” that is, its overcoming while preserving that which is of value. It would be a mistake to assume that the chapter on the culture industry is the only one in the book that addresses culture — most of the chapters do in fact engage with culture, whether understood in its limited register (Homer’s *Odyssey*, the works of de Sade, Nietzsche, Kant) or in the wide sense of referencing communities and civilizations (the first chapter invokes the belief system of primitive cultures). Adorno and Horkheimer’s overall thesis is that Enlightenment reason is flawed and, furthermore, that it has become totalitarian in modernity, establishing a world-wide system of oppression. This resembles Weber’s “iron cage” in that the constraining mechanisms are invisible and are even mistaken social goods and signs of progress.

The culture *industry* is important in several ways in this context. First, it makes money, we should not ignore the fact that this is a capitalistic enterprise, after all, and profits matter. Art is truth and truth threatens the system so, secondly, the culture industry has “liquidated” art within its sphere of influence.<sup>611</sup> Third, the culture industry inoculates and interpellates, not however in the sense of creating subjectivity, as in Althusser (false subjectivity in his structural Marxism, of course, merely an effect of ideology), but in the sense of tearing down, nullifying the subjectivity that pre-exists. Simultaneously, the products keep the consumers meek, malleable, and controllable:

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<sup>611</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 127.

Culture has always contributed to the subduing of revolutionary as well as of barbaric instincts. Industrial culture does something more. It inculcates the conditions on which implacable life is allowed to be lived at all. Individuals must use their general satiety as a motive for abandoning themselves to the collective power of which they are sated. The permanently hopeless situations which grind down filmgoers in daily life are transformed by their reproduction, in some unknown way, into a promise that they may continue to exist. One needs only to become aware of one's nullity, to subscribe to one's own defeat, and one is already a party to it.<sup>612</sup>

Adorno and Horkheimer travel widely in their book, from the ancient world right up to their present, the immediate wake of the Second World War. However, when scholars are brave enough to enter into the murk of history, searching for origins, causality and development, there is often no telling where they might end up. Thus, in a recent volume on digital media, the two authors of the introduction had no sooner denied computers a place in digital culture than they found themselves in ancient Babylon, 4000 years ago, and had just offered that long gone culture a seat at the digital table. They, after all, invented the number zero.<sup>613</sup>

However, bracketing Babylon for the moment, or, indeed, for the rest of the dissertation, there are three periods or historical moments that are commonly seen as pivotal in the emergence and development of mass communications. There is initially the Printing Revolution in the fifteenth century, associated above all with Johannes Gutenberg and the invention of movable type. For some, this is the only one that matters. Thus, Canadian literary scholar and prophet of postmodernity, Marshall McLuhan, entitled his best-known work, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962); as it is not entitled *The Gutenberg Universe* we immediately know that the prophet of bad metaphors (media hot

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<sup>612</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 123.

<sup>613</sup> Glen Creeber and Royston Martin. "Introduction." *Digital Cultures*. Ed. by Glen Creeber and Royston Martin. Berkshire: Open University Press, 2011, p. 1.

and cold?) and such linguistic grandiloquence that even his spiritual offspring, Jean Baudrillard, could not always match it, is on his best behaviour. The book holds that after the invention of type, man was placed under the “tyranny of the visible,” becoming “Gutenberg man” — essentially thrown out of the Eden of his past where all of an individual’s senses entered equally into the task of mediating the world to and on behalf of their owner, and into a monolithic, indeed, black and white world of typescript where vision was the only thing that mattered; turning us all, essentially, into Bartlebys.<sup>614</sup> While the thesis is highly imaginative it is also remarkably unpersuasive. There has always been a hierarchy of senses, with smell and touch ranking lowest because they are the primary senses during sex and for other bodily pleasures, but presumably “Gutenberg man” did go on to make “Gutenberg babies,” thus retaining at least some connection to his other physiological attributes besides eyesight.<sup>615</sup>

As already suggested, the best thing about the book may be the title; the size of a galaxy — containing conceivably hundreds of trillions of stars — drives home just about perfectly the immensity, the enormity, the literally mind-boggling nature of the transformation that was about to happen to knowledge, how immensely augmented it would be thanks to the printing presses. That the printed word could be shared relatively easily laid the groundwork for the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Age of Enlightenment and the Scientific revolution, and so as not be unfair, it is to McLuhan’s credit that he does indeed make all these historical connections.

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<sup>614</sup> Marshall McLuhan. *The Gutenberg Galaxy. The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013, p. 3

<sup>615</sup> Charles Wolfe. “The Senses in Philosophy and Science: From the Nobility of Sight to the Materialism of Touch.” *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Renaissance*. Ed. H. Roodenburg. Oxford: Berg, 2013.

Although a lot happens in the period, as indicated above, those tracing the evolution of mass media do as a rule skip from around 1500 to 1800 and the first and second industrial revolutions. With urbanization, increased wages, leisure time for workers, great demand for amusements (the classic venues of the time were the theatre, the music hall and the fair), but as choices grew more varied, and working people quite demanding and picky about what kind of entertainment their hard earned money bought, competition in the as of yet mostly disorganized entertainment field increased and various rationalizing gestures could be noted, and not only on the side of the purveyors. Entertainment started to make regular appearances in the household budget, if not quite an “unavoidable” expense, it did still have a little something allocated to it quite often.<sup>616</sup>

As Huyssen notes above, technology is the impetus and condition of possibility for mass culture. The transcontinental railroad in the US in the nineteenth century, mass immigration and the first mass educated, mass literate generation in the world were important signposts on the way towards the massive entertainment industry of the twentieth century.<sup>617</sup> In times past, regimes all over Europe could treat the only form of popular culture widely available, the theatre, just as they pleased, regulating it to death or banning the entire practice, but with mass circulation weeklies and daily newspapers and a reading public that amounted to a market for millions of printed books, the cat was out of the bag — the cat here being the modern citizen, the bag conservative

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<sup>616</sup> On the household budget aspect of the above passage, see Gerben Bakker. *Entertainment Industrialised. The Emergence of the International Film Industry, 1890–1940*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 110–153.

<sup>617</sup> John Springhall. *The Genesis of Mass Culture. Show Business Live in America, 1840 to 1940*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 1–11.



traditions, restrictive legislation and vested power interests, and the force doing the untying is of course technology/modernity.

Cinema plays a central role in this narrative, although by no means the first mode of entertainment to engage audiences with intense mimetic effects, virtual travel, electrical wonders and so forth. However, with the emergence of cinema, the panoramas, phantasmagorias, dioramas, and hot air balloons trips, all these seemed relics of a bygone era. Cinema was a technology that industrialized entertainment just like steam power industrialized the textile industry. A 1907 article, suggestively entitled “The Nickel Madness,” noted “the amazing spread of a new kind of amusement enterprise which is making fortunes for its projectors.”<sup>618</sup>

By the early 1920s, following the earlier example of Thomas Edison in trust-building, the major Hollywood studios had either started or were about to start adding theaters to their holdings, which in light of their control of production and distribution would make them fully vertically integrated. As early as 1921 Adolph Zukor and Paramount owned or had control over a quarter of all domestic theaters, or so noted a concerned US Federal Trade Commission.<sup>619</sup> In light of who was taking a look at Paramount’s business practices it may not come as a surprise that the studio system would be dismantled as an illegal monopoly in 1948 by court decision. Nevertheless, the studios enjoyed a three-decade run as an incredibly efficient and smoothly

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<sup>618</sup> “The Nickel Madness” by Barton W. Currie was originally published in Harper’s Weekly in 1907. It is reprinted in Steven J. Ross (ed.). *Movies and American Society*. Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, p. 32.

<sup>619</sup> Douglas Gomery. *The Hollywood Studio System. A History*. London: BFI, 2005, p. 19.

functioning, and profitable, enterprise and it is to them that both Laxness and Adorno and Horkheimer looked.

Before taking over exhibition, the studios had acquired the formerly independent distribution companies that controlled the where and when film reels would reach specific theaters. Today, however, nobody needs to bother lugging those large and heavy film canisters around, or rushing to the airport to pick up a batch a few hours before a premier. Films are now transported on small hard drives that connect to digital projection systems that have relegated the old way of screening films at the speed of 24 frames per second to the dust bin. Not a single theatre today in Reykjavík, to give just one example, shows “films” off of a film; everything is digitally projected. And this brings us to the third touchstone in the development of mass communications, the digital revolution and the digital age in which we now live but these are outside the ken of this project.

Laxness’ early optimism concerning the artistic possibilities of cinema as it was operated through the studio system of the time was quick to fade, as we noted above “it’s a mass industry run by corporations,” he stated unequivocally.<sup>620</sup> While a simple statement, not many shared Laxness’ interest in this particular point. When the new technology of the cinema was unveiled at the close of the nineteenth century, for example, its capacity to store time captured the attention of the French public and was widely thought to have metaphysical implications. Not only could film preserve the likeness of loved ones, like still photography, but also their movements. Thus, in *La Poste*, the following

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<sup>620</sup> Halldór Laxness. “The American Film in 1928.” Trans. by Björn Þór Vilhjálmsson. *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*. 2/2011, p. 146.

description of the 1895 Lumière unveiling of the apparatus in Paris appeared: “When these cameras are made available to the public, when everyone can photograph their dear ones, no longer in motionless form but in their movements, their activity, their familiar gestures, with words on their lips, death will have ceased to be absolute.”<sup>621</sup>

Again in Paris but half a century later, the nucleus of what would later be known as the French New Wave promoted a line of thinking that shares certain affinities with the metaphysics of the reception of early cinema. The unprecedented mimetic capacity of the cinema was articulated through an ontology of the photographic image. An existential connection between model and copy, explained via the index, made cinema different from all other figurative and representational methods.<sup>622</sup> In between these two moments of Parisian film philosophy, cinema became in the writings of young Soviet filmmakers, primarily Eisenstein, a force that could influence, perhaps even decisively shape the psyche of the spectator, taking over his or her physiological responses. More than that, the central element of the language of cinema, montage, was in accord with the dialectical science of history (characterized, just like cinema, by the conflict of elements that then were sublated into a third, greater entity) as conceived of by Marx, Engels and Lenin and thus clearly the art form of the modern age, as well as the future.<sup>623</sup>

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<sup>621</sup> Noël Burch. *Life to These Shadows*. Berkley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1990, pp. 20–21.

<sup>622</sup> André Bazin. “The Ontology of the Photographic Image.” *What is Cinema* 1. Trans. by Hugh Gray. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1967.

<sup>623</sup> Sergei Eisenstein. “A Dialectic Approach to Film Form.”. Trans. by Jay Leyda. San Diego, New York and London: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Inc. A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book, 1977.

Moving from ideological inoculation but returning to cinema's indelible ability to render the visible world on the screen, a Hungarian–Jewish film philosopher, aesthete, writer, poet and an inveterate although not always voluntary nomad, Béla Balázs, would write the first full length book of film theory in German contending that cinema entailed a break of world–historical importance: mankind was about to reclaim its long prized but also long lost relationship of perceptual immediacy to the human body, displaced when the printed word rose to cultural dominance.<sup>624</sup> McLuhan was clearly not the first to plant his flag on the “Gutenberg man”. Around the same time, Walter Benjamin transposed the notion of the aura from mysticism into filmic discourse,<sup>625</sup> and the concept of “photogénie,” how the cinematic image infused the human form with extra grace, entered the scene in the writings of French impressionists.<sup>626</sup>

Later, of course, ideology critique entered film studies, along with feminism and post–colonial theory. In the 1960s and 1970s the cinematic apparatus was theorized as a device of immense ideological importance, constructing subjective positions for the spectator that were conducive to false consciousness.<sup>627</sup> In the hands of French post '68 critics, cinema now functioned as an implementation of Plato's allegory of the cave, with the modern consumer in the role of the prisoner. The “spell of fascinating images,” as Timothy Corrigan

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<sup>624</sup> Béla Balázs. *Visible Man. Bela Balazs: Early Film Theory: Visible Man and the Spirit of Film* (Film Europa). New York: Berghahn Books, 2011.

<sup>625</sup> Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version.” *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings*. Ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin. Trans. by Edmund Jephcott, R. Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and Others. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008.

<sup>626</sup> Jean Epstein. “On Certain Characteristics of Photogénie.” *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology 1907–1939*. Volume 1: 1907–1929. Ed. by Richard Abel. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993.

<sup>627</sup> Jean-Louis Baudry. “The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema.” *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Seventh Edition. Ed. by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

puts it, has in other words given rise to a discursive formation that stretches back to the originating moment of cinema itself.<sup>628</sup>

The various discourses that joined in this particular formation all sought to account for the nature, essence or effect of the first wholly invented art; a technology that signified the instauration of a new era, and in that respect seemed to correspond to modernity itself. And as other media entered the fray, the range of venues for artistic expression, social commentary and news greatly expanded. Radio and television joined movies in the category of electronic media, while the market for print journalism and magazines, as well as books, not least when they started coming out in paperback, expanded greatly. The age of mass communication was well on its way.

Absent however from the conceptual approaches outlined above, right up to the 1960s, is an engagement with the material reality of the film industry, the social, economic and political circumstances that shaped film production “on the ground,” and then the ramifications of the monopolistic domination of this wondrous new medium by multinational corporations. Dreamy reflections on Asta Nielsen’s face will only get us so far.<sup>629</sup> Unfortunately, this meant that in the first half of the twentieth century government and municipal agencies, the Catholic Church and other religious sects, various progressive organizations, charities and populists were left on their own to focus with serious intensity on

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<sup>628</sup> Timothy Corrigan. *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader*. New York and London: Routledge, 2002, p. 6.

<sup>629</sup> Neither was there much attention paid to film reception, with the exception of Eisenstein who reflected deeply on the cognitive processes of reception and Benjamin, whose thoughts on the matter were however impressionistic and all in all focused more on the image than what went on in the movie theatre. The writings of the French impressionists were about as intangible and mystic as their filmic practice was ponderous and ungainly (to express the terrifying impression a judge in a courtroom makes to a poor street seller, the judge is rendered gigantic, while the salesman looks up in awe, to give one example).

the ideological content of cinema.<sup>630</sup> Lee Grieveson has for example pointed out how in the first decades of the twentieth century knowledge of cinema and what it “did” to people became an issue of primary importance to government agencies, as they themselves were developing methods to act upon and shape the conduct of the populace.<sup>631</sup>

Within the social sciences however, things were different. Less concerned with aesthetics than the film theorists listed above, understandably, sociology focused on the social role of mass media, its social effects and its nature. A recent textbook posits the role of mass media as:

designing cultural messages and stories and delivering them to large and diverse audiences through media channels as old and distinctive as the printed book and as new and converged as the Internet [...] Culture links individuals to their society by providing both shared and contested values, and the mass media help circulate those values. The mass media are the cultural industries—the channels of communication—that produce and distribute songs, novels, TV shows, news- papers, movies, video games, Internet services, and other cultural products to large numbers of people.<sup>632</sup>

This description is clearly aiming for value neutrality and would seem indicative of what Paul Lazarsfeld, one of the founders of modern communication studies, has termed “administrative research,” which is characterized by the deployment of empirical research methods and adheres to, or tries to, strict objectivity with regard to its findings. On the opposite side of the aisle is what Lazarsfeld terms “critical research” and is associated with the Frankfurt School. Critical research seeks a holistic view, situating media within the broader context of social life and goes beyond technical issues and statistics to engage with basic moral questions

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<sup>630</sup> The result in Hollywood was the Production Code and the institution of self-censorship.

<sup>631</sup> Lee Grieveson. “Cinema Studies and the Conduct of Conduct.” *Inventing Film Studies*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008, p. 5.

<sup>632</sup> Richard Campell, Christopher R. Martin, Bettina Fabos. *Media & Culture. An Introduction to Mass Communication*. 8th Edition. Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2009, p. 6.

of values, justice, equity and the public good.<sup>633</sup> Somewhat later the study of mass society and mass culture was placed at the center of sociology by Leon Bramson's hugely influential *The Political Context of Sociology* (1961), who contrasted the philosophically inflected European tradition of interrogating mass media forms with the American one, which was liberal and pragmatic, or "empirical" as Lazarsfeld put it.<sup>634</sup>

Values and notions of the public good have at any rate always played a prominent role in the discussion of communication venues and mass communication. A good example is Habermas' conception of the "public sphere," which refers to the development of a free space for rational debate, a site where reason and argumentation, not tradition or status, are decisive factors — this of course was by no means a self evident thing in the early modern period, indeed, it did not exist prior to the 1700s — and its emergence played an important role in mediating the effects of state power. The development of the public sphere was further accelerated under the pressure provided by the emerging formation of a civil society and the urban environment. The major loci were sites such as coffee houses and salons, and the pages of the recently prominent daily newspapers.<sup>635</sup>

Once the incredible reach and power of electronic media was becoming clear, hopes not dissimilar from the ideals that had initially accompanied the

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<sup>633</sup> Paul Lazarsfeld. "Administrative and Critical Communications Research." *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, 1/1941. Cited in Kellner, "Critical Perspectives on Television."

<sup>634</sup> D. Martindale. "Leon Bramson. The Political Context of Sociology." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 1/1962.

<sup>635</sup> Earlier, notions of civic performance and social consolidations of the subject were based on a certain notion of publicness; it was the public life of the individual that determined his status and importance. However, the public sphere functions differently, it is the venue for private individuals to participate in public affairs while retaining their status as private individuals. See Jürgen Habermas. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991, pp. 1–27.

public sphere, were manifested. These included that the mass media might keep the citizen informed and updated so efficiently and quickly that democracy itself would benefit, as civic life became more efficient and the voting public better informed, making for a healthier society. These new technologies might also open up heretofore unimagined educational possibilities and thus, again, strengthen the foundations of democracy. In other words, that “mass communication [...] stood for liberation and represented the road to enlightenment and freedom.”<sup>636</sup>

That “enlightenment and freedom” did not represent the only way to go with mass media dawned early on a figure that would come closer to achieving total planetary rule than anyone in history, Adolf Hitler. Hitler identified propaganda and the strategic deployment of mass media as early as 1924 as the key to his own (future) success. He in fact laid the blame for the German defeat in the First World War to a substantial degree at the feet of insufficient familiarity with modern media and propaganda. While the nation’s enemies had for example produced movie after movie about the evils of the Kaiser and “Huns,” the Germans themselves had stayed filmicly “silent.” Hitler however would not make the same mistake: “the art of propaganda lies in understanding the emotional ideas of the great masses and finding, through a psychologically correct form, the way to the attention and thence to the heart of the broad masses”.<sup>637</sup>

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<sup>636</sup> Hanno Hardt. *Myths For the Masses. An Essay on Mass Communication*. Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp. 2–3.

<sup>637</sup> Adolf Hitler. *Mein Kampf*. Trans. by Ralph Manheim. Boston and New York: A Mariner Book. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999, p. 180. If we insert “commercial success” in place of “propaganda” in the beginning of the quote, it could be mistaken for a passage from an internal memo of a studio mogul.



As we discussed above, Adorno and Horkheimer aligned the culture industry closely with what they termed “the fraudulent myth of fascism” and rather than seeing the new mass communication technologies as liberating, they viewed them as fostering the calamity of modernity by reinforcing the mythic aspect of the times. To an extent, reality is what people think it is, and thus the reality of contemporary life is shaped disproportionately by one industry, the communication industry, in whose embrace the multitudes immerse themselves, seemingly ignorant or ignoring the fact that nothing in mass communication is untouched by commercial imperatives, political goals and ideological accent, much as Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman demonstrated in their propaganda model.<sup>638</sup>

Today six companies — GE, News Corp, Disney, Viacom, Time–Warner and CBS — control 90% of all media in the United States.<sup>639</sup> One of these, News Corp owns twenty–seven television stations, including the Fox family; publisher HarperCollins and numerous newspapers including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Times* and the *New York Post*, and three movie studios. The only thing distinguishing News Corp however from the other five companies, as far as one can tell, is that the owner, Rupert Murdoch, does not bother with smoke filled backrooms or whatever surreptitious channels are actually in use but wields the enormous political power that comes with such media holdings with lunatic glee right out in the open. It was almost not a surprise when in 2011 News Corps was

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<sup>638</sup> Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.

<sup>639</sup> Ashley Lutz. “These 6 Corporations Control 90% Of The Media In America.” *Business Insider*, 14 June, 2012.

shown to be a major criminal enterprise with connections that reached into the office of British Prime Minister David Cameron.<sup>640</sup>

And the real tragedy of course is not illegal journalistic practices, a definition that would also cover the publication of the Pentagon Papers, or Glenn Beck's sweeping lack of acumen in his lessons on history on Fox, but that there is, as Hardt points out, "no social or political life — or meaningful social practice — outside a mediated reality," one whose shape is determined by the institutional power of News Corp and its fellowship of five.<sup>641</sup> This is reflected in Adorno and Horkheimer's comment that "Ideology becomes the emphatic and systematic proclamation of what is. Through its inherent tendency to adopt the tone of the factual report, the culture industry makes itself the irrefutable prophet of the existing order."<sup>642</sup>

For Laxness, the alignment of the economic imperatives of capitalism and this new medium made the revaluation of previous assumptions concerning the role of mass art and popular culture necessary. Cultural production had of course always been under the sway of economic power,<sup>643</sup> but Laxness had not realized

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<sup>640</sup> Carl Bernstein. "Is Phone-Hacking Scandal Murdoch's Watergate?" *Newsweek*, 9 July, 2011.

<sup>641</sup> Hardt. *Myths for the Masses*, p. 6.

<sup>642</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 118.

<sup>643</sup> An excellent summary of the dynamics at play here is offered by Stephen Crook, Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters: "The differentiating modernization of culture takes place through related processes of institutional and occupational differentiation. Throughout the modern period various forms of patronage have supported actors, playwrights, composers, musicians, painters, sculptors and others in a variety of ways, and thereby facilitated the 'autonomy' of drama, music and visual and plastic arts. If patronage has been indispensable to the development of the differentiated artistic 'career', so has the later institutionalization of artistic training in art schools, musical conservatories, academies of dramatic art and the like. As artistic culture shifted its primary site from the private sphere of the aristocratic court into the bourgeois public sphere, an array of institutions specifically given to the arts emerged, such as art galleries, opera houses, concert halls, publishers and theaters. In turn, these institutions support a range of "second order" occupations of managers, impresarios, and specialized critics connected to the differentiated arts. Institutional and occupational differentiation is implicated in that hierarchical differentiation which is so much a mark of modern culture." *Postmodernization: Change in Advanced Society*. London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1992, pp. 51–52.

before the extent of the role of commercial and economic interests in the production of culture in the modern film industry. Movies were the subject of capitalistic incorporation, reification and exploitation. Institutions infected to the bone by political interests also designed them and the 1920s was precisely the decade when Hollywood perfected the international arm of its distribution system.

The second part of Adorno and Horkheimer's chapter title might usefully be recalled in this context, "Enlightenment as Mass Deception." Deception, through basic semantics, is part of a binary of which the other half is truth. "If the objective social tendency of this age is incarnated in the obscure subjective intentions of board chairmen," they note in typically paradoxical preliminary way, before engaging in what would later be referred to as institutional analysis:

this is primarily the case in the most powerful sectors of industry: steel, petroleum, electricity, chemicals. Compared to them the culture monopolies are weak and dependent. They have to keep in with the true wielders of power, to ensure that their sphere of mass society [...] is not subjected to a series of purges. The dependence of the most powerful broadcasting company on the electrical industry, or of film on the banks, characterizes the whole sphere, the individual sectors of which are themselves economically intertwined.<sup>644</sup>

Often accused of wilful obscurity, the above passage can at any rate stand as shining example of careful analysis and clarity in presentation. Furthermore, Adorno and Horkheimer are of course entirely correct. After the shift to sound, all the studios were hugely indebted to banks. Furthermore, the technological push towards sound in the 1920s was motivated solely by the historical happenstance that this was a period of concentrated development at enormous conglomerates such as General Electric and Western Electric (the manufacturing

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<sup>644</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 96.

branch of AT&T) that saw sound cinema as an area into which it would be profitable to move, selling everything from vacuum tubes to entire sound systems; diversification for existing technological patents in other words.<sup>645</sup> Mapping power dynamics and tracing economic influence is one way of fighting the “mass deception” of the culture industry. The question remains however, if the “cultural monopolies,” as they refer to the studios, are such small potatoes compared to any number of other industries, why not focus on them instead if the intention is to get to grips with the logic of modernity?

I would suggest that an initial response to that question is to be found if we look again at the sub-heading of the chapter, touched on above. The key word may however not be “deception” but “mass.” Ever since the foundation of the Catholic *Congregatio de propaganda fide* in 1622, the work of promoting and selling ideas that may in fact not be entirely true has been institutionalized and highly organized. What is new is the “mass” factor, the incredible reach of Hollywood, which at the time of the publication of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was at the height of its planetary power, dominating all markets, everywhere, and enjoying domestically the attendance of a clientele numbering (incredibly) 90 million a week.<sup>646</sup>

Interestingly in the present context, a young author who had proven to be a failure in Hollywood and had subsequently returned to his homeland, an

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<sup>645</sup> Donald Crafton. “Introduction: The Uncertainty of Sound.” *The Talkies. American Cinema’s Transition to Sound 1926–1931. History of the American Cinema*. Volume 4. Charles Harpole General Editor. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997, pp. 9–18. See also Steve J. Wurtzler. *Electric Sounds. Technological Change and the Rise of Corporate Mass Media*. New York: Columbia Press, 2007, pp. 19–69.

<sup>646</sup> John Belton. *American Cinema. American Culture*. Third Edition. Boston et. al.: McGrawHill, 2009, pp. 321–332. See also Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurrin, Richard Maxwell and Ting Wang. *Global Hollywood 2*. London: BFI Publishing, 2005.

isolated island whose name nobody who did not live there or belonged to the Nordic community could ever remember existed, published an essay that included the following reflection:

Films are made in much the same way as newspapers: it's a mass industry run by corporations making use of wage slaves who simply do their work without much initiative for a daily wage ranging from \$7.50 to \$1000. The power behind them is Wall Street and the psychological reality portrayed on screen represents the values of Capital.<sup>647</sup>

The year was 1929 and as we noted above, the world of film scholarship was busy constructing theories about a ghostly effervescence imbued by the strip of film on the human figure and rejoicing that the Gutenberg calamity might finally be reversed. In Russia, the concern was how to motivate, energize and educate with moving images. Two decades before Adorno and Horkheimer came to the conclusion that the “objective social tendency of this age is incarnated in the obscure subjective intentions of board chairmen,” Laxness observed not only that the medium was indeed nothing but mass deception, promulgated in the interests of Capital but also that it was an “instrument employed by the enemies of man” — that is, enemies of the working class.<sup>648</sup>

#### 4.3 The Commoner's Book: *Fragments of a Reception History*

By the time Laxness established himself as a writer and a public intellectual in the mid 1920s, a conservative backlash largely framed the cultural debate in Iceland.<sup>649</sup> Historian Ingi Sigurðsson describes how Iceland witnessed a decisive withdrawal from ideologies of modernization in the wake of the First World War

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<sup>647</sup> Laxness, “The American Film in 1928,” p. 146.

<sup>648</sup> Laxness, “The American Film in 1928,” p. 148.

<sup>649</sup> Ásgeirsson, *Iðnbylting hugarfarsins*, pp. 13–44. See also chapter one.

for reasons that were significantly different from those motivating a similar discursive recalibration of the effects of technological progress in continental Europe.<sup>650</sup> At stake in Iceland, rather than the memory of war, was the concentrated promotion of anti-modern sentiments of rural uplift that fronted for the economic interests of a wealthy land-owning class, threatened by the urbanization of Reykjavík, the migration from the countryside and the growth of fishing towns around the coastline.<sup>651</sup>

This gives a sense of some of the conceptual models and ideologies that Laxness addresses in his early essays on modernization and it frames the publication *Alþýðubókin*, whose thematically linked essays made Laxness famous in a way that his previous published work, the modernist novel *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, had not done although the latter had certainly situated him prominently in the Reykjavík literary scene.

In his biography of Laxness, Halldór Guðmundsson examines contemporary testimonies that attest to the “strong reactions” the book invoked “among “ordinary people,” and how “these almost never appeared in newspapers and journals.”<sup>652</sup> This sounds plausible, *Alþýðubókin*, as will be clearer in just a bit after we’ve discussed some of its more controversial aspects, is the kind of work that shoulders its way into the center of any cultural debate, and stays there. It is also true that quite a few newspapers, weeklies, and other culture outlets stayed silent on *Alþýðubókin* but, still, there were reactions,

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<sup>650</sup> Ingi Sigurðsson. “Upplýsingin og hugmyndaheimur Íslendinga á síðustu áratugum 19. aldar og öndverðri 20. öld.” *Ritmennt*, 6/2011, pp. 114–115, 132–133.

<sup>651</sup> Árni Sigursjónsson speaks in this context of a “new romanticism” that came to influence in the 1920s. Its foremost elements were the idealization of the farming life, the exaltation of humility and poverty; materialism was criticized and communal ideals rejected in favor of reactionary notions of independence and the value of solitude. Sigurjónsson, *Laxness og þjóðlífið* I, pp. 52–54.

<sup>652</sup> Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, p. 247. In the original: “og minntist harðra viðbragða hjá almenningi sem voru fjarri því að birtast í blöðum og tímaritum.”

strong ones. “A naïve reader would likely make the blunder of asking if there were no limits when it came to what is allowed to be printed in this country,” writes a concerned commentator in a column on the front page of the conservative weekly *Vörður* shortly before Christmas 1929.<sup>653</sup>

Laxness was also the recipient of a polite rebuff from one of the more eminent cultural journals of the time, *Eimreiðin*, where fault was found with his leaps of fancy and, more seriously, his often vulgar and offensive language, especially when directed at things that were commonly held in high esteem, “[e]ven though severe punishments for blasphemy have been abolished, we still haven’t progressed far enough, for that sort of talk to take on the appearance of good taste in the eyes of the reader.”<sup>654</sup> Not everyone agreed with this somewhat severe evaluation and thus in the journal *Straumar*, the note of alarm that was being rung by conservative critics on account of Laxness’ supposed blasphemy was placed in the context of the young author’s “daring” and “playfulness,” which was followed by a very positive assessment that again referenced the linguistic friskiness of the essays: “But the other thing should not be overlooked and that is the fact that the book is among the most vigorous and impish to have appeared by an Icelandic author in many years.”<sup>655</sup>

What, we may wonder, caused such consternation among critics and local intellectuals, especially those firmly entrenched in that part of the highland

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<sup>653</sup> “Hvað eiga ‘miðflokksmenn’ að lesa um jólin?” *Vörður*, 21 December, 1929, p. 1. In the original: “Fáfróðum lesanda mundi verða á að spyrja hvort engin takmörk væru fyrir því, hvað segja mætti á prenti í þessu landi.”

<sup>654</sup> “H.J.” “Halldór Kiljan Laxness: Alþýðubókin. —Rvík 1929.” *Eimreiðin*, 1/1930, pp. 103–104. In the original: “Þótt hætt sé nú að beita hörðum refsingum fyrir hégómlegt tal um aðal trúartriði manna og guðshugmynd, þá er enn ekki svo langt komið, að slíkt verki smekklega á lesandann”

<sup>655</sup> “Kringsjá.” *Straumar*, 1–4/1930, p. 60. In the original: “En hinu má ekki gleyma að bókin er eitt hið bragðmesta og hressilegasta rit, sem út hefur komið eftir Íslending í mörg ár”.

heaths outside of Reykjavík known as the moral high ground? “Linguistic friskiness,” will only cause so much consternation. At first glance *Alþýðubókin* seems harmless enough, indeed, the first three essays take for their subject innocuous matters: books, the issue of nationality and nineteenth-century romantic poet Jónas Hallgrímsson. These topics might even seem to suggest a change of tact, tone or direction for the young author; such a tiresome gadfly on the neck of the Reykjavík and rural elite for years now (“I rouse you. I persuade you. I upbraid you.”).<sup>656</sup>

The first essay is entitled, directly enough, “Bækur” (Books), and opens thus “People should not think that they know everything just because they happen to have read a random shelf-length of books, because the truth is not in books and not even in good books, but in people whose hearts are good.”<sup>657</sup> Several options present themselves at this point: a) Laxness is joking, b) this is the beginning of a metaphysical riddle or, c) Laxness has turned into a modern day *Candide* (a book he after all translated into Icelandic). None of the above proves correct however, but the careless reader who is just leafing through may not notice yet, especially as the second essay is reassuringly entitled “Þjóðerni” (Nationality) and few concepts create a similarly warm and fuzzy feeling deep down in the stomach of even the sternest conservative. The opening pages do as a matter of fact seem nice enough, even tugging slightly at the heartstrings as a tale is recounted of an elderly émigré couple, who have not seen their homeland since they were young, and are returning to ease out the remainder of their days

<sup>656</sup> Plato. *Apology*. Trans. by G.M.A Grube. *Plato – Complete Works*. Ed. by John M. Cooper. Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis and Cambridge, pp. 28–29 / 30e–31a.

<sup>657</sup> Halldór Laxness. *Alþýðubókin*. Reykjavík: Jafnaðarmannafélag Íslands, 1929, p. 9. In the original: “Menn skyldu varast að halda, að þeir viti nú alla skapaða hluti, þótt þeir hafi lesið eitthvert slangur af bókum, því sannleikurinn er ekki í bókum og ekki einu sinni í góðum bókum, heldur í mönnum, sem hafa gott hjartalag.”



in their native soil. Here is a parable of the power of the homeland, the native soil, if there ever was one. And someone will have to eat their hat if the attitude towards Iceland itself isn't considerably more positive than was Laxness' wont in earlier reflections on the nation, where the focus tended to be on its many flaws, wants, gaps, primitiveness and other embarrassing cultural lacunae.

The third essay focuses on Jónas Hallgrímsson, the central romantic poet of the nineteenth-century in Icelandic literary history, and appears, at first glance, simply to be a *tour de force* literary analysis. Things start to become more troubling as soon as the essays are not just glanced at but actually read. Thus, in the disarmingly childish and naïve essay, the one that seemed so charmingly divorced from reality, "Bækur," the reader only has to move down a paragraph or two from the quote to be met with this disquieting statement: "Truthfully, it is our duty to honor those that have undergone great trials in order to discover things that may benefit the human animal, just as we are obligated to remove from the earth those that exploit the defenceless and prove despotic to the meek."<sup>658</sup> It is the same sanguine voice as was speaking when the essay opened but now, rather than extolling the virtues of the kindness of strangers, it is announcing class warfare as if nothing could be more pedestrian and everyday, and class warfare may even be an understatement; some sort of extermination is being proposed.

That the essay returns soon enough to literature is not enough to assuage the anxieties just raised, particularly in view of the tone in which the respectable

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<sup>658</sup> Laxness, *Alþýðubókin*, p. 9. In the original: "Í sannleika ber oss að hafa þá menn í heiðri miklum, sem lagst hafa í þrekraunir til að uppgötva hluti, er mega verða til blessunar menskri kind, eins og oss ber að hinu leytnu skylda til að útmá af jörðinni þá menn, sem sýna lítilmagnanum yfirgang og meinbægni."

literature of the moment is discussed. The bourgeoisie novel in all of its glory is in fact dismissed as if it were mere pulp fiction, cheap amusement, and Laxness furthermore states with complete confidence that the middle class novel as it has developed can only feature one of three plots: a girl of decent standing marries a boy of decent standing; a rich girl marries a poor boy who shows every sign of being able to nurture the family fortune to new and unheard of heights; or, third, a rich boy marries a poor girl, and thereby makes her upstanding. Better stories come “from children” Laxness notes before turning his attention to the premier literary figure of the age, Knut Hamsun.<sup>659</sup> In terms of narrative skill, Laxness, goes on, Hamsun does not “compare to one of my best friends, an old sailor and drunk, named Brynki, sometimes called the ever-inebriated” who, before being murdered, told indelible stories, “he was like Knut Hamsun and Charles Chaplin combined, but with all the pretentiousness removed.”<sup>660</sup>

Having thus dismissed the vast majority of contemporary authors, all those in fact who are not actively revolutionary, and to an extent the role of literature (life in the form of Brynki is far greater source of narrative than artistic talent), Laxness does admit that there are exceptions to the overall draught: “It is not possible to deny that there are in fact some excellent novels to be found in the world; the story about Don Quixote is an example. But such books are not really novels, they are rather the holy writ of human life. Among them is *Vefarinn*

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<sup>659</sup> Laxness, *Alþýðubókin*, p. 13. In the original: “Sögur koma þannig beztar frá börnum”.

<sup>660</sup> Laxness, *Alþýðubókin*, p. 9. In the original: “en auðvitað hefir hann *aldrei komist í hálfkvisti við einn af mínum beztu vinum, gamlan skútukarl og fylliraft, sem Brynki hét og kallaður sífulli*, enda þótt hann hafi iðulega verið ófyllri en margur, sem hafði hærri metorð. Áður en Brynki var drepinn á Laugaveginum sagði hann mér mörg hundruð sögur af slagsmálum sínum, fyllirí, málaferlum, skútulífi, ástaræfintýrum og öðrum útistöðum. *Hann var eins og Knut Hamsun og Charles Chaplin í einu lagi — að frádreginni allri listrænni uppgerð.*” It must be assumed, going by Laxness’ later essay in the volume that deals quite a bit with Chaplin, that in the present situation the major portion of the artistic pretension that Laxness invokes is shouldered by Hamsun

*mikli frá Kasmír* which was written to inform children and youths about the serious matters of the current historical moment.”<sup>661</sup>

Laxness’ condemnation of literary “pretentiousness” — by which he means everything that interferes with language fulfilling its most basic communicative function in as smooth and efficient fashion as possible — indicates a significant shift away from the aesthetics of his last novel, *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, his poetry, and the aesthetic ideologies he had been busily promoting in Iceland before leaving for the United States. The same can be said of his humorous reminiscences of his friend, Brynki, a constantly sloshed fountain of stories and the difference between his stories and those of Hamsun and Chaplin presumably being that his are not “made up.” As Árni Sigurjónsson has pointed out, there are aspects in *Alþýðubókin* where Laxness wilfully problematizes the very existential rationale of writers (and artists in general).<sup>662</sup> However, the playful gesture of (shamelessly) placing his own novel on the same plateau of literary grace and genius as Cervantes’ masterwork, Laxness proves that he does enjoy the odd literary trick and that the modesty and humble idiocy that characterized his initial address was nothing but a sham — that he was pulling our conservative leg, that the gadfly is stinging yet.

“Þjóðerni” does not sail under a false flag by any means, but neither does Laxness shift his stance or change his tone from his earlier polemical days when the modernization of Reykjavík was the order of the day. The destiny of those

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<sup>661</sup> Laxness, *Alþýðubókin*, p. 9. In the original: “Þó er ekki fyrir það að synja að til eru ágætar skáldsögur í heiminum, einsog til dæmis sagan um Don Quijote. En slíkar bækur eru í rauninni ekki skáldsögur, heldur nokkurskonar guðspjöll víðernanna, ræða um þýðingu mannlegs lífs og fjarviddir sálarinnar. Slík bók er líka Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír, sem rituð var til að fræða börn og unglunga um alvörumál vor.”

<sup>662</sup> Árni Sigurjónsson. “Hugmyndafræði Alþýðubókarinnar.” *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 1/1982, pp. 49–51.

many, many people who left Iceland for the New World, the United States and Canada — the Icelandic name for the emigrants was *Vestur Íslendingar* (Western Icelanders) — in the last decades of the nineteenth-century was a subject that Laxness tended to dwell on, and he was always fairly consistent in his conclusion, namely that the historical events as they transpired could only be registered and understood in the mode of the tragedy, not only for Iceland but also, and perhaps not least, for those who left — without however judging people who had to suffer inhuman poverty and insufferably harsh living conditions.<sup>663</sup>

The 1927 short story “Nýa Ísland” (New Iceland) is a case in point as it describes a family that emigrates to Canada, depicted as a frozen expanse of emptiness, and where everything turns against them. The last scene shows the father, having lost his children, utterly beaten and the narrative closes with a short sentence, “His tears fell upon the ice.”<sup>664</sup> Unafraid of embracing sentimentality, and extremely direct in its affective punches, the story is effective in the manner of a boxer who knows only how to keep barrelling forward.

Thus, in this essay, we have no sooner gotten underway discussing the many positive things that inhere to Icelandic nationality than the tableau shifts and the New World is now the subject (we slide a bit between the United States and Canada), in particular its flashy and vulgar aspects. The technological abundance of the United States is for example decried as nothing but a plethora

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<sup>663</sup> It has been estimated that in the period 1870–1914, 17,000 Icelanders emigrated to America, most went to Canada. Gunnar Karlsson. *Iceland's 1100 Years. The History of a Marginal Society*. London: Hurst & Company, 2000, pp. 234–239. See also Daisy Neijmann. “Icelandic Canadian Literature.” *A History of Icelandic Literature. Vol. 5 of Histories of Scandinavian Literature*. Ed. by Daisy Neijmann. Lincoln and London: The University Press of Nebraska, 2006, pp. 608–642.

<sup>664</sup> Halldór Laxness. “Nýa Ísland.” *Sögur*. Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 2000, p. 203.

of “machines [that are used] to fool the slaves in order to make them even more subservient to the brutes that “owned” the American state,” — and by “brutes” Laxness means the leaders of corporate America.<sup>665</sup> And thus, the fate of the Icelanders who left was “to be torn up by the roots from their national soil and thrown out into the American desert” of “murderous” imperial politics and a society empty of humanity, all just capitalistic greed.<sup>666</sup> With “Þjóðerni” Laxness had indeed written an essay celebrating Icelandic nationality but he did not do so in a manner that would please the front-page columnists of *Vörður*. Even Jónas Hallgrímsson was commandeered in the third essay; the traditional meanings associated with his figure are refuted and his timeless core — which Laxness quite astutely identifies with his language, not any one poem — is manifested not with transcendental feelings, or emotions recollected in tranquillity, but a profound empathy with those who life has left behind. In Laxness’ hands, Jónas Hallgrímsson becomes the Icelandic Dostoyevsky, a figure torn by the need to express “Icelandic fate,” the pain and suffering as well as the joy but it is sometimes difficult to discern the joyful moments in the elegiac mood that hovers around Hallgrímsson’s language; he has “the talent of grief” without belonging to it.<sup>667</sup> And when it comes to explaining the impetus that motivates this most finely tuned instrument for the expression of unique Icelandic characteristics, when it comes to identifying what has fostered this poetic genius, it is not the harsh but beautiful embrace of Icelandic nature, rather it is the urban

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<sup>665</sup> Laxness, *Alþýðubókin*, p. 61. In the original: “eru mestan part að eins meðul til að blekkja þrælana undir vald mannhatara þeirra, sem ‘eiga’ ameríska ríkið”.

<sup>666</sup> Laxness, *Alþýðubókin*, p. 61, 18. In the original: “Fólk þetta hefir sem sagt verið rifið með rótum upp úr þjóðernisjarðvegi sínum og kastað inn í hina amerísku eyðimörk”. Second quote: “og er það hugmynd auðvaldsins að slátra mér og öðrum saklausum öreigum á þessum morðdrekum í framtíðinni, til þess að hlutabréf Morgans falli ekki í verði.”

<sup>667</sup> Laxness, *Alþýðubókin*, bls. 85. In the original: “En þótt hann hafi öðlast gáfu sorgarinnar eins og allir vitrir menn, þá fer því farri að hann sé sorgarinnar maður.”

metropolis, meaning in this case Copenhagen. “Great poets are always under the sway of city life or other large populated places, as opposed to the countryside.”<sup>668</sup>

If the contention that an urban motor drove the poetic force that had produced some of the most enduring and exquisite nature imagery in all of Icelandic poetry made some readers uncomfortable, worse was still to come. Women’s rights had been a concern of Laxness’ for quite some time, as we have already seen, and the “woman question” was hotly debated in Iceland throughout the first decades of the twentieth-century. Laxness was from the first confrontational when it came to women’s right to a sexual identity and he would as a matter of fact write a play on the subject in a few years time, *Straumrof* (Short Circuit, 1934). Enormous strides had of course been made since the middle of the nineteenth century in all the Nordic countries when women had virtually no rights whatsoever, to the second decade of the following century when women in all the Nordic countries had achieved suffrage. In the essay “Karl, kona, barn” Laxness takes up virtually all the hot-button gender issues that had been tearing across Scandinavia since the 1880s. The reason that the following passage, where Laxness compares the rearing of daughters among the bourgeoisie to poultry farming, may seem designed to shock but probably comes down to the fact that the passage is as a matter of fact so designed: by heroically aligning himself with what the bourgeoisie would call decadence, immorality or plain insanity, the young author is trying to gather together as much subversive

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<sup>668</sup> Laxness, *Alþýðubókin*, p. 94. In the original: “Stórskáld eru æfinlega undir áhrifum borgalífsins eða annarra stórra staða í andstöðumerkingu við sveitirnar.”

force as is within his power, with the aim of destabilizing normalizing functions of social and gender relations:

The farming of daughters is practiced by the bourgeoisie, employing methods analogous to those in poultry farming; — the girl is not raised to become a valuable, free-thinking and productive member of society. Instead, everything is directed towards turning them into a marketable commodity, — refinement, packaging, product sticker, silk threading, and so forth. In other words, the women of the upper classes have no practical knowledge, cannot do anything, want nothing, know nothing, think of nothing, — in a word, they are nothing but sex toys, chattel bred to satisfy the lust of ruthless degenerates of the exploitation class.<sup>669</sup>

The shock that was evident all through the front-page article in *Vörður* has now been put in context. An essay entitled “Þrifnaður á Íslandi” (Cleanliness in Iceland) also became one of the most talked about portions of the book, not surprisingly as the subject matter was salacious, scandalous, and offensive to nearly everyone; the hygienic misfortunes of the nation as a whole, thus by default including the individuals. In terms of general volleys, Laxness wants the hideous death-traps that masquerade as habitats for humans — the huts, shacks, shanties, hovels, dumps, pigpens, and cellars, in which the poor were forced to dwell, all of which airless, leaky, infested by mold, fungi and slime mould, cold, windy, dirty; these circumstances no doubt being among the leading causes of infant mortality in Iceland — burnt to the ground. More “intimate” aspects of the reformist “crusade” involved a frank discussion of toilets and pages upon pages on the dental hygiene of the typical Icelander, or the lack thereof. He also wants every residential building connected to a water utility. Expressing a sentiment

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<sup>669</sup> Laxness, *Alþýðubókin*, p. 280. In the original: “Dætrarækt er stunduð í borgarastéttinni út frá sjónarmiðum, hliðstæðum við alifuglarækt; — stúlkan er ekki uppalin til þess að verða nýtur, víðsýnn og starfshæfur þjóðfélagseinstaklingur, heldur er kappkostað að gera þær sem útgengilegasta vöru, — fágun, stimplun, umbúðir, vörumiðar, silkibönd, o.s.frv. M.ö.o.: Konur hinnar betri borgarastéttar kunna ekki neitt, geta ekki neitt, vilja ekki neitt, vita ekki neitta, hugsa ekki neitt, — í einu orði sagt: eru ekki neitt nema kynferðisáhöld, gripir, sem ræktaðir eru til þess að svala frygð samvizkulausra bílífismanna af rániðjustétt.”

heavily reminiscent of his notion of “cultured stylization” in “Af íslensku menningarástandi,” Laxness furthermore notes:

A clean body produces a decent consciousness. Men’s thoughts turn brighter; they start to desire more refinement. Clean men are agreeable to interact with. If one knows oneself to be well-kept, one will instinctually behave well towards others. A man who knows himself to be odious will behave in a revolting way toward others. Such is the answer to the riddle as to why filthiness and discourteousness go together.<sup>670</sup>

This is a theme that is dear to Laxness and we have encountered it before.

Perhaps it is not necessary to reiterate that he does not mean that a dock-worker or someone who digs ditches should be spick and span at all times.

Laxness’ point is that no matter what you do, the way you treat and carry yourself is of fundamental importance and reflects interiority much better than the old romantic trope of the eyes. Thus, a tired old man walking away from his day at the fish mongers may pull up his pants, tuck in his shirt, re-tie his shoelaces, and make sure his hat is on properly— this is what Laxness is talking about, and he compares it negatively to the character type who does none of these things because it is not strictly *necessary* in order to get home.

Laxness accentuation of “cultured stylization” is to a degree a personal issue, indeed, several of Laxness’ other themes are perhaps more traditional in reformist terms. However, in a world where the subject cannot affect the rise of the Third Reich, and may not have Trotsky’s talents for raising an army, under such circumstances the subject may indeed feel increasingly alienated, atomized and bereft of purpose. However, by making that one area that is under one’s

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<sup>670</sup> Laxness, *Alþýðubókin*, p. 108. In the original: “Hreinn líkami veldur þokkalegu sálarlífi. Menn fara að hugsa bjartar; men fara að vilja fegur. Hreindir men verða ósjálfrátt geðslegir í umgengni. Viti meaður sig geðslegan fyrir sjálfum sér, verður hann ósjálfrátt geðslegur gagnvart öðrum. Maður, sem veit sig ógeðslegan með sjálfum sér, hagar sér ruddalega gagnvart öðrum. Hér er að finna lausn nokkra þeirrar gátu, hvers vegna sóðaskapur og ókurteisi fylgist einatt að.”



control subject to an aesthetic vision — and this may be expanded to one’s near environment — may be as close to heroism as the everyday allows most to get. In another sense, however, the emphasis on the cultivation of the self is of course in lockstep with many other aspects of cultural and societal modernization, from hygiene to behavioural patterns.

In “Hugmyndafræði Alþýðubókarinnar” (The Ideology of The Commoner’s Book), an essay published in 1982 and may still stand as the most extensive analysis of Laxness’ essay collection, Árni Sigurjónsson discusses “Þrifnaður á Íslandi” from a “psychological” perspective noting that when thusly viewed, “obsessive cleanliness” can be read as an obvious sign of “guilt” which has been “projected upon the environment,” which then must be cleaned in an attempt to assuage the aforementioned feelings of guilt.<sup>671</sup> How exactly does this relate to Laxness, one may wonder; fortunately Sigurjónsson stands at the ready with an answer. In capitalistic modernity, the author must hawk his wares on the market, which makes him feel like a “hooker”.<sup>672</sup> Somehow this feeling is transposed by Laxness unto the entire Icelandic nation:

Icelanders must be clean, they must wash themselves, and scrub until they are sparkling clean like Maria; mankind must be washed clean of the original sin, but that means, if we translate it into Halldórs “scientific” symbolic language: get rid of capitalism. The guilt of the writer as a pen for hire must be washed away. By criticizing the bourgeoisie fiercely Halldór is trying to prove to himself that he is not dependent on it, but he cannot get rid of the nagging suspicion that he nevertheless is [...] He doesn’t really belong in the company of the common people until it has been given a thorough wash. But he is drawn to it, despite its dirtiness, just as Arnaldur is to Salka Valka. He wants to fertilize the nation with his foreign ideas and Enlightenment, but he is

<sup>671</sup> Sigurjónsson, “Hugmyndafræði Alþýðubókarinnar,” p. 55. In the original: “Spurningin um þrifnað íslendinga og þrifnað yfirleitt hefur greinilega *sálfræðilega* og félagslega yfirtóna, að ekki sé talað um þá trúarlegu. Sú tenging við sálfræði sem beinast liggur við er auðvitað sú að *hreinlætisæði* standi í réttu hlutfalli við *sektarkennd*. Þá er *sálrænni kreppu varpað yfir á umhverfið*, og men fara að því ósýðnileg óhreinindi.”

<sup>672</sup> Sigurjónsson, “Hugmyndafræði Alþýðubókarinnar,” p. 55. In the original: “Á tíma kapítalismans framleiða höfundarnir fyrir vörumarkað. Þeir hafa tilhneigingu til að upplifa sjálfa sem sem *mellur* þegar þeir selja mikið en sem *misskilda snillinga* þegar þeir selja lítið.”

horrified by the thought of living in close quarters with it for the foreseeable future.<sup>673</sup>

This is certainly not the only peculiar passage in Sigurjónsson's essay but it is by far the most peculiar, indeed, it is downright odd. It is clear from the first that Sigurjónsson has some sort of an axe to grind, invoking as he does Laxness' ostensible "betrayal" of his youthful ideals in later life. Admittedly, Sigurjónsson only does this to make it utterly clear that Laxness' "betrayal" is not the subject of the article, yet managing to squeeze in the notion that the betrayal is indeed considered a fact "by some" twice in the span of six lines, with some of these lines being taken up entirely by the discussion of the opinions of these unnamed "some," who don't like Laxness' political development, which is of no concern to Sigurjónsson in the present essay, and so on.

Next, the reader is presented with a lengthy taxonomy of various ideological factions and political classifications, as well as the designations that Laxness applied to himself, and then the author is essentially told off for not really fitting into any of the clearly defined groupings ("socialist," "single-taxer," "communist," "Marxist," "anti-bourgeoisie," "scientific-socialist," "technocrat," "social-democrat," "vulgar materialist," "rationalist" — to name a few). There are, Sigurjónsson tells us, contradictions to be found in the essay collection that render a clear demarcation impossible.

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<sup>673</sup> Sigurjónsson, "Hugmyndafræði Alþýðubókarinnar," p. 56. In the original: "Íslendingar verða að vera hreinir, þeir verað að þvo sig og skrúbba þangað til þeir eru orðnir hreinir eins og María; það verður að þvo mannkynið hreint af erfðasýndinni, en það þýðir, ef við þýðum yfir á "vísindalegt" táknið Halldórs: losa það við kapitalismann. Það þarf að þvo burtu sekt rithöfundarins sem leigupenna. Með því að úthúða borgarastéttinni reynir Halldór að sanna fyrir sjálfum sér að hann sé ekki háður henni, en hann losnar ekki við þann nagandi grun að hann sé það nú samt [...] Í félagsskap alþýðunnar á hann vart heima fyrr en hún hefur verið þvegin rækilega. En hann dregst að henni þótt skítug sé, rétt eins og Arnaldur að Sölku Völku. Hann vill frjónva þjóðina með útlendum hugmyndum sínum og upplýsingu, en hann hryllir við sambýli við hana til frambúðar."

The initial response to Sigurjónsson's categorizing dilemma, and the natural one is, who cares? At this moment, he is the mirror image of the figure of rationality in Nietzsche's parable who has decided there are such creatures as mammals in the world. This man then feels compelled to assign nine random characteristics to the creature he has just invented (the "mammal"). Off he goes then, searching for animals that fulfil his criteria and — *voilà* — he finds plenty of animals that have all the designated markings; that their biological complexity involves thousands of other "characteristics" is not the issue. Nietzsche compares this to someone absent-mindedly juggling a rock, then heading off to a bush and hiding the rock behind the bush. Next he goes off searching for the rock and he finds it — behind the bush. Nietzsche notes that while, yes, the endeavour was a success, it is still difficult to get caught up in the process, let alone compliment the man for his achievement. In Sigurjónsson's case, every step of the above narrative is followed except he fails to find the rock at the end, and seems less than pleased.<sup>674</sup>

Another brief detour. In *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Steven Pinker refers to Norbert Elias as "the most important thinker you have never heard of," and the reason for his importance being his book *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation* (The Civilizing Process, 1939), which was only belatedly translated into English.<sup>675</sup> Elias' particular stroke of genius was to trace a history of the civilizing process of Europeans through the sketchily documented medieval period and up through the early modern by studying guides of etiquette, such as Desiderius

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<sup>674</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. by Vincent B. Leitch. W.W. Norton & Company, New York and London, 2000.

<sup>675</sup> Steven Pinker. *The Better Angels of Our Nature. A History of Violence and Humanity*. London and New York: Penguin, 2012, pp. 72, 82.

Erasmus' *On Civility in Boys* (1530). Among the suggestions Elias came across were, "Don't foul the staircases, corridors, closets or wall hangings with urine," "Don't touch your private parts under you clothes with your bare hands," "Don't blow your nose into the tablecloth, or into your fingers, sleeve, or hat."<sup>676</sup> And so on. Reading this, one is astounded at the magnitude of the task, not too long ago, to turn what seem to have been apes in human form into the civilized human beings we are accustomed to meet and greet in modernity.

I am not suggesting that Laxness' task was of this nature — according to Pinker the great victories had been won by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (these included not killing other people at the dinner table, hence the harmlessly blunt table knives we know today) — but to call for indoor plumbing, toilets, and a major rethinking of what was considered acceptable dwelling conditions for people in the overcrowded capital, well, these were issues of life and death; contagious diseases and many other scenarios of horror. The point is that for Sigurjónsson to ridicule these aspects of Laxness' essay, or downright ignore them, shows his argument to be in bad faith.

And for anyone who has read Laxness' travelogues, when he often covered enormous distances by foot or skiing, going into the deep interior and far distant fjords where he stayed in cottages more destitute than one would have thought possible, places crawling with lice and vermin, yet there he sat talking to the peasants, sleeping in their beds as their guest and so forth — to portray this inveterate traveller as some sort of mysophobic misanthrope is just plain bizarre. But the intent is not to trace every point with which one might

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<sup>676</sup> Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, p. 83.

disagree — including the downright incomprehensible sexual metaphors, “fertilize the nation” — but to demonstrate what a powerful impetus for furious rebuttals this essay collection of Laxness’ still is.

As Sigurjónsson’s essay progresses, his language and tenor grow more intense and less forbearing, reaching a culmination in the passage we have been discussing, where the intent is clearly to finish Laxness off, rhetorically speaking. Even simply condescending comments such as “if we translate it into Halldórs “scientific” symbolic language,” which is a pot-shot at Laxness never having been particularly strong in Marxist theory or conceptual vocabulary, seem just utterly baffling, while enormously suggestive and fruitful in terms of research into the reception history of the book.

By far the most incisive and astute essay to appear in this initial period however was Sigurður Einarsson’s extensive review in the journal *Iðunn* in 1931. Einarsson starts by reflecting on the various ways in which a book can be *new*. It can be fresh off the printers, he starts by noting, thus being new in the sense of being a recent addition to the market. This of course is fairly meaningless. But then one can imagine new methods for the handling of aesthetic material and its expression to be presented in the text; rarely are there revolutions in this field but newness of this sort can make a cultural artefact an original contribution to its medium:

Finally, the book can be new in the sense that it conjures out of the back recesses of men’s minds subjects that heretofore had been shrouded in darkness. Ways of the past, which included stumbling around in these areas in utter confusion, have become obsolete as artistic genius has now shed light over the environs, the light of human intelligence and creative energy. In such

a case, the wondrous may happen, that one little book becomes emblematic of the entire range of cultural aspirations of the current moment [...]<sup>677</sup>

While partly inflected by the discourse of the artist as seer, as someone who reveals the truth about reality to people who until then had been laboring under some form of misapprehension (“stumbling around in these areas in utter confusion”), the more important aspect of Einarsson’s argument is how “one little book” can through its own being represent the core of the modern, or its “entire range of cultural aspirations,” as Einarsson puts it. The essay collection is not perfect, he also makes clear, but its organic and deep connection to the current moment is something that no other Icelandic book had managed to achieve before.<sup>678</sup>

Einarsson is here looking at the same feature of the text that preoccupied several other critics, the language of the book, and it is the radical newness of the linguistic dimension that he celebrates, much more so than the actual content or political import of Laxness’ interventions in the essays themselves.<sup>679</sup> Rather than focusing on the “negatives” of Laxness’ style, Einarsson looks at language as part of the cultural field, not only in the sense that language may influence our

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<sup>677</sup> Sigurður Einarsson. “Þrjár bækur.” *Iðunn*, 1931, p. 399. In the original: Og loks getur bókin verið ný með þeim hætti, að töfruð sé fram úr hugarfylgsnum manna viðfangsefni, sem hjúpuð voru myrkri, og viðleitni, sem var að brjótast þar um í ráðaleysi, og listræn snilli látin bregða yfir þau glaðaljósi mannvits og skapandi orku. Þá kann svo undursamlega til að bera, að ein lítil bók verði tákn allrar menningarviðleitni samtíðarinnar”.

<sup>678</sup> “It is by no means my intention,” Sigurður says, “to maintain that Halldór Kiljan Laxness’ book is totalizing symbol for the entirety of his contemporary moment. To be that it lacks several things, which will be discussed further below. But it gets closer — and closer, much closer than any modern Icelandic book.” Einarsson, “Þrjár bækur,” p. 400. In the original: “Nú vil ég engan veginn halda því fram að bók Halldórs Kiljans Laxness sé mmingarlegt heildartákn samtíðar sinnar. Til þess skortir hana ýmislegt, sem hér verður dregið á. En hún stendur talsvert nær því — og nær, miklu nær en nokkur önnur íslensk nútímabók.”

<sup>679</sup> Laxness’ use of the Icelandic language or, more precisely, accusations to the effect that he was unable to deploy it correctly, or that he desecrated it (with his publication of the Sagas with modern spelling), or that he corrupted it (with his incorporation of youthful “slang” and words clearly of foreign origin), turned out to be a discursive formation of considerable longevity, following him for decades. That he insisted on his own idiosyncratic spelling did not help things.

modes of thinking but, rather, that language can be malformed by ideology and corrupted; either emptied of meaning or infused with an insidious political undercurrent that becomes an unavoidable encumbrance in all linguistic usage. “In our time,” wrote George Orwell, “political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible.”<sup>680</sup> He goes on to discuss how the work that language is made to do when the British rule in India, the Russian purges or the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan are defended slowly but surely infects its expressive capacity, moving it ever closer, one imagines, to the “doublespeak” of his classic novel *1984* (1948).

This is similar to the approach taken by Einarsson. For him the conventional language of literature, its tropes and entire vocabulary of representational tactics, have been rendered inoperative by the dominance of bourgeoisie ideology within the parameters of literary expression. Furthermore, an independent minded modern author, faced with this edifice of ideologically infected clichés finds it unusable, utterly, in all of its aspects. “Concepts such as “love, truth, ideals, patriotism, and freedom, only to name a few examples, have become so tarnished through dreadful treatment, and they are inflected so deeply by corruption and fraudulent manipulation,” that no right-thinking writer feels comfortable using them, he says.<sup>681</sup> The conventional vocabulary of the writer has been so deeply infected by capitalist ideology and the propagandistic machinations of the ruling classes that the modern writer must simply discard its entire conceptual edifice, throw it all overboard. “It is exactly

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<sup>680</sup> George Orwell. “Politics and the English Language.” *A Collection of Essays*. San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1981, p. 166.

<sup>681</sup> Einarsson, “Þrjár bækur,” p. 400. In the original: “Orð eins og kærleikur, sannleikur, hugsjónir, föðurlandsást og frelsi, svo nefnd sé aðeins örfá dæmi, eru orðin svo slepjuð af illri meðferð, og það loðir svo mikið við þau af óheilindum og misnotkun”

this that it seems to me that Halldór Kiljan Laxness has done. He has, as have others, been forced to create for himself a new idiom, a new language.”<sup>682</sup>

Clearly, such a task is immense and involves a formidable mixture of distrust towards language and love of language, radical closeness that allows for fertile new beginnings. This also involves, at least partly, rejection of the language of the heritage as nothing became the object of the aspirant cultural ambitions of the rising middle class like the literary heritage, the Sagas and the poetry of the nineteenth-century. Indeed, Einarsson is speaking in no uncertain terms of the need to *become* modern; that the only uncontaminated sphere of language and literary expression was that of the current moment. And this is Laxness’ great achievement in *Alþýðubókin* in Einarsson’s opinion, to have succeeded in doing just that; infuse his language with the spirit of modernity, its ethos and aesthetic: “It is the perspective and vision of the future that characterize modernity that are revealed for the first time in Icelandic in *Alþýðubókin*. With the book, Halldór Kiljan resembles an ice-breaker, forcing the way for the modern mindset to be afforded some space within the parameters of the Icelandic language and Icelandic thinking,” — more so than any of his contemporaries Laxness knows and promotes “the glad tidings of modernity” and *Alþýðubókin* stands therefore in a closer, more organic relationship with modernity than anything else published in Icelandic.<sup>683</sup>

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<sup>682</sup> Einarsson, “Þrjár bækur,” p. 400. In the original: “Einmitt þetta virðist mér Halldór Kiljan hafa gert. Hann hefur, sem margir fleiri, orðið að skapa sér nýtt orðfæri, nýtt mál.”

<sup>683</sup> Einarsson, “Þrjár bækur,” p. 402. First quote, in the original: “Það er lífsskoðun og framtíðardraumur nýttíðarinnar, sem birtist í *Alþýðubókinni* í fyrsta sinn á íslenzku. Með henni reynir Halldór Kiljan að brjóta skoðunum nýtmans leið inn á svæði íslenzks máls og íslenzkrar hugsunar”. Second quote: “fagnaðarboðskap nýtmans.”



Immediately striking, of course, is the fact that Einarsson is assigning to *Alþýðubókin* the role that most often is assumed to be the proprietorship of the various avant-garde movements. Indeed, Einarsson does not even mention *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* in this context, or Laxness' earlier poetry, when discussing the linguistic struggle that he posits as going on between entrenched interests, the ideologies that have shaped the conceptual models by which we understand the world, and the attempt to break out these constraints and by means of what Adorno would term "consummate negativity".<sup>684</sup> One way to understand this is to emphasize precisely the role of concepts and ideology and assume that for Einarsson contestation over the integrity of language takes place, not in the realm of art, but in that of practical and pure reason, that is, it is in and through the great ethical/political struggles of modernity, as well as the manifold social shifts that rationalized modernity has brought forth, that our conceptual apparatus will take on its shape and endow the world with meaning. Laxness' textual practice, at any rate, stood at this moment in history in close proximity to the two aspects of modernity that are often discussed in tandem, that is aesthetic modernism and societal modernization.

#### *4.4 Layout of the Revolution*

It is interesting to take a step back now and examine for just a brief moment the graphic design of *Alþýðubókin*, that is the first edition of 1929, and how its striking simplicity, conveys a range of meanings: The front cover is steeped in a sharp and vivid redness that covers the entire range of the front plate, leaving no

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<sup>684</sup> Theodor Adorno. *Minima Moralia. Reflections From a Damaged Life*. Trans. by E. Jephcott. New York and London. Verso, 2000, p. 247.

margins and no spaces for ornamental supplements or alternatives. Laxness' name is printed in thick black letters about 2 centimetres from the top and then, perhaps a single centimetre below that in much larger letters, there is the title of the book, *Alþýðubókin*, almost as if the letters had been steam powered onto the paper. As is, this is the prototypical look of a book that is calling for social revolution; the aggressive color palette (intense red, thick black). What shifts the entire graphic outlook however is the black textbox in the lower right side, which frames a proclamation, a revolutionary manifesto (or a portion thereof): "This book illuminates in a bright flash all the issues that the common people of Iceland are concerned with — social issues, literature, arts, sex, religion. A new revolution has taken place in the psychic life of the author, and he now invites the Icelandic people to enjoy the rewards."<sup>685</sup> In other words, a message from what we can only presume is the author or — since the author is referred to in the third person — the publisher, but presumably all is done in tandem with the writer.

There is no denying the audaciousness of the proclamation, nor how the trajectory of the text leads from the issues and matters that are assumed to interest, burden, fascinate, incite devotion or provoke anxiety in the hearts and minds of the people of Iceland to the final statement that undermines all that which came before by suggesting rather bluntly that the true subject of this book is its author's inner life; the development of his subjectivity — which is not really true, or at least a considerable exaggeration. Before turning the page, however,

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<sup>685</sup> Laxness, *Alþýðubókin*, front cover. In the original: "Bók þessi bregður leiftrum yfir öll þau efni, sem íslenskri alþýðu eru hugleikin, — þjóðfélagsmál, bókmenntir, listir, kynferðismál, trúmál. Ný bylting hefur gerst í sálarlífi höfundarins og hann býður íslenskri alþýðu að njóta af ávöxtum hennar.

because then things will change, it is worth admiring the stark and clean forms that define the cover. This is how one signifies the ruddy health of one's ideology, "we will win, you cannot stand against this," is the message conveyed — or one of them. And the design clearly speaks to a tradition of political tracts in a similar register, as becomes clear when the original cover of *Alþýðubókin* is compared to the packaging of famous revolutionary texts, such as Vladimir Lenin's *Shto delat'?* (What is To Be Done, 1902).<sup>686</sup>

The reader then turns the page and another surprise waits. The title page is largely taken up by a photograph showing Laxness standing in a wooden grove with a lake in the background; fully and almost formally dressed, he cuts an imposing figure, even in a still pose. His surroundings are the Mediterraneanized idyll and picturesque landscape of Los Angeles in the late 1920s. The photo perfectly encapsulates a strain of utopian representations of Hollywood as the place where dreams come true, an image promoted by real estate boosters and movie studios in equal measure, as noted above. This is ironic as Laxness was in fact highly critical of this particular imaginary but the contrast between this photo, with Laxness standing in a wooden grove with a lake in the background, and the austere, politically sober, even grim semiotics of the front page, make for a highly incongruous introduction to a volume that does in fact lack a unified political stance, much as is indicated by the graphics of its opening.<sup>687</sup> To

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<sup>686</sup> Lenin's work is inspired by the novel of the same name by the nineteenth-century Russian revolutionary Nikolai Chernyshevsky, who again inspired Vladimir Nabokov to write a pseudo-biography of him in his final Russian novel *Dar* (The Gift, 1938).

<sup>687</sup> Having said that, however, it is important to note that *Alþýðubókin* shows Laxness taking an even firmer stance than before against conservative social structures and rural ideologies, and his thinking is more concentrated than in the essays published before he left for the United States. Although conducted in a different register, this particular strain in Laxness' work would continue and reach a high point (in a sense) the following decade with the publication of the novel *Sjálfstætt fólk* (Independent People, 1934–35), which shed particularly harsh light on

complete the paradoxical nature of the meanings generated by the book design and layout, there is second textual message on the title page, this one reading: “To the Socialist Party, with friendly regards. HKL.” This either means that Laxness is dedicating the book to the Socialist Party or giving it to them. The second option is the correct one. As ever, getting books published was difficult in Iceland and by handing over the book to the Socialist Party, as a gift, publication was at least assured.

#### *4.5 Glorification of Capital*

In his essay on Hollywood, Laxness’ gaze comes to rest on many of the central institutional aspects of the movie industry: production practices, the star system, distribution networks, as well as the content of the films themselves. Laxness will argue that the American film industry functions to a large degree in order to obfuscate the interests of the working class by, for example, promoting images of wealth that are conducive to subservience to capital, the acceptance of consumer society and the naturalization of class division. The fact that Hollywood aims at the construction of an illusionary relationship between the audience and the world through mimetic representations unique in their indexical power is reflected in the material environs where the films are screened, “the magnificent movie palaces [...] where one can step inside and have a look for two dollars and fifty cents”.<sup>688</sup> That is, the glorification of capital on the screen is replicated in the spatial trajectory of the historical spectator as he or

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farm life in the provinces. For more on *Sjálfstætt fólk*, see Vésteinn Ólason’s monograph on the novel, *Sjálfstætt fólk eftir Halldór Laxness*. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1983.

<sup>688</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 150.

she leaves a real world domicile to enjoy momentary respite from daily concerns inside a “movie palace,” an architectural monument to ideology in that its promise of affluence is in fact the expression of the inequities of capitalism. Much like the flickering cinematic images which dissolve into nothingness as soon as the projector is turned off, the “palace” proves an empty facade, a promise of a better life that will never be kept.

While fundamentally concerned with the economic logic of Hollywood, the essay also affords Laxness the chance to furnish his own list of film favorites. It is not going too far to say that Laxness makes the most of this opportunity. The film artists that in Laxness’ opinion have managed to tap into the new medium’s potential are lavishly praised, while those, much more numerous, that either fail to realize that the technology of cinema requires a whole new aesthetic mind-set, or — although these are far from mutually exclusive failings — view film production solely as an industry, are excoriated. Indeed, Laxness’ language is at times highly polemical and his judgments severe. Thus, for example, George O’Brien and Janet Gaynor, the stars of Murnau’s *Sunrise* (1927), are referred to as “typical Hollywood imbeciles,” whose inept performances are in large part to blame for what Laxness considers the film’s failure.<sup>689</sup>

It should be noted, however, that blustery dismissals such as this one are usually accompanied by a more elaborate critique. It is thus typical for Laxness’ rhetorical style that *Sunrise*’s most significant problems are in fact traced back to Hermann Sudermann’s original short story and the adaptation process, rather than the “imbecility” of the leads, a designation which serves

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<sup>689</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 155.

merely as a prelude to what in fact concerns Laxness. Given Laxness' strong preference for *The Way of All Flesh* (Fleming, 1927) over *Sunrise*, it is also clear that his judgment is not always in line with subsequent critical opinion but he proves himself to be a remarkably clear-sighted commentator and his extended critique of, for example, Cecil B. DeMille anticipates later unfavorable critical evaluations (and revaluations) of the director.<sup>690</sup>

“Kvikmyndin ameríska 1928” can usefully be read as the combination of three distinct approaches to Hollywood in the 1920s. First, there is the introductory segment, wherein pedagogical concerns are expressed in tandem with an anxious and openly hostile articulation of Hollywood as a global powerhouse that when exported threatens the integrity, even the existential conditions, of national cultures. The introductory chapter, which is even more ferocious in its holistic condemnation of Hollywood than the rest of the essay, is interesting not least because it represents Laxness taking up the well-worn banner of conservative cultural critics who had long been warning of the dangers of American films, particularly to the minds of the young. Only two years earlier, in the midst of Laxness' energetic self-figuration as a cosmopolitan, and when he was calling for Icelanders to modernize, expand their horizons and take a critical, rather than a worshipful, look at the heritage, he is unlikely to have been much impressed by the arguments he presents in this segment of the essay. It is thus not a surprise that these passages are a late addition and somewhat out of step with the rest of the essay. At the same time, however, Laxness does inflect his

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<sup>690</sup> Scott Eyman, *Empire of Dreams. The Epic Life of Cecil B. DeMille*. New York and London: Simon & Schuster 2010, pp. 4–6, 170–171, 186–188.

position with a keen awareness of the fact that the emergence of cinema represents a drastic shift in the way in which cultural artifacts are distributed.

Second, there is Laxness' ideological critique and his economic analysis of the Hollywood studio system. The segments that follow the preface, from two through to four, are central to this aspect of the essay, wherein Laxness expounds a theory of how subjectivity and notions of personal identity are grounded in the imaginary constructions offered by Hollywood narratives. Laxness's concern with the ideological underpinnings of Hollywood is however not limited to thematic content as such. He also pays attention to the visual register and politicized strategies of representation that valorize the class trappings of the wealthy, and thus indirectly naturalize social inequalities. Through the construction of an object world that emphasizes spectacle, consumer desire and display, Hollywood in a sense positions the audience as worshippers of the rich and of capital itself. Laxness however identifies another, contradictory side to this representational strategy, one that subtly undermines the ideological function of the cinema. The compulsive focus on signifiers of wealth and class, the diegetic supremacy of material objects, obliquely dehumanizes the narrative. The luxury goods take on a life of their own, representing consumer fantasies but also demonstrating how the characters are themselves literally consumed through the workings of commodity fetishism, becoming inconsequential compared to the tactile sensuousness of the décor. Strangely enough, then, the films themselves can be seen to articulate the Marxist conception of alienation, suggesting that subjects must surrender the core elements of their being in order to fully participate in the capitalistic spectacle of a modern society and consumer economy.

Dehumanizing as these images are in Laxness's rendering of Hollywood's idolatry of objects, they stand in stark contrast to the way the American cinema portrays the common worker. Raising Laxness's particular ire are films such as Josef von Sternberg's *The Last Command* (1928) that deal in an openly hostile way with the Russian revolution. Laxness mentions several films where the "horrible, revolution-infected Russian proletariat" is depicted negatively through the careful manipulation of a signifying system.<sup>691</sup> They are shown "dressed in the same kind of rags as American bums, their faces scrunched up, their hair dirty and unkempt, their cheeks dark with a week's worth of stubble".<sup>692</sup>

The ideological message is forcefully brought home as "these shameless and unshaven criminals carry out a revolution against the beautiful aristocrats in their pretty uniforms [...] and kill them".<sup>693</sup> Discussing on the one hand how the logic of advertisements and an emerging consumer culture are promoted and admired (even posited as the apex of human culture) and, on the other, the way class consciousness and class antagonism is caricatured, Laxness again points to the manner in which narrative structures and the *mise-en-scène* come together to ensure that the ideological message properly situates the audience.

The third aspect of the essay, Laxness' discussion of individual films and filmmakers, encompasses three distinct parts. First, there is the extensive discussion of Cecil B. DeMille, which takes up the long fourth segment, continuing into the fifth. Then, second, we have the passage on Chaplin (the sixth segment), which includes a personal anecdote about being at a gathering with

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<sup>691</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 157.

<sup>692</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 157.

<sup>693</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 157.



the star comedian. The essay actually incorporates numerous references to Laxness' interaction and conversations with Hollywood and California luminaries, such as Upton Sinclair and Chaplin, and one such recounted dialogue (with "a highly educated European film-maker who currently resides here in Hollywood") is sure to strike the reader as an alarming glimpse into anti-Semitism in the film industry.<sup>694</sup> Indeed, Laxness' account of the conversation cannot but implicate Laxness himself, as he fails to distance himself sufficiently from his interlocutor's bigoted opinions.

Lastly, there is Laxness' discussion in segments seven and eight of the "importation" of film talent to Hollywood, with a focus on the German director F.W. Murnau and actor Emil Jannings, as well as on the Swedish actress Greta Garbo. Although initially hopeful that these talented artists might help raise the bar in Hollywood film production, Laxness is in the end less than optimistic, and his overall disillusionment with Hollywood is clearly discernable. What endows Laxness' critique with a level of urgency in this context is that he speaks with full awareness that he is addressing a specific historical situation, and a cultural practice that's particular to a certain time and place. But he's also aware that the *industrial approach* that he is paying such close attention to, rather than furthering the potential of a new art form, might serve instead to stifle it before it has been fully discovered or appreciated.

### ***5. American Cinema and Creative Art***

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<sup>694</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 147.

In "Cinematography and Creative Art," Laxness' first essay to write a non-fiction piece on Hollywood, he complains of the dearth of serious writings on cinema before informing the reader that as luck would have it, he has come into possession of a "dissertation of lucid originality" on film aesthetics in German, but "written by a Slovakian" who goes unnamed, as does the dissertation.<sup>695</sup> While thus somewhat skimpy on biographic and bibliographic details, Laxness tackles the historical, aesthetic and philosophical aspects of the text without hesitation, and what he likes in particular is the argument that in the beginning human expression was initially dependent on gestures ("grimaces and gesticulation") rather than language, indeed, with sound functioning at best as accompaniment to the primary domain of the physical.<sup>696</sup>

As social animals, the "Slovakian" maintains, humans used to exist in communities dependent on unmediated physicality for communication. In a post-Darwin age, this may not sound revolutionary. The argument is not however presented in an "evolutionary" register, the opposite, as a matter of fact, will turn out to be the case, and the grunting creatures thus imagined are presented not as apes but as beings quite like contemporary humans, except that they don't talk, something that, rather than being a limitation, indicates a freer existence than the modern one.

Indeed, that the human faculty to produce sounds should have developed into the intelligible units that make up language can be seen to have been virtually a coincidence. As the development of language was contingent and haphazard, continues the "Slovakian," it follows that there is no reason to view

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<sup>695</sup> Laxness, "Cinematography and Creative Art," p. 1.

<sup>696</sup> Laxness, "Cinematography and Creative Art," p. 1.

language in its verbal and written forms as a perfect end-station for communication; indeed, language simply represents a particular moment in the evolution of communication techniques. There are even indications that the abstract nature of words and the indirect and obtuse process of signifying embedded in language may be outdated, and need to be replaced by more indexical methods of representation: “The modern man, when not recommending his merchandise is a lazy speaker and still lazier listener. His mind has turned from the abstract nature of words. Seeking entertainment, he goes to places where he can see pictures and hear music,” Laxness states, still working through and recounting the contents and implications of the dissertation. Language is commodified in capitalistic modernity and the development that has carried human communication technologies forward may therefore not be wholly positive as is evidenced by the above juxtaposition of the alienation of labor and the abstraction of language, and the resulting human desire for relief from estrangement.

The text that so impressed Laxness is clearly *Der sichtbare Mensch* (Visible Man) by Béla Balázs, the Hungarian film scholar and screenwriter.<sup>697</sup> The book, which is a defense of the film medium as well as an elaborate systemization of film language articulated through a phenomenology of perception, was originally published in 1924 and is the first full-length book on film in German. The text, furthermore, is an important touchstone in the development of Balázs’ thinking on film and represents a culmination of his work on cinema up to that point as a critic and “free-floating intellectual,” to employ

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<sup>697</sup> No one has previously identified the mysterious “Slovakian” as Balázs, and we do not know the circumstances under which Laxness got acquainted with Balázs’ text but his travels in Germany and familiarity with the language, and his friends there, may have played a role.

Erica Carter's designation of the generation of Hungarian intellectuals who were dispersed across Europe in the tumultuous opening decades of the century (including Balázs' friend and early collaborator György Lukács).<sup>698</sup> While Balázs' presence is most clearly felt in "Cinematography and Creative Art," he remains, along with Upton Sinclair (in a slightly different register), the most important influence on Laxness' approach to films, both in terms of the generation of meaning and conception of aesthetics. Indeed, Laxness' view on the relationship between film and literature, his accentuation of the expressivity of the filmic body and his preoccupation with actors and acting, as well as his interest in the close up and the face of particular actresses (including Asta Nielsen, a particular favorite of Balázs'), can be understood in relation to Balázs' theories.

There are also important conjunctions between Laxness' implicit notion that film language has an important non-conceptual function that translates into pure affect, which touches on his claim that cinema is more "subjective" than other art forms, and Balázs' stance towards the "unmediated" communication capacity of the image. Furthermore, Balázs' chapter on Chaplin is in certain key respects an influence on Laxness' later analysis of the film comedian.<sup>699</sup> It is thus fruitful to briefly sketch an outline of Balázs' early theories before moving on to Laxness' own articulation of cinema.

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<sup>698</sup> Carter, Erica: Introduction. *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory. Visible Man and The Spirit of Film* by Béla Balázs. Ed. Erica Carter. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010, p. xx.

<sup>699</sup> In view of Balázs' subsequent, and quite successful, career as a screenwriter it is perhaps not surprising that *Visible Man* functions not only as a theory of film but also as a compendium of suggestions for film making, including screenwriting. One might even say that Balázs' theory is more prescriptive than descriptive. There are several indicators that Laxness wrote his movie treatments with one eye on Balázs' text.

### 5.1. *Visible Man and Non-Conceptual Communication*

Balázs' focus in *Visible Man* is on the deep emotional and affective impact of films, rather than their narrative coherence, and he emphasizes that with film we are seeing the emergence of a genuinely popular art form. Enabling cinema's social function, Balázs explains, is the technical reproducibility of the filmic artifact and the medium's dispersal through the urban landscape, its radical accessibility. His privileging of the notion of *spirit* and contention that "it is out of film that the spirit of the people arises," ties in to cinema's technological capacity for reproduction, but in a somewhat mystical register; the concept of "spirit" here invoking a racial and nationalistic discourse.<sup>700</sup>

However, much as Stephen Heath would do later, he comes to focus on — and privilege — the human figure in narrative space.<sup>701</sup> It is through the figure of the body, explicated through the historical narrative recounted (reasonably closely, if not completely accurately) by Laxness, that Balázs posits a utopian space for cinema as a method of recuperating a spiritual understanding of the body, as well as an immediacy of experience that had been lost as the written word came to dominance: "[Man's] gestures do not signify concepts at all, but are the direct expression of his non-rational self, and whatever is expressed in his face and his movements arises from a stratum of the soul that can never be brought to the light of day by words."<sup>702</sup> The abstraction of language obscures the body and its signifying system. Balázs' account of filmic communication as non-conceptual — and thus in a sense without a cultural frame of reference —

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<sup>700</sup> Balázs, *Visible Man*, p. 4.

<sup>701</sup> Stephen Heath. "Narrative Space." *Questions of Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981, p. 19–76.

<sup>702</sup> Balázs, *Visible Man*, p. 9.

heralds, in a highly utopian register, the “return” of universality through the codification of gestures and facial expressions common to all, which would be rendered meaningful within an internationally understood system of communication based on the visible, filmic body.<sup>703</sup>

Among the many things that appeal to Laxness in Balázs’ text is the latter’s historicization of perception and his theorization of the unique role films play in the lives of urban people, that is, Balázs’ accentuation of the difference between the film medium and other, more established art forms. The implicit link that Balázs posits between the abstraction of print culture and the alienation of capitalism becomes in this context a springboard for reflection. In Balázs’ formulation, the rise of the image and cinematic technology holds out the promise of a return to a purer, originary form of communication — suggesting that the cultural implications of the first art form that’s wholly dependent on technology are in a fundamental sense radically anti-modern. Laxness subtly bypasses this aspect of Balázs’ argument, positing instead a close connection between image culture and capitalism by accentuating for example the monetary side of film production, as well the role of advertising in contemporary culture. Nevertheless, Laxness does build on Balázs’ insights and agrees that the indexicality of films opens up a whole range of new possibilities for artistic creation. He also agrees that the accessibility of cinema may rank as one of its most radical features, and thus, despite commercial imperatives that problematize the promise of the medium, he accentuates that the publicness of cinema is what essentially grounds its impact.

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<sup>703</sup> Indeed, Balázs proposes a filmic lexicon of gestures and bodily expressions that would serve a similar purpose as does a dictionary, see Balázs, *Visible Man*, p. 12.

A significant implication follows from this conclusion, as Laxness and Balázs make clear, namely that print culture's stature is destabilized and the word no longer stands uncontested as the preeminent mode of communication and artistic creation. Thus, as Laxness continues to ponder the role of the image in modernity, and the implications of its radical accessibility and dispersal across the social body, he increasingly comes to focus on the devaluation of the word and the implication of this trajectory for writers and "fine" literature. Perhaps, however, it would be more accurate to say that the role and relevance of progressive art in culture becomes deeply problematic as Laxness works through his argument. Thus, for example, the "microscopic finesse" of Marcel Proust, who for Laxness is "the master of modern literary technique, the most subtle and exquisite, the purest litterateur among all men of letters," turns out to have little relevance to "our age of feverish activity" — urbanization and commercialized thrills.<sup>704</sup> "All genuine literature has in our age of specialization [been] transformed into material for students of litterature [sic] and art, instead of being means of popular entertainment," Laxness says, indicating that the specialization inherent in modernization processes applies to art as well, with a similarly obfuscating result as is evidenced in other cultural and scientific spheres.<sup>705</sup>

Laxness' proposition that Proust's writing and rewriting of the self is incapable of resonating with a substantial readership in a mechanized age also

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<sup>704</sup> Laxness, "Cinematography and Creative Art," p. 2. Laxness' description of Proust's art is not particularly historical, and historicizing his argument would raise a host of questions regarding artists and society, and what the role of "progressive" art has been through the ages. Indeed, the question would be raised whether a "pure litterateur" could have existed at any point prior to the current historical moment when he is simultaneously brought into being and displaced, i.e. within the capitalistic order of modernity.

<sup>705</sup> Laxness, "Cinematography and Creative Art," p. 2.

indicates the manner in which the evolution of communication techniques threatens to render the literary word obsolete, something that Laxness discusses in tandem with the more general problematic of aesthetic value. He even entertains the notion of “the complete ruin of literature,” which for Laxness seems to call for melancholic reflection rather than mourning.<sup>706</sup> In fact, Laxness wants his reader to face squarely up to the existential fact that modern man has been thrown into a world whose emblematic cultural mode is cinema. This may entail certain losses but, in contrast to elitist literature, the medium of film represents the most “democratic entertainment that has ever been invented” and is therefore endowed with definite value in a cultural system based on popular appeal.<sup>707</sup>

### *5.2 Image Culture*

A sense of ambiguity runs through these pages. On the one hand, prompted by his “beautiful Slovakian friend,” Laxness is describing the decline of the word and literary culture — even literary sensibility — and the emergence of something different, something crasser (man’s activity being determined by “merchandise” and market imperatives, and culture in a sense functioning as a ‘break’ from the alienated life) and less contemplative than was the norm in the past.<sup>708</sup> However, the shift also entails a move towards a cultural field where the masses, historically displaced from the site of official culture and aesthetic activity, are brought into proximity with modern cultural forms. The process is portrayed

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<sup>706</sup> Laxness, “Cinematography and Creative Art,” p. 2.

<sup>707</sup> Laxness, “Cinematography and Creative Art,” p. 1.

<sup>708</sup> Laxness, “Cinematography and Creative Art,” p. 2.



under the rubric of evolution in the sense that mass engagement with culture involves, in addition to a level of democratization, a radical refashioning of conceptions of the cultural artifact and is also, somewhat more opaquely, indicative of the next step in the development of communication.

In both cases, however, a rhetorical move is made that neatly bypasses the varied social uses to which technological innovations are put, a process deeply enmeshed in ideology and power relations, and replaces them with a teleological drive that is endowed with generally positive overtones. Laxness thus avoids discussing the potential conflict between a market driven economy that is quick to realize the various advantages of image culture and the manner in which the new image culture may conceivably speak to emerging mass movements and egalitarian principles. Indeed, as Laxness develops his argument about Hollywood in later articles, the tension between the democratic and commercial aspects of cinema come to the fore and he acknowledges that the progressive potential of the medium is unlikely to grow and mature under the circumstances that hold sway in the American film industry.

The reader is also bound to ask, and Laxness' tone certainly invites the question, whether an age so preoccupied with sensation as to deem the literary word irrelevant doesn't demand active resistance, rather than acquiescence. Not least in view of the fact that it is suggested that this transitional state of affairs has been brought about not only through capitalistic alienation but also out of "laziness" mixed with a general social consensus privileging material goods and economic interests. The fact that these problems are raised and discussed by a writer who not only has several novels under his belt, not to mention short

stories, essays and poems, but one who has also decided to move to Hollywood to try his hand at writing for the movies, endows the ruminations in “Cinematography and Creative Art” with a strong autobiographical current and underlines the general impact of the transformation being discussed, namely the emergence of mass culture.

Nevertheless, if the forces of technology and history result in the coarsening of sentiment and intolerance towards aesthetic mediation, and the demand for the immediacy of pure sensation, shock and spectacle, Laxness’ reader may well be excused for being only lukewarm about the promise held out by “democratic modernity,” as well as the cinema. Weighing heavily on Laxness’ argument is the distinct possibility that the images on the screen, rather than pointing towards the next step on the evolutionary ladder and announcing some sort of a liberating rediscovery of the human body, could be read as a form of regression towards primitive gesticulation and non-articulation.<sup>709</sup> Laxness realizes that his argument is open to being read as a narrative of decline, and is concerned to avoid such a “misunderstanding”:

You might conclude from this that the present writer were a young poet of the pessimistic school, who had had bad luck with the editors and consequently found himself standing on the street in his old pair of boots, lamenting over the decadency of the reading world. But nothing the like. I want to point out that I have not been speaking of degeneration. I have been speaking of progress all the time. In explanation of this I want to make a good use of a well-known banality from popular biology: The decline of one species is always in a square ratio to the growth of another which appears to be fitter for the surroundings. I find myself at home with the ultra-modern spirit of picture-worshipping and greet with pleasure the atavistic taste of the mechanical age which has come to the picture again — only a thousand times more perfect picture than our ancestors of the bronze age used to carve in wood, chalk and stone, — the moving picture. The release of the [sic] mankind from the tyranny of the word gives us right to believe in a beautiful millennium to come.<sup>710</sup>

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<sup>709</sup> This can be perceived as a problem for Balázs’s theory in *Visible Man* as well.

<sup>710</sup> Laxness, “Cinematography and Creative Art,” p. 3.

In a game of one-upmanship, Laxness outdoes the ‘Slovakian’ theorist by bringing an even more brutal Darwinian imaginary to bear on the question of new media, while embracing the “atavistic” reading of his evolutionary schema with the significant addendum that the atavistic tendency being discussed is as a matter of fact a step forward, representing as it does something “a thousand times [more] perfect” than its originary predecessor. Interestingly, what amounted to a conflicted depiction of the diluted resonance of a Proust in modernity in the essay’s opening pages is now presented as the manifestation of an implacable logic and progress. Furthermore, not wishing to give the mistaken impression of himself as a failed writer coming to the pictures in desperation, or being driven by base monetary motives, Laxness confirms his cultural and aesthetic commitment to the new technological mode and “the ultra-modern spirit of picture-worshipping” in hyperbolic terms. A testimony of aesthetic transport within the realm of the image follows:

Now I am going to make a confession. I do not pretend to do it because anybody might be interested, – I just do it for the fun of it. Having had a dreary past of Homer and Virgil in the original, yes, having heard and read an incredible [sic] lot of things during my twenty five years of life time I must own that no forms, expressing the inner reality of human nature have, with the exceptions of some musical performances appealed to me to such an extent as the following:

A minute long close up of Asta Nielsen’s face in *Fröken Julia*, some details in Charles Chaplin’s acting in *The Kid*, some characteristics of Emil Jannings’ gait in his last role in *The Way of All Flesh* [...] and Gilda Grey dancing [...]

The list of favorites will remain unchanged through the various versions of the essay, Asta Nielsen, Chaplin, Jannings and *The Way of All Flesh*, these Laxness keeps returning to while working out his ideas about Hollywood. Also of note is that the above thoughts on the cinematic sublime — and the somewhat self-congratulatory juxtaposition of Homer (read in the original Greek, no less) and the modern — are accompanied by similar reflections on the transformation

(rather than decline) of the religious spirit in modernity, and how such a shift can in a sense be viewed as an inverse reflection of the growth of glamour and the advertisement industries. This is presented in terms reminiscent of Max Weber's notion of the "disenchantment of culture" but without the sense of the unmooring of meaning that colors Weber's view of rationalized modernity.<sup>711</sup> Laxness tends to view the religious icons of the past as well as the modern iconography of stars and advertisement models as functioning on a roughly comparable terrain, an atemporal marketplace where institutional interests hock their goods for their own benefit. A sense of identity, self-worth and existential meaning once provided by the church through its various products is now no less efficiently imparted by consumer goods. Weber's reference to the continued presence of various "deities" in modernity similarly speaks to Laxness' somewhat cynical notion that, despite certain superficial changes, "irrational" power structures will remain in place as long as transcendence is ascribed to agents of material interests.

### *5.3 The Tractor and the Spade*

Laxness' gesture towards the de-aurification of the past is coupled with an ironic refusal to engage in reactionary cultural critique. His aim, rather, is to defuse the discursive tendency to relate modernity negatively to tradition and point to mechanization and the democratization of culture embedded in mass art as having a number of positive qualities, in particular in so far as they offer a

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<sup>711</sup> Weber, Max. "Science as Vocation." *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology*. Ed. and trans. by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York and London: Routledge 2009, p. 138-139.

possibility of side-stepping elite culture and elite interests.<sup>712</sup> Nevertheless, Laxness' reasoning and rhetorical style are somewhat too languid and untroubled ("It [the advertisement poster of the Palmolive lady] must awake in people some pious feelings, for otherwise it [would not] hang [...] there.") to be wholly convincing. The trope of Palmolive lady returns in an essay in *Alþýðubókin* where, perhaps more explicitly than here, a more fruitful opening is offered to read commercial culture and capitalism as harvesting human interests and feelings for economic gain in much the same way as religion did before.<sup>713</sup>

Much like Balázs, who is concerned about defending cinema against its critics, Laxness tries to demarcate and identify the value of cinema by comparing it to other aesthetic modes or "techniques". Unlike Balázs, however, who is hesitant to embrace the industrial aspect of cinema and locates the value of the medium rather in an analysis of its "immediacy" in a symbolic economy, Laxness at this point argues that increased mechanical sophistication in creative work allows cinema, being entirely grounded in technological processes, a privileged position in relation to the other arts due to efficiency, scope and productivity: "A man with a Fordson-tractor is more prominent a thing than a man with a spade," Laxness says and suggests that we should rejoice in the "perfection of human instruments."<sup>714</sup> Continuing, he invokes the "marvel that the instrument of authorship has developed from a fountain pen or a typewriter into a group of actors moving in the focus of a camera."<sup>715</sup>

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<sup>712</sup> Something that, as noted earlier, is problematic in terms of Laxness' rendering of how Hollywood functions.

<sup>713</sup> Laxness, *Alþýðubókin*. Önnur útgáfa, p. 115–17.

<sup>714</sup> Laxness, "Cinematography and Creative Art," p. 4.

<sup>715</sup> Laxness, "Cinematography and Creative Art," p. 4.

Aside from the Eisensteinian resonance of the tractor comparison, the utilitarian undertones are quite striking and the contrast drawn between film and literature throughout the first half of “Cinematography and Creative Art” can in this light be read as indicative of Laxness’s allegiance to modernization and serves to indicate not only how deeply rooted his investment in cinema was at the time of his arrival in the US but also how firmly these two strands were interwoven. The dispersal of the concept of the author and its reconfiguration as an apparatus is relevant as well, that is, rather than taking recourse in the figure of the director, Laxness sets up a constellation of functions (actors, technological equipment, the pro-filmic set-up) that together make up an “authorial presence.” The notion that this complex mechanism, the cinematic apparatus as such, can then be wielded, manipulated and controlled with a level of precision comparable to that of a pen or typewriter is in itself a testament to Laxness’ valorization of the rationalizing impulses of modernity and the powers to be harnessed by technological means.

In conjunction with Laxness’ earlier comments about the crisis of the word in modernity, the above developmental projection also indicates a radical reevaluation of the category of literature, the artistic mode associated with the pen and the typewriter. In *Alþýðubókin*, published two years later, Laxness was intent on demystifying literature as a category of rarified art, to which end he brought a “proletarian” perspective to the analysis of its social function and employed a criterion not unlike the one invoked in “Cinematography and Creative Art” concerning the “democratization of art” and how art so rarefied as to lose its mass appeal is conceivably doomed to perish. The Darwinian imaginary and the notion of “outdated” technology also prove a recurring theme

in *Alþýðubókin*, particularly in the essay “Myndir” (Pictures) where Laxness discusses contemporary art and lambasts modern artists on the one hand for employing outdated means (“To starve for ten years in service of the artistic ideal of making pictures with methods that became outdated over a century ago – that is nothing but feebleness”) and for abandoning figurative art and employing non-representational strategies.<sup>716</sup> The photograph has made the paint brush and canvas into relics of the past.

What is perhaps most striking when “Cinematography and Creative Art” is compared to “Kvikmyndin ameríska 1928” and the other essays in *Alþýðubókin* is the extent to which the radical stance regarding the value of the mass appeal of art has migrated from his discussion of cinema and over to other art forms, such as poetry, which is deemed at its most valuable when it achieves the status of folk-art, when it becomes, as it were, ingrained into the daily lives of ordinary men and women. Indeed, Laxness’ statement from “Cinematography and Creative Art” that “[a]rt has [...] no social value, and we might feel tempted to claim absolutely no value, if there is not a soul, and we might feel tempted to claim: if there is not a considerable number of souls to whom it does appeal,” has two years later in *Alþýðubókin* been turned into a general measure of the value of literature and art in general, with the signal exception of the medium that in the original essay motivates this entire line of reasoning, namely the movies.<sup>717</sup> In *Alþýðubókin*, as a matter of fact, the Hollywood film has become “*one of the most sophisticated instruments of the ruling class to keep the masses in ignorance and*

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<sup>716</sup> Laxness, *Alþýðubókin*, p. 107. “En að húngra í tíu ár fyrir þá hugsjón að búa til myndir eftir aðferðum, sem eru úreltar fyrir meira en hundrað árum, það er roluskapur.”

<sup>717</sup> Laxness, “Cinematography and Creative Art,” p. 2.

*servility*,” with the threat being precisely their mass appeal.<sup>718</sup> What we see taking place in the interim is Laxness’ turn towards ideological critique and, to an extent, a more nationalist point of view. In order to map this development the three articles in German prove very useful.

#### *5.4 Variable Versions*

In “Kunst und Künstlichkeit im Film” Balázs’ influence is still clearly discernable as his historical perspective on the development of communication technologies is incorporated into the opening of the article without acknowledgment of the source (not even a ‘Slovakian’ is referenced). The rise of the image is discussed, but more briefly than in the English ‘original,’ and Proust makes an appearance as an example of the type of literature that, despite representing the height of literary aesthetics, is not in keeping with the times. The “Fordson tractor” comparison however has been dropped, as has for the most part the line of argument that was grounded in a monolithic view of technological development. The opening section of “Cinematography and Creative Art,” which “Kunst und Künstlichkeit im Film” replicates in an abbreviated form, will as a whole be dropped in the final Icelandic version.

What follows in both the English and German articles is a lightly mocking description of the “99% movie”, that is, the typical Hollywood film, which contains analytical kernels that are to be developed further in the two subsequent German articles, including an aside about Bible films that increases in significance as Laxness develops his analysis of Hollywood, and reaches its full

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<sup>718</sup> Laxness, *Alþýðubókin*, p. 135. The phrase appears in English in the original as Laxness is recounting a conversation with Upton Sinclair. The italics are in the original as well.



flowering in the extended discussion of Cecil B. DeMille in the final version.<sup>719</sup> Ideology, such an integral part of the essay in its fully developed form, is however only discussed in relation to the regulated standards of beauty in Hollywood films, and how these standards tend to privilege actors who are good looking but lack “personality” and the ability to express “inner life”.<sup>720</sup> As a matter of fact, the role of the actor is discussed in the abstract, with a reference to the work of Hugo Münsterberg, in much greater detail than will be the case in the final version, which is one of the things that makes these two essays interesting in the context of Laxness’ thinking on cinema and a valuable supplement to the later texts.<sup>721</sup>

Among the subjects touched on in “Cinematography and Creative Art,” but did not make it into the concluding version of the essay, is a very intriguing passage on F.W. Murnau’s *Sunrise* (1928), a text that Laxness employs to shed light on his contention that as a medium, cinema is “almost entirely of a subjective nature,” that it is “perhaps more psychological than any other genus of art”.<sup>722</sup> At first glance, this statement may seem to fly in the face of what by now are long standing assumptions about cinema’s “objectivity” (being highly resistant, for example, to theorizations of a narrating subject), as well as cinema’s indexicality and existential link to pro-filmic reality.<sup>723</sup> In light of Laxness’ fascination with Balázs’ text, it is not unlikely that the contention of

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<sup>719</sup> Laxness, “Cinematography and Creative Art,” p. 4.

<sup>720</sup> Laxness, “Cinematography and Creative Art,” p. 7.

<sup>721</sup> It should be noted however that important themes from “Cinematography and Creative Art” that are not taken up in “Kunst und Künstlichkeit im Film,” such as the role of the amateur and the complexities of adapting literary classics, will resurface in the later Icelandic version.

<sup>722</sup> Laxness, “Cinematography and Creative Art,” p. 7.

<sup>723</sup> For more on narrative structures in fiction films, see David Bordwell. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison. The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985. For a wide-ranging discussion of film and indexicality, see Philip Rosen. *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

film's "subjectivity" references, on the one hand, the role of the actor who, when theorized as a *filmic body*, becomes a conduit to an unmediated, wordless spirit that in a sense refutes (or refuses to acknowledge) Empiricist and Cartesian dualism.<sup>724</sup>

Secondly, the subjective nature of silent cinema can be seen to relate to the Balázsian notion of subjectivity (also conceptualized as mood or atmosphere) created through the radical openness that comes to the fore when the various objects in the diegetic world are not relegated to an inferior status within the image on account of their lacking speech (because in the silent film, the actors also "suffer" from this lack), but partake in the signifying system of the image on grounds of equality.<sup>725</sup>

It is in "Dollarfilme," perhaps unsurprisingly given the title, that Laxness presents the outline of his ideological critique, with many, but not all, of the important motifs and accentuations in place that come to ground his approach in "Kvikmyndin ameríska 1928". Laxness' eventual portrayal of Hollywood as an astoundingly effective "machine" in an administered society controlled through pleasure and distraction is at this point a little rough around the edges, and missing for example is the extensive analysis of Cecil B. DeMille that will play a crucial role in Laxness' analysis of the way glamor and commodity fetishism

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<sup>724</sup> At stake is a conception of film language and *mise en scène* where "the [filmic] body becomes unmediated spirit, spirit rendered visible, wordless," that is, the cinematic image is imbued with a degree of non-conceptual immediacy that bypasses the symbolic register but whose meaning comes into being through fusion with mental associations of the perceiving subject. Balázs, *Visible Man*, p. 9.

<sup>725</sup> Discussing notions of the inter-subjective influence of films (including their capacity for "psychical infection"), Lee Grieveson offers a suggestive reading of the spectating subject as conceptualized in early discourse on cinema. See Grieveson, "Cinema Studies and the Conduct of Conduct," pp. 3–37. For a further discussion of these aspects of Balázs theory, see Carter, "Introduction," p. xxiii–xxvii. See also Mattias Frey. "Cultural Problems of Classical Film Theory: Béla Balázs, 'Universal Language' and the Birth of National Cinema." *Screen*, 4/2010, p. 324–340.

function in Hollywood movies, but in the essay Laxness still puts forward what amounts to a strong analysis of the industrial and financialized workings of the “dream factory.” Indeed, many of the sharpest passages of the final Icelandic version are prefigured here. The third German language article, “Chaplin, Jannings und andere Stars,” appears considerably expanded upon as the last third of the Icelandic essay, where the dearth of quality material in Hollywood is discussed, as well as its reactionary iconography. In the German article we also note the presence of Balázs when it comes to Laxness’ discussion of actors and their central role in establishing a link between spectators and the image.

### ***6. Ideological Work in the Dream Factory***

In the Icelandic essay, Laxness’ approach to the evaluation of cultural products is similarly critical and while he certainly continues to place considerable importance on individual expression and the individual work, and is not hesitant about constructing his own canon of film greats, his discussion of particular celebrities and filmmakers serves to a greater extent than before to emphasize his interest in the underlying structure and economic organization that makes cultural production on the scale of Hollywood possible. Laxness is in other words fundamentally most interested in the ideological grid that supports and inflects an artistic discourse that comes into being at the intersection of the cultural and the industrial. The fact that Laxness attempts to conduct such an investigation and explicate the hidden logic of cinematic production is one feature of the essay that sets it apart from more conventional critiques of the “state of the industry” that had begun to appear in American magazines and newspapers quite

regularly by this time.<sup>726</sup> The essay also stands as a fascinating example of what, in subsequent years, would become an important strand of cultural studies: the economic critique of Hollywood.

The introductory passage, which didn't feature in the earlier articles and can thus be considered a late addition, plays a curious role in relation to the piece as a whole and offers an interesting place from which to start outlining in a more systematic fashion Laxness' stance towards Hollywood. With notable stylistic exuberance, Laxness opens the essay by contrasting two distinct media, film and literature, and two national artistic traditions, the Icelandic and the American:

Our newspapers frequently feature harsh reviews of shoddy poetry and other drivel that is written in Iceland and published in book form. But all the execrable literature and general nonsense that have appeared in print and speech in Icelandic since the settlement era seem of little consequence when compared to the enormous production of cinematic muck that sweeps over our land from America.<sup>727</sup>

What initially was a fairly positive attitude towards American filmmaking, when Laxness arrived in the States, even if he quickly developed certain reservations, has by this point turned hostile, if humorously so, as is often the case in Laxness' writings. Indeed, the flow of Laxness' language mimics the torrent of debris that is pictured sweeping over the cultural landscape. American films are a danger, we gather, they represent something unclean and torrential, almost unstoppable. The burlesque nature of Laxness' imagery invokes invasion, cultural imperialism,

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<sup>726</sup> On the subject, Myron Lounsbury has this to say: "The regular film reviewer, although he first achieved a permanent place in periodical literature in the early twenties, rarely contributed comments of any significant critical perception. The writings of Robert Sherwood, John Farrar and Clayton Hamilton may serve to illustrate the inadequacies of even the most articulate reviewers of the period. For the most part, they confined themselves to pointing out the need for greater refinement and restraint within the film medium." *The Origins of American Film Criticism, 1909-1939*. New York: Arno Press, 1973, p. 116.

<sup>727</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p.145-146.

pollution, and the threat of erasure of the local, while simultaneously mocking American “cinematic muck” as a cultural product so appalling as to represent a world historical low. Interestingly, Laxness’ comparison of film and literature offers a glimpse of a modified stance towards modernization. Whatever the detrimental effects of a desultory literary practice in the cultural life of a country, they pale in comparison to the Hollywood film. Underlying this statement is a suggestive contrast between a literary tradition reaching back to the “settlement era” and a ‘newfangled’ cultural medium, one that is emblematic of a shifting social terrain and employs a whole new range of representational strategies.

The comparison is grounded in a vision of traditional practices giving way to highly technologized mass production and assembly line methods, division of labor, standardization, financialization and global distribution, all of which enables a shift so enormous as to represent a tidal wave of change “that sweeps over our land,” implicitly transforming, through a drastic change in consumption patterns and the content of the consumed cultural artifact, the very nature of national culture. In his earlier articles on modernization, Laxness evinced a desire for sweeping change (presumably originating abroad) transforming traditional cultural forms, modernizing and urbanizing the capital, and improving the lives of the common people through industry and technology.

Clearly, a step has been taken away from any simple vision of technological advancement, and notions of cultural exchange have an added layer of complexity at this point. Indeed, Laxness here demonstrates a critical view of the role of technology and mechanized efficiency, and processes of modernization that are not sensitive to difference and heterogeneity.

Laxness' negative stance towards American films in the opening section stands in a tense relationship with the rest of the essay, which, while critical and at times hyperbolic, shies away from wholesale condemnation. This can be viewed as the first part of a rhetorical maneuver that aims to ground the essay in the context of *Alþýðubókin* as a whole. That is, while being dismissive of the American cultural model as it pertains to cinema, his essay must necessarily be endowed with a compelling rhetorical dimension that validates a lengthy excursion on a foreign cultural institution within a specific Icelandic framework. Laxness thus explicates what can be termed a "logic of negativity" through a combination of nationalistic, cultural and pedagogic rhetoric; this triumvirate being the substantive center of the introduction. It is precisely the "logic of negativity," which lies at the heart of Laxness' introduction, which requires further exposition at this point.

Firstly, as we have seen above, Laxness' earlier passion for modernization has now been altered enough for the project to carry a dark undercurrent, which allows for a discursive space that is critical of rationalizing processes. Motivating Laxness' critique is the fact that Hollywood's globally distributed cultural products, through close association with industrial capitalism and forces of homogenization, are compromised enough to posit a threat to the integrity of a national culture whose deeply literary heritage comes into conflict with the forces of entertainment and consumption. Secondly, Laxness invokes the influence of American films on the impressionable minds of the young, thus identifying a compelling reason to pay attention to a cultural enterprise geographically far removed from the shores of Iceland:

[F]ilms made here in Hollywood have become one of the most common child-rearing tools in Iceland. Douglas Fairbanks, Tom Mix and John Gilbert, as well as their wives, hold greater attraction and have more influence on the young in Reykjavik than Pastor Friðrik Friðriksson, Headmaster Sigurður Jónsson, and the Director of Educational Policy, Ásgeir Ásgeirsson.<sup>728</sup>

As already mentioned, films were hotly contested among municipal authorities and the public in the first decades of the century. The harmful influence of movies on children was widely seen as the most pressing issue when it came to cinema's increasing popularity in Reykjavík. Laxness thus places himself within a domestic tradition of moralizing on the cinema, employing arguments that are hardly original to him, nor were concerns about the unwholesome influence of movies unique to Iceland.<sup>729</sup> Interestingly, however, it is through this 'pedagogic' side of Laxness' argument that his awareness of the global reach of Hollywood and the fact that the nature of modern communication technology is undergoing a dramatic shift, one that is characterized by the changing status of the cultural product itself, is forcefully registered. The dispersion of ideologically inflected 'texts' such as movies is not confined, or necessarily slowed down, by the traditional national, geographic and linguistic barriers and borders.

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<sup>728</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 146. The distinct possibility that Laxness is not only referring to children, but also adults, as being 'brought up' by the movies, can be more clearly discerned in the original than in the translation. It should be mentioned that the representatives of civic virtue mentioned by Laxness all played a notable role in shaping youth culture at the time. Pastor Friðrik Friðriksson was involved in the founding of a number of community and youth oriented organizations around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of whom still exist (the Icelandic chapter of YMCA among them) Ásgeir Ásgeirsson was prominent from the early 1920s as a congressman and minister and would later become the second president of Iceland (1952–1968). Sigurður Jónsson was the headmaster of Barnaskóli Reykjavíkur, a school for children located in central Reykjavík.

<sup>729</sup> The fact that the concern about this issue was no less acute in Europe, and was sustained over a period of time, is evident in the European Committee on Crime Problems' publication of *The Cinema and the Protection of Youth* in 1968 (Strasbourg: Council of Europe), where the 'sociological' problem of movies was addressed from the perspective of various European states.

After the First World War, Hollywood was a prominent example of a shift towards a network of globally relevant media industries. Long before television, movies represented a new mode of distribution of the cultural text, one that traveled quite freely between nations and, eventually, across social classes, partly due to the ever increasing sophistication of organized commerce and the possibilities offered by technological advancements (constrained, admittedly, by regulations and quotas but this form of regulatory framework can also be seen to place films, more blatantly than was usually the case with cultural products, in the realm of commodities). The reverberations, as Laxness, rightly points out, could be felt and were significant in the cultural context of Iceland, as they were elsewhere.<sup>730</sup>

The essay on American cinema thus represents a pivotal step in Laxness' thinking on technology and everyday practice as well as communication technologies and many of its conclusions are deeply inscribed in Laxness' play *Straumrof*.

### 6.1 Fandom and the Hollywood Brutes

Others responded to these same concerns. Thus, while discussing the international framework of contemporary film production in the important cultural journal *Eimreiðin*, its editor Sveinn Sigurðsson described the initial industrial fears accompanying the transition to sound and pointed out that, in

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<sup>730</sup> For an overview of Hollywood and globalization, see Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, and Richard Maxwell. *Global Hollywood 2*. London: BFI Publishing 2005, especially chapter 1, "Hollywood History, Cultural Imperialism and Globalisation." Useful in terms of the global reach of Hollywood and its significance for local culture is "Film International" by Stephen Prince in *World Literature Today*. 3-4/2003, pp. 371-381.



spite of the shift from an apparently more easily exportable product, the emergence of sound motion pictures strengthened, rather than weakened, the international influence of the major film producing nations, “Heretofore,” he wrote in 1932, “filmmaking has been the most international of all the arts and will presumably continue as such, but with talking pictures the producing nations have come into possession of an important instrument to spread their own language and culture.”<sup>731</sup> Earlier, socialist politician Einar Olgeirsson had expressed deep concern about the nature and quality of the films being imported to Iceland, and blamed the situation on the logic of the large international distribution houses that were unable or unwilling to take into account the specific needs of a small market such as the Icelandic one.<sup>732</sup>

The third argument that Laxness offers has certain affinities with Sveinsson and Olgeirsson’s views but is presented even more forcefully. The popularity of American films, Laxness warns, is threatening to marginalize and displace traditional Icelandic culture and prominent homegrown artists:

The American film has more eager fans than all the Icelandic arts put together. A silly kissing film starring a uniformed Konrad Nagel will draw a larger audience in a single evening in Reykjavík than an exhibition of Ásgrímur’s paintings will do in a month. Cecil B. DeMille, William Fox, Metro–Goldwyn–Meyer and Lasky–Paramount set more Icelandic hearts aflutter than the work of Einar Jónsson, Jóhannes Kjarval, Einar Benediktsson, Jón Leifs and Davíð Stefánsson combined. And each year the nation lines up to deliver greater riches to the uncultured Hollywood brutes and movie millionaires in exchange for this bilious waste than it has contributed to native geniuses since the country was settled.<sup>733</sup>

This passage is quite local in its emphasis and Laxness’ list of noteworthy Icelandic artists who are being overshadowed by films in the popular

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<sup>731</sup> Sveinn Sigurðsson. “Kvikmyndir og þjóðleg menning.” *Eimreiðin*, 3–4/1932, p. 23.

<sup>732</sup> Einar Olgeirsson. “Íslensk menningarmál. Rekstur kvikmyndaleikhúsanna.” *Rjettur*, 1–2/1926, pp. 133–135.

<sup>733</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 146.

imagination, as well as the prominent educational and youth culture representatives that he mentions, will be unfamiliar to readers not thoroughly versed in Icelandic 20th century history and art. This should not, however, prove disconcerting. What matters in terms of the artists, for example, is not their individual place within Icelandic culture but their function in Laxness' text as representatives of *a* culture, and perhaps even more crucially, as representatives of the culture of a small nation and a tiny linguistic community. Their invocation points to the disparity when Icelandic artists (notably those who practice their art in more rarefied fields than cinema such as poetry and sculpture) are pitted against the huge industrial combines of Hollywood.

While thus referencing well known Icelandic painters, Ásgrímur Jónsson and Jóhannes Kjarlval, sculptor Einar Jónsson, composer Jón Leifs, and poets Einar Benediktsson and Davíð Stefánsson, Laxness condemns mass culture in no uncertain terms. Standardized and formulaic mass entertainment is for Laxness very different from cultural expression rooted in a community and national tradition, but he must nevertheless grapple with the problem of Hollywood's popularity. The agonizing question Laxness faces is why the "false dreams of mass culture," to employ Dominic Strinati's phrase, so completely overwhelm domestic artistic expression, even if clearly worthless ("silly kissing films").<sup>734</sup> The problematic set out by Laxness references his earlier metaphors of invasion and cultural imperialism while grounding his distinction between Icelandic culture and American films even more clearly than before in the highbrow/lowbrow model. Interestingly, this distinction, while unquestioned in

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<sup>734</sup> Dominic Strinati. *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 13.

relation to the Icelandic context, is addressed somewhat later in the essay, when the focus has settled on the American film industry, and its validity problematized.

The issue of Hollywood's popularity remains central throughout the essay, but the analytical register shifts from high/low to questions regarding ideology and consumption. The latter set of concerns can nevertheless be said to be already present in Laxness' opening remarks in the sense that Americanized imagery and the aspect of consumerism that is embedded in the notion of celebrity and a star system are viewed as means of manipulating audiences. But the critique of Icelandic culture itself should not be overlooked; Laxness' scorn is not solely directed at the film factories in Hollywood.

Audiences who do not grasp the value of authentic art within their own milieu but choose instead to deliver "riches to the uncultured Hollywood brutes and movie millionaires" are symptomatic of a problem that cannot be blamed entirely on Hollywood; here we are back in the terrain of the uncouth and backward culture that Laxness portrayed in his earlier essays, a social environment hostile to deep structural change and where prejudice against the figure of the artist (idler and freeloader) remains a factor. These conditions, in Laxness' opinion, are ripe for exploitation by the Hollywood "brutes" offering soporific pleasures. We are presented with an audience whose passivity and ignorance make it easily susceptible to the spell of fascinating images and can thus, in a sense, be "managed" by mass communication industries. And although Laxness indicates that commercially produced movies from Hollywood are for the most part inferior to the more traditionally situated arts, such as painting,

music and poetry, a position that essentially echoes the conventional bourgeois dismissal of cinema in earlier decades, such views are about to be relegated to the background as Laxness focuses on the value of the medium and its unique destiny in America.

Following the preface, Laxness introduces his general conception of the American film industry and his analytical framework for the film medium as such. First is the issue of the high/low distinction. Although Laxness comes down firmly on the side of 'art' and then proceeds to explain why films should be approached with the rigor befitting a serious art form, we may notice a strain of ambivalence, perhaps even irony bordering on cynicism, in his reasoning. The characteristic triumvirate structure of his propositional style is also present:

[T]he reasons we refer to films as an art form, even though film-making as practised at present is little more than mass industry, are the following: first, the studios insist on that name being applied to their product; second, films deal with human concerns that have traditionally been explored under the aegis of the arts and do so employing related means; and third, the only way we can ascertain the cultural significance of a film is by employing the precepts of artistic critique.<sup>735</sup>

Although the preface contains Laxness' most flamboyant denunciations of the American film, the polemical tone remains throughout the essay. Thus the striving of Hollywood for cultural acceptance is acknowledged in the above quote, where the notion of "product" is made to significantly echo the "mass industry" comparison in the lead-up, but the desire to appropriate a classier cultural designation is also presented as a moment of product branding and upward market mobility, rather than as an aspiration to be achieved through creative work. Then, much like Eisenstein who pointed to the Dickensian "close-

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<sup>735</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 147.

up” in order to suggest affinities between film and the novel, Laxness goes on to emphasize the commonalities between films and traditional arts.<sup>736</sup>

That is, Laxness maintains that a thematic core of immutable human concerns is shared among the arts, films included. This precludes an easy dismissal of the new medium. Embedded in the sentiment is a sense of the potentiality of cinema as opposed to its present circumstances, along with a clear awareness of the social impact and significance of popular culture. This becomes even clearer in the third proposition where movies are seen as requiring “artistic critique,” which according Laxness means that the “cultural significance of a film” should be investigated. Laxness goes on to clarify his methodological stance and defines “artistic critique” as textual engagement that pays attention to the cultural, social, and political circumstances that inflect form and content. In order “to understand American films,” Laxness writes, “we need to understand the social context of their production.”<sup>737</sup> Laxness accentuates the fact that no cultural product, least of all the movies, comes into being in a political or social vacuum.

## 6.2 *The Tramp and the Vulgarite*

Laxness’ ‘artistic critique’ is brought to bear on two cinematic figures in particular, renowned director Cecil B. DeMille and Charlie Chaplin, at the time perhaps the most famous man in the world. These two, in a sense, stand at the center of the essay and in order to grasp the contours of Laxness’ argument

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<sup>736</sup> Sergei Eisenstein. “Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today.” *Film Form*. Ed. and trans. Jay Leda. New York and London: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1977, p. 195–201.

<sup>737</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 147.

about Hollywood it is necessary to account for the very different meanings he ascribes to them. Indeed, DeMille and Chaplin come to represent the promise and perils of the film medium itself.

In Chaplin, Laxness sees the emancipatory and humanist potential of cinema. Chaplin is “the only author in the American film industry to ground his works in living participation in the conditions of those downtrodden by society and love for the cause of the underdog.”<sup>738</sup> With obvious admiration, Laxness discusses a series of films, including *The Kid* (1921) and *The Gold Rush* (1925), as well as famous shorts, and considers Chaplin’s at that point latest feature film, *The Circus* (1928), to be the greatest work of art to come out of America in the year of its release.

Thus, for Laxness, Chaplin is not only an artist with a social conscience, he is also a director who has mastered the “grand form” of cinema, that is, he is able to express himself in a manner that utilizes the specific capacities of the film medium: “Every idea is handled with deep understanding that in its essence is cinematic,” Laxness states when discussing the intricate symbolic register of *The Circus*, and contrasts the director to filmmakers who lack a significantly deep understanding of the language of film, and remain, for example, in thrall to the principles governing literature or, even worse, view cinematic practice solely in terms of profit and industrial concerns.<sup>739</sup>

It is precisely in the context of the financial imperatives of Hollywood that Cecil B. DeMille plays a central role for Laxness who sees his career trajectory, leading from early advocacy for cinema as a respectable middle class art form to

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<sup>738</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 153.

<sup>739</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 147 and 154.

being, to paraphrase Sumiko Higashi, who has written extensively on DeMille, a “purveyor” of high class consumer durables and luxury goods, as embodying the utmost extremity of commodity fetishism. In Laxness’ essay, DeMille serves as the main analytical evidence for broader claims concerning Hollywood’s ideological accent, ties to the corporate world and the emptying out of cinematic form, as well as the industry’s role on the global stage.

Indeed, with an eye on Laxness’ central critique of Hollywood, that the “psychological reality portrayed on screen represents the values of Capital,” it is not difficult to see why DeMille’s work and extravagance would be taken as emblematic of the logic of capitalism and an emerging consumer culture, driven by advertisements and publicity.<sup>740</sup> That DeMille is merely representative, perhaps the foremost representative, of a general consensus and a shared outlook is precisely what renders the cultural framework of Hollywood a creative “desert” according to Laxness, despite the rich artistic possibilities offered by cinematic technology as a medium.

Cinematic “art” as practiced in Hollywood is in sway to the commodity and commercialization, evidenced by concern with budgets, stars, spectacle, and profit — and managing what would later be termed the administered society. This is why DeMille, and not Chaplin, represents what Laxness terms the Hollywood spirit:

It is difficult to pick a specific example when it comes to American films, because most of them are exactly the same. Yet I am inclined to think that Cecil B. DeMille might be an appropriate representative of the spirit that dominates in the American film world at the moment. A number of plays have been advertised and promoted under his name that distinguish themselves among many worthy contenders as examples of what a play should not be – especially

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<sup>740</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 146.

on film. Cecil B. DeMille is the master of making films that cannot be justified from any perspective whatsoever having to do with informed sensibilities.<sup>741</sup>

Analyzing the *mise en scène* of Hollywood films, Laxness frequently speaks of the conspicuous consumption that characterizes the life–style of the characters and the general décor of their environment. He notes that “the presence of the actors, as well as their names, often seems merely decorative, as if their sole purpose were to fill up space next to gaudy objects that stand in for art, such as furniture, dining sets, luxury automobiles, costumes, palaces, a *million dollars*.”<sup>742</sup>

DeMille’s work as a director, not least his mid–career sex comedies, which emphasized tactile sensuousness through luxurious displays involving a whole range of home furnishings (bedroom furniture, table settings, bathroom ornaments, embroidered pillows, fine linens), as well as the bubble baths and lounges where the domestic squabbles of the wealthy were played out, is therefore a solid example of the dehumanization described by Laxness.<sup>743</sup> When coupled with the epic ostentatiousness of his Biblical films, it is therefore not surprising that the director should be viewed by Laxness as utterly complicit with the spectacle of capitalism, its dependence of visual display in order to inoculate consumer desire, and the implicit necessity to promote wasteful consumption in order to allow the capitalistic order to reproduce itself.

Indeed, DeMille’s framing of commodities and carefully constructed *mise en scène*, according to Sumiko Higashi, “constituted an advice manual preaching against old habits of self–restraint,” and furthermore proved extremely

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<sup>741</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 149.

<sup>742</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 156. For more on the implications of these “consuming fantasies,” see Björn Þór Vilhjálmsson. “Modernity and the Moving Image: Halldór Laxness and the Writing of ‘The American Film in 1928.’” *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*, 2/2011.

<sup>743</sup> Sumiko Higashi. *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture. The Silent Era*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and New York, University of California Press, 1994, pp. 175–76.



influential on the emerging advertisement industries.<sup>744</sup> This affinity between DeMille's cinematic practice and the market economy is something that Laxness pays special attention to as he discusses the advertisement campaigns of DeMille's Biblical films, noting for example the proclamations of the huge numbers of actors and extras involved in *The King of Kings* (1927). He also points to the close working relationship between Hollywood's publicity machine and traditional news media, which has the effect of inundating the public sphere with glib promotional chatter.

Thus the silver screen becomes the depository of markers of affluence and abundance but taken to heights of profligacy and extravagance in DeMille's case.<sup>745</sup> For Laxness, DeMille is more than a promoter of the spectacle of capitalism, he is someone who believes that the poverty of the human condition needs to be outweighed by the grandeur of objects. DeMille also brings to the fore an issue central to Laxness' thinking on Hollywood and ideology, namely the question of why the display of economic opulence and luscious lifestyles should appeal so strongly to working class audiences, rather than, say, promote reflection on their part on an economic system, which is clearly exploitative and unfair.

Laxness' thinking in this instance speaks to a shift during the silent era that Steven J. Ross has discussed, where a concern with "portraying the hardships of working-class life" receded and in its place films were increasingly made that "promoted conservative visions of class harmony" and, in place of problems of the workplace, attention now shifted toward "the pleasures of the

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<sup>744</sup> Higashi, *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture*, pp. 177-78.

<sup>745</sup> DeMille, for example, had the enormous Guadalupe set for the *Ten Commandments* (1924), one of the most expensive films of the period, buried and destroyed when shooting was over.

new consumer society.”<sup>746</sup> Laxness is aware of the ideological interests that might motivate such a shift, and the way in which the film medium was being used to shape public opinion, but he is angered by the apparent ease with which the films have been co-opted for such a task, and somewhat baffled by audience susceptibility. The fantasy lives of audiences are the center-piece of Laxness’ ideological critique, which is what we now turn to.

#### *6.4 Cultural Production as Ideology*

It is important to note the distinction that Laxness posits between the medium of film itself and its various, localized manifestations. For Laxness, the artistic possibilities innate to the technological apparatus are vast:

I do not see how it can be denied that as a medium of expression the motion picture, particularly the talking picture, is among the most perfect inventions of our culture; it is nothing less than the unification of photography and the theatre into a single grand form — one so rich in possibility that its capacities seem endless. However, when discussing American films, we must not forget that their fate has been to be swallowed whole by spiritually barren commercial powers [...].<sup>747</sup>

On the one hand, the medium itself clearly fascinates Laxness but, on the other, its most prominent representative, the Hollywood film, is felt to be a deeply problematic phenomenon, due, in part, to the structure of the studio system whose enormous productivity bears in his view more than a passing resemblance to mechanical production and the logic of industrial capitalism. Early in the essay, Laxness makes that very point: “Films are made in much the same way as newspapers: it’s an industry that is run by capital [...]” Informing

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<sup>746</sup> Steven J. Ross. *Working Class Hollywood. Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, pp. 7, 9.

<sup>747</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 147.

this view is the grounding assumption that it is indeed the production practice, the financial logic of Hollywood as a corporate enterprise, which needs to be grasped in order to comprehend the meaning and the significance of films as cultural texts. If one wants to gain a significant understanding of the American film industry, one must tear one's eye away from the silver screen, away from the distracting antics and frolics of the stars, and one must even, in a geographic sense, transpose oneself from the sunny locale of the West coast. Indeed, the very notion of Hollywood, Laxness would maintain, has very little to do with what Hollywood actually does.

Making a film, one might pedantically point out, costs a virtual fortune and those producing films, therefore, need the financial backing of substantial economic or corporate entities. Thus, the pulsing heart, or the displaced center, of the film industry is not the studio lot but, rather, the corporate suites that, at the time of Laxness' writing, still formed recognizable markers in the complex economic landscape: "The power behind [the film industry] is Wall Street and the psychological reality portrayed on screen represents the values of Capital."<sup>748</sup> One of the things that Laxness wants to accentuate is that the cultural signifiers normally associated with American movies, such ambiguous concepts as "movie magic," "escapism," and the apparent innocuousness of the products themselves, signaled a consciously mediated facade constructed by forces located elsewhere, with that most mythic of all epigrams, "made in Hollywood," as their perfect alibi, and, finally, that the masquerade has an ideological function. The vision of the world presented by Hollywood, according to Laxness, is not articulated by accident.

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<sup>748</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 146.

One of the implications of Laxness' institutional and ideological mode of analysis is that, inescapably, the manner in which movies are viewed changes registers, the works themselves become ideologically suspect, and the need to place them in a larger social context arises via the method of "artistic" critique. What allows for such a critique is that the terrain of cultural production, although verging on the monolithic, is to a degree contested (Chaplin is Laxness' prime example, but Murnau as well), but in the end no individual part can be understood unless placed in relation to the totality that can be referred to as "Hollywood," and into this specific term is incorporated not only a geographic locale but also a whole constellation of interests that range across the cultural field.

The following passages, extensive as they are, represent a moment in Laxness' text where he attempts to identify the individual components of the constellation, the ideological factors that make Hollywood "work," and are thus central to his argument. Taken together, they represent one of the finest examples in the entire essay of what Laxness terms "artistic critique." In these passages, Laxness looks closely at the social context of the cinematic institution and proposes a certain relationship between the audience and the images on the screen; he also discusses the commodification of culture and aligns the film industry with a generalized sense of exploitative market forces:

Film is an instrument employed by the enemies of man on behalf of reactionary forces that exploits the appetite for sensationalism evident among an ignorant segment of the American public. The thirst for sensationalism is the national characteristic most enthusiastically nurtured by newspapers and advertisements – the two most prominent pedagogical institutions in the United States. The second goal of movies is to instil American religion and American morals into the working boors, to inculcate in them national slogans such as '*Liberty*', '*Opportunity*' and '*Prosperity*', which makes every poor sod believe that he, too, can become a businessman, a factory owner or the president of the republic. The fact is that only about six to eight people out of a

thousand can actually say they enjoy liberty, have opportunities, and can rest assured of their future prosperity. Thus, when there is talk of 'prosperity', what is being discussed is how well the ruling classes have done profiting from the boors this or that year.<sup>749</sup>

Several things are worth noting in the above passage, including the rhetorical strategies employed to position the "working boors" in opposition to the cultural producers. Laxness renders the disenfranchisement of the working classes at the level of language by portraying them as "poor sods" and the "boorish" objects of forces that pander to their worst instincts, thus cultivating consumers and citizens that are passive in the sense that their critical faculties have been disarmed and directed towards fantasies and dreams. As Patrick Brantlinger has pointed out, the brand of social analysis that posits popular culture as the opiate that shores up and safeguards the continued dominance of a particular class has ancient roots but, as he also points out, in the modern era the valence of this kind of social critique has shifted and the focus has increasingly been on the totalitarian aspect of modern societies, due in part to the rise of oppressive political systems in the first decades of the 20th century, new technologies of distribution, and the widespread merger of the cultural, political and the economic realms in modern conceptions of the state.<sup>750</sup> Thus, in the shift from 'popular culture' to 'mass culture,' many commentators in the West, and Laxness is among them, believed they were witnessing the intrusion of commodification and capitalistic ideology into a formerly more authentic sphere of popular expression. It is this totalizing conception of a monopolization by the administrators of the cultural sphere, who are seen as moving hand in hand with the forces who shape the political field, that lies behind Laxness' view of a

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<sup>749</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 148-149.

<sup>750</sup> Patrick Brantlinger. *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983, pp. 31-80.

cultural apparatus that serves an ideological function, and in a sense targets vulnerable and uninformed segments of the population; the sensationalism of the product, rather than educating or engaging the audience, is a mechanism of social engineering. Laxness thus draws a correlation between the economic and the cultural realms: in the latter he finds the same forms of objectifying discourses that serve to ground the former.

The disjuncture between mediatized discourses and social reality is made clear by Laxness' "translation" of popularized and mythologized concepts such as "liberty" and "prosperity," into a more "truthful" and socially responsible register, thus accentuating the role he sees the movies and, in a more generalized sense, the entire media field, playing in the construction of an exploitative social arena. Laxness continues:

This, for example, is a very prosperous year, and both Edison and Ford have predicted growth under the governance of Hoover, sending each and every dead-broke ditch-digger into ecstasy over the unprecedented prosperity of Edison and Ford and Hoover, as advertised in the movies and the newspapers, and he can now be seen swearing on his mother's grave that he, too, can become president of the republic, or, if not president, at least a businessman. Last but not least, the American film allows the privileged classes to gloat over their affluence and, by the flaunting of their success, urge the unwashed masses into a position of worshipful submission to the might and glory of Capital.<sup>751</sup>

While discussing Hollywood, Laxness is, as we have seen, first and foremost concerned with the problem of the social, and he tends to evaluate works of art on the basis of their inherent possibility to enact, or promote, social change. A grounding assumption in the passages quoted above is that films that are produced in Hollywood are not likely to be critical of the dominant social and economic order because they are themselves products of that order, and wholly dependent on it for their existence. That is, when it comes to the relationship

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<sup>751</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 149.

between institutions, such as the movie studios and their corporate backers, and the works themselves, it is clear that Laxness believes that an ideological agenda, one that is a fairly direct reflection of, as he put it, “the values of capital,” shapes the Hollywood-product. But while it seems almost a given in Laxness’ appraisal of Hollywood that American films are, substantially, cogs in the industrial wheel of capitalist domination, what gives us pause is, on the one hand, the question of the social role of ideology and, on the other, how Laxness perceives films to function as an ideological apparatus.

The first problem is only explicable in terms of societal power dynamics and economic interests. Glossing Laxness, we might say that ideology has to be believed in order to be functional. That is, unless a substantial consensus exists within a specific social formation about the ‘essential’ validity of the presuppositions that ground a particular ideological instance, we would not be able to speak of that instance as being functional (whatever its function was supposed to be, it would be “discredited” and thus useless). This view assumes that ideology indeed has a function and furthermore that the function involves the mystification of social relations (class/gender/race relations for example). The social messages propagated by the Hollywood combines are in their constitutive essence a falsehood; the cinematic images veil but do not fundamentally change the nature of the true social conditions but need to be, in a sense, redeemed and brought to light. The implicit imperative of “artistic critique” is therefore to disperse the false “image” to reveal reality or the “truth.” This is an approach to ideology, which has many respectable antecedents and

can indeed be traced back to John Locke and the empiricist's championing of reason.<sup>752</sup>

This is the context that gives rise to Laxness' view of the relation between audiences and the institution of cinema. Laxness assumes that there exists a form of cultural segmentation when it comes to films and their audiences, much like the one which is to be found in the standard version of film history, but unlike those film historians who explain which segment of the population frequented the movies in terms of industrial practice and pre-existing social formations, Laxness seems to consider industrial practice as a form of industrial propaganda, with movies marketed to a target audience in order to manufacture consent regarding social relations, or ignorance thereof:

During a year of relatively close acquaintance with the film industry, I have found one view to hold remarkable sway, namely that it is an impossible task to make films acceptable to an informed audience and even more hopeless to make them in order to inform audiences. Films thus mostly target the uninformed with the aim of making them even more uninformed.<sup>753</sup>

The idea that art does not represent some ideal or absolute conception of beauty, but rather promotes the particular interests of a particular class at a moment in history, is of course not new and, as was briefly touched on above, both in the context of mass culture and fashion.

It is likely, however, that Laxness is in this instance at least partly building on Upton Sinclair's massive and ambitious treatise on the artists' propaganda function in society, as presented in his 1925 *Mammonart. An Essay in Economic Interpretation*. In the volume, Sinclair surveys the way artists' representations of the world have been employed systematically by the ruling classes to mystify

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<sup>752</sup> David Hawkes. *Ideology*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 42–47.

<sup>753</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 149. Laxness,



and subjugate the common people.<sup>754</sup> Sinclair even implies that with the cinematic apparatus, a heretofore unsurpassed mechanism for domination has been brought forth. Laxness' friendship with Sinclair, and his reference to "mammonart" in the essay, would seem to confirm that Laxness' notions about the ideological function of movies are to an extent indebted to Sinclair's text.

### 6.5 *The Pleasures of Capitalism*

It is arguable that the advent of mass communication, the rise of entertainment industries, their consolidation into multinational corporations and consequent efforts to monopolize markets, has revitalized the question of what forces shape the ideological account cultural products give of themselves and the world. Even more importantly, the problem of the role culture industries play in civil society has increasingly come to the fore as the importance of telecommunications in daily life has increased in the 20th century. It is precisely these questions that inform Laxness' interrogation of the content of popular films, wherein he locates certain recurring narrative tropes that are associated with, on the one hand, religion, and, on the other, nationalistic and political ideologies.

These tropes function, as Laxness puts it, to make conservative or reactionary values appealing, and cinema proves a particularly convenient apparatus in this context. However, when Laxness discusses what he views as Hollywood's propensity to parade on the screen luxurious and decadent

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<sup>754</sup> Introducing his subject, Sinclair states: "This book is a study of the artist in his relation to the propertied classes. Its thesis is that from the dawn of human history, the path to honor and success in the arts has been through the service and glorification of the ruling classes; entertaining them, making them pleasant to themselves, and teaching their subjects and slaves to stand in awe of them". Sinclair, *Mammonart*, p. 17.

lifestyles, far out of reach for the common man, he has to take into account the fact that these narratives of class-based privilege prove a pleasurable cinematic experience for those segments of the population who might be expected to take such reminders of social inequality amiss. Subsequently, Laxness attempts to navigate the problem of the pleasurable pull of images that directly or indirectly highlight economic disparity under the rubric of desire and the appeal of cross class fantasies.

When Laxness describes the manner in which the privileged classes “gloat over their affluence and, by the flaunting of their success, urge the unwashed masses into a position of worshipful submission to the might and glory of Capital,” he is addressing a specific mechanism of social power, the display of superiority through command of material resources, and gesturing towards the ideological function of desire as it comes to be culturally produced and managed in such a way as to be conducive to social stability. The display of conspicuous consumption redirects notions of social change away from an ideology that demands fundamental restructuring of the economic order and towards the idea that social mobility simply involves the acquisition of material goods. Laxness thus accentuates the variety of consumer goods — furniture, dining sets, luxury automobiles, expensive clothes, fancy houses, all of which represent concrete entities that can be enjoyed — that are consistently on display in Hollywood movies and, rather than being mere décor, seem to be the real discursive center of the film narrative:

on the screen, again and again, the same inane demonstrations of the evening finery of the upper classes and their ballrooms, the uniforms of generals being displayed from front and back a thousand times, the drunken escapades of aristocrats; there is plenty of kisses and dancing, million-dollar bedrooms,

fisticuffs and flight, chases, etc. – these monotonous sequences have been part and parcel of American films for the past two decades.<sup>755</sup>

It is interesting to note in this context that Laxness' conception of the film industry as an ideological apparatus is subtly refined between 1929, when the first edition of *Alþýðubókin* was published, and 1947 when the second edition appeared, and we can see Laxness moving away from the notion of display as having a directly coercive dimension towards a more psychologically nuanced construction of the relationship between the audience and the image.

Moving away from the notion of passive audiences, Laxness in two highly significant additions addresses the psychological mechanisms that ground the effectivities of the ideological apparatus, explaining how the audience, rather than being somehow stripped of agency in the face of the virulence of corporate power, is “handled” and “manipulated” within the pleasurable context of narrative immersion and buoyant identification with stars and political personalities, thus positing more clearly the subjective “effects” that the industrial and corporate power structure seeks to convey through the display of conspicuous consumption.

These additions move Laxness' argument beyond a conception of the audience as passively bowing in “worshipful submission” to power and capital and bring in a new focus on the manner in which they are seduced and turned into active participants in the production and consumption of ideology. In the following quotes, the two significant changes are illustrated by italicizing Laxness' 1947 alterations and placing those passages deleted from the original in brackets:

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<sup>755</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, p. 157.

The second goal of movies is to instil American religion and American morals into the working boors, to inculcate in them national slogans such as ‘Liberty’, ‘Opportunity’ and ‘Prosperity’, [deleted: “but the meaning of these words is that the economic adventurer who is the most strident hater of humanity should also be the one most justified in exploiting the worthless masses,” and replaced with:] *with the result that anyone who is down and out still grounds his social views on the rock–solid belief that he, too, can become a businessman, a factory owner or the president of the republic.*<sup>756</sup>

And the second passage:

This, for example, is a very prosperous year, and both Ford and Edison have predicted growth under Hoover’s governance, sending each and every dead–broke ditch digger as he stands with his shovel at his side into ecstasy over the prosperity that is constantly being discussed in the movies and the newspapers, *and he now proclaims that he too, just as every other American, can become President of the Republic, or, if not President, at least a businessman.*<sup>757</sup>

The point that Laxness is making in these brief but important alterations is that the display of all the finery in Hollywood films serves a very specific and expertly tailored ideological purpose, that is, the cultural, narrative and aesthetic articulations that “urge the unwashed masses into a position of worshipful submission to the might and glory of Capital” come together in the unspoken promise that while the material goods may be out of reach at the moment, they might not be so in the future. The logic on display here, the one that ensures the “ecstasy” of the ditch digger, is conformity and hope: By conforming to the rules of a system that constantly advertises success as its ultimate promise, the hope

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<sup>756</sup> Unitalicized material is from Laxness, *Alþýðubókin*. Reykjavík: Jafnaðarmannafélag Íslands, 1929, p. 211–212. “Í annan stað er það takmark kvikmyndarinnar að innprenta dónunum, þ.e. alþýðu, ameríska trú og amerískt siðgæði, innprenta þeim sem grandgæfilegast hin amerísku þjóðarvígurð eins og ‘Liberty’, ‘Opportunity’, og ‘Prosperity’, en merking þessara orða er sú, að sá æfintýramaðurinn, sem verstur er mannhatarinn, eigi að hafa mestan rétt til að útsjúga andskotans skríflinn.” The additional, italicized material is from *Alþýðubókin*. Önnur útgáfa. p. 136.

<sup>757</sup> Unitalicized material is from Laxness, *Alþýðubókin*, p. 211–212. “Í ár er t.d. hið mesta velgengnisár, og bæði Ford og Edison hafa spáð vaxandi velgengni undir stjórn Hoovers, og hver einasti staurblankur skurðgrafari er alveg í sjöunda himni yfir rekunni út af þeirri makalausú velgengni, sem alt af er verið að tala um í kvikmyndum og blöðum.” The additional, italicized material is from Laxness, *Alþýðubókin*. Önnur útgáfa, p. 136.

comes into being that someday, perhaps, the subject itself will be favored by success.

It is interesting to note that the alterations to the essay in the second edition bring the tenor of the argument even closer to the bleak vision presented by Adorno and Horkheimer, who trace a line from the production practices of Hollywood and the economic realities underlying those practices to the psychological principles that link entertainment products to the overall ideological framework of capitalistic modernity. In describing these principles, Adorno and Horkheimer speak of the “necessity, inherent in the system, of never releasing its grip on the consumer [...] all needs should be presented to individuals as capable of fulfillment by the culture industry, they should be so set up in advance that individuals experience themselves through their needs only as eternal consumers [...]”<sup>758</sup> What motivates and sustains the illusion when, in the daily life of consumers, they are constantly faced with the blatant truism that fulfillment of “all needs” is indeed not a constitutive factor of the present economic system, is the ideological trap of “probability calculations.” Adorno and Horkheimer point out that, “[i]deology hides itself in probability calculations. Fortune will not smile on all — just on the one who draws the winning ticket or, rather, the one designed to do so by a higher power [...] Chance itself is planned.”<sup>759</sup>

If economic realities are acknowledged and thus possibly questioned because these very realities, for Laxness as for Adorno and Horkheimer, foreclose any hope of such naturalized social mobility, desire might be

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<sup>758</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 113.

<sup>759</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 116–117.

transformed into resentment. This is dangerous because while desire encourages submission to the status quo (in the hope of satisfying desire, reaping benefits, at some later date), resentment indicates a dismissal of the status quo, and the possible desire to reap material benefits immediately, perhaps even by violent means (we should keep in mind that the Russian revolution was only a decade in the past when Laxness' essay was first published). So long as every "dead-broke ditch digger" grounds his existence on the hope "that he, too, can become a businessman, a factory owner or the president of the republic,," the imaginary economy hums along.

Facilitating these ideological effects is the visceral attraction of the moving image, what Colin McGinn simply calls the "power of movies," and some directors, Cecil B. DeMille among them, try to accentuate and magnify through spectacle and the very techniques that Laxness ironically refers to as "the mad screeching" of the "vitaphone effects" and "shameless display".<sup>760</sup> What the moving image is supremely capable of, precisely through its manipulation of desire, is seduction and mystification. What Laxness is pointing out is the effectiveness of a certain kind of imaginary economy that feeds on the real but is, at the same time, divorced from it. Laxness is thus highly concerned with the psychological effect of the image, the notion that films are instrumental in the production of subjectivity, while he also relentlessly historicizes and contextualizes the mode of film production. While acknowledging the power of the image, Laxness wants to look beyond the screen for the real significance of

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<sup>760</sup> Laxness, *The American Film in 1928*, pp. 152, 149. Colin McGinn. *The Power of Movies. How Screen and Mind Interact*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2005.

the cinematic artifact, a meaning that for him will always come back to society and the problem of the social interaction between texts and subjects.

Laxness left Hollywood in 1929, and thus a chapter in his life came to a close. He had given up on movies and decided to pursue a literary career. But in a very real sense, the early attraction to cinema would stay with him through the years. Films, in spite of his rejection of the medium's most prominent representative, the Hollywood movie, were never fully left behind, rather, they would come to circle through his fiction in an ever more politicized context, one that is in many ways reminiscent of his 1929 essay. Laxness increasingly associated American movies with a certain type of cultural and economic imperialism, and he made thematic use of his critical stance towards the American culture industry in plays and novels, most prominently in the novel *Atómstöðin* (Atom Station, 1948) and the play *Silfurtunglið* (The Silver Moon, 1954). Much later, Laxness returns to the psychological enigma that grounds the movie-going experience, something he had as a young man attempted to conceptualize, while delving deeper than before into the relationship between images and the subconscious. Indeed, the Good Cinema, that most curious of locales, ends up being the central mystery of Laxness last novel, *Guðsgjafaþula* (The Rhyme of God's Bounty, 1972).

I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent  
and still, and each thing in its last place, under the last dust.

Samuel Beckett  
*Endgame*

What does nihilism mean?  
That the highest values devalue themselves.  
The aim is lacking; "why?" finds no answer

Friedrich Nietzsche.  
*The Will to Power*

## Chapter 3: Staging Modernity

### *1. Modernity and the Ends of Humanity*

The Cold War, partly visible on the political horizon in the 1940s, was a hardened reality by the early 1950s. China had “fallen” to the Communists and the Soviet Union dominated an entire hemisphere; in addition, it had acquired nuclear weapons. At various points the war in the Korean peninsula threatened to escalate into a Third World War. By the middle of the decade, politics of suspicion and ideological intransigence divided the world into two blocks, the West and the East; the division between capitalism and communism becoming “concrete” with the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961. Nations not directly incorporated into the sphere of influence of one of the two superpowers had to learn to navigate a new world order that was at once more closely integrated and radically divided than ever before.<sup>761</sup>

These volatile and dangerous recalibrations, the passing of the torch of empire, constitute the geopolitical framework for significant social shifts in Iceland, including the rise of urban culture and the decline of traditional rural communities. The establishment of an American military base proved to be one

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<sup>761</sup> For more on the global social context of the period, the emergence of the Cold War, and the new world order thus brought into existence, see Noam Chomsky. *World Orders Old and New*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, pp. 26–73.



of the major signifiers of postwar social realities and is addressed by Halldór Laxness in his 1948 novel *Atómstöðin* (The Atom Station).<sup>762</sup> In several important respects, *Atómstöðin*, and the above outlined geopolitical tensions that it addresses, provides a fruitful context through which to approach the four plays that Laxness subsequently wrote, *Silfurtúnglið* (The Silver Moon, 1954), *Strompleikurinn* (The Chimney Play, 1961), *Prjónastofan Sólin* (Sun Knitting, 1962) and *Dúfnaveislan* (The Dove Party, 1966). *Straumrof* (Short Circuit, 1934), Laxness' first play, is also significant in this context, as it constitutes his first effort for the stage and relates to the later plays in various ways as will be discussed below. The chapter argues that all five are unfairly ignored in Laxness scholarship.

The general undervaluation of the plays is in itself not of primary importance, however, but is read as symptomatic of certain textual elements, both formal and thematic, that characterize the plays and these are the features which the chapter aims to explore. It is suggested that the reason for the absence of the plays, both from the stage and the scholarship, may involve the way in which they differ from Laxness' much more widely read novels from the same period in that they address the problematic of technological modernity in more abstract and despairing terms. There are other reasons, of course, that help explain why Laxness' theatrical works have taken a back-seat to his other prose works, including the assumption that plays should be seen on the stage rather than read. It is nevertheless interesting that while three of Laxness' four post-

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<sup>762</sup> The Icelandic parliament signed an agreement with the United States about an American military base in Keflavík at the end of 1946. This was a subject that divided the nation in the second half of the twentieth century. See Valur Gunnarsson. *Í eldlínu kalda stríðsins. Samskipti Íslands og Bandaríkjanna 1945–1960*. Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 1996.

Nobel novels revolve around a nostalgic depiction of the past, *Brekkukostsannáll* (The Fish Can Sing, 1957), *Innansveitarkrónika* (Chronicle of a County, 1970) and *Guðsgjafapula* (The Rhyme of God's Bounty, 1972), and to these one might be tempted to add the four volume autobiography published between 1975 and 1980, which also casts a mildly wistful look at the past, the plays that Laxness wrote after 1950 all thematize the moral void of modernity that is then illustrated by a thematic constellation that includes the loss of innocence, murder, exploitation, genocide and apocalypse.<sup>763</sup> As noted, a number of these figurations appear for the first time in Laxness' first post war novel, *Atómstöðin*, and we will therefore discuss some of its features briefly before moving on to the plays.<sup>764</sup>

*Atómstöðin* is narrated from the point of view of Uglya, a young girl from the country, who slowly comes to know the dangers as well as the rewards of urban living. She also witnesses how compromises, political machinations, ideological manipulations and the use of economic pressure have replaced physical force in the consolidation of power and its reproduction in post-war Iceland. The narrative intertwines the migration from the countryside with the rise of the bourgeoisie as these demographic shifts coalesce in the household where Uglya is employed, presided over by Búi Árland, a rich and powerful minister in the government.

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<sup>763</sup> The four volume autobiography is made up of *Í túninu heima* (In My Home Hayfield, 1975), *Úngur ég var* (Young I Was, 1976), *Sjömeistarasagan* (The Tale of the Seven Masters, 1978), *Grikklandsárið* (The Greek Year, 1980).

<sup>764</sup> Strictly speaking, *Eldur í Kaupinhafn* (Fire in Copenhagen, 1946) is Laxness' first post-war novel but it is also the third part of his epic novel *Íslandsklukkan* — it was common in this period for Icelandic authors to publish their novels in parts, the reasons were financial — but *Atómstöðin* is his first entirely *original* post-war work, i.e. conceived and brought to fruition in the period after the close of the war.

Youth subcultures, communist cells and bohemians make up a richly drawn urban environment and the feminine perspective of the narration brings contested issues such as the building of a public nursery to the forefront.<sup>765</sup> Women's rights thus become one of the thematic markers of modernity that Laxness activates in the novel while another is modern art.<sup>766</sup> The latter is particularly important as it is through the figuration of a pair of small time criminals and vagabonds, one of whom is an avant-garde poet, that the novel gestures towards the doubly unthinkable reality of a post war situation that must account for both the knowledge and memory of the Holocaust and the existence of the atom bomb, a weapon whose destructive capacity was without historical precedence. As a matter of fact, the poet identifies his poetry, made up of a nonsensical string of syllables, with the atom bomb, calling it "atom poetry," and himself an "atom poet".<sup>767</sup> In a key scene, he threatens suicide and, when confronted, explains that he has "seen all the photos from Buchenwald" and therefore finds it:

impossible to be a poet any longer. The emotions stand still and will not heed the helm after you have studied the pictures of those emancipated bodies; and those dead gaping mouths. The love life of the trout, the rose glowing on the heath, *dichterliebe*, it's all over. *Fini. Slutt.* Tristram and Isolde are dead. They

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<sup>765</sup> Public nursery references in this instance a publicly run or subsidized day-care for children. As women of the upper classes usually had hired help around the house, the push for such an imitative came from the working class.

<sup>766</sup> Both of these themes have important antecedents in Laxness' writings on modernity and modernization in the 1920s; both are for example addressed in stand-alone essays in *Alþýðubókin* (The Commoner's Book, 1929), which is discussed more closely in chapter 2.

<sup>767</sup> When modernism in poetry became a sustained literary practice in Iceland in the 1950s, the new movement of young poets was referred to as "atómskáldin" — the atom poets — in what was, with reference to Laxness' novel, meant to be a derogatory manner. Rather than taking umbrage, the poets willingly adopted the name for their "movement" (in the beginning there were, perhaps, five or six poets that could be grouped together in this fashion) and shifted at the same time the connotations of the concept. For more on this, see Eysteinn Þorvaldsson. *Atómskáldin. Aðdragandi og upphaf módernisma í íslenskri ljóðagerð*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1980, pp. 101–105.

died in Buchenwald. And now nothing less than suicide will do any more.”  
[...]<sup>768</sup>

“Atómskáldið” has long since ceased trying to employ language in a meaningful or straightforwardly communicative fashion in his poetry but now that he requires language to actually express the unspeakable, indeed unbelievable horror of the concentration camps, he (re)discovers its limits.<sup>769</sup> Predating Adorno’s famous axiom from 1949 “that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” the poet’s declaration in Laxness’ novel articulates a similar sentiment, that lyric poetry and perhaps even romantic love are dead, destroyed in the ovens.<sup>770</sup> And yet, the soliloquy of the atom poet suggests that making such a statement remains a symbolic gesture without existential weight, and therefore inadequate when faced with the void that is Buchenwald.<sup>771</sup> Suicide, however, is not mere symbolization; it’s an act, the resounding saying of “no” to existence. It is also the fundamental question posed by and to philosophy, according to Albert Camus; that is, given the premise that the universe is in its essence absurd and irrational, the decision whether or not to live becomes a fraught one, demanding

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<sup>768</sup> Halldór Laxness. *The Atom Station*. Trans. by Magnus Magnusson. London: Vintage, 2004, p. 66. Halldór Laxness. *Atómstöðin*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1948, pp. 104–105. In the original the quote reads: “Ég er búinn að sjá allar myndirnar frá Buchenwald [...] Það er ekki hægt að vera skáld leingur. Tilfinningarnar standa kyrrar og láta ekki að stjórn eftir að þú hefur skoðað þessa horkroppa á mynd; og þessa dauðu opnu munna. Ástamál silúnga, rósir rjóð á heiði, dichterliebe, það er búið; fini; slútt. Tristram og Ísodd eru látin. Þau önduðust í Buchenwald. Og næturgalinn er búinn að missa röddina af því við erum búnir að missa eyrað, það er dáíð á okkur eyrað, eyrað á okkur andaðist í Buchenwald. Og ekkert dugir framur minna en sjálfsmorð”.

<sup>769</sup> That the camps were “unbelievable” and that the Nazis were aware of the fact is a central, and one of the most horrific, strands of Primo Levi’s *The Drowning and the Saved*. Even if the Nazis lost the war, Levi recounts an officer saying, they would still have won the war of memory; they had done the unthinkable and the unthinkable would not be believed. Primo Levi. *The Drowned and the Saved*. New York and London: Vintage, 1988, pp. 3–4.

<sup>770</sup> Theodor Adorno. “Cultural Criticism and Society.” *Prisms*. Trans. by Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1983, p. 34.

<sup>771</sup> Adorno revisits the problem of Auschwitz in his later *Negative Dialectics*, noting for example that in the wake of the Holocaust, “our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience.” Theodor Adorno. *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. by E. B. Ashton. New York and London: Continuum, 2003, p. 362. *Negative Dialectics* was originally published in 1966.

a rationale that articulates and illustrates the subject's position *vis a vis* life.<sup>772</sup>

This is the dilemma that is exacerbated and made infinitely more pressing by the Holocaust and the concentration camps. The Final Solution, conceived of as the destruction of European Jewry, questions the very fundamentals of the ideology of progress and the Enlightenment, even the solidity of the conception of the human. As Zygmunt Bauman has argued, following Adorno and Horkheimer, the camps demonstrated how the mechanisms of rationality, technology and culture were all placed "in the service of a goal incomprehensible in its irrationality."<sup>773</sup> It is precisely this "incomprehensible" dimension of the Holocaust that the atom-poet hopes to gesture towards by and through the act of suicide.

### 1.1 "The Destroyer of Worlds"

The concept of suicide, denoting self-annihilation of entire communities, or humankind, is relevant in a larger thematic context, as indicated by the novel's very title, *Atómstöðin*. The presence of an American military base in Iceland has transformed the country into an "atom station," a militarized site, a naval station, possibly a launching station for missiles against the Soviet Union and most certainly a target in an all-out nuclear war, should one break out, which was thought likely.<sup>774</sup> Agreeing to host a military base is thus read as a potentially

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<sup>772</sup> Albert Camus. "Absurdity and Suicide." *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. New York and London: Vintage, 2008, pp. 19–31.

<sup>773</sup> Zygmunt Bauman. *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001, p. 136.

<sup>774</sup> It is important to note that at when Laxness' novel was published a nuclear confrontation between the two superpowers was impossible as the Soviet Union did not have nuclear weapons. However, their first experimental explosion of a nuclear weapon took place soon enough, or in the middle of 1949. Soviet intent to achieve nuclear capacity had however been clear since the end of the war and commentators agreed that the nuclear armament of the Soviet Union was inevitable. For decades, neither country would however have missiles whose range was long enough to reach from "home" to the country of the enemy; Iceland thus became the ideal launching pad.

suicidal gesture. The title also functions as a clear reminder that the Cold War can turn into a nuclear race and points forward to the important geographic position of Iceland midway between the two contesting superpowers.<sup>775</sup>

If the local connotations of the title invokes insights into the possible dangers inherent in making Iceland a potential target in a war, then the global viewpoint addresses itself to the fundamental problem of the fact that the human species has employed its mastery over the physical universe to suicidal ends. This is a conundrum that American novelist Don DeLillo encapsulates pithily in a scene in *White Noise* where Murray Jay Siskind, a professor whose goal is to start an academic department in Elvis Presley studies, notes that technology is riven by a fundamental contradiction, the fact that, "It creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other. Technology is lust removed from nature."<sup>776</sup> "Lust removed from nature," might serve as a definition of Freud's death drive but it also speaks to the loosening of the borders between man and machine and how desire, political action and cognitive functions can be funneled in directions previously unthinkable; more contemporaneous examples range from the grotesque *jouissance* of J.G. Ballard's

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<sup>775</sup> At the time when Laxness' novel was published, the arms race had not begun. The novel however correctly assumes that to be a historical inevitability.

<sup>776</sup> Don DeLillo. *White Noise*. Text and Criticism. New York and London: Penguin Books, 1998, p. 285. The theme of the corrupting and dangerous influence of technology and progress, Plato's *Phaedrus* where the Egyptian god Theuth makes a gift of the technology of writing to King Thamus and presents it as a cure for the flaws in human memory. Thamus disagrees, and sees writing in the long run as something that will undermine memory by giving people a way of outsourcing its function; what is written down need not be remembered. As Derrida pointed out, in the Ancient Greek the same word is employed for writing as remedy and writing as a malignancy, *pharmakon*, thus endowing the concept with mutually exclusive meanings, much as Murray does in the quote above where technology promises immortality and extinction at the same time. Plato. *Phaedrus*. Trans. by G.M.A. Grube. *Plato - Complete Works*. Ed. By John M. Cooper. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997. See also Jacques Derrida. "Plato's Pharmacy." *Disseminations*. Trans. by Barbara Johnson. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981.

*Crash* (1973) to the feminist politics of Donna Haraway's conception of the cyborg, to contemporary developments in AI.

Here we might also recall Robert Oppenheimer's famous exclamation on July 16, 1945 after witnessing the detonation of the first atomic bomb: "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."<sup>777</sup> The personal pronoun masks the fact that Oppenheimer speaks for mankind, whose Promethean strivings have made them from this moment onwards capable of destroying their world. The trauma that resides in the figure of the "atom poet" is thus twofold. In addition to asserting the reality of the Holocaust through the announcement of his impending suicide, the nomenclature that the poet has chosen for himself, identifying himself with science as destruction, foregrounds the fact that technology has crossed a barrier previously unimaginable and by forcing the unimaginable to reveal itself as reality, the modern subject had been burdened with what Susan Sontag termed "the imagination of disaster," which is characterized by:

the trauma suffered by everyone in the middle of the 20th century when it became clear that, from now on to the end of human history, every person would spend his individual life under the threat not only of individual death, which is certain, but of something almost insupportable psychologically — collective incineration and extinction which could come at any time, virtually without warning.<sup>778</sup>

The Holocaust, as Karl Jaspers noted, did not in fact represent the ultimate act of

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<sup>777</sup> Robert Oppenheimer was one of the central inventors of the nuclear bomb and appears to have uttered the phrase quoted above in a television documentary entitled *The Decision to Drop the Bomb* (1965). In the literature on the Manhattan project and Oppenheimer himself, the quote often appears slightly differently phrased, "the destroyer of worlds" being replaced by "the shatterer of worlds." In a recent article, James A Hijjiya notes that the earliest printed occurrence of the phrase he has been able to find is a 1948 *Time* article. See James A. Hijjiya. "The Gita of J. Robert Oppenheimer." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*. 2/2000, p. 124. The phrase appeared in the latter configuration ("shatterer of worlds") in 1958 in Robert Jungk's *Brighter than a Thousand Suns: A Personal History of the Atomic Scientists* (New York: Mariner Books, 1970), which was based on an interview with Oppenheimer.

<sup>778</sup> Susan Sontag. "The Imagination of Disaster." *Against Interpretation*. New York: Vintage, 1994, p. 224.

dehumanization; the genocide conducted by the Third Reich could be taken yet farther and the Holocaust made into a Nuclear Holocaust; the apocalypse of a peoples turned into planetary apocalypse — and with much the same mechanism, the pressing of the button not being that different from the turning of a valve.<sup>779</sup>

In *Atómstöðin* Laxness addresses these deep-seated questions and problems raised by technological modernity but as Peter Hallberg points out, the novel's ultimate stance is positive and humanist. In its course, Ugly comes to know an organist, a figure who, in addition to his musical prowess, is an amateur florist, a florid talker and a philosopher of the derelict and discarded, and proves not only her friend but also mentor and guide to a realm of values opposed to those represented by the rich and politically connected household where she works. It's in his house that she comes to know about modern art as well as grace, kindness and wisdom — and the fact that Laxness considered having the Danish translation of *Atómstöðin* published under the title of "The Organist's House" indicates the centrality of this locale.<sup>780</sup>

The organist gives Ugly a bouquet of flowers when they part for the last time. She has just learned that he has sold his house and instinctively asks where he is going, "The same road as the flowers," he responds, words that carry a distinct intimation of death. Ugly realizes this and gets flustered. Her next question, put forward in a slightly aggressive tone, is who will take care of the flowers. "Flowers are immortal," the organist laughs and shrugs the query off,

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<sup>779</sup> Karl Jaspers. *The Future of Mankind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961, pp. 55–57.

<sup>780</sup> Halldór Guðmundsson. *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*. Reykjavík: JPV Forlag, p. 526.



“You cut them in autumn and they will grow again in spring, — somewhere.”<sup>781</sup>

This melancholic exchange invokes an earlier conversation between the Organist and Ugly where the possibility is raised that Iceland might become a target in a nuclear war, now that it plays host to an American military base. The organist’s unworried response is as follows:

People reckon cities the more beautiful the larger the gardens in them, so that dwelling-houses can disappear between apple trees and rose bushes and mirror themselves in still lakes. The loveliest garden is nevertheless the countryside; that is the garden of gardens. When the nuclear bomb has razed the cities to the ground in this present world revolution because they have failed to keep pace with evolution, then the culture of the countryside will arise, and the earth will become the garden which it never was before except in dreams and poetry.<sup>782</sup>

The emphasis on rebirth is now tinged with an apocalyptic dimension; the organist envisions atomic war laying waste to the civilized world, and, moreover, he seems to welcome the thought, viewing the apocalypse as a rebirth and a cleansing. As a matter of fact, the conjunction of the two concepts, apocalypse and rebirth (or cleansing), is deeply ingrained in the historical trajectory of religious thinking across the world, the latter forming in a sense the guarantee of the positive essence of the apocalyptic event. Indeed, “apocalypsis” (ἀποκάλυψις) in the Ancient Greek means “un-covering,” to “reveal” something; the revelation is usually assumed to be the victory of good over evil.<sup>783</sup> The same

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<sup>781</sup> Laxness, *The Atom Station*, p. 178. Laxness, *Atómstöðin*, p. 273. In the original, the exchange is as follows: “Ég flyt í dag, Ég seldi húsið í gær. / Hvert ferðu, sagði ég. / Sömu leið og blómin, sagði hann. / Og blómin, sagði ég. Hver hugsar um þau? / Blóm eru ódauðleg, sagði hann og hló. Þú klippir þau í haust og þau vaxa aftur í vor, — einhversstaðar.”

<sup>782</sup> Laxness, *The Atom Station*, p. 172. Laxness, *Atómstöðin*, p. 264. In the original, the passage reads: “Menn telja borgir því fegurri sem í þeim eru stærri garðar, svo mannabústaðir hverfi milli apaldra og rósarunna og spegli sig í kyrrum vötnum. Fegurstur garða er þó sveitin, hún er garður garða. Þegar kjarnorkusprengjan hefur jafnað borgirnar við jörðu í þessari heimsbyltingu sem nú stendur, af því þær eru orðnar á eftir þróuninni, þá hefst menning sveitanna, jörðin verður sá garður sem hún aldrei var fyr nema í draumum og ljóðum.”

<sup>783</sup> When it comes to death and finitude, Christian eschatology is the relevant discourse, dealing with heaven and hell, the resurrection of the dead, and so forth. There has, however, been a slow movement transferring eschatological meanings on to the discourse of the apocalypse and in the

applies to the Old Testament and the Jewish religion. The Torah speaks of an “apocalypse” that’s associated with the moment when Jerusalem was lost and the Davidic line of kings extinguished, twin catastrophes that in fact threatened the tribe with extinction. However, that was not the manifestation of the apocalypse but rather the divine revelation, offered later, that the tribe had ample rewards in store as well as a magnificent rebirth as a nation.<sup>784</sup>

Attitudes changed in a dramatic fashion with secularization and the future came increasingly to be seen in hopeful light, emblematic of progress and the belief that things would always get better; the future would be more prosperous, peaceful and plentiful.<sup>785</sup> In the previous model, the apocalypse meant the confirmation of the worldview of a particular sect; it confirmed the existence of an afterlife or some power that was set to transform median reality into a more dreamlike and rewarding shape. It also meant that the future was a closed off temporal space, always being brought to a close with a coming/reaping/judgment/destruction while in modernity the future opened

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present context, at the risk of simplify matters, the latter concept is employed to cover both domains.

<sup>784</sup> Within apocalyptic discourse, the concept of rebirth thus invokes a range of cultural tropes, most notably perhaps via the “cleansing” effects of the Old Testament flood where Noah ensures that life on earth continues, backed by the perhaps not surprising facility of Jehovah in the field of spec drawings. For more on this, see John J. Collins. “Eschatological Dynamics and Utopian Ideals in Early Judaism.” *Imagining the End: Visions of Apocalypse from the Ancient Middle East to Modern America*. Ed. by Abbas Amanat and Magnus Bernhardsson. London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, pp. 69–89.

<sup>785</sup> A related mode of thinking came to the fore in the period preceding and during the initial stages of the First World War, with war and destruction being in some quarters viewed as a form of rebirth for a culture desiccated by the luxurious turpitude of modernity. Marinetti and the Italian futurists must count among the more vocal proponents of this view, as famously encapsulated in the ninth dictum of their manifesto: “We will glorify war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for [...]” F. T. Marinetti. “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism.” *Documents of 20th Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*. Ed. by Umbro Apollonio. Trans. by Robert Brain, R.W. Flint, J.C. Higgitt and Caroline Tisdall. New York: Viking Press, 1973, p. 19.

itself up to reveal a near limitless terrain.<sup>786</sup>

Certain religions, sects and cults in the West still adhere to apocalyptic scenarios but the presence and influence of these groups, cultural and political, is muted and little felt and, when these ideologies are contrasted with global warming for instance, or the nuclear threat, it becomes clear that notions of the world's end have indeed taken on a literal meaning in the twentieth century.<sup>787</sup> There is no question of a promise being fulfilled or a teleology being brought to a close; at stake is the fact that "our" world, the entire human habitat, has become highly vulnerable to human interventions while, whatever happens, the universe will continue to exist with the Earth going about its normal orbital rounds. If worst comes to worst, the human race will simply join the myriad species that have already left the planetary scene by reason of extinction. The unbearable weight of this thought is what Sontag seeks to capture in her notion of "the imagination of disaster".<sup>788</sup>

The organist's speech performs a balancing act between these two categories of apocalyptic discourse, one symbolic, the other literal. While the religious view violates humanism by downgrading earthly existence and positing it as inferior to whatever glories are supposed to await after death, the modern view strips the religious apocalyptic imagination of its idealist function, the

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<sup>786</sup> Martha Himmelfarb. *The Apocalypse. A Brief History*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 1–15.

<sup>787</sup> It is possible to criticize the claim that the effects of the doomsday and millennial sects is "muted and little felt" — one might for example point to how Bush and Rove targeted them for support during the 2004 presidential election. One might also note the phenomenal popularity of the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, which deals with the end times through the prism of Christian dispensationalism. For more on this, see Nicholas Guyatt. *Have a Nice Doomsday: Why Millions of Americans Are Looking Forward to the End of the World*. London: Ebury Press, Random House, 2008. A clear distinction between the sects and global warming could also be problematized by the fact that some of them actively wish to quicken the warming process to bring about "apocalypse".

<sup>788</sup> See also Elizabeth Kolbert. *The Sixth Extinction. An Unnatural History*. New York: Henry Holt and Co, 2014.

notion that global catastrophe would represent the confirmation of an enchanted world view, by substituting progress for teleology. The danger in the latter conceptual scenario is that it threatens to render the biological cessation of human life meaningless beyond the fact of the event itself, and how it entails a slight shift in the ecology of the planet. This refers us back to Camus' grounding philosophical question — to be or not to be — and how the true horror of the modern apocalypse is precisely to be found in its meaninglessness, something that aligns it in a scandalous but inevitable fashion with Auschwitz and the meaninglessness of the Holocaust.

The pastoral and Arcadian tenor of the Organist's thoughts, how he celebrates unspoiled nature and the countryside ("the garden of gardens"), and his cyclical sense of time, is the rhetorical method by which he raises human life to something beyond biology. He does this by way of the category of the aesthetic ("the earth will be the garden it never was except in dreams and poetry" as well as the imagery of the flowers).<sup>789</sup> There is however another reading possible, one less "positive" in that it asks at what point the organist's celestial peacefulness in the face of the extinction of the majority of humankind ceases to be emblematic of pastoral equanimity and belief in "life" and starts to resemble indifference, the viewpoint of a someone whose curiosity is raised by what is gazed upon but whose sympathies are miles away, as if the millennial-long strife of human beings to escape the brutal darkness of which history is made, means nothing.

The most cryptic utterance of the organist's speech is related to the

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<sup>789</sup> The organist's sense of time is cyclical in that the build-up of civilization and its destruction seems to be played out over and over, thus registering a temporal sensibility that precedes the emergence of historicity, what Frederic Jameson has referred to as the "oldest model of temporality on the books." See *A Singular Modernity. Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. London and New York: Verso, 2002, p. 4.

ahistorical and atemporal dimension of his evocation of a post-apocalyptic future, namely that it represents *progress*, and a situation where the metropolitan centers of modernity, rather than setting the cultural meridian and being at the forefront of change, innovation and revolution, find themselves “lag[ing] behind”. Reminiscent of the way in which French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard posits modernity as the natural successor of postmodernity, reversing the traditional historical chronology, the organist may be understood to be suggesting that internal to rational modernity is a flaw that will counter its noble aspirations, enhance its destructive capacities and thus ensure its collapse, making modernity the inevitable precursor to primitive pastorality.<sup>790</sup> The failure, however, is not a permanent one, nor is it a “failure,” the cycle simply repeats itself. Thus it is possible to understand the subject of modernity in this context as “lagging behind” in much the same way as the townspeople in Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* who had not yet heard the news of the death of god and were therefore behind the curve. For them, life went on as ever and the “madman” who knew the truth realized that he had come too early.<sup>791</sup>

Of Ugla and the Organist’s final parting which occurs while a political betrayal of the most serious and tragic sort, namely the surrender to the American demands for a military base, reaches its pitiful crescendo in a nearby square with a burlesque scene of nationalism as eminent nineteenth century poet Jónas Hallgrímsson’s “bones” are carried away for reburial, and Ugla hurries

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<sup>790</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard. “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” Trans. by Régis Durand. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. p. 79.

<sup>791</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Gay Science. With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. Trans. by Josefine Nauckhoff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 120–121.

away, clutching the bouquet of flowers to her chest Hallberg notes:<sup>792</sup>

This last meeting between the organist and Ugly is a good example of how mysticism and radical social critique were interlaced in Halldór. With these two key characters of the narrative he puts forward his belief in the future of man. The organist's flowers — the immortal flowers — grasped by the girl from the North Country become the symbol of how all betrayals of humankind are useless; life is indomitable.<sup>793</sup>

Hallberg's interpretation of the novel's conclusion is persuasive; rather than invoking (again) the twin specters of the Holocaust and nuclear war, life is presented as indomitable. The organist may be an ambiguous figure, but the textual consciousness itself is not pessimistic when it comes to rendering the outlines of a future that depends on the likes of Ugly and not the rich and politically powerful man who employed her, an empty shell of a human being in fact, nor the organist, who only went out at night, as he was so utterly disgusted with civic society.

### 1.2 Apocalyptic Theater

The publication of the monumental rewriting of the saga heritage, *Gerpla* (The Happy Warriors, 1952), followed *Atómstöðin*, with the sweetly nostalgic *Brekkukotsannáll* (The Fish Can Sing, 1957) rounding off the novelistic decade. In between the publication of these two texts, Laxness received the Nobel Prize in literature. It is however in his theatrical works that he most rewardingly

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<sup>792</sup> The "betrayal" at stake here is the agreement with the US about Iceland hosting a military base; the nationalistic farce taking place at that moment is the public re-burial of Iceland's best loved poet, Jónas Hallgrímsson, who passed in Copenhagen in the late nineteenth century, but whose bones had just been retrieved, and were to be ceremonially put into the ground in Þingvellir, a national park and the original site of Iceland's (and the world's) first parliament. Laxness makes clear that the latter issue is intended as pure spectacle, a nationalistic diversion to make the deal with the US easier.

<sup>793</sup> Peter Hallberg. *Hús skáldsins II. Um skáldverk Halldórs Laxness frá Sölku Völku til Gerplu*. Trans. by Helgi J. Halldórsson. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1971, p. 158.

continued his engagement with the negativity of modernity, taking up in a resolute and unblinking fashion the problematic that *Atómstöðin* gestures towards but then shies away from. Indeed, *Silfurtúnglið* (The Silver Moon, 1954), staged six years after the publication of *Atómstöðin*, can in a certain sense be read as a companion piece to the novel but it is also much darker, largely bereft of hope.<sup>794</sup> When Peter Hallberg, discussing *Silfurtúnglið*, notes that “Laxness may never have written as despairing a work,” he is by no means being hyperbolic; the life-affirming framework of *Atómstöðin* has been abandoned.<sup>795</sup> The similarities are nevertheless important. For example, the main protagonist, Lóa, a newly married young mother, resembles the narrator of *Atómstöðin* in many ways. Both, of course, are named after birds, but in addition, Lóa, much like

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<sup>794</sup> Both works, as a matter of fact, share a fairly lowly position in the totem pole that structures the aesthetic hierarchy of Laxness’ works, and which sets by far the greatest value on Laxness’ epic novels. Haukur Ingvarsson has shown how a consensus came into being, lasting for decades, that *Íslandsklukkan* (Iceland’s Bell, 1943–1946) represented the pinnacle of Laxness’ artistic achievement. See *Andlitsdrættir samtíðarinnar. Síðustu skáldsögur Halldórs Laxness*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag and ReykjavíkurAkademían, 2009, pp. 20–40. What many critics felt to be lost when Laxness moved on from the social realist novel — a clear political stance, the expression of humanistic sentiments — is clearly on display in Njörður P. Njarðvík’s discussion of *Guðsgjafaþula*, a novel that in part deals with life in a fishing town, when he compares it unfavorably with *Salka Valka* (1931–32), Laxness epic novel about the harsh realities of a small and remote fishing village. For Njarðvík, Laxness’ later fiction is characterized by “irony” and a stance that he describes “ideology degree zero”, finally asking if a *Salka Valka* could possibly have been “hiding away” among the crowd of women employed to salt the fish. “The world of the working class has receded from sight,” Njörður says in closing. See Njörður P. Njarðvík. “Samfúnía. Fáein orð um þjóðfélagslega umfjöllun í skáldsögum Halldórs Laxness.” *Sjö erindi um Halldór Laxness*. Ed. by Sveinn Skorri Höskuldsson. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1972, pp. 152–153. In the original: “Eins og Gerpla endar hún í tómi, eins konar hugmyndafræðilegum núllpunkti.” “Umfjöllun höfundar virðist mér hins vegar bera keim af kaldhæðni.” “Veröld hins vinnandi fólks er komin úr sjónmáli.” Jón Viðar Jónsson gestures towards *Atómstöðin*’s position on the aforementioned totem pole when he asserts that the novel, in his opinion, can be seen as one of Laxness’ “most interesting,” even being a “keyword in the entire oeuvre.” Jón Viðar Jónsson. “Er hægt að leikgera Laxness? Atómstöð Halldórs Kiljans Laxness á leiksviði og í bío.” *Andvari*, 2002, p. 148. Staking out such a strong position would be unnecessary, even eccentric, when it comes to the works firmly canonized. Jónsson also describes *Atómstöðin* as Laxness’ by far “most political work” (p. 145), a comment that in a sense expresses a widely and long held consensus but also functions to remind contemporary readers of the “scandalous” dimension of a text whose social consciousness produces a network of references to contemporary politics and social issues, even famous personages, in a way that was considered highly unusual at the time — even, as noted, scandalous. The ambiguous status of *Atómstöðin* and *Silfurtúnglið*, it is safe to venture, has much to do with their prominent political dimension. For more on this see Hallberg, *Hús skáldsins II*, pp. 139–162; Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, pp. 524–532.

<sup>795</sup> Hallberg, *Hús skáldsins II*, p. 162.

Ugla, moves to Reykjavík in search of something that can supplement her rural life and the migration from the countryside to the capital is thus addressed.<sup>796</sup> In both cases the motivation for the move to the capital is music; learning the organ in Ugla's case, becoming a famous singer in Lóa's case. In general, *Silfurtúnglið* tells the story of Lóa, a housewife out in the countryside and a new mother, who is "enticed" away from home and hearth by an entertainment entrepreneur and local mogul, Feilan Ó. Feilan who runs a cabaret theater called Silfurtúnglið. As the play progresses, ever larger culture industry forces are revealed and Lóa is sucked deeper and deeper into the soulless vortex of cultural reification and commercialization. Finally, the qualities of authenticity that initially made her such a tantalizing "property" for Feilan have been erased by her experiences in the cabaret.

Much like the earlier novel, *Silfurtúnglið* is concerned with the new social role of urban women, in fact, the way in which the play grapples with an immense and complex gender problematic represents one of its most suggestive and demanding aspects. The gender dimension of *Silfurtúnglið* should be emphasized as it constitutes an important thematic strand that links to all of Laxness' plays and decisively inflects any reading of their approach to modernity. This will be addressed in much greater detail below. If gender represents for Laxness a problematic that has not been overcome or adequately resolved in modernity, the two texts, *Atómstöðin* and *Silfurtúnglið*, also contrast modernity's promise of freedom and emancipation in a wider sense with the threat of system imperatives, which in this case are symbolized by nuclear technology and the fact that man's rationality and domination of nature has brought him to the brink

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<sup>796</sup> "Ugla" means owl while "Lóa" refers to the golden plover.



of the annihilation of the species. Indeed, the possibility — probability even — of humankind rendering itself extinct through its technological prowess, becoming the “destroyer of worlds,” provides the impetus for four of Laxness’ five plays; the metaphoric of thermonuclear weapons being a constitutive element of the rhetoric of all but Laxness’ very first play.<sup>797</sup> Yet *Straumrof* (Short Circuit), as the title suggests, is concerned with energy harvested from a new energy source, electricity in this instance, and thus links thematically to the latter four plays.

What needs to be emphasized however is what Hallberg gestures towards in the quote above, that although *Silfurtúnglið* has textual affinities with *Atómstöðin*, and can thus be read as the author’s continued grappling with many of the earlier novel’s central themes, it is also in its radical negativity different from its predecessor, and this difference points the way towards the three late plays of the following decade. Often criticized for being melodramatic and, even, “obvious” in its political address, *Silfurtúnglið* has layers not often probed by critics, although they have been circled around, so to speak, in interesting ways, as will be discussed more closely shortly.<sup>798</sup> Suffice to say that exegesis on the play tends to center on the main character’s degradation and despair, mapping the links in the chain that eventually lead to Lóa’s tragic and forlorn ending as, having just been sexually exploited by an industry bigwig, she learns of her infant son’s death.

A reading that emphasizes the downward spiral and melodramatic ending

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<sup>797</sup> That is, the plays *Silfurtúnglið*, *Strompleikurinn*, *Prjónastofan Sólin* and *Dúfnaveislan*. *Straumrof* predates the splitting of the atom.

<sup>798</sup> “Úr heimi leiklistarinnar: Silfurtúnglið eftir Halldór Kiljan Laxness.” *Spegillinn*, 1 October, 1954, pp. 171–172; “Silfurtúnglið.” *Fálkinn*, 15 October, 1954, p. 3; Einar Bragi. “Hugleiðingar um Silfurtúnglið og fleira.” *Birtingur*, 1/1955, p. 34–35; Jónas Guðmundsson. “Silfurtúnglið á öðru kvertéli.” *Tíminn*, 30 April, 1975, p. 9.

as the culmination of a fall from grace risks certain lacunae and may even be seen as inherently flawed. In order to be coherent, it depends on the presence of an alternative to the fallen modernity that is shown to engulf and “corrupt” Lóa; in order for there to be a fall there must have been an original Eden. In *Atómstöðin*, such an alternative is presented in Ugla’s country home, where she goes to give birth and raise her child in security and pastoral idyll, and, most importantly, where she is stationed at a safe distance from urban threats, ideological, moral and physical.<sup>799</sup> However, despite Ugla and Lóa sharing rural origins, nothing akin to Fljótsdalur, Ugla’s home county, is to be seen in *Silfurtúnglið*, there is no alternative from whence to measure and map her gradual decline, despite a lineage of critics arguing otherwise.<sup>800</sup> The despair invoked quite appropriately by Hallberg references the terminal conclusion of Lóa’s excursion into the culture industry, the way in which the final act stages the apocalypse of her private world.

The notion of the apocalypse as stated above runs through all of Laxness’ theatrical works, even the very first, *Straumrof*, performed in 1934, which addresses gender issues in a provocative fashion. The play is ostensibly

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<sup>799</sup> “I was sitting down in the gully beside the stream, where the smell of the reeds is stronger in winter than in summer; it was here that we had played as children with sheep’s horns and jawbones, and filled a rusty tin can in the stream with the sort of water which could just as easily be cocoa, or mutton broth, or schnapps. And later there stood a tent here on the bank for three late–summer nights.” Laxness. *The Atom Station*, p. 126. Laxness, *Atómstöðin*, p. 196. In the original: “Ég sit niðri í gilinu við lækinn þar sem reyrylktin er sterkari á veturna en sumrin, það var hér sem við lékum okkur börn að horni og kjálka; og fyltum ryðgaða dós í læknum af þesskonar vatni sem alteis gat verið súkkulaði, kjötsúpa og brennivín. Og síðan stóð toptjald hér á bakkanum þrjár síðsumarnætur.”

<sup>800</sup> This relates to a thematic pattern often invoked and analyzed in the context of Laxness’ later works, which we will be referring to as the “two worlds”-theme. This will be dealt with in detail below. At the moment, it should be emphasized, for clarity, that Lóa comes from a small town in the countryside, not all that dissimilar to Ugla’s background, although the latter’s is more rural and isolated. The most pivotal item distinguishing them is Ugla’s youth and status at the beginning of *Atómstöðin* as a single woman while Lóa is married and a mother. These are no mere details but are of pivotal importance in both cases, decisively shaping the progression of the narrative.

concerned with the quiet and privileged life of the Kaldal family; the patriarch, Loftur, being involved in business while the wife, Gæa, ensures the equilibrium, distinction and virtue of the bourgeoisie home. The stormy love life of the daughter of the house, Alda, motivates what resembles a comedy of manners in the first act. However, as the family leaves for their hunting lodge in the country things take a darker turn. Gæa sleeps with Alda's new fiancée and the third act constitutes a dramatic confrontation between the fiancée and Gæa regarding the various bourgeoisie "proprieties" that can be said to be at stake in such a complicated situation. The play then concludes with the destruction of the "nuclear" family, partly willed and hoped for, as in the case of millennial sects, but also the manifestation of the deathly dynamic that infuses a social infrastructure described by Weber as an "iron cage," transmuting however what the great sociologist envisioned as a confined existence into an apocalyptic climax of brutality, mayhem, tragedy and in a strange way, a twisted emblem of the concept of justice; all of which can be read under the auspices of the world-view posited by Freud less than three decades after Weber where modernity is literally torn asunder by the discontents bred by civilization. The conclusion, much as in *Silfurtúnglið*, represents the destruction of the world of the female lead, Gæa, and the desperate and in a sense apocalyptic ending of her direct genetic line and symbol of the future, when she murders her daughter.

*Silfurtúnglið*, like *Atómstöðin*, is partly a political allegory. However, its more substantial dimension involves the way the text employs representations of the culture industry on the one hand and images of domestic "idyll" on the other to express the experience of modernity as a dead-end for the development of both a harmonious and just society on the one hand and the free play of

subjectivity in the individual's interactions with the world on the other. This is still done through a "realistically" motivated narrative and characterization that, if not seeking verisimilitude, is at least internally coherent. The work of Brecht has frequently been mentioned as an influence, in part because *Silfurtúnglið* features a musical number and stage performances quite prominently and partly because of its political dimension. The play's formal conventionality would however seem to distance it from the aesthetics of Brecht's epic theater. Conversely, Laxness' first play, *Straumrof*, was often associated with an avant-garde movement of the first decades of the twentieth century, namely expressionism.<sup>801</sup>

To an extent, such associations can be justified but the "expressionistic" formal elements that are so often mentioned are in fact not intrusive and although by no means anemic, they cannot be said to trump the formal traditionalism that is considerably more prevalent, even in the context of the last two acts, which critics often pointed to when the play's expressionistic elements were being discussed. It could be argued that the above assessment, that the text

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<sup>801</sup> Expressionism has strong associations with German painting and later literature, poetry in particular, and rejected both impressionism and naturalism. The Blaue Reiter group's exhibitions in Munich in 1911–1912 are considered a key moment in the history of expressionism. David Macey notes that "Expressionist painting uses distorted lines and perspective and forms and bold colours to express raw emotion and spirituality." "Expressionism." *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*. New York and London: Penguin Books, 2000, p. 118. Discussing Expressionism in the context of cinema, Thomas Elsaesser emphasizes how quickly the concept became a designation of a certain kind of fashionable stylization, verging on being a brand name that proved extremely beneficial in terms of exporting German art — German exports being in general not very popular in Europe in the aftermath of the First World War. Thomas Elsaesser. *Weimar Cinema and After. Germany's Historical Imaginary*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 18–61. In the context of Laxness, see: Árni Ibsen. "Icelandic Theater 1790–1975." *A History of Icelandic Literature*. Ed. by Daisy Neijmann, Lincoln and London: The University of Nebraska Press, 2006, p. 566; Sveinn Einarsson. "Vorið geingur í lið með kálfum. Um Laxness og leiklistina." *Þar ríkir fegurðin ein. Öld með Halldóri Laxness*. Ed. by Einar Sigurðsson. Reykjavík: Landsbókasafn Íslands – Háskólabókasafn, 2002, pp. 31–32. Interestingly, Stefán Baldursson aligns *Straumrof* with the theater of the absurd, rather than expressionism. He does this with particular reference to the function of broadcast radio in the play, a subject which we will return to. See Stefán Baldursson. "Uppþornuð sítróna og tvær rauðar jólakúlur." *Sjö erindi um Halldór Laxness*. Ed. by Sveinn Skorri Höskuldsson. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1973, pp. 88–91.

is an example of expressionism, has much to do with the tendency to transpose the confrontation in the last act between Gæa and her lover, a debate that turns into an increasingly heated argument, into the realm of the irrational and the uncontrolled passions; this applies of course only to Gæa's contributions to the exchange (passionate, irrational), which is nonsensical, her reasoning is sharp, sharper indeed than her male lover's, as will be shown in due course.<sup>802</sup>

A more evenhanded description might note that the play is a psychological drama, which, in the first act, is fused with a comedy of manners; there are heavily symbolic formal devices, some teetering between the categories of expressionism and the pathetic fallacy, particularly when it comes to the way in which wild nature reflects the inner turmoil of the characters. The "purest" expressionistic elements of the play are brought forth by way of the deployment of broadcast media in the text. More specifically, the formal constraints of the medium of the radio and the formal traditions of the content of broadcasts are subverted and made subordinate to the expression of a highly subjective deranged view of the world. The text still strives for psychological verisimilitude, linear plotting and realism, if inflected by psychoanalysis in a manner that was highly unusual on the Icelandic stage at the time.<sup>803</sup>

Starting with *Strompleikurinn* (The Chimney Play, 1961), the first in a series that quite appropriately has been called Laxness' experimental

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<sup>802</sup> *A Dream Play* (1901) and *The Ghost Sonata* (1907) by August Strindberg are often taken to represent the inaugurating moment of expressionism in the theater. Laxness was enormously impressed by Strindberg and he is frequently mentioned as an influence on *Straumrof* (more on this later); however it suffices to compare the high abstraction of *A Dream Play* and the complete lack of any form of a realistic social setting in *The Ghost Sonata* to *Straumrof* to ascertain that little if any connection exists between these works.

<sup>803</sup> The connection to Freud and psychoanalysis was commented upon at the time, as will be discussed below.

“trilogy,”<sup>804</sup> followed by *Prjónastofan Sólin* (Sun Knitting, 1962) and *Dúfnaveislan* (The Dove Party, 1966), an anti-realistic aesthetic comes to dominate Laxness’ theatrical work. These late plays dispense, for the most part, with mechanisms of traditional mimetic representational structures and models and approach modernity by way of a thorough recalibration of theatrical form. Aspects of the realist play are still present, much as traditional linguistic usage characterize the works of Kafka; nothing in the outward appearance of the articulations of the Kafkaesque text suggest high abstraction. It is the cumulative effect, however, that proves disorientating, the gradually revealed unfathomability of the diegetic world that is coming into being, just like in Kafka, line by line in Laxness’ late plays. In a 1967 essay on *Prjónastofan Sólin*, Laxness expresses a similar thought when he says, “Although the play is realistic, few things are in their ‘right’ place.”<sup>805</sup>

A strong absurdist sensibility runs through all three plays as well, and this is without a doubt the “feature” or aspect of the texts that critical assessments, reviews and scholarly work dealing with the plays most often commented upon when it came to the task of categorization and assigning them a place in contemporary literary and theatrical culture. In his seminal work on the theater of the absurd, Martin Esslin identifies the grounding framework that unites the disparate authors assembled under the aegis of the absurd by emphasizing:

the sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited [and so the absurd is that which] is devoid of purpose [...]. Cut off from religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost;

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<sup>804</sup> Einarsson, “Vorið geingur í lið með kálfum,” p. 42.

<sup>805</sup> Halldór Laxness. “Heimur Prjónastofunnar.” *Yfirskyggðir staðir*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1971, p. 85. In the original: “Þó leikurinn sé raunsæislegur, þá eru fæstir hlutir þar á ‘réttum’ stað.”

all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.<sup>806</sup>

This definition, when unpacked, shares a number of philosophical and aesthetic concerns with Laxness' three late plays, which is where the author most fully returns to the historical situation that in *Atómstöðin* was characterized by the double negative of a nihilistic futurity and the evacuation of substantive meaning from past models — “Tristram and Isolde are dead. They perished in Buchenwald,” is here the ultimate expression — and he does so employing various formal and thematic “tools” to render an existential crisis of temporal lockdown where the regulative ideals associated with the future and, as mentioned, past ideals have, on the one hand, lost their promise and, on the other, their legitimation and authority.<sup>807</sup>

The clearest expression of this textual positioning is *Prjónastofan Sólin*, whose plot is convoluted while also being devoid of incident, right up until the end when the stage literally explodes in open warfare and, finally, a symbolic atomic apocalypse, between factions not easily identified, although the aggressor is aligned with the French dissident paramilitary group *Organisation de l'armée secreta* (OAS), but could also be taken to represent feminism turned militant.<sup>808</sup> The old French villa that is the setting for the play is destroyed in the battle that ensues, an event that stands as the most direct figuration of an apocalypse in Laxness' plays. The last section takes place in the ruins, in some after- or hinterworld perhaps, where each character gets their “just” comeuppance, which

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<sup>806</sup> Martin Esslin. *The Theater of the Absurd*. Third Edition. London: Penguin Books, 1983, p. 22.

<sup>807</sup> At the same time, however, there are important differences between Laxness' late plays and the way in which Esslin theorizes the theater of the absurd, as will be addressed when we get to the last three plays.

<sup>808</sup> Peter Hallberg notes the connection to OAS in “Laxness som dramatiker.” *Sticketeljén Solen*. Göteborg: Zindermans Förlag, 1964.

is largely to continue with their existence as before; lives that the play has shown, in an almost procedural fashion and on a case by case basis, to be grounded in artifice, deception and self-delusion.<sup>809</sup>

Indeed, from the very start of the play, when we are introduced to the derelict knitting “factory” entitled Sun Knitting, which is housed in the aforementioned French villa, the reader is bound to ask a number of questions, the first perhaps pertaining to the mystery of why the knitting operation would concentrate on mittens when its production is supposed to support those without arms, that is, those unfortunate enough to have lost their arms through some catastrophic event. The oblique and never openly stated connection to victims of war (the paintings of Otto Dix might be a point of reference here) is unmistakable, and only grows stronger as “militant” operations come, as noted above, to increased prominence in the narrative of the play.

The woman who runs the knitting store, Sólborg, uses the rest of the profits to subsidize the workings of a strange religious order, Allsnægtarborðið, run by mystic and street corner philosopher Ibsen Ljósdal. In financial plight, however, Sólborg is forced to advertise for lodgers, the only takers being the operator of a beauty pageant, whose business is loathsome enough for Ibsen, who until then had resided in the French villa for free, to leave in something of a

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<sup>809</sup> Laxness’ own exegesis of the ending accentuates the apocalypse and the last scene as taking place in something akin to heaven: “The war breaks out. This world is engulfed by fire. And just as in other wars, there is only victor: the nightingale. The final scene takes place the day after the apocalypse when each and everyone finds their soul mate for eternity. The nightingale is singing, — actually, it’s only an Icelandic thrush; but this is Heaven and the curtain comes down.” Laxness, “Heimur Þrjónastofunnar,” p. 85. In the original: “Styrjöldin skellur á. Þessi heimur geingur upp fyrir eldi. Og eins og í öðrum styrjöldum er aðeins sigurvegari: næturgalinn. Lokaastriðið gerist daginn eftir ragnarök þegar einn og sérhver finnur sálarmaka sinn um aldir alda. Næturgalinn er að sýngja, — það er reyndar aðeins íslenskur þröstur; en þetta er Himnaríki og tjaldið fellur.” A note should be made registering the recurrence of the nightingale as a symbol connected to the end of days. In *Atómstöðin*, the atom poet invokes the nightingale in relation to the horrors of Buchenwald.



huff. What then takes place could be described as a confrontation between the values of Ljósdal and the beauty pageant operator but is in fact more multifaceted and complicated than that.

The apocalypse in *Prjónastofan Sólin* is reminiscent of the apocalyptic utopia imagined by the organist in *Atómstöðin* in the sense that, much like his flowers, the characters reappear after a certain period of time has lapsed. The difference is the value system that is in place. There is nothing to indicate in *Prjónastofan Sólin* that the human endeavor, generally speaking, is particularly fruitful or, for that matter, that humans are worth being “replanted” so that the species may continue and pop up in safe places beyond the territories of terror, war and catastrophes. Theater scholar and playwright Hávar Sigurjónsson has articulated how a specific formal device is pivotal in creating the above mentioned sense of distancing and alienation, noting that the author:

lends the characters words to speak but is not interested in bringing them into being from the text. They don't think anything beyond what they say. This makes them transparent and stylized. At the same time they lose their credibility as people of flesh and blood. They become fictional with a capital letter.<sup>810</sup>

Sigurjónsson's description, brief as it is, still serves as an excellent indication of why Laxness' plays did not become popular successes. While there are exceptions to Sigurjónsson's “blanket” categorization of the play's characters, particularly with respect to “Fegurðarstjórinn” — the beauty pageant manager who is a representative of the culture industry, and highly reminiscent of Feilan Ó. Feilan in *Silfurtúnglið* — there is indeed a feeling of emptiness that pervades

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<sup>810</sup> Sigurjónsson, “Frá Strompleik til Dúfnaveislu,” p. 87. In the original the quote reads: “Hann leggur persónunum orð í munn en hefur ekki áhuga á að skapa þær úr textanum. Þær hugsa ekki annað en þær segja. Það gerir þær gagnsæjar og stílfærðar. Um leið glata þær trúverðugleika sínum sem persónur af holdi og blóði. Þær verða leikpersónur með stórum staf.”

the play and the characters.

The apocalyptic war that destroys the French villa, the setting of the play, points forward to Rögnvaldur Reykill in *Dúfnaveislan*, an unscrupulous entrepreneur and inventor, as well as a rapist, who is developing a weapon of immense destructive capacity, a cross between the neutron and atomic bomb, which is also handy in close quarters. Not all aspects of the play are that dramatic, however, and the ostensible leads of the play are as devoid of “dramatics” as is possible to imagine. “Pressarinn” or “the ironer,” an elderly man who steam presses trousers for a living in a modest facility located in a basement, and his wife are the central characters of the play, which opens just as Pressarinn has put up a small notice in his window advertising his new special rate for ironing.

Rather than a customer, however, it is a representative of the “union of ironers” who turns up, informing the bewildered old man that through his “special offer” he is in fact undercutting his fellow ironers and breaking union rules. When the union official discovers that the unassuming old man whom he apparently thought would be easy to intimidate has in his possession a substantial amount of money, which is crammed into every nook and cranny of the humble abode — the money being an ever-present thorn in the ironer’s side, as there is nothing he dislikes more than money — he quickly changes his tune, becoming more friendly and offering to “manage” the old man’s affairs. As he relieves the old ironer of his money, with the latter’s full consent, he also talks him and his wife into adopting a child.

As the play progresses, the child, a young girl when adopted, Anda, grows

into a fair lady and the ironer's money, being shrewdly invested by the union official, also grows until it reaches vast sums, making the ironer, without his knowledge, into a world class industrial magnate. Motivating the narrative is the old ironer's wish for a birthday party in which he will serve "doves" and the fateful meeting of Anda and the aforementioned Rögnvaldur Reykill, who seems intent on getting his hands on the ironer's fortune in order to complete the development of his mechanism of destruction.

The rhetoric of "mutual assured destruction" and "a winnable nuclear war," coming out of think tanks in the United States, from the military and in various propaganda from the mid 1950s onwards, represents the lunacy of institutional structures faced with the "imagination of disaster," and, broadly speaking, is the raw material of a new social reality that Laxness transposes and activates within the textual domain of his plays, infusing it with a mixture of humor, melodramatic touches, and, significantly, a form of deterritorialization as the site of the apocalyptic events is Iceland (although never specified directly; also, it must be admitted that the concept of deterritorialization loses much of its connotative range in the face of global disaster).<sup>811</sup> Intertwined, as well, are a variety of formal and aesthetic idioms, ranging from the theater of the absurd to nihilism, the theater of cruelty, remnants of the old tradition of the vaudeville and, as one astute reviewer noted, the influence of the works of Chaplin can also

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<sup>811</sup> The "MAD" doctrine can be traced back to John Foster Dulles' coinage of "massive retaliation" during his stint as Secretary of State for Eisenhower in the 1950s. See John Foster Dulles. "The Evolution of Foreign Policy." Department of State, Press Release No. 81. Archived from the original on 1998–2011 by the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation. ([http://www.nuclearfiles.org/menu/key-issues/nuclear-weapons/history/cold-war/strategy/article-dulles-retaliation\\_1954-01-12.htm](http://www.nuclearfiles.org/menu/key-issues/nuclear-weapons/history/cold-war/strategy/article-dulles-retaliation_1954-01-12.htm)). Retrieved on 20 May 2014. The concept of a "winnable nuclear war" was mocked by Stanley Kubrick in his 1968 film, *Dr. Strangelove, or How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. For more on this, see Noam Chomsky and Larry Polk. *Nuclear War and Environmental Catastrophe*. New York and Emeryville: Seven Story Press, 2013.

be felt.<sup>812</sup> Laxness furthermore allows the reader/spectator to trace the absurdist streaks — the register of the absurd being dominant in terms of generating meaning in the plays — to particular traumatic events in modernity.

Psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton's observation concerning the shift in the relationship of human beings to the world in a nuclear age speaks closely to this multifaceted aspect of Laxness' late plays and indicates how the absurd is motivated and how it functions:

There's something so extreme about these weapons and their capacity to destroy much of the world's population that it has a dimension of absurdity [...] In my view, the only relatively accurate kind of perception of nuclear weapons is to see them in their apocalyptic dimension, in their world-destroying dimension [...] One has to draw upon the apocalyptic dimension of what they do, and one also has to draw on the absurdity of us destroying our species by our own technology.<sup>813</sup>

In *Strompleikurinn*, Laxness puts forward what may be his boldest fusion of realism and the absurd. A military barrack provides the setting, which is thus immediately politicized as well as precisely situated in historical and social terms. The play is a cynical comedy that tells of the declining fortunes of a mother and daughter who, used to a gentrified life in the countryside, moved to Reykjavík after a family setback. When the play opens, the pair is approaching complete penury and they employ every means at their disposal to survive in a world that makes quite clear how limited the options available to women in this situation actually are. The barracks mentioned above were abandoned by the US after the war and after the construction of a base in Miðnesheiði on the

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<sup>812</sup> Gunnar Bergmann. "Strompleikurinn eftir Halldór Kiljan Laxness." *Vísir*, 12 October, 1961, p. 9.

<sup>813</sup> Robert Jay Lifton is quoted in Reed Johnson. "The Bomb Is Back. Just when we thought it was passe, the nuclear threat looms large." *Los Angeles Times*. 18 June, 2002, p. E1. The source for the Lifton quote and Johnson's article is Tad Daley. *Apocalypse Never. Forging the Path to a Nuclear Weapon-Free World*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010, p. 9.

Reykjanes peninsula, and were subsequently inhabited by Reykjavík's poor; the settlements that thus came into being during a time of a huge demographic influx to the capital were literal ghettos.<sup>814</sup>

The play's characterization, similarly, is more recognizably "human" than in the two works that followed. At the same time, the text is "framed" by an utterly absurd occurrence, one that is signified in the title of the play and its reference to a chimney. Mrs. Ólfer, the "matriarch" of the household, has stuck the body of an old woman, a lodger with the family since they moved to the capital, into the chimney that stands in the middle of the barrack. There the body remains, ever present but unseen, throughout the events of the play, this despite the temporal frame of the narrative being several years. At the end, of course, the body is revealed.

The old woman who met such an ignominious end was the recipient of social security checks that played a substantial part in keeping Mrs. Ólfer and her daughter, Ljóna, fed and with a roof over their heads. It is thus suggested that foul play may have been involved in the old lady's passing. While some critics designated *Strompleikurinn* as "crime fiction" or a "crime drama," the schemata surrounding the body in the chimney is too absurd to be aligned either with the "hardboiled" realism of the inter-war detective fiction or the "cozy" who-dunnits of the Agatha Christie school.<sup>815</sup> At the end Mrs. Ólfer and Ljóna both disappear up into the chimney, presumably to meet their end. There can be no doubt, however, regarding the symbolic charge of the chimney; not only is it situated

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<sup>814</sup> For more on this, see Eggert Þór Bernharðsson. *Undir bárujárnsboga. Braggalíf í Reykjavík 1940–1960*. Reykjavík: JPV, 2000.

<sup>815</sup> See for example, "Á. Hj.". "Strompleikurinn." *Nýi tíminn*, 19 October, 1961, p. 8; Gunnar Bergmann, "Strompleikurinn," p. 9.

right in the middle of the stage, it also serves as a continual reminder of the body enclosed within it. The chimney in other words never becomes just another prop that the audience can be expected to stop noticing at some point during the play. The symbolic importance of the chimney was picked up on by contemporary commentators who stepped forward with a variety of theories to explain and explicate its meaning.

The responses of those addressing the symbolic dimension of the chimney when the play was initially performed can be divided into three categories. First, there are those that voice their certainty that the author is expressing something profound, or attempting to, when he positions the chimney in such an obtrusive way, making clear that it is supposed to be significant to the understanding of the text — naming the work after the chimney being another indicator. At stake therefore is probably a symbol, perhaps even the central symbol of the work, these critics point out, but this is then quickly followed by the admission that whatever the meaning is, it is too opaque, too much of a riddle for the commentator holding the pen to venture a guess, much less engage in a serious hermeneutical scuffle with the text.<sup>816</sup> Secondly there are those who view the chimney in apocalyptic terms, seeing it as symbolizing a requiem of sorts for the bourgeoisie, while others, less politically inclined, these representing the third hermeneutical category, viewed it as a fitting “punishment” for various crimes and misdemeanors, taking the fact that the

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<sup>816</sup> “Á. Hj.”. “Strompleikurinn,” p. 8; “Strompleikurinn.” *Þjóðviljinn*, 12 October, 1961, p. 6; Ólafur Gunnarsson. “Strompleikurinn.” *Skinfaxi*, 1–2/1961, p. 35; Stefán Benediktsson. “Leiklist.” *Skólablaðið*. Gefið út af Menntaskólanum í Reykjavík. 1/1961, p. 20; Bergmann, “Strompleikurinn,” p. 9; Sigurður Grímsson. “Strompleikurinn.” *Morgunblaðið*, 13 October, p. 6.

mother and daughter disappeared into it to be a form of just comeuppance.<sup>817</sup>

Later critics would associate the chimney with the presence of the American military and its base in Keflavík.<sup>818</sup>

Of these, the contention that the chimney is imbued with an apocalyptic dimension is the most persuasive, although the critic in question may falter slightly when he identifies Mrs. Ólfer and Ljóna with the bourgeoisie, and the chimney thus as weaponized architectural device of political import in the class struggle. Admittedly, the protagonists have fallen on hard times, and their dwelling in the abandoned barracks represents their steep downward mobility. The question remains, however, seeing as Mrs. Ólfer and Ljóna do not in the course of the play seem to have any significant hope of rising to their former gentrified status and lifestyle, how exterminating them could be read as partaking in the struggle against the capitalist oppressor.

To resolve these hermeneutic difficulties, it is useful to take a step back and consider the symbolic economy of the play in a wider context. An amusing headline in the lead-up to the opening of the play in October of 1961 might as a matter of fact provide a place to start. Immense secrecy surrounded Laxness' play as the program for the upcoming season at Þjóðleikhúsið was introduced, with the theater director refusing to divulge anything whatsoever concerning the

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<sup>817</sup> Ragnar Jóhannsson. "Strompleikurinn og gagnrýnin." *Tíminn*, 17 October, 1961, p. 9; Ólafur Jónsson. "Kringum Strompleikinn." *Tíminn*, 27 June, 1962, p. 9; Sveinn Skorri Höskuldsson. "Ragnrök Hý Nusamfélags. Nokkrar hugleiðingar um Strompleikinn eftir Halldór Kiljan Laxness." *Dagfari*, 1 December, 1961, pp. 17–19.

<sup>818</sup> Hávar Sigurjónsson. "Frá Strompleik til Dúfnaveislu." *Ekkert orð er skrípi ef það stendur á réttum stað. Um ævi og verk Halldórs Laxness*. Ed. by Jón Ólafsson. Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2002, p. 88. Sigurjónsson also wonders whether the chimney can be read as symbolizing spiritual ascension rather than the punitive register more commonly invoked. Not much lies behind this observation beyond the fact that the author notes that the chimney points to heaven. Few things in the play would however suggest that this is the case, or that what is being offered is a persuasive reading, as — punitive measures notwithstanding — there is literally nothing that recommends the pair as contenders for enlightenment or spiritual rewards.

contents of the play, its thematic interests or even its genre; he is simply quoted as saying that the play is a “terrifying mystery”.<sup>819</sup> The day after the press conference, the newspaper *Tíminn* had a story about the upcoming season where Laxness’ contribution was clearly of greatest interest. Apparently the newspaperman had managed to glean a further tidbit of information from the proceedings the previous day, although hardly a scoop, namely that the name of the work, “The Chimney Play” in fact referred to a smokestack, a ventilating system for a furnace, fireplace or a hearth. Although this should have surprised no-one, the headline of the article that presented the coming season in the nation’s premiere cultural institution thus read: “The name of The Chimney Play references a smokestack”.<sup>820</sup>

Keeping in mind that Laxness was the only author even remotely capable of creating media frenzy in Iceland, the absurdity of the approach described above is still staggering, suggesting that rather than a newspaper, the more appropriate venue for this particular journalistic articulation might have been the play itself, especially in light of its absurdist dimension. Nevertheless, the reference to the smokestack serves as a springboard that allows us to gain a perspective on the symbolic register in question that is different from the triumvirate mentioned above. Some of the primary associations the concept of a chimney is likely to invoke include Old Nick and his favorite entryway into houses on Christmas Eve; how the grease and soot produced by this method of heating made domiciles literally unlivable by the time winter came to a close,

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<sup>819</sup> “Strompleikurinn er kenndur við reykþáf.” *Tíminn*, 12 September 1961, p. 3. The quote in the original reads: “Þá véc Þjóðleikhússtjóri að Strompleiknum sem hann kallaði ‘hinn óttalega leyndardóm’.” See also “HH.” “Þetta er mikill og góður strompur.” *Morgunblaðið*, 7 October, p. 3.

<sup>820</sup> “Strompleikurinn er kenndur við reykþáf,” p. 3.



thus necessitating “spring cleaning,” a concept which we still retain, quite unnecessarily; cozy evenings spent in front of a fire and, quite possibly, vicious chimney sweeps in the novels of Charles Dickens. The most pressing association in the present context, however, is the fact that giant smokestacks pointing to the heavens were the preeminent signifiers of the industrial revolution — towering over their urban environment, the smokestacks littered the landscape of European industrial cities, their ominous height and continual spew of black cloud torrents radically changing the cityscape of Britain and then, later, the continent, and reminding the urban population of the presence, and continual work, of capitalistic, industrial production.

### *1.3 The Five Chimneys*

In *The Chimney of the World*, Stephen Mosley traces the immense polluting effects of industrial smokestacks, and how they as a result shaped the urban environment, making certain heavily polluted areas (such as the East End in London and large portions of Manchester) not only into health hazards but almost uninhabitable during cold weather when thick, yellow, sulphurous fog descended to ground level, making breathing difficult and finding ones way among cobbled streets and muddy sideways even more so.<sup>821</sup> Keeping in mind that we have already, through the invocation of the industrial revolution and the concomitant narrative of progress and rational development, entered a constellation that must include the Holocaust and the camps, it is interesting to find that the symbolic register of the chimney and the smokestack plays a central

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<sup>821</sup> Stephen Mosley. *The Chimney of the World. A History of Smoke Pollution in Victorian and Edwardian Manchester*. Cambridge: The White Horse Press, 2001, p. 62.

role in Holocaust imaginary; no less so, as a matter of fact, than is the case in the grand narrative of urbanization and industrialization. That is, the manner in which the Holocaust was conceptualized as a genocidal event in the period following the war and mediated by means of a variety of representational techniques and media, depended heavily on chimneys; as signifiers, they were not monolithic, they “spoke” in several registers at once and provided, in addition, a rare amalgamation of an entire range of meanings that frame the Holocaust from the very beginning to its end.<sup>822</sup> Testifying to the enduring and horrifying significance of the function performed by this particular architectural contraption in this particular context, Auschwitz survivor Olga Lengyel entitled her memoir *The Five Chimneys* — there was one for each crematorium.<sup>823</sup>

Survivors speak of the “olfactory landscape” of Auschwitz, the smell of “burning meat and [...] ashes.”<sup>824</sup> Once the Holocaust was accepted and knowledge of it spread, so did the idea of the gas chambers and the ovens enter the cultural horizon of informed, educated and cultured western subjects, uncomfortable and unpleasant as the process may have been and denial

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<sup>822</sup> Initially, they were part of an enormously complicated solution to a logistical problem while also spreading out across the perceptual sensorium in an unusual way. Looking at architectural plans and extant photos, the chimneys rising up out of the enormous crematoriums are among the most visible and immediately striking markers of what took place in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Then, the crematoriums and the chimneys were the target of the uprising by the Auschwitz Sonderkommando. Finally, hoping to erase the evidence of what had occurred, the Nazis used explosives to destroy the crematoriums as they retreated towards Germany at the end of the war. See “The Jewish Virtual Library.” A Project of the American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise offers photos and textual explication in abundance. (<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/augas.html> — retrieved on 24 March 2014).

<sup>823</sup> That the chimney points skywards, mentioned above, might in this context be read as a reference to Paul Celan’s poem “Death Fugue” and the lines “He shouts play death more sweetly Death is a master from Deutschland / he shouts scrape your strings darker you’ll *rise then in smoke to the sky* / you’ll have a grave then in the clouds there you won’t lie too cramped.” (emphasis mine). Paul Celan. “Death Fugue.” Trans. John Felstiner. (<http://mason.gmu.edu/~lsmithg/deathfugue.html> — retrieved 30 July 2014).

<sup>824</sup> Tim Cole. “Crematoria, Barracks, Gateway: Survivors’ Return Visits to the Memory Landscapes of Auschwitz.” *History and Memory*, 2/2013, p. 122.

common. When examining the logistics of the great murderous push that was underway between the middle of 1943 and January of 1945, the genocide becomes something close to a scientific and organizational problem, a challenging project — how to dispose of several thousand corpses every 24 hours at a single site? This is where the crematoriums and the chimneys come into focus, being integral to the proper and satisfactory solution to the above mentioned problem and others like it.

In other words, chimneys carry a hefty symbolic freight, ranging from the incipient industrial revolution to class struggle to the Second World War and the Nazi genocide. Keeping in mind that Laxness was concerned with the ethical, philosophical and even aesthetic problems raised by the Holocaust as early as 1948, it seems reasonable that he was not unaware of the symbolic register that a chimney closely associated with murder and death would invoke.<sup>825</sup> This does not mean that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the actual chimney in the play, the one heating the lowly barracks belonging to Mrs. Ólfer and Ljóna, and wartime atrocities. Rather, the text is, like *Silfurtúnglið*, *Prjónastofan Sólin* and *Dúfnaveislan*, concerned with post-war realities, the “imagination of disaster” and the emptying out of human subjectivity that the Holocaust entails, or threatens to entail, as evidenced by the desolate

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<sup>825</sup> There is a moment in the critical reception of *Strompleikurinn* that gestures in this direction. In an article entitled “Halldór Kiljan Laxness og múgmorðin,” which appeared on the cover of *Ný vikutíðindi*, the anonymous commentator rages against Laxness’ support of the Soviet Union. With reference to Khrushchev’s secret speech to the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, the commentator accuses Laxness of hypocrisy and asks how he means to atone for supporting in word and deed a genocidal regime. Finally, he asks if *Strompleikurinn*, with the body in the chimney, is some sort of oblique reference to the millions killed by Stalin. “Halldór Kiljan Laxness og múgmorðin.” *Ný vikutíðindi*. 1 December, 1961, pp. 1, 4.

proclamations of the atom poet in *Atómstöðin*.<sup>826</sup> The chimney, to put it differently, situates the text in a relationship with history, trauma and other texts that explicitly or obliquely thematize the Holocaust; how the author then manages and develops the symbolic register thus activated is another matter, one that will be examined in more detail below.

Laxness' five plays show a substantial range when it comes to themes and modes of formal approach while they also share deep and abiding concerns, the plays being closely interlinked. The historical situation of the post-war era, along with the full realization of what took place during the war, is a primary cause in this instance. In previous decades, the societal effects deriving from alterations in the means of production and the influx of technology were difficult to resist or contain, the ideological terrain of the modernization project, the ground shaping subjective reactions to the "march of progress," was still contested and open to conflicting interpretations. Cultural pessimism was of course rampant in the wake of the First World War but the enormous and utterly irrational fact of another war within a generation changed everything.<sup>827</sup> Now, the suggestion in Weber and Freud, for example, that the structure of Western reason was inherently flawed came under serious scrutiny; this strain of philosophical and cultural negativity is signaled in a quintessential fashion in the opening movement of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where the

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<sup>826</sup> To an extent, as Mark Mazower points out, the trauma and shock of the Holocaust derive from the fact that the methods of incalculable brutality, casually employed by European colonial powers in far flung places, were now put into practice in the heart of Europe and white people were the victims. Mark Mazower. *Hitler's Empire. How the Nazis Ruled Europe*. New York and London: Penguin, pp. 8–11.

<sup>827</sup> While discussing what he terms Sigurður Nordal's "neo-romanticism," which he links to isolationism, the philosophy of Rousseau and works of Hamsun, Ragnar E. Kvaran notes that there is nothing new or specifically Icelandic about screeds against modern culture and modernity. He points to Oswald Spengler and says that the belief in science was shipwrecked in the First World War, and that pessimism permeates everything at the current cultural moment. Ragnar E. Kvaran. "Flóttinn." *Iðunn*, 1928, pp. 17–19.

aims of the Enlightenment are articulated only to be contrasted all the more strikingly to their failure: “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.”<sup>828</sup>

The treatise as a whole, in addressing this failure, can be read as a devastating critique of modernity that recasts the history of human emancipation as terminally inflected by power and violence, a “pathos of negativism” of such bleak despair that only an “apocalyptic reversal of [...] fate [...] and a break in the continuum of history” can facilitate a properly emancipatory dynamic.<sup>829</sup> Another way to put this is that the system of reason has closed in on itself, instrumental rationality so strictly dominating the conceptual register of thinking that any alternative is quickly dismissed as mere fancy, trifle. Indeed, Adorno and Horkheimer contend that the belief in the completeness of scientific rationality has taken on the exact same characteristics as pre-Enlightenment feudal-power, that is, it justifies its authority as natural.

When, in *Silfurtúnglið*, Feilan Ó. Feilan exhorts that one must “be ready to throw without question all that is most intimate into the marketplace” he is not only speaking on behalf of capital and market ideology, literally vocalizing what Marx analyzed as commodity fetishism and Derrida later endowed with a spectral dimension, he is also invoking a variant of the concept of the sacrifice

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<sup>828</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 1.

<sup>829</sup> First quote, Axel Honneth. “Adorno and Foucault: Two Forms of the Critique of Modernity.” *Theodor W. Adorno. Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory. Volume III*. Ed. by Simon Jarvis. London and New York. Routledge, 2007, p. 91. Second quote, Seyla Benhabib. “Modernity and the Aporias of Critical Theory.” *The Frankfurt School. Critical Assessments*. Volume 1. Ed. by Jay Bernstein. London and New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 120.

that Freud as well as Adorno and Horkheimer posit as a fundamental hermeneutic category when coming to terms with the dark side of modernity.<sup>830</sup> For Adorno and Horkheimer, the sacrifice, in its most fundamental register, represents substitution, the alternation of one thing for another (a god is offered an animal as a substitute for a human being, for instance), and thus also the initial stirrings of the cognitive capacity that will at first enable the creation of sign systems such as writing and eventually the complex assemblage of skills necessary to bond together atoms in a nuclear fusion, harnessing a million times more energy than would be possible by any other means; then combining the result with fissile material and the nuclear chain reaction needed to reach supercritical mass; at the end of which process Freud's "prosthetic gods" hold in their hands the power, as Oppenheimer observed, to destroy worlds.

In the quote above, Feilan is offering to market and commodify the innermost core of a subject's identity, what it holds dearest and what, to a lesser or greater degree, calibrates feelings of self-worth and modulates relationships with others. In other words, Feilan aims to degrade the very thing that most forcefully pushes for an affirmative response to Camus' positing of suicide as the grounding problem of philosophy: The subject's sense or belief that there is something inherent to subjectivity and existence which is authentic and sanctified by being in the world, by interpersonal relationships, the nearness of loved ones; something that even in the face of the disinterest of the universe and the death of god endows us with what Nietzsche called *amor fati*, the love of life,

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<sup>830</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 94. In the original: "Hin stóra list er í því fólgin að láta engar persónulegar hömlur hefta sig; vera reiðubúinn að kasta á markaðinn alveg hispurslaust öllu því innilegasta og um leið algeingasta og sjálfsgöðasta sem býr í sérhverjum mennskum manni." Jacques Derrida. *The Spectres of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. by Peggy Kamuf. New York and London: Routledge, 1994.

and would thus also go a fair distance towards lessening the static of the absurd that surrounds the subject in a secular world. Removing this from the domain of the personal and placing it as a commodity to be bartered, exploited, caricatured, rendered false and artificial, in this case in exchange for celebrity and stardom, represents the very category of symbolic substitutions that Adorno and Horkheimer associate with the mythic undercurrent of the Enlightenment, the blinkered trajectory of instrumental reason that leads, or can lead, threatens to lead, is easily led to create immense architectural structures that are designed for genocide; camps in fact. As sites of death, they represent an extraordinary feat of modern engineering; organization and technical proficiency that managed to activate a highly efficient national infrastructure (transportation, bureaucratic institutions, the census, etc.) in the service of ideology and a single goal in a manner that may well at that time have been unmatched in the modern world. From another perspective, of course, the technical feats that enabled the Final Solution to proceed and gain velocity nullify the entire project of modernity.

Finally, much as Adorno and Horkheimer posit affinities between the culture industry of Hollywood and fascism — affinities, not direct linkages or a shared ontology — Laxness associates the dehumanization that must by default be the starting ground of any thinking of atomic weapons with the fate of the tragic singer in *Silfurtúnglið*; how to approach a device whose destructive capacity can only be measured as a substantial percentage of the population of nation states, continents or the planet as a whole? The culture that produces such weapons, and then employs them, is in all essential respects the same as the

one that enacted the Holocaust.<sup>831</sup> In place, then, there must also be cultural enablers, a conceptual horizon, an ethos or shared ethic that does not immediately shy away in abhorrence. The ideological structures and apparatuses that produce and reproduce such societies can be depicted and symbolized by the culture industry, Laxness would maintain, much like Adorno and Horkheimer. As if to emphasize this linkage, Feilan's patter is permeated with references to atomic weapons, noting for example that the hustle and bustle of modernity is such that the only relief is offered by the bomb — or Lóa's simple and authentic musical recitation; he even notes at one point that Lóa completely overshadows the atom bomb, which implicitly means that his dreams of profit trump the "imagination of disaster" and its implications.

The notion of a nuclear *holocaust* suggests, as was mentioned above, the historical moment of the Final Solution and the concomitant connotative range of chimneys, ovens, soot and ashes, all of which feature significantly in *Strompleikurinn*, a play that Sveinn Skorri Höskuldsson has described as an "impassioned critique as well as a depiction of the profound tragedy of people who live on the basis of a crime."<sup>832</sup> He goes on to compare the chimney in the barracks to a "grave" and then notes that the play as a whole is a symbol for the decline and "collapse of [western] culture".<sup>833</sup> This is a suggestive reading,

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<sup>831</sup> Who and how many knew what was happening during the Nazi extermination of the Jews has remained a vexing question in terms of German history, touching directly on the burden of guilt that is shared by the nation. Initially, and for quite a long time, it was accepted that the whole operation was kept secret from the country as a whole. Here the emphasis is placed on the proceedings of the Wannsee conference, held on 20 January 1942, which was indeed secret, and the blame for subsequent events placed on Hitler, Himmler, Heydrich and the SS. The work of revisionist historians however has rendered this view of history untenable.

<sup>832</sup> Höskuldsson, "Ragnrök Hý Nusamfélags," p. 19. In the original: "Strompleikurinn er magnþrunginn ádeila og jafnframt djúpur harmleikur fólks sem lifir á glæp."

<sup>833</sup> Höskuldsson, "Ragnrök Hý Nusamfélags," p. 19. First quote, in the original: "Það er eins og þessum Gnipahelli sé það eitt ætlað að gleypa hvern lífsneista, og umbúnaðurinn minnir á gröf."



closely related to the theme of the apocalypse discussed above, although it is the contention here that Laxness is not concerned with “decline” as much as the progression of technoscience, the formation of the administrative *imperatives* of the monetary–bureaucratic system of modernity and a form of modern rationality — emblemized by the twin atrocities of the Holocaust and the nuclear bombing of Japan — that has given up on the emancipatory possibilities of the Enlightenment and subjective agency, *sacrificed* them might be a more appropriate term, in order to gain dominance and mastery over nature and the material world, their fellow man, and perhaps their own unruly interiority.

The late plays depict a world where the piece–by–piece removal of the transcendental set of assumptions of the past, and their replacement by efforts at rationalized order, has made humankind dominant but also calls forth anxieties for subjects henceforth irrevocably assigned to the task of constructing the legitimizing framework for the values of their culture, what Jürgen Habermas refers to as the normative content of modernity.<sup>834</sup> However, perhaps even more so than the Holocaust, the concept of a meaningless apocalypse, Laxness suggests, threatens to void any sense of the modern project having an intrinsic worth, let alone it being an “incomplete project,” as Habermas would have it. Enlightenment ideals are weighed against the contradictions embedded in the cognitive potentials of rationality, and catastrophes such as the Holocaust and Nagasaki and Hiroshima, that shattered any optimism or belief in reason and

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Second quote, in the original: “Ef Strompleikurinn er tákn um *hrun þeirrar menningar* og þess samfélags, er um hríð hefur þróast með þjóðum á norðurhveli jarðar [...]”.

<sup>834</sup> Habermas stresses the “ambivalent tones,” the “ambivalent content” of, and the “shadings” that inflect the “emancipatory–reconciling aspects of social rationalization,” while also objecting to the collapsing of the distinctions between “Enlightenment and manipulation,” “truth and ideology.” Jürgen Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Trans. Frederick G. Lawrence. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990, pp. 337–339.

rationalization, possibly beyond repair.<sup>835</sup>

At stake, therefore, is a constellation of themes, problems and the conceptualization of a deep-seated uncertainty about the human value of technological progress that unifies not only the four late plays but is also to be found, foregrounded and explicitly so, if articulated in a different way and into a different context, in Laxness' first play, *Straumrof*. Mapping these linkages and the ways in which the above-mentioned thematic and conceptual constellation is manifested within the domain of Laxness' theatrical work is the aim of this chapter. In light of the fact that scholars have avoided no area of Laxness' oeuvre as studiously as his work in the theater, a considerable number of additional questions present themselves. What, in the end, is the status of the plays within the oeuvre? Are they an anomaly, a quirky distraction, a restorative measure of some sort, or a significant contribution to the field of Icelandic theater and an integral part of the complex assemblage that makes up the range of mediated "knowledge" about the author, his self-figurations on the various stages and platforms provided by the media, the facts of the life and then, of course, the work? There is the slow start and the surprising "late" period, intensely productive and indicative of genuine commitment. Yet the work of the 1960s was cut off abruptly as Laxness abandoned the theater after *Dúfnaveislan*, perhaps as the result of what he found to be an intensely disappointing reception of this theatrical work.

Then there are taxonomical problems having to do with periodization, thematic and formal classifications, and affinities and connections with other

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<sup>835</sup> Jürgen Habermas. "Modernity – An Incomplete Project." Trans. Seila Ben-Habib. *Postmodern Culture*. Ed. Hal Foster. London: Pluto Press, 1985.

works. Do the five plays belong to a single continuum or do they fall into two periods or more? What of the theatrical adaptations of his novels, two of which he was closely involved with?<sup>836</sup> What more can be said of the thematic affinities between the plays and just how successful Laxness was, when all is said and done, as a playwright? And yet, these constitute only the preliminary areas that need to be investigated. There is also the matter of the dynamics of cultural exchange and influence that inflect the generation of meaning in Laxness' plays, ranging from the conscious reworking or engagement with other texts to structural factors having to do with the workings of literary systems and the freight of significance carried by language itself. The literary context extends from the Nordic 19<sup>th</sup> century — Ibsen and Strindberg — to the continental avant-garde and political theater of Brecht in the post-war era, with the center of a global entertainment empire, Hollywood, also being of pivotal importance. Then there is the way in which the plays invoked, involved and were inflected by a specific historical context: the social, political and cultural horizons of Laxness' home country.

These questions will be addressed in the sections that follow, although some point toward subjective experiences of the sort that renders all responses equally valid, and these will largely be incorporated as meta-data, that is, by discussing how previous scholars have responded to them and/or by examining the main currents of contemporary reactions to the plays. While a thematic cluster such as the general critical response and scholarly consensus on Laxness' career as a playwright will be addressed in the following section, many of the

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<sup>836</sup> These are *Íslandsklukkan* (1950) and *Kristnihald undir Jökli* (1975); the theatrical adaptations are discussed in more detail below.

issues identified above will be intertwined with the overall project of this chapter, which is to address a particular constellation of themes and problems in Laxness' original theater works, in chronological order, starting with *Straumrof*. These involve the employment of and the symbolic charge that inheres in the concept of the apocalypse; the centrality of gender issues and how they are repeatedly positioned as an important problematic in Laxness' depiction of the lived experience and social reality of modernity; and the presence and transfigurations of the culture industry. Then there is the way in which Laxness grapples with the existential bleakness, the threat of the void, when it comes to the traumatic realities of the Holocaust and the atom bomb. It should also be noted that temporal jumps will be made as well as generic ones, as Laxness' novels will be invoked and involved in the discussion when such connections are found productive, and temporality will be fluid as patterns and connections will be traced between works separated by, in some cases, many decades. We will however begin with Laxness' theatrical "legacy," namely how a dominant discursive framework has been constructed through which many, if not most, contemporary readings of the plays seem to be filtered.

## ***2. Modernity and Aesthetic Trajectories***

Twenty years passed between the writing of *Straumrof* and *Silfurtúnglið*, Laxness' first two original plays. Leikfélag Reykjavíkur (Reykjavík Theater Company) staged the former in 1934, while Þjóðleikhúsið (The National Theater) performed the latter in 1954. As noted above, three more works for the stage appeared in quick succession in the 1960s. *Strompleikurinn* was staged in

Þjóðleikhúsið in 1961, *Prjónastofan Sólin* was published in 1962 but there was a four-year interval before it was eventually performed, again in Þjóðleikhúsið. The third text is *Dúfnaveislan*, which Leikfélag Reykjavíkur produced for the stage in 1966.<sup>837</sup>

The three late plays are remarkable for a variety of reasons; one involving what was widely taken to be a startling, perhaps even a shocking, revelation that coincided with news of the impending genesis of the first in the series, *Strompleikurinn*, and then surrounded the creation of all three plays and inflected their reception. The event in question was Laxness' public declaration that he was giving up the novel to concentrate fully on the stage. Around the time of the publication of *Paradísarheimt* (Paradise Reclaimed, 1960), Laxness was already suggesting that a touch of fatigue or even satiation was inflecting his relationship with his medium of choice and as time passed the caveats grew fewer, the statements less coy and his reflections on the current state of the novel darker.<sup>838</sup>

On May 5, 1961, *Alþýðublaðið* became one of the first news outlets to all but confirm that Laxness was serious about rethinking and realigning his career, and did so with a cover story and sizable headline. Posing the news in the form of

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<sup>837</sup> *Dúfnaveislan* is based on short story of the same name, which appeared in Laxness' last short story collection, *Sjöstafakverið* (The Seven Letter Booklet, 1964).

<sup>838</sup> An early example of Laxness' disillusionment with the novel is to be found in an interview in the magazine *Dagskrá* in 1957, in the wake of the publication of *Brekkukotsannáll*, where Laxness suggests, somewhat absurdly, that rather than write another novel, he might go to sea. He also expresses doubts about the novel as a form and its relevance to contemporary culture: "I do however often wonder where the folk hide themselves that can be bothered to read the novels that one writes. Novels are fine if one gets a cold or finds oneself traveling or in other kinds of lamentable situations; not to mention if one is struck down by extended bronchitis and needs to decamp to a sanatorium. But I'll be damned if I know where else readers of novels conceal themselves." *Dagskrá*, 15 October, 1957, p. 12. Quoted in Ingvarsson, *Andlitsdrættir samtímans*, p. 77. In the original: "Annars er ég oft að velta því fyrir mér hvar það fólk leynist sem nennir að lesa þessar skáldsögur sem maður er að skrifa. Skáldsögur eru ágætar ef maður fær kvæf eða lendir í ferðalögum eða annarri ógæfu, hvað þá ef maður fær langvarandi bronchitis og þarf að fara á hæli. En ég veit svei mér ekki hvar skáldsagnalesendur leynast annars staðar."

a question, the headline read: “Has Kiljan stopped writing novels?” The article itself recounted how the Norwegian daily *Arbeiderbladet* had three days earlier run a story on Laxness that seemed to include a substantial scoop. Laxness, “the Icelandic writer who received the Nobel prize in literature in 1956,” the paper noted by way of introduction, “is not going to write more novels. From here on, he is only going to write plays.”<sup>839</sup> A myriad of similar statements would follow as hardly an interview went by for years without the matter of Laxness’ retirement from the novel coming up. However, Laxness’ most notable utterance about his proposed downtime from the novel is to be found in his 1965 essay, “Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit” (Private Memorandums Concerning Novels and Plays), which was published in the essay collection *Upphaf mannúðarstefnu* (The Beginnings of Humanism).<sup>840</sup> What makes this particular iteration of Laxness’ concern with literary forms memorable and noteworthy beyond other statements of a similar kind, is not so much that his announcement constitutes a surprise but rather the context within which the declaration of retirement is made, as it allows or invites something of a grand interpretation of the trajectory of Laxness’ career and the plateau at which he found himself at present.

It would be a simplification to claim that the essay represented or offered a comprehensive and entirely coherent overview of Laxness’ stance and thinking on literature and the cultural heritage, it is, however, a fascinating document,

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<sup>839</sup> “Kiljan hættur að skrifa skáldsögur?” *Alþýðublaðið*, 5 May, 1961, p. 1. The Icelandic translation (from the Norwegian) reads as follows: “Halldór K. Laxness, íslenski rithöfundurinn, sem fékk Nóbelsverðlaunin í bókmenntum 1956, ætlar ekki að skrifa fleiri skáldsögur. Hann mun hér eftir eingöngu skrifa leikrit.”

<sup>840</sup> The title could also be rendered The Origin of Humanism or, emphasizing the possible meanings of the second word in the original title, The Beginning/Origin of Humanitarianism.

extremely rich and suggestive in many ways and as a reflection on modern art and the expressive potentials of the novel, its scope and ambition are quite astounding.<sup>841</sup> However, the essay also stands as a testament to the author's literary likes and dislikes, the latter being more in evidence. Although this aspect of the essay is to an extent interesting, for example the revelation of just how limited Laxness' affection for most manifestations of modern novelistic practice turns out to be, this subjective strand of strident bursts of appraisal and evaluation is also among the piece's central flaws, as will be discussed further below.

When approaching the essay, as is the case with most of Laxness' public utterances throughout his career, it is necessary to consider Laxness' rhetorical flourishes and self-figuration, as well as the formal constraints and freedoms of the platform that is being employed in each instance. It is clear that Laxness was extremely media savvy by this point, going the rounds of newspaper interviews and press conferences whenever he had a new book to promote and traveling widely abroad for much the same reason. Indeed, the media demand for Laxness in his home country appears to have been quite insatiable; extensive interviews appeared regularly without any promotional motivation to pressure them into being. This ties into the fact that for the whole of his career, Laxness had been a vigorous participant in the cultural conversation, and at times an extremely

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<sup>841</sup> The essay was commissioned by the Soviet magazine *Literaturnaja Gazeta*, and written in 1962 and published a year later in the magazine. See Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness*, pp. 667–668. What follows is what Laxness says about his retirement from the novel, being careful to hedge his bets about the duration of said retirement: “Some writers are such industrious workers that they never have a moment's peace to reflect. I found it to be logical to cease writing novels for now and get used to seeing this medium from some remove; and these memorandums have come into being during such a respite.” Halldór Laxness. “Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit.” *Upphaf mannúðarstefnu*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1965, p. 73. In the original the quote reads: “Sumir höfundar eru svo ákafir verkamenn að þeir fá aldrei ráðríum til að hugsa sig um. Mér virtist ekki ófyrirsynju að hætta skáldsagnagerð í bili og venjast því að sjá þennan miðil úr nokkrum fjarska; þessar minnisgreinar hafa orðið til í slíku orlofi.”

polemical participant — even vitriolic, especially in political disputes — and when the great number of interviews with and stories about him, appearing at first in favorably disposed left wing newspapers but permeating later the entire spectrum of political opinion, are considered alongside his unceasing outpouring of “timely pieces”, it is clear that his fame, controversy and reputation came in time to far surpass any of his colleagues. The fact that he was the nation’s sole recipient of the Nobel Prize played of course an enormous role in this respect. The point is that by the early 1960s, it is safe to assume that Laxness’ “aesthetic position,” broadly speaking, would have been one of the discursive entities mediated through various media outlets and thus well known, although often in what would now be referred to as “sound-bites,” or condensed form, comments that may have been pared down to accommodate column inches or, as happened frequently, deeply inflected by the author’s playful public persona, and how he most often, if quite lightheartedly, refused to answer questions that related directly to his work or his conceptualization of the cultural landscape.<sup>842</sup>

It is in this context that the essay “Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit” can be assumed to have carried a hefty charge but is also a symbolic gesture that needs to be understood in the context of Laxness’ assimilation of the cultural capital of the Sagas which is initially accomplished through scholarly writing on the subject and through the controversial publications of the medieval texts with modern spelling in the 1930s and 1940s and then of course the writing of *Gerpla*. In the essay under discussion we note

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<sup>842</sup> While the instances of playful coyness when it comes to Laxness’ aesthetic position(s) are too numerous to recount, Helga Kress has written an account of the trajectory of Laxness’ thinking on the novel, see “Okkar tími — okkar líf. Þróun sagnagerðar Halldórs Laxness og hugmyndir hans um skáldsöguna.” *Sjö erindi um Halldór Laxness*. Ed. by Sveinn Skorri Höskuldsson. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1973, pp. 155–182.



the fusing of his aesthetic position, and his most recent aesthetic project — playwriting — with the form of the Sagas.<sup>843</sup> As to the (libidinal) charge conveyed by the essay, there is the matter of spectacle; that is, Laxness' opinions carried a great deal of weight and here was a great specimen of a rather rare breed: Laxness speaking in what appeared to be earnest tones about his deeply held aesthetic beliefs and doing so in aggressive and, at times, hyperbolic fashion.<sup>844</sup> Then there is the question of form and platform. The medium of the essay allows for reflection in an entirely different register from the typical newspaper or radio profile, as well as the space to carry a complex argument through a number of genuflections. As Laxness certainly utilized these “features” of the genre, “Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit” is imbued with an obvious sheen of ambition, its construction is intricate, dense and the contents highly intriguing.<sup>845</sup> The piece reads as a manifesto, one that speaks to almost the entirety of Laxness' post–Nobel period, one could argue. It is certainly among his two or three most frequently cited essays; indeed, it would not be surprising if it were his most cited.

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<sup>843</sup> For more on this, see Jón Karl Helgason. *Hetjan og höfundurinn. Brot úr íslenskri menningarsögu*. Reykjavík: Heimskringla. Háskólaforlag Máls og menningar, 1998; Ástráður Eysteinnsson. “Er Halldór Laxness höfundur Fóstbræðrasögu? Um höfundargildi, textatengsl og þýðingu í sambandi Laxness við fornsögurnar. *Skáldskaparmál*, 1/1991, pp. 171–188.

<sup>844</sup> Laxness published notable and influential essays on literature throughout his career. The most significant are: “Úr sirkus menningarinnar.” *Morgunblaðið*, 14 December, 1924; “Tíska og menning. Um ljóð.” *Morgunblaðið*, 21 May, 1925; “Inngangur að ritdómum. Skáldsagnagerð. Starffræðilegar athuganir.” *Alþýðublaðið*, 18 January, 5 February, 1927. “Um Jónas Hallgrímsson.” *Alþýðubókin*. Þriðja útgáfa. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1947, pp. 48–61. “Minnisgreinar um fornsögur.” *Sjálfsgörur hlutir*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1946, pp. 9–58. “Vandamál skáldskaparins á vorum dögum.” *Dagur í senn*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1955, pp. 191–216; “Hnýsilegir staðir í fornkvaðum,” and “The writer in a small language community,” in *Yfirskyggðir staðir*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1971, pp. 12–48, pp. 152–166. See also in this context Þorleifur Hauksson. “Hluthafi í veruleikanum og hlutlaus skoðari: um ritgerðir og ritgerðarstíl Halldórs Laxness.” *Skírni*, 1/2002, pp. 65–88.

<sup>845</sup> Ólafur Jónsson. “Endurprentun til óþurftar?” *Tíminn*, 6 December, 1962, p. 9.

## 2.1 *The Problem of Presence*

A melancholic tone is struck in the essay's opening: "The time I have spent putting novels together is by no means negligible and in that sense becoming somewhat experienced in the handling of the medium was unavoidable. I tried to do what I could with what to me seemed to be the chief qualities of the medium, some of them at least."<sup>846</sup> As Haukur Ingvarsson has noted, the key stylistic mark of the opening remarks is the past tense in "I tried to do what I could", signaling that Laxness' career as a novelist has come to a close.<sup>847</sup> Then, in a bold temporal jump, Laxness invokes Ancient-Greek historian Thucydides while making the point that the novel is fundamentally constituted by what he refers to as its annalistic nature, the transformation of what has already occurred into a written narrative — the difference being that the events recounted in annals can be assumed to have taken place. From there Laxness travels widely in time and space, and between cultural forms, and, once more one might say that he manages to confirm his stature as a cultural and literary commentator and theorist.<sup>848</sup> That said, the essay is uneven and Laxness probably lost, and keeps losing, a reader or two in the span of the first few pages.

One of Laxness' difficulties when it came to the writing of non-fiction was calibrating the precise tone of his prose, and here the speaking voice that initially

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<sup>846</sup> Laxness, "Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit," p. 67. In the original: "Talsverður tími hefur farið í það fyrir mér að setja skáldsögur saman, svo ég komst ekki hjá því að fá dálitla sjálfsreynslu af þessum miðli. Ég reyndi að gera það sem ég gat úr því sem virtust höfuðkostir þessa forms, sumum að minnsta kosti."

<sup>847</sup> Ingvarsson, *Andlitsdrættir samtíðarinnar*, p. 82.

<sup>848</sup> Laxness was an extremely astute and knowledgeable writer on literary issues and literary history; some of his essays on the Sagas are still read today by scholars in the field. Indeed, Vésteinn Ólason, whose field of expertise is Icelandic medieval literature, designates Laxness a "poet-scholar" in an article on Laxness and the literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. See Vésteinn Ólason. "Halldór Kiljan Laxness og forn sagnahefð." *Ég tek það gilt. Greinar um bókmenntir tuttugustu aldar*. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2008, pp. 73–94.

greet the reader is disagreeably high-handed, an effect that goes especially badly with the ignominiously small-minded nature of the argument being put forward as the essay gathers steam in the first few pages, which contrasts the genius of the Sagas with the inanity of the modern novel. Modern novelists are figured as workers in a vineyard whose “roots” go back to ancient narrative forms, something that is supposed to illustrate, explain and excuse, all at the same time, their incompetence in handling the medium: “The roots of this art are to be found in immemorial antiquity, so a lot of the workers in this vineyard are only to be pitied [rather than blamed] if they never understand what they are doing and thrash about in traps or at the bottom of a hole till their dying day.”<sup>849</sup> Laxness juxtaposes the sad fate of these failed writers with Snorri Sturluson, an Icelandic chieftain, scholar and chronicler whose *Heimskringla* (ca. 1230), the recounting of the histories of Norwegian kings, “is considered by scholars no less than sensible readers to be a radiant example of perfection in narrative prose.”<sup>850</sup> In passages like these, Laxness reads like a highly eccentric, prejudiced and exasperation-inducing grandstander whose sole intellectual offering amounts to a reread of cultural tropes and argumentations (the famous “Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns” for example) that have, along with the notion of a timeless standard of beauty, long been considered unusable in discourse on literary history. The fact that Laxness may be out of touch, or seem that way today, when it comes to comparing literary works from different

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<sup>849</sup> Laxness, “Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit,” p. 69. In the original: “Rætur þessarar listgreinar liggja í óminnisfjarska fornaldar, svo mörgum verkamönnum í þessum víngráði er vorkunn þó þeim skiljist aldrei hvað þeir eru að gera og brjótist um ævilangt í tálsnörum og botnholum.”

<sup>850</sup> Laxness, “Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit,” p. 69. In the original: “Bók hans Heimskringla, sögur af Noregskonungum, er af lærdómsmönnum ekki síður en skynsömum lesöndum alment talin lifandi dæmi fullkominnar frásögu óbundinnar.”

periods, cultural regimentations, and literary systems, is not the main problem; the self-satisfied, jingoistic tone is what grates. But instead of turning on his heel and leaving in a huff, after having given the youngsters a piece of his mind, Laxness makes a supremely elegant move, one that rescues the entire enterprise, by ceasing to pontificate about the excellence of the Icelandic literary heritage, and moving on to a highly insightful and provocative analysis of one of the grounding elements of how the novel and other prose fiction functions, namely the role of the narrator. More on this below; first it is useful to briefly map the essay's central lines of inquiry, of which there are four.

These are, first, the articulation of Laxness' poetics, the expression of which depends on two distinct but related binaries, the former involves the aforementioned contrast between the Icelandic Sagas and the modern novel, while the latter offers up a hermeneutical revision of the concepts of "truth" and "fact." Secondly, there is the transfiguration of the material elements of the literary tradition of the Sagas into a personalized abstraction for Laxness' benefit, functioning as a normative model and idealization that ranges over several categories at once: the literary, the ethical, matters of etiquette, notions of masculinity, and the proper care of the self, to name a few. Thirdly there is a rigorous analysis of novelistic narrative structures; a fourth strand involving a comparison between works for the stage and literary fiction rounds things up with the Sagas being aligned with the stage.<sup>851</sup>

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<sup>851</sup> Describing the necessity to be brief and to the point in a play, Laxness notes that "Even a reply that is filled with condensed human wisdom can dangerously weaken the play, if it does not entail a coherent connection to the grounding conceptualization of the work as a whole." Later Laxness notes the danger of a playwright moralizing: "Another trap that awaits the playwright is to preach morals to the public in the theater. Why? Because an ethical sensibility is probably the one thing that every shoemaker and shop girl in the audience has been as richly endowed with as

The first rhetorical domain, touching on Laxness' poetics, depends on a contrast between the sheer and utter perfection of the Icelandic literary heritage as represented by the Sagas — a heritage that Laxness made fun of as rather primitive in the 1920s.<sup>852</sup> Laxness mocks the excesses and amoebalike fluctuations of certain tendencies of post-war fiction and the seeming inability of modern authors to cope properly, artistically speaking, when they finally shook themselves free of nineteenth century models and realized just how vast and flexible the territory of the novel actually was; thus they started hauling all sorts of goods, equipment and gear into a creative habitat, stuff that is in its essence utterly at odds with what the nature and role of narratives have always been (the objectionable add-ons including torrents of mundane information and facts — think Joyce, Gaddis, Pynchon; psychology, the psychoanalytic discourse of complexes and neurosis, solipsistic navel gazing, the mysterious preservation in typescript of drunken rages, deliriums and nervous breakdowns, and a most obnoxious peddling of belief systems and morality lessons).

This less than rigorous overview of the contemporary novelistic scene stands in direct relation to Laxness' deployment of the concepts of truth and fact, both of which are removed from their conventional semantic constellations and, in a somewhat bold move, made to symbolize the essentials of the essay's

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the playwright, if not more so." The author goes on to enumerate a number of elements that the plays share with the characteristics of the Sagas, enumerated a few pages earlier in the essay. Laxness, "Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit," p. 76. In the original: "Meira að segja tilsvár fullt af samþjöppuðu mannviti getur orðið til að veikja leikinn hættulega, standi það ekki í réttum röktengslum við grundvallarhugmynd verksins." And the second quote: "Önnur talsnara sem bíður leikritaskálds er sú þegar hann lætur eftir ástríðu sinni til að predika moral yfir almenníngi í leikhúsinu. Hversvegna? Vegna þess að siðgæði er sennilega sá einn varníngrur sem hver skósmiður og innanbúðarstúlka í salnum hefur feingið eins vel útlátinn og leikhöfundurinn, ef ekki betur."

<sup>852</sup> The point being that nothing novelistic has emerged to trump the medieval manuscripts. Of course, with similar logic one might point out that the novel represents a remarkably limited advance on the epinikion mode, which had its heyday around 500 BC.

unfolding of the conflict between literary value systems. The former is rendered negatively and stands for domination, the totalitarian habit of positing a party line, around which everyone and everything is forced to adhere; in other words, truth becomes the dictatorship of the subjective perceptions and imperious solipsism of a single, supreme leader, or emblematic of an impersonal system that demands subservience to whatever variant of the “truth” happens to be the hobbyhorse of the moment. Laxness’ disillusionment with Stalinism, and his earlier experiences with Catholicism, it is safe to assume, inflect his thinking on this point. Laxness has given up on all-encompassing emancipatory systems and ideologies; the quiet flow of tao and Eastern philosophy is where his mind now turns.<sup>853</sup>

At the same time the concept of “fact” is not posited as a statistic or a measurement; it is not something arrived at in a laboratory. Rather, for Laxness at this point in time, a “fact” is something almost ephemeral, fluctuating and happenstance: it is the encounter between a subject and the world when the empty drift of life suddenly coalesces into something significant, be it a telling detail or a world historical event, and then undergoes another transformation, this time at the hand of the artist/writer; indeed, if the writer is good enough, he will realize that there is no such thing as “empty drift” — existence, if looked at correctly, is always justified in itself and thus a constant source of “facts”. The point to accentuate here is that the “fact” as understood by Laxness is not ideological, and, although perhaps not a primordial Hegelian encounter of world and a consciousness without concepts, it is not significantly mediated by outside

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<sup>853</sup> Ólafur Jónsson’s essay “Taó” from 1966 still stands as the most informative and incisive examination of this strand in Laxness’ thought and work. See Ólafur Jónsson. “Taó.” *Alþýðublaðið*, Jólblað, 1966, pp. 8, 9, 14.

forces; the structuring devices that endow the lived “fact” with meaning are the subjectivity of the individual, the combination of cognitive skills, innate intelligence, memory and experience — although how to divorce this set of categories from cultural situatedness and thus ideological interpellation is a problem that lies outside the purview of Laxness’ article.<sup>854</sup> Whether the luminous moments described by Laxness as “facts” can become meaningful without a reference to a “system” of some sort, that is, a notion of truth, understood as the employment of concepts in order to abstract the particular into the general and thus categorize sensory and cognitive experience, or whether the reduction of truth to dogma and irrational orthodoxy is a particularly helpful gesture, need not be debated here. Suffice to say, these are the tools Laxness needs in order to articulate his own trajectory and his admiration for the theater as a form and medium.

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<sup>854</sup> Addressing the function of the concept of a “fact” in literary and aesthetic (and ethical) terms, Laxness writes: “In those instances that truth does not refer to the mythification of facts, it stands for myth without facts. Concepts in general but particularly made-up definitions, are not amenable to a good novelist. He does not find it agreeable to view the world as the hill where Revelation manifests itself, but rather the site where facts take place; and he makes use of facts as they come to him, one at a time. A storyteller who forgets facts due to his interest in Revelation or the preaching of truth, is at risk of ending up adjacent to the scribes of holy writ [...] Christian doctrine maintains that the conscience is the voice of god in man. For others, conscience is a symbol of the moral pressure that the environment brings to bear on the individual, and the reference here is to conformism [...] In a dictatorship the will of the tyrant contaminates the entirety of the moral environment [however] if we are to suppose that each vocation is endowed with a specific form of conscience, as Socrates is supposed to have said, then I would say that the fact, any fact derived from creation, is the closest a novelist will come to knowing the voice of god.” Laxness, “Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit,” pp. 70, 72. In the original: “Í þeim tilfellum þar sem sannleikur merkir ekki goðsögn um staðreyndir, merkir hann goðsagnir án staðreynda. Hugtök yfirleitt, en þó einkum tilbúnar skilgreiningar, eru góðum skáldsagnahöfundi lítt hugarhaldin. Honum fellur ekki að líta á veröldina einsog hólinn þar sem Opinberunin birtist, heldur plássið þar sem staðreyndir gerast; og hann gerir sér mat úr staðreyndum eftir því sem þær ber að, einni í senn. Sögumanni sem gleymir staðreyndum vegna áhuga síns á Opinberuninni eða boðun sannleikans, honum hættir við að lenda í sala með helgisagnariturum [...] Í kristnum dómi er sagt að samviskan sé rödd guðs í mannum. Öðrum virðist samviska tákni þann siðferðilegan þrýsting sem umhverfið veldur á einstaklinginn og er þá átt við vald konformismans [...] Í harðstjórnarríki gegnsýrir vilji harðstjórans alt siðferðilegt loftslag [en] sé gert ráð fyrir því að að hverju starfi fylgi sérstök samviska, eins og haft er eftir Sókratesi, þá mundi ég segja að staðreyndin, hvaða sköpuð staðreynd sem er, komist næst því að vera skáldsagnahöfundi rödd guðs.”

It may not come as a complete surprise that it is the Icelandic literary heritage that is associated with the complex of values, functions and idealizations that come together in Laxness inscription of the concept of “fact,” while modern literature, enmeshed in a variety of ideologies (from Marxism to free market idealism), is associated with “truth”. More interesting, in fact, than the literary conclusions drawn from the contrasting set of literary values is the way in which Laxness’ binary ends up producing a figure or a portrait of the typical Saga writer, the real identities of whom are mostly lost to history.<sup>855</sup> In addition to functioning as the gold standard of artistic accomplishment, modernity itself can be measured against this figure, which then becomes the index of all that has been lost.

Laxness’ essay offers a fairly detailed portrait of the prototypical authorial figure of the Sagas, albeit a portrait that is drawn mostly negatively, through the extensive list of characteristics that the Saga author does not have, but which accrue to the modern author and his works. It can thus be surmised that the author of a Saga, or a likeminded figure, finds other venues than his art to grapple with his psychological problems, if he has any; what he does not do under any circumstances is air his dirty laundry in his writings. Neither does he flaunt his education and knowledge, although it is in fact extensive; he just isn’t a poseur. Rather, he is modest and his modesty is measured against the subject that he has chosen to mediate, for, since chosen by this admirable artist, it is sure to be highly significant. Therefore it is not seemly, the Saga writer feels, for him to intrude beyond what is strictly necessary for the telling of the tale (here we

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<sup>855</sup> Sverrir Tómasson. “The Middle Ages. Old Icelandic Prose.” *A History of Icelandic Literature*. Ed. by Daisy Neijmann, Lincoln and London: The University of Nebraska Press, 2006, pp. 64–173.



have ethics combined with astute aesthetic judgment). His text is not verbose; it does not resemble the ravings of a drunk and it most certainly has none of the characteristics of a hysteric — and here it should be noted that although perhaps not entirely collapsed, the separation between the textual consciousness of a narrative and the biographical author is hanging by a couple of fence posts and a lone string of barbed wire.<sup>856</sup>

## 2.2 “An interloper with no name and a very uncertain passport”

Although it is not entirely clear just which groups, movements, individuals, even generations of novelists fall under Laxness’ disfavor, the possibilities range from militant fiction with a political message (black, queer or feminist, in addition to the tradition Laxness was intimately familiar with, the leftist anti-capitalist critique), to the “uncouth” fiction of the Beats.<sup>857</sup> The postmodern novel of

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<sup>856</sup> The relevant passages are interspersed over about two pages. In what follows, they are condensed to somewhat resemble a narrative flow: “Any connoisseur of delusions could make the novel into a public venue where to battle it out with the ghosts that traveled with him, shrug off complexes, phobias and manias [while] others tried to turn the novel into some kind of a debating society for youngsters where the entire history of the world is on the schedule, to be addressed free-style.” In contrast to this there are the authors of the Sagas “who may well have been learned and intelligent, in fact perhaps philosophers and psychologists. But if that was the case, they avoided making this known like the plague. They never reveal personal matters in their writings, neither do they brag about their various fields of expertise [while in yet another contrast, the modern author] tries to turn the medium into a venue for the gestures of the deranged [and] verbosity that bears the characteristics of a drunken loser, a hysterical personage or other types of bewildered men.” Laxness, “Persónulegar minnisgreinar,” pp. 70–71. In the original: “Hvaða grilluveiðari sem var gat kosið sér skáldsögu að opinberum vettváangi til að jafna metin við þá drauga sem fylgdu honum, rölta af sér komplexa, fóbíur og manfur [meðan] aðrir hafa reynt að að snúa skáldsögunni í einhverskonar málfundafélag únglinga þar sem málefnaskrá veraldarsögunnar er til umræðu einsog hún leggur sig eftir frjálsri aðferð.” “Það má vel vera að höfundar fornsagnanna hafi verið lærðir menn og vel gefnir, gott ef ekki heimspekingar og sálfræðingar. En hafi svo verið þá forðuðust þeir eins og heitan eldinn að láta á því bera. Þeir segja aldrei einkamál sín í því sem þeir rita, né sýna hvað þeim séu gefnar margar íþróttir [en nútímahöfundar hafa sýnt viðleitni til að] snúa þessum miðli í geðbilunarpát [og] þesskonar vaðal sem ber einkenni drukkens aumíngja, móðursjúkrar persónu eða annarra vánkaðra manna.”

<sup>857</sup> As Peter Hallberg notes, this represents a dramatic shift from Laxness’ previous political engagement, and the poetics he discusses in his talk, later published as the essay, “Vandamál skáldskaparins á vorum dögum” (The Problem of Literature in Our Time), given in Oslo in 1954, where he still advocates for political engagement. See Peter Hallberg. *Halldór Laxness*. Trans. by

William Gaddis and John Barth, that is, the literature of exhaustion, might also enter into the picture; same applies to the Oulipo movement in France, or the depth hermeneutics saturating a Freudian age in general — the list could go on, but what seems to tie the objects of Laxness' critique together is the subjectivity of the narrating presence, the human-sounding and -seeming force that keeps the movement of the story progressing, whether we refer to the presence in question as the author, the implied author, textual consciousness, subject of enunciation, a narrating subject, or function/device/motor. In all cases, the narrator is the avatar of the presence in question and quite discernable as the "source" of textual meaning (even of the text). For Laxness, this disturbs the central tenant of his late poetics, namely that the authorial presence, in keeping with the Icelandic Sagas should keep back, withdraw to a point as close to invisibility as possible.<sup>858</sup>

It is in this context that Laxness articulates a question that he has by his own admission grappled with for a long time:

There is a question that has piqued the one holding the pen at this moment, and it has done so for a long time; the question is what to do with a personage that we shall call Plus Ex. Who is Plus Ex? An interloper with no name and a very uncertain passport who is always present, much like a voyeur, wherever one bears down in a novel. This gentleman is never modest enough to take his seat at the far back of the character gallery but rather demands to be foregrounded and placed at the very center of the narrative, even in a story where the author does everything in his power not to coincide with the narrator.<sup>859</sup>

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Njörður P. Njarðvík. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1975, p. 191. See also Halldór Laxness. "Vandamál skáldskaparins á vorum dögum." *Dagur í senn*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1955, pp. 191–216.

<sup>858</sup> It should not come as a surprise therefore that the only modern "movement" Laxness really expressed positive feelings towards was the French Nouveau roman.

<sup>859</sup> Laxness, "Persónulegar minnisgreinar," p. 73. In the original: "Leingi hefur sú spurning strítt á þann sem hér heldur á penna, hversu farið skuli með mann nokkurn sem við skulum kalla Plús Ex. Hver er Plús Ex? Það er sú boðflenna með aungu nafni og óglöggu vegabréfi sem ævinlega er viðstödd líkt og gluggagæir hvar sem gripið er ofaní skáldsögu. Þessi herra er aldrei svo smáþægur að setjast aftastur í persónuröðinni heldur sættir sig ekki við annað en öndvegi nær

The problem Laxness has with the form of the novel seems to be so deeply ingrained, and so closely linked to the privileging and foregrounding of a particular subjectivity, or multiple subjectivities, which really is the crux of the problem for the author — and the central flaw of the modern novel as Laxness sees it — that it seems literally insoluble. Although the narrator keeps himself at a distance from the interiority of the characters that populate his tale, the problem still remains that his/her/its subjectivity is continually on display, even though ostensibly outside the diegesis. Tone, plot choices, gaps, turns of phrase, all these provide information about the narrating subject. These problems disappear however if Plus Ex is exiled outside the textual domain, which is where the medium of the theater comes in. In the theater, Plus Ex is replaced by the audience:

A play's formal parameters are as strict as those of a chessboard or a printed cross word puzzle. There is no room on the stage for the author to leave behind extra gear that he might happen to be carrying. In the middle of a novel the author can all of a sudden start with an essay or commence a speech on a subject of his choice, and nobody is the worse for it, except the reader gets a little muddleheaded, puts the book down, and takes a nap [...] In a play, tedium of this sort can incite a mob against the author.<sup>860</sup>

While Laxness may over-emphasize the strictures that are in play on the stage and underrepresent the breviloquence that does tend to structure the descriptive and world-creating function of a novel and motivate its forward momentum, it is also clear that the stage is where he finds the aesthetics that he promotes in “Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit” to be most

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miðju frásagnarinnar, jafnvel í sögu þar sem höfundur gerir sér þó alt far um að samsama ekki sjálfan sig sögumanninum.”

<sup>860</sup> Laxness, “Persónulegar minnisgreinar,” p. 75. In the original: “Sjónleik er jafn þraungur stakkur skorinn í geimnum og taflborði eða prentaðri krossgátu. Það er ekkert pláss umfram á leiksviðinu til að skilja eftir aukadót sem höfundurinn kynni að hafa meðferðis. Í miðri skáldsögu getur höfundurinn altí einu byrjað ritgerð eða farið að halda ræðu um sjálfvalið efni, og aungan sakar, nema lesarinn verður þungur í höfðinu, leggur frá sér bókina og fer að lúra [...] Í leikriti geta leiðindi af þessu tagi orðið til að æsa múg gegn höfundinum.”

likely to get some traction; the calculated distance, the sparseness and “modesty” of the narrator, to adhere to the harsh disciplinary measures of what really is a very short work in comparison to most novels. For Laxness there is furthermore, it might be argued, a certain affinity to be gleaned by the narrative technique of the Sagas, described thusly: “The sharpness of focus and the purity of the language are simply two sides of the same thing. The reader sees the events through some form of magic glass that not only renders them believable but, above everything else, significant.”<sup>861</sup> The unique position that the reader inhabits when reading the Sagas comes down to mediation, compared to modern texts the mediating “apparatus” is much less overt and conspicuous than is the case in the modern novel; the “purity of the language” and the magic glass metaphor describe a method that through a highly sophisticated mimetic capacity renders its model almost in its “natural” state.

Theater corresponds to the criteria subtly laid down in this passage through the sheer power of presence; if the technology of writing can approach (but never achieve) the status of the indexical, as Laxness suggests, then there is still one thing that trumps the index and that is the presence of “original” — actors in this case, live bodies that signify through a complex semiotic system that involves the stage design, props and location of actors, their physical vocabulary and often easily discernable vocal training, in addition to their handling and mediation of the text of the play. Beyond this however, there is the immediacy of their presence. This particular mechanism of the theater, Laxness seems to be thinking, offers a unique formal venue to create textual

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<sup>861</sup> Laxness, “Persónulegar minnisgreinar,” p. 69. In the original: “Skygni höfundar og tærleiki í máli virðist vera aðeins tvær hliðar á einum hlut. Lesandinn sér atburðina út um eitthvað töfragler sem gerir þá ekki aðeins trúlega heldur umfram alt merkilega.”

correspondences with his idealization of ancient stylistics in the Sagas whose purity of vision and being was translated into their representational modes.

There is another aspect of Laxness' rhetoric to consider. As has been noted, his investment in the theater was serious. At the same time, the theater was a fledgling art in Iceland at the time. Although the theater had a history at this point, there was still some way to go in order for it to be possible to speak of a theater "scene" or a vibrant theatrical culture. The opening of Þjóðleikhúsið was of course an important milestone but alone and by itself that did not suffice for a genuinely dynamic and creative environment to come into being, although of course the stability and institutional security was important. There were nevertheless few Icelandic playwrights and, indeed, Þjóðleikhúsið has been criticized for not fostering talent during its initial decades with sufficient vigor.<sup>862</sup> In this context, Laxness' decision to devote himself to the theater must have been viewed as quite significant and the cultural capital that was thus in one grand swoop aligned with the theater clearly functioned to the benefit of theatrical institutions. The immense excitement that greets the news of his impending first play is evidence in this regard and the way in which Laxness' contribution to a theatrical season could easily overshadow everything else is another indicator. "All of [Laxness'] plays have evoked excited anticipation and heated exchanges as people made it the topic of conversation, once news of their impending arrival has gotten out, but none of them, however, have elicited

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<sup>862</sup> Árni Ibsen. "Bókmenntasaga úr gömlum heimi." *Morgunblaðið*, 20 June, 1999, p. 34. Hávar Sigurjónsson. "Íslenskt, já takk!" *Morgunblaðið*, 20 April 2000, p. D20. Lóa. "Kunna íslenskri höfundar ekki að skrifa leikrit? — eða hræðast þeir sláturþörf gagnrýnenda?" *Tíminn*, 9 March, 1996, p. 8; Guðmundur Steinsson and Sigrún Valbergisdóttir. "Blóð og eldur." *Morgunblaðið*, 2 February, 1991, pp. 18–19; Richard Beck. "Fyrstu starfsár þjóðleikhússins." *Tíminn*, 9 March, 1956, p. 7; Gunnlaugur Ásgeirsson. "Íslensk leiklistarsaga." *Helgarpósturinn*, 16 January, 1981, p. 20.

anything like the response of *Strompleikurinn*,” Sigurður Grímsson wrote the day after the premier.<sup>863</sup> But it is also possible to view Laxness’ invocation of the Sagas in “Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit” and the manner in which he associates certain key elements of the Saga heritage with the modern form of the theater as a subtle rhetorical maneuver that functions to construct a connection or a link between an art form that still has some maturing to do with what amounts to the very engine of cultural legitimacy in the Icelandic context. That is, Laxness may not (solely) be using the Sagas to illustrate a literary point and co-opt for himself some of their shiny veneer but, rather (or also), to pass it along to a cultural and institutional environment that could indeed do with all the help it could get.

In addition to everything else, the essay functions as a signifier of the importance Laxness placed upon his theatrical work. Laxness not only rationalizes the trajectory of his own career as leading inexorably to the form of the drama, but he posits the medium of theater as a purer expression of literary art than the novel and associates the cultural capital of the Saga heritage with the modern theater. Much is therefore invested in Laxness’ “transition.” The reception and subsequent critical constructions of this period in Laxness’ career will now be addressed.

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<sup>863</sup> Grímsson, “Strompleikurinn eftir Halldór Kiljan Laxness,” p. 6. In the original: “Öll leikrit hans hafa vakið mikið umtal manna á meðal og eftirvæntingu, er til þeirra hefur fréttst, en ekkert þeirra þó í ríkara mæli en Strompleikurinn”. “Kiljan hefir lokið samningu nýs leikrits. Þjóðleikhúsið tekur það til sýningar.” *Tíminn*, 20 February, 1954, p. 1; “hh.” “Þetta er mikill og góður strompur.” *Morgunblaðið*, 7 October, 1961, p. 3; “Strompleikurinn kominn í bókabúðir.” *Morgunblaðið*, 11 October, 1961, p. 3; “Ekki hægt að skrifa leikrit við skrifborð.” *Alþýðublaðið*, 26 March, 1966, pp. 3, 14; “Dúfnaveislan komin út í bókarformi.” *Vísir*, 30 April, 1966, p. 7; “Prjónastofan Sólin frumsýnd á 16 ára afmæli Þjóðleikhússins.” *Tíminn*, 16 April, 1966, p. 1; “Frumkýning á Prjónastofunni Sólinni síðasta vetrardag.” *Þjóðviljinn*, 16 April, 1966, p. 1; “Prjónastofan Sólin frumsýnd síðasta vetrardag.” *Vísir*, 16 April, 1966, pp. 1, 5; “Prjónastofan frumsýnd í kvöld.” *Tíminn*, 20 April, 1966, p. 9; “Dúfnaveislan frumsýnd á föstudag.” *Morgunblaðið*, 23 April, 1966, p. 3.

### 3. “Leisurely” Literary Interludes

Given the sporadic nature of Laxness’ initial engagement with the theater, it is quite reasonable for Árni Ibsen to describe Laxness’ playwriting up until the 1960s as constituting something of an “interlude” in a literary career that ranged freely across genres and different modes of writing.<sup>864</sup> Indeed, playwriting seemed initially to be something that occupied the author only intermittently, and between (or as respite during) the writing of his novels. In a 1966 interview, Laxness appears to give credence to this view when he describes how his first play came about:

I took time off from the writing of ‘Independent People’ for two weeks, or thereabouts, and as a form of respite and diversion I wrote the play. The subject matter had come to me and I thought that a dramatic format of some sort would be most convenient — without realizing that I was becoming a playwright and lacking utterly such ambitions. I wrote it quickly, and in that original form the work has remained.<sup>865</sup>

Laxness was, as mentioned above, always rather adept at positioning himself in the cultural landscape through highly performative self-figurations in the media — the goals of which shifted, while his capacity and tenacity in this regard remained a constant — and the above passage should be read in the context of a theatrical career, which up to that point had been uneven with two of three

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<sup>864</sup> Árni Ibsen. “Leikritun eftir 1918.” *Íslensk bókmenntasaga V*. Ed. by Guðmundur Andri Thorsson. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2006, p. 236.

<sup>865</sup> Sveinn Einarsson. “Rætt við Laxness. Fyrri hluti. ‘Eiginlega skrikaði ég inn í þetta fyrir þróun skáldsagnastílsins ...’.” *Vísir*, 31 January, 1966, p. 7. In the original the quote reads: “Ég tók mér frí frá ‘Sjálfstæðu fólki’ í hálfan mánuð, eða þar um bil, og skrifaði leikritið mér til hvíldar og tilbreytingar. Mér hafði dottið þetta efni í hug og áleit þægilegast að koma því fyrir í einhvers konar leikritsform — alveg án þess þó að mér væri ljóst að ég væri að gerast leikritahöfundur og alveg án þess að hafa nokkurn metnað í þá átt. Ég skrifaði þetta í snatri, og í þessu upprunalega formi hefur það legið síðan.”

original works for the stage being deemed outright failures (*Straumrof* and *Strompleikurinn*) and the reception of the third (*Silfurtúnglið*) mixed at best.<sup>866</sup>

When Laxness therefore emphasizes that *Straumrof* was written quickly and without much planning he downplays any theatrical aspirations he may have entertained at the time. The genesis of the play is described as occurring at the juncture of inspiration and the haphazard. The subject matter “came” to Laxness who, in a reflexive gesture, wrote the play in a virtual white heat, the speed being such as to counter notions of the literary work as the manifestation of sustained reflection and aesthetic ambition. This allows Laxness to distance himself from what many consider a severely flawed text, as will be discussed in more detail below. Having established that *Straumrof* was written in a burst of inspiration, it would clearly be unfair to expect it to resemble the finely honed textual artifacts usually associated with the author — while Laxness subtly yet stubbornly still insists on its possible value by implicitly referencing the play’s genuineness, immediacy, the possibility that the intensity of its composition may have synchronized with the “primordial” — a favorite phrase of contemporary reviewers when discussing the play — thrust of its dramatic arc.

Laxness’ air of nonchalance, likely not quite genuine, is underlined when he describes how *Straumrof* ended up on the stage. In this portion of the interview the author’s stoicism and disinterest are endowed with a distinct

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<sup>866</sup> It is interesting to read the descriptions of scholars, historians and critics when it comes to the success or failure of *Silfurtúnglið* during its initial run, as the range that separates some of these accounts is considerable. An article in *Mánudagsblaðið* discusses the theatrical season of 1954–1955 in Þjóðleikhúsið, and is highly critical, anticipating that the theater will not even be able to finish the season. When it comes to *Silfurtúnglið*, the article notes: “H.K. Laxness’ play *Silfurtúnglið*, quickly revealed itself as a failure, as ticket sales have gone down to next to nothing.” “Leikhúsunnandi.” “Lokar Þjóðleikhúsið í byrjun desember. Aðsókn mjög dræm. Neyðaróp Rósinkranz.” *Mánudagsblaðið*, 15 November, 1954, p. 2. In the original: “Leikrit H.K. Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, datt um sjálft sig nær í upphafi, en aðsókn að því hefur dvínað niður úr öllu valdi.”



narrative dimension. After one of his frequent stays abroad, so Laxness begins his tale, word had somehow gotten around that in his possession was a recently completed play. Laxness' work would seem to have roused considerable interest and speculation about town, which the reader is given ample room to imagine spreading across Reykjavík in the form of rumors, anecdotes and chitchat until the news at last reaches the managers of culture, the theatrical gatekeepers, whose response is charmingly naïve in Laxness' rendering of the story in that, having heard of the play, they simply arrive as a troupe at the home of the artist in the earnest hope of securing permission to stage it — unread, as it would appear.<sup>867</sup>

Laxness manages to portray his first play as being something of a lark and, at the same time, an intensely desirable object. The suggestion, oblique but present, is that no matter how slight his creative efforts, they were of considerable interest to those who had their ears to the ground and were aware of innovative literary developments. Laxness then presents himself as having been so far removed from concerns and anxieties or, conversely, ambitions and hopes regarding his debut stage effort that he was not even in Iceland when the play was staged and thus never saw a single performance; something that is recounted without a hint of regret.<sup>868</sup> Left unsaid is the fact that Laxness' confidant, Erlendur Guðmundsson of Unuhús, wrote the young author an extremely detailed report about the premier, a gesture based, one would think,

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<sup>867</sup> "I was paid a visit by a number of men and women from Leikfélag Reykjavíkur, who wanted to stage the play," Laxness says in the interview. Einarsson, "Rætt við Laxness," p. 7. In the original: "Það komu til mín menn og konur frá Leikfélagi Reykjavíkur og vildu fá að leika það."

<sup>868</sup> See for example Laxness' account in "Dúfnaveizlan frumsýnd á föstudag." *Morgunblaðið*, 23 April, 1966, p. 3.

on the assumption that the matter was of considerable interest to the recipient.<sup>869</sup>

It is worth noting that there is no suggestion, ever, that Laxness took the reception of his work or anything having to do with his authorial image and career prospects lightly; quite the contrary, a fairly innocuous comment in a newspaper became the cause for a lawsuit when he was in his mid twenties and he could harbor a sense of acrimonious resentment for a bad review for years, if not decades.<sup>870</sup> But whatever Laxness' feelings at the time regarding *Straumrof* — and there are plenty of reasons to think that he may have been considerably more invested in the fate of his work than the interview indicates — the central point is that as Laxness headed into the theatrical season of 1966, wherein he would have two plays opening, he staked out a position with regard to his authorial image that should work to the benefit of the new plays.<sup>871</sup> Back when

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<sup>869</sup> Erlendur's letter is reprinted in "Tvö einkabréf tengd frumsýningu Straumrofs." *Laxness og leiklistin*, design of program Björn G. Björnsson, Jón Þórisson and Ólafur J. Engilbertsson, exhibition text written by Jón Viðar Jónsson, Samtök um leikminjasafn: Reykjavík, 2002, pp. 54–57.

<sup>870</sup> When *Morgunblaðið* referred to aspects of Laxness' third novel, *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (The Great Weaver of Kashmir, 1927) as being obscene in a political column, the author became incensed and threatened a lawsuit. See Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, pp. 206–207.

<sup>871</sup> There are indeed reasons why Laxness' carefully modest articulation of the origins of his first play may not seem entirely persuasive. For one thing, he was passionate about the theater, he even wrote about it for a time, and thus the disdain for his debut seems somewhat strange. There is also speculation that *Straumrof* may have had a considerably longer gestation period than indicated in the interview. Among the plays Laxness reviewed in the early 1930s was a production of *Fröken Julie* (1888) by Swedish playwright August Strindberg. A number of commentators have noted the significance of Strindberg's classic play as an influence, even a model of sorts, for *Straumrof*, and it has been suggested that this encounter with Strindberg's cross-class romantic tragedy may have been the moment when Laxness' own work started taking shape. See "Laxness og leiklistin. Frá sýningunni," *Laxness og leiklistin*, design of program Björn G. Björnsson, Jón Þórisson and Ólafur J. Engilbertsson, exhibition text written by Jón Viðar Jónsson, Samtök um leikminjasafn: Reykjavík, 2002, p. 13. Laxness' review essays on the theater were not collected and reprinted until 2002, but they are insightful and evidence a dynamic engagement with the theater. See Halldór Laxness. "Leikhúsið. Soffía Guðlaugsdóttir: Fröken Júlía, eftir Strindberg." *Alþýðublaðið*, 8 March, 1932, p. 3. See also Halldór Laxness. "Laxness sem leikdómari. Leikdómar Halldórs Kiljan Laxness frá árunum 1931 og '32." *Safn til sögu íslenskrar leiklistar og leikbókmennta*. 1 bindi. Ed. Jón Viðar Jónsson. Published by Jón Viðar Jónsson, Auður Laxness and Steingerður Guðmundsdóttir, 1998, pp. 18–19.

he wrote *Straumrof*, Laxness indicates, he was a novelist dabbling in the theater; the same, if to a somewhat lesser extent, applies to *Silfurtúnglið*. Now, however, he is pursuing the theater with utmost seriousness, and has even given up the novel to do so; nothing in other words remains of the dilettantism that some might associate with his earlier efforts.

There was also the disappointing reception of *Strompleikurinn*, Laxness' most recent contribution to the theater. Even the friendliest of reviews could only be described as lukewarm, and the play lagged behind even the modest success of *Silfurtúnglið* in terms of receipts. The peculiar purgatorial interim suffered by *Prjónastofan Sólin* — finished and published in 1962, performed in 1966 — is directly related to the underwhelming box-office performance of its predecessor as well as the general bafflement of audiences and critics alike. A student paper referred to the play as a “fiasco” while critiques in more established venues pointed out, for example, that the only thing that managed to trump the breathless anticipation among attendees before the curtain was raised on opening night was their disappointment by the time it came down.<sup>872</sup> Why the extreme reaction? — the same review asks. An answer is quickly provided. One of the nation's most established authors has simply produced a careless and “slapdash work” lacking the required drive for excellence that characterizes literature of note.<sup>873</sup> “The most anticipated work of the fall season has

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<sup>872</sup> Benediktsson, “Leiklist,” p. 20. In the original: “En eigi Strompleikurinn að vera táknaæn lýsing einhvers, sem ekki verður betur lýst á annan veg, þá er leikurinn *fiasco*.” Sigurður Grímsson. “Strompleikurinn.” *Morgunblaðið*, 13 October, 1961, p. 6. What he wrote was: “If the anticipation of the theater audience was palpable, as the play started, the disappointment was no less obvious at the end.” In the original: “Hafi eftirvænting leikhúsgesta verið mikil, er leikurinn hófst, þá voru vonbrigðin ekki minni í leikslök.”

<sup>873</sup> Grímsson, “Strompleikurinn,” p. 6. In the original: “En hvers vegna? Ástæðan er einfaldlega sú að að hér gat að líta leikrit eftir viðurkenndan og mikilhæfan höfund, sem virðist hafa kastað til þess höndum.”

disappointed nearly everyone,” philosopher Gunnar Dal wrote, adding that the play had been a resounding “flop on opening night”;<sup>874</sup> the reviews were, if not unanimous in their negative evaluation, then still so overwhelmingly unenthusiastic as to “seep” into or “infect” an article defending Laxness entitled “Strompleikurinn og gagnrýnin” (The Chimney Play and the Criticism), where the author at one point admits that Laxness’ play is “flawed, if viewed from a strictly theatrical perspective”.<sup>875</sup>

When Laxness came back the year after the showing of *Strompleikurinn* with an even more difficult and abstruse play in tow, Þjóðleikhúsið “politely” declined despite a close collaboration with the author, which reached back to the theatrical adaptation of *Íslandsklukkan* (Iceland’s Bell, 1943–1946) as one of three plays chosen for the opening season of Þjóðleikhúsið in 1950, a moment of considerable significance in the nation’s cultural life. The production was co-written by Laxness and Lárus Pálsson, actor and director, and became the theater’s most successful production, and could, in addition, claim a certain distinction as the only one among the three plays during the inaugural season that was making its first stage premier.<sup>876</sup> Making the most of the occasion of the opening of a long awaited institution, a competition for plays of outstanding quality was orchestrated in preparation for the opening season, with the winners to be staged at some point in the near future, in Þjóðleikhúsið naturally.

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<sup>874</sup> Gunnar Dal. “Strompleikurinn.” *Tíminn*, 13 October, 1961, p. 9. The quote: “Menn hafa beðið þessa leiks með meiri eftirvæntingu en annarra viðburða menningarlífsins á þessu hausti og flestir orðið fyrir vonbrigðum. — Leikritið féll á frumsýningu.”

<sup>875</sup> Jóhannsson, “Strompleikurinn og gagnrýnin,” p. 9. In the original, “Vafalaust er það rétt, að verkið sé gallað, séð frá ströngu leikritunarsjónarmiði.”

<sup>876</sup> Ólafur Ragnarsson notes that by the early 1970s, *Íslandsklukkan* had been performed more frequently than any other play in Þjóðleikhúsið, there having been at that point about 130 performances, and about 70–80 thousand people had seen it. Ólafur Ragnarsson. *Til fundar við skáldið Halldór Laxness*. Reykjavík: Veröld, 2007, p. 254.

Nineteen plays were submitted, awards were handed out but not a single one of the plays, in a highly curious development, was staged as promised.<sup>877</sup> The massive success of *Íslandsklukkan*, it might be pointed out, set the bar quite high for the evaluation of Laxness' successive stage plays, at least in terms of what constituted commercial success, but it also seems to have reignited Laxness' interest in the stage as he returned only four years later with his second original play.

A few days before *Íslandsklukkan* opened, the text of the theatrical adaptation was published as *Snæfríður Íslandssól*. The title derived from the name of the novel's tragic heroine. It is not clear why Laxness chose a different name for the published version of the play, although he would do so again on two later occasions (the stage adaptation of *Kristnihald undir Jökli* became *Úa* when published in 1970; *Atómstöðin* became *Norðanstúlkan* in 1970).<sup>878</sup> None of the stage performances made use of these alternative/new names, neither as titles nor in the programs that accompanied the plays' run. The three texts that were published in this fashion, usually on the day of the theatrical premiere or somewhat earlier, always had the authorial name of Laxness adorned in its usual place, his books by this point being printed in a highly distinctive, unified format. This was not a matter of mere formality; rights, revenues, respect and credit all accrued to the name above the title. In the case of *Íslandsklukkan*, Laxness is listed as the sole writer of the adaptation, although it is conventional knowledge that the director of the play, Lárus Pálsson, worked closely with him from

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<sup>877</sup> For more on this, see Sigurjónsson, "Íslenskt, já takk!," p. D20.

<sup>878</sup> It is interesting to note that Laxness gives all three of the plays the name of the female lead (*Snæfríður Íslandssól*, *Úa*) or, in one case, a geographically inspired sobriquet (*Norðanstúlkan*). One might be tempted to wonder if an oblique reference to another playwright who tended to do just that might be a motivating factor (*Miss Julie*, *Kristina*, *Hedda Gabler*).

beginning to end, and was as a matter of fact commissioned by Þjóðleikhúsið to do so. In the case of the adaptations of *Kristnihald undir Jökli* and *Atómstöðin* (*Northern Country Girl* and *Úa*), co-writers were listed (Sveinn Einarsson in the former instance, Einarsson and Þorsteinn Gunnarsson in the latter) but Laxness was identified as primary author and retained all rights alone. Jón Viðar Jónsson has discussed the shenanigans around the function as well as the cultural and monetary worth of the authorial name in his article on theatrical and filmic adaptations of *Atómstöðin*.<sup>879</sup>

When Laxness was approached by Leikfélag Reykjavíkur about the possibility of staging *Prjónastofan Sólin* several years after Þjóðleikhúsið turned it down, he welcomed by all accounts the opportunity to work with the smaller, but also more independent and experimental playhouse, offering it a choice between his 1962 play or a work that was still in progress but quickly gaining shape and substance, entitled *Dúfnaveislan*.<sup>880</sup> Leikfélag Reykjavíkur chose *Dúfnaveislan*, while at the same time Þjóðleikhúsið reconsidered its earlier decision and took *Prjónastofan Sólin* on. *Dúfnaveislan* went on to become the most successful of Laxness' original plays, striking a chord with audiences and critics alike. In comparison, *Prjónastofan Sólin* met with a muted reception.

However, the end result was, if not an unparalleled situation in Icelandic

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<sup>879</sup> It seems clear at any rate that Laxness used the power and influence that he wielded in Iceland by this point, most obviously in the cultural life of course, to consolidate his own interests and to the direct detriment of his co-workers. See Jón Viðar Jónsson, "Er hægt að leikgera Laxness?," p. 145. In the same article Jónsson suggests that the reason for the name change of the three plays may simply have been "bibliographical," so as to avoid confusion between his novels and the printed versions of the plays, an elegant suggestion that's quite persuasive. An example of such confusion is on offer in "Snæfríður Íslandssól." *Tíminn*, 25 April, 1950, p. 3. The "artistic" value of the stage adaptations of Laxness' novels has remained something of a sensitive issue. Critical acclaim has tended to be muted, the adaptations having a reputation for being episodic and relying on the audience's familiarity with the original works. As noted, *Íslandsklukkan* was a smash hit for Þjóðleikhúsið in 1950 and other adaptations of Laxness' novels have proven themselves to be near certain popular hits, a truism to this day.

<sup>880</sup> "Tveir heimar, sem mætast." *Vísir*, 23 April, 1966, p. 6.

theatrical history, then at least a highly uncommon one, as Laxness found himself in the fall of that year the author of two plays that were running simultaneously in Reykjavík's two most important theaters, Leikfélag Reykjavíkur and Þjóðleikhúsið, with one of them, *Dúfnaveislan*, happening to be the sensation of the theatrical season.<sup>881</sup>

### 3.1 How Many Stars to Give Laxness the Playwright?

Establishing a reputation as a serious playwright was important to Laxness, but theatrical success had proven elusive. His disappointment when *Prjónastofan Sólin* was rejected, as well as a more general feeling that his theater work was unappreciated, can be gleaned from numerous interviews and statements made by the author. An article in *Vísir* in 1963 discusses Laxness' "disappointment" when it comes to "the reception of his plays among critics and audiences" and a direct quote, "My plays are rarely shown and are not popular successes" is made into the headline.<sup>882</sup> In light of the opening question in a 1962 interview with Laxness, these sentiments on the author's part are not conjured out of thin air: "I am told that people are rather unhappy with your writing plays now," the interviewer notes at the beginning of his conversation with the author.<sup>883</sup>

"Everybody is against me writing plays," Laxness states in a press conference two years later, as if responding belatedly to the opening salvo of the previously

<sup>881</sup> "Leikrit Laxness í báðum leikhúsum borgarinnar. Litið inn á æfingu í Þjóðleikhúsinu og lðnó og rætt við höfundinn." *Morgunblaðið*, 16 April, 1966, p. 5; "Þjóðleikhúsið flutti 17 verk á leikárinu." *Vísir*, 11 July, 1966, p. 8; "Prjónastofan frumsýnd í kvöld." *Tíminn*, 20 April, 1966, p. 9.

<sup>882</sup> "Leikrit mín eru sjaldan sýnd og slá ekki í gegn." Laxnes ræðst á leikhús Norðurlanda." *Vísir*, 23 April, 1963, pp. 16, 5. In the original: "Kemur það í ljós, að Laxness er vonsvikinn yfir þeim móttökum sem leikrit hans hafa hlotið hjá leikhúsgestum og leikhúsgagnrýnendum."

<sup>883</sup> N[jörður] P. N[jarðvík]. "Ég hef ekkert tilbúið skoðanakerfi." *Vísir*, 10 September, 1962, p. 9. In the original: "Mér er sagt að fólk sé heldur óánægt með að þér skulið vera farinn að skrifa leikrit."

quoted interview.<sup>884</sup> In an attempt to defend his theatrical work, Laxness mentions in another interview that a Danish critic, Ole Nord, had in private conversation noted that incompetent Icelandic theater critics were to blame for “ruining the reputation of [his] plays”; these critics being too lax to “take the time for a genuinely rigorous engagement” with the works in question.<sup>885</sup> Laxness’ correspondence with Peter Hallberg in this period also offers numerous instances of the author voicing his disappointment.<sup>886</sup>

While it is true that a number of critics appeared somewhat taken aback when encountering Laxness’ late plays, the reviews are less political and more professional than those that greeted many of his earlier texts.<sup>887</sup> In addition, Laxness’ plays entered a theatrical milieu that, while not entirely unfamiliar with post-war experimental theater as a number of key works by Beckett and Ionesco had been staged in Reykjavík in the preceding years, was still used to much more conventional fare. Sveinn Einarsson has for example pointed out how it can be

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<sup>884</sup> Laxness’ comments on the novel on the occasion of the same press conference are interesting in the present context: “I write plays because the novelistic form does not satisfy me anymore. The novel is a field that’s been plowed heavily. My novels had become so similar to plays that the step into theater work was a short one.” “Allir á móti því að ég skrifi leikrit.” *Alþýðublaðið*, 17 September, 1965, p. 3. In the original: “Annars eru allir á móti að ég skrifi leikrit. Þau fást ekki útgefin og enginn vill leika þau.” And the second quote, about the novel: “Ég skrifa leikrit vegna þess að skáldsöguformið fullnægir mér ekki lengur. Skáldsagan er ákaflega mikið plægður akur. Mínar skáldsögur voru orðnar svo líkar leikriti að sporið var stutt yfir í leikritagerð.”

<sup>885</sup> The critic in question is Ole Storm, who had attended rehearsals of *Prjónastofan Sólin* and supposedly found Icelandic theater critics “short-winded,” a somewhat obscure put-down admittedly. Björn Bjarman. “Vi blev bedragne.” *Alþýðublaðið*, 24 November, 1968, p. 12. In the original: “Í hitteðfyrri, þegar verið að sýna leikrit mín hér var danski ritdómarinn Ole Storm á ferð hérlandis og sá þau. Á dögnum skrifaði hann, að íslenskir bóka- og leikgagnrýnendur mundu þjást af andarteppu og vildi kenna þeim um, að leikrit mín hefðu fengið óorð að órannsökuðu máli.”

<sup>886</sup> LBS 200 NF, Landsbókasafn Íslands–HBS, handritasafn, HKL bréfaskipti, section A/B.

<sup>887</sup> The point is not that Laxness is wrong when he suggests that the critical establishment did in some respects have difficulties when approaching his theatrical work. However, the response was almost never outright dismissal; reviewers grappled with the texts, often finding a great many things to compliment even if they ultimately came to the conclusion that a particular work was flawed or had failed. Critics also noted certain thematic similarities between the plays and Halldór’s previous work and found them therefore, despite new abstract trappings, to lack originality and to suffer in comparison to earlier iterations of Laxness’ preoccupations. While one may not agree with the final evaluation, these insights are not insignificant.



argued that the directorial aesthetics that dominated Þjóðleikhúsið in its early period derived from Danish theatrical realism dating back to the years following the First World War.<sup>888</sup> *Gullna hliðið* (The Golden Gate, 1941) by Davíð Stefánsson, a broad comedy based on an old folk tale, was the most popular play of the 1940s,<sup>889</sup> a title claimed by Laxness' own *Íslandsklukkan* in the following decade, a work also far removed from any sense of experimentation with form or medium. Keeping this background in mind, the fact that critics and audiences would be (or might be) divided when faced with Laxness' highly experimental, demanding, symbolic and progressive plays was perhaps not surprising. These were texts bearing direct links to the theater of the absurd, and all being less than dynamic when it came to plot development, cliffhangers, moral lessons and women in physical or moral peril, and other popular narrative hooks, Laxness not even allowing any of the three late plays to feature a lead that could by some stretch of the imagination be considered sympathetic.<sup>890</sup>

If success in the realm of theater seemed within reach during the theatrical season of 1966, the moment passed and Laxness did not produce further works for the stage. And posterity has not been particularly kind, it would seem. His works composed originally for the stage continue to suffer in terms of popular esteem in comparison to adaptations of his novels — and the novels themselves, of course, as suggested by the opening question, actually

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<sup>888</sup> Sveinn Einarsson. "Um leikstjórn: erindi á aðalfundi Hins íslenska bókmenntafélags 17. desember 1979." *Skírnir*, 1980, pp. 5–23. See also Ásgeirsson, "Íslensk leiklistarsaga," p. 20.

<sup>889</sup> "A great work of literature, *Gullna hliðið* isn't," Ásgeir Hjartarson says, quite succinctly, in his review of a 1948 production. *Tjaldið fellur. Leikdómar og greinar. Maí 1948–maí 1958*. Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1958, p. 13. In the original: "Mikið skáldverk er 'Gullna hliðið' ekki."

<sup>890</sup> It is also interesting to note that in a conversation printed in *Morgunblaðið* that took place several years after Laxness "quoted" his interlocutor on the state of Icelandic theater criticism, Ole Nord asks Laxness several questions about *Prjónastofan Sólin* but manages not only to refrain from complimenting the play but also to indirectly express the fact that he is less than enthusiastic about Laxness investing his energies in the theater. See Ole Storm. "Ole Storm ræðir við Halldór Laxness." *Morgunblaðið* (Blað II), 24 December, 1966, pp. 1–2.

more of a statement, in the interview cited above, conducted by N[jörður] P. N[jarðvík]. As early as 1968, Jóhann Hjálmarsson, poet and one of the preeminent literary critics of the period, noted that Laxness' plays "have not managed to become cultural mainstays like his novels."<sup>891</sup> That the plays that Laxness wrote specifically for the stage have not become "mainstays" of Icelandic theatrical life is indeed a valid observation, and quite possibly an understatement.

Laxness' first play *Straumrof* has been produced twice for the stage, with more than forty years separating the two productions, the original one in 1934 and the latter in 1977.<sup>892</sup> *Silfurtúnglið* was staged twice in addition to its 1954 premier; in 1975 to celebrate the 25-year anniversary of Þjóðleikhúsið, which was a respectful gesture. The third showing was by Leikfélag Akureyrar (The Theater Company of Akureyri), the most significant of the regional theaters, in 1986.<sup>893</sup> It should be noted however that *Silfurtúnglið* has traveled more widely than most of Laxness' plays, being staged in Moscow in 1955, Finland in 1956, and then in Czechoslovakia in 1956. The three foreign outings occur in the two years immediately following the play's premier in Iceland, and are, probably

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<sup>891</sup> Jóhann Hjálmarsson. "Veraldarfjallið." *Morgunblaðið*, 13 October, 1968, p. 12. In the original: "Leikrit Halldórs Laxness haf ekki náð jafn sterkum tókum á þjóðinni og önnur skáldverk hans."

<sup>892</sup> When stage productions of Laxness' works are discussed, the focus is on productions by established companies and theaters. Left out are student and regional productions, "readings" and radio adaptations, to name a few. Of these there are many but their frequency does tend to go hand in hand with the differing popularity of the plays. Bracketing them does therefore not skew or distort the main thrust of the argument. The discussion of the various stage productions is indebted to: Jökull Sævarsson. "Laxness í leikgerð. Leiksýningar, útvarpsleikrit, sjónvarpsmyndir og kvikmyndir byggðar á verkum Halldórs Laxness." *Par ríkir fegurðin ein. Öld með Halldóri Laxness*. Ed. by Einar Sigurðsson, Reykjavík: Landsbókasafn Íslands — Háskólabókasafn, 2002; and to Jónsson, "Er hægt að leikgera Laxness?"; and the database on the website of Leikminjasafn Íslands (The Icelandic Theater Museum), <http://www.leikminjasafn.is/leit.asp>.

<sup>893</sup> In 1979 a TV movie was made based on the play, directed by Hrafn Gunnlaugsson. This particular "manifestation" of the text will be returned to.

quite significantly, clustered around the time when Laxness received the Nobel Prize.

*Strompleikurinn* was revisited in 1972 by Leikfélag Akureyrar and then in 2002 by Þjóðleikhúsið. The only full-fledged production *Prjónastofan Sólin* has enjoyed is its original 1966 run. *Dúfnaveislan* was shown in Akureyri in 1968 and then, again, by Leikfélag Reykjavíkur in 1991 with Halldór E. Laxness, the author's grandson, directing. Meanwhile *Íslandsklukkan* has been staged seven times (1950, 1955, 1960, 1968, 1985, 1993, 1996, 2010);<sup>894</sup> *Kristnihald undir Jökli* three times (1970, 1975, 2001), while *Heimsljós* (World's Light, 1937–1940) has also appeared on stage in three different versions (1981, 1989, 1989), and *Sjálfstætt fólk* three times (1972, 1979, 1999 in two parts). There have also been stage productions of *Salka Valka* and *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*; and Laxness' experimental poem from the 1920s, "Rhodymenia Palmata" even found its way to the stage in 1992.<sup>895</sup>

Although not complete, the above listing demonstrates just how prominent Laxness has been on the Icelandic stage in the second half of the twentieth century. That the literary adaptations trumped the plays he composed for the stage is also abundantly clear. Important as well is the fact that the adaptations, notwithstanding the number of times they have been revived, have usually been the flagship productions of their respective theatrical seasons, and done well. And Laxness' reputation as a playwright is much less secure than his reputation as a novelist. The almost aggressively direct title of Jón Viðar

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<sup>894</sup> Árni Ibsen suggests, although with reservations, that it might well be argued that *Íslandsklukkan* is the cornerstone of the work Þjóðleikhúsið has done in terms of local, Icelandic plays. See Ibsen, "Íslenskt, já takk!," p. 20.

<sup>895</sup> As noted in the Introduction, several of the above mentioned novels have also been adapted for the screen.

Jónsson's article "Was Halldór Laxness a Good Playwright?" may serve as an indication to that effect. In a similar vein, Halldór Guðmundsson summarizes perceptions of the author's theatrical career by noting in his biography that Laxness' original plays were "frequently viewed as a detour, and as something that he did not do well".<sup>896</sup>

Jónsson's aforementioned article may well be the most comprehensive overview of Laxness' theatrical career to date, biographies not excepted, but it is also written in an abrasive and abrupt style that at times makes the content appear less thoughtful than is in fact the case. Jónsson has a tendency to present his opinions and value judgments as facts, leaving little room for a debate on hermeneutical fineries. That said, Jónsson is to his credit absolutely free of the sycophantic dimension that characterizes a substantial portion of Icelandic critical writings on Laxness, particularly in the decades that can be termed the post-Nobel phase. The veneration that characterized the way in which the critical establishment approached Laxness only started to wane when a new generation of literary scholars emerged in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>897</sup> Jónsson is

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<sup>896</sup> Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, p. 664. In the original: "Þótt oft sé litið á leikrit Halldórs sem hliðarspor, þar sem honum hafi ekki tekist vel upp".

<sup>897</sup> It would however not be accurate to say that the aforementioned strand of reverence has been "overcome," and a suitable level of critical neutrality and distance achieved. Far from it, it is still a notable feature of the cultural debate although, as noted, less prominent and less overtly expressive. Discussing precisely this aspect of the cultural life in Iceland, Þröstur Helgason makes the point that all the reverence, respect, deference and genuflections before the genius that is Laxness had over the course of decades created what he termed "a mountain of clichés" that radically distorted our perceptions of the author. The proper assessment of Laxness' works awaited a future less in thrall to the Nobel-winner. See Þröstur Helgason. "Klisjufjallið Halldór Laxness." *Morgunblaðið*, 23 April, 2002, p. 38. In terms of the period being discussed, however, Sveinn Skorri Höskuldsson's radio address on the occasion of the author's seventieth birthday is an illustrative if also somewhat unfortunate example of the sycophantic lows academic discourse would reach when in full worship mode. His comments on Laxness' importance to national identity are, to cite just one example, enmeshed in a strange developmental and evolutionary metaphor: "When the role that Halldór has played in our national and cultural life for the past half a century is examined, certain words that fell in conversation several years ago come to mind, almost by themselves. The occasion was an afternoon conversation about Halldór and his works: — Without him we would still be little more than apes in the marshes." Sveinn Skorri

unhesitant however when it comes the criticizing accepted “truths” about the nation’s premier author, be it Laxness’ synthesis of Brechtian political theater and absurdist aesthetics, the importance of the philosophy of “tao” in his writings or, putting things quite directly, which of his plays, if any, are the most successful. Regarding the last mentioned matter, Jónsson argues that the work commonly cited as Laxness’ most coherent and successful theatrical endeavor, and the most popular, *Dúfnaveislan*, is in fact severely flawed and that both *Strompleikurinn* and *Prjónastofan Sólin*, in particular the latter, are much more interesting, complex and demanding texts. In these instances Jónsson does give himself the space needed for sustained argumentation; we will return to his interpretation of these texts below, as his stance is not only intriguing but may also be justified.

The title of the concluding subchapter in Jónsson’s article playfully references the common critical practice of summing up the value of a work of art with artificial barometers of excellence: “How many stars does the playwright receive?” Jónsson does not carry out his “threat,” as he puts it, of assigning stars to Laxness’ career in the theater.<sup>898</sup> Indeed, such a gesture would be utterly absurd, but in a somewhat curious moment, as if he simply cannot help himself,

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Höskuldsson. “Sambúð skálds við þjóð sína.” *Sjö erindi um Halldór Laxness*. Ed. by Sveinn Skorri Höskuldsson. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1973, p. 11. In the original: “Þegar skoðað er það hlutverk, sem Halldór Laxness hefur skipað í þjóðlífi okkar og menningarlífi s.l. hálfu öld, koma ósjálfrátt í hugann orð, sem féllu fyrir nokkrum árum, þar sem rætt hafði verið góða dagsstund um Halldór og verk hans: — Án hans værum við enn ekki annað en apar í mýrum.” It is worth noting that in a review of the book in which Höskuldsson’s essay appeared, Gunnar Stefánsson takes particular issue with Höskuldsson’s contribution, pointing out that it combines unseemly deference towards the subject with a vastly overblown conception of the role of literature in contemporary society. Gunnar Stefánsson. “Samtíningur frá afmælisári.” *Tíminn*, 26 May, 1974, p. 26.

<sup>898</sup> Jón Viðar Jónsson, „Var Halldór Laxness gott leikritaskáld?“ *Laxness og leiklistin*, hönnun sýningaskrár Björn G. Björnsson, Jón Þórisson og Ólafur J. Engilbertsson, samning sýningartexta Jón Viðar Jónsson, Samtök um leikminjasafn: Reykjavík, 2002, p. 36. In the original: “Ekki skal ég hneyksla viðkvæmar sálir með því að gera alvöru úr þeirri ‘hótun’, sem kom fram í síðustu millifyrirsögn, að gefa leikritaskáldinu Halldóri Laxness einhvern tiltekinn stjörnuþjöldu.”

Jónsson nevertheless notes that if his back were against the wall and he were forced to evaluate Laxness “according to some fixed scale,” the result “wouldn’t be particularly good.”<sup>899</sup> He is nevertheless appreciative of Laxness’ continuing appetite for artistic risk-taking and he seems to prefer modernist ambiguity to what he designated as melodramatic effects in the first two plays (even a form of “hysterical gibberish” and acting out in the case of *Straumrof*; the reference to hysteria constituting a most interesting choice of a descriptive register, as will be discussed in more detail below).<sup>900</sup> Most importantly, from Jónsson’s point of view, the three late plays represent the “first sustained attempt at modernist theatrical writing” in Iceland.<sup>901</sup>

### 3.2 *The First Theatrical Modernist*

In a 1998 article in *Morgunblaðið*, Hávar Sigurjónsson makes a similar point whilst being more complimentary towards Laxness’ theatrical oeuvre. He notes that Laxness’ original plays were overshadowed by the popularity of the theatrical adaptations of his novels, a situation only made more acute by the fact that the plays that Laxness wrote specifically for the stage, in particular the last three, were progressive, untraditional and iconoclastic. They “broke new

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<sup>899</sup> Jónsson, “Var Halldór Laxness gott leikritaskáld?,” p. 36. In the original: “Kæmist ég hins vegar ekki hjá því að gefa honum einkunn eftir einhverjum fyrirfram gefnum skala yrði hún ekkert sérstaklega há.”

<sup>900</sup> Over the years and decades, Laxness did mature and improve as a playwright in Jónsson’s estimation; Laxness’ technique becoming surer, his approach more self-aware, the constellation of themes that interested him transposed in ever more innovative ways onto the stage. What did not improve, Jónsson suggests, is the author’s talent for the construction of plot. In Jónsson’s opinion, the three late plays in particular lacked thematic or dramatic devices that ideally provide a narrative with its forward impetus and momentum. The brief quote is from Jónsson, “Var Halldór Laxness gott leikritaskáld?,” p. 21 and reads in the original thus: “Því að þar verður leikurinn á köflum lítið annað en samfelldur móðursýkisvaðall frúarinnar”.

<sup>901</sup> Jónsson, “Var Halldór Laxness gott leikritaskáld?,” p. 27. In the original: “Í íslenskri leikritunarsögu eru þau fyrsta umtalsverða tilraunin til móðernískrar leikritunar”.

ground” for Icelandic theater, Sigurjónsson observes, thus perhaps forfeiting whatever commercial prospects the authorial name might have imparted upon more conventional or mainstream works.<sup>902</sup>

His 2002 essay, “Frá Strompleik til Dúfnaveislu,” can be read as a continuation of the article from three years earlier, and among other things it offers a succinct and persuasive reading of the aesthetic factors that ground the three late plays and, much like in the earlier essay, he attempts to counter the “exaggerated” portrayal of Laxness as an unpopular playwright.<sup>903</sup> The opening statement, slightly Adornoesque in its internally contravening and humorous depiction of the aforementioned construction of Laxness’ theatrical career as a misstep, suggests that a number of assumptions need revisiting:

Halldór Laxness is the most successful playwright in the entire field of Icelandic theater if we sidestep the brief period in the early 1960s when he wrote plays. This may sound like an absurd statement but is grounded in the commonly accepted — but significantly flawed — assumption that his plays were essentially rejected by the public, while the theatrical adaptations of his novels were among the most popular works staged in the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>904</sup>

The sentiment expressed by Sigurjónsson may not represent the critical consensus but it does articulate succinctly the position of a “faction” of Laxness scholars, particularly those whose field of expertise is the theater. A case in point is Sveinn Einarsson’s observation regarding Laxness’ supposed “failure” as a playwright:

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<sup>902</sup> Hávar Sigurjónsson. “Lífið á fjöllumum.” *Morgunblaðið*, 14 February, 1998, p. 10. In the original: “óhefðbundin” and “fet[i] ótroðnar slóðir”.

<sup>903</sup> Sigurjónsson, “Frá Strompleik til Dúfnaveislu,” p. 86. In the original: “Reyndar hefur orðstír Laxness sem fremur lítt vinsæls leikritaskálds fengið á sig nokkurn *ýkjublæ* [...]”.

<sup>904</sup> Sigurjónsson, “Frá Strompleik til Dúfnaveislu,” p. 85. In the original, the quote reads: “Halldór Laxness er sá höfundur sem notið hefur mestra vinsælda í íslensku leikhúsi ef undan eru skilin fáein ár á fyrrihluta sjöunda áratugar síðustu aldar er hann skrifaði leikrit. Þetta hljómar kannski sem fáránleg fullyrðing en byggist á þeirri viðteknu — en sumpart röngu — skoðun að leikrit hans hafi notið takmarkaðra vinsælda en leikgerðir af skáldsögum hans hafi verið með vinsælustu leikverkum sem upp voru færð hér á síðari hluta 20. aldar.”

The notion is sometimes introduced when Laxness' literary works are being discussed that his contribution to the theater was in the end a case of missed opportunities. Nothing could be further from the truth. The notion may have something to do with the fact that adaptations of some of the author's most notable novels have been more popular than several of his plays [...] But upon more careful consideration it becomes evident that Halldór Laxness is the most prominent of all Icelandic stage writers for the past half a century.<sup>905</sup>

Einarsson and Sigurjónsson share an emphasis on what they consider a wide-spread misconception, one that is almost “fact-proof”. No matter how many times it is pointed out that *Strompleikurinn* was not actually a commercial disaster and that *Silfurtúnglið* received quite favorable reviews in a number of newspapers and journals during its initial run in 1954 while its revival in 1975 was met with excellent reviews across the board, the opinion lingers that playwriting was “something that [Laxness] did not do well”.

It should be kept in mind however, as shown above, that Einarsson's point regarding Laxness' prominence, while factually accurate, rests on the adaptations more so than on the original plays and that, furthermore, there was a notable scarcity of Icelandic playwrights during (and well past) the years in which Laxness was most active in the theater.<sup>906</sup> It is still difficult to contest Einarsson's key point, namely that it took considerable courage for someone who in this period was deemed one of “the continent's greatest novelists” to invest his

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<sup>905</sup> Sveinn Einarsson. “Vorið geingur í lið með kálfum. Um Laxness og leiklistina.” *Þar ríkir fegurðin ein. Öld með Halldóri Laxness*. Ed. by Einar Sigurðsson. Reykjavík: Landsbókasafn Íslands – Háskólabókasafn, 2002, p. 23. In the original: “Þeirri skoðun hefur stundum verið fleygt í umfjöllun um skáldskap Halldórs Laxness að hann hafi ekki átt erindi sem erfiði í íslenskt leikhús. Þetta er með öllu fjarri sanni. Ef til vill hafa menn byggt þessa skoðun á þeirri staðreynd, að leikgerðir af nokkrum helstu skáldsögum höfundar hafa notið meiri almenningshylli en sum leikrita hans [...] Ef alls er gætt er sannleikurinn sá að Halldór Laxness er fyrirferðarmestur allra íslenskra höfunda á íslensku leiksviði undanfarna hálfu öld.”

<sup>906</sup> Árni Ibsen notes that it took Þjóðleikhúsið close to two decades to establish itself as a productive force and agent of change in the theatrical life in Iceland. While traditionalism that quite literally slides over into parochialism and cronyism; reliance on proven foreign works, both in terms of popularity and cultural capital; the reluctance to “foster” young playwrights, follow them through several works, rather than just the one, which, if it fails to attract an audience could simply be a career ending disaster; and several other issues can be raised as possible explanation, the fact remains that this must be considered an extremely disappointing start. See Ibsen, “Íslenskt, já takk!,” p. 20.



time, energy and credibility in a new medium.<sup>907</sup> In particular he singles out *Strompleikurinn* as being an unparalleled accomplishment within the Icelandic theatrical tradition, a text that was utterly “at variance with everything written up until that time in the theater by an Icelandic author.”<sup>908</sup> Einarsson thus takes a similar position as Jónsson, emphasizing the importance of Laxness’ initial play of the 1960s, while also confronting the play’s reputation head-on, so to speak, with revisionist intent.

This was not the first time Einarsson had taken a stand in this “dispute” — the evaluation of Laxness’ cultural capital as it relates to the theater. A 1989 documentary film on Laxness was unfairly dismissive of his theatrical accomplishments, Einarsson thought: “Judging by this film, people can be expected to think that [Laxness’ interactions with the theater] were painful [...] and that Halldór was never really welcome there.”<sup>909</sup> Nothing could be further from the truth, according to Einarsson, who notes that “few if any playwrights have proven more popular among the theater-going public” and that Laxness can be credited with transforming “our theater culture into an Icelandic theater culture”.<sup>910</sup> Einarsson’s article concludes with the call for a revival of *Dúfnaveislan*. It should be noted, however, that although there are regular calls

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<sup>907</sup> Einarsson, “Vorið geingur í lið með kálfum,” p. 42. In the original: “Það er bæði metnaður og dirfska sem þarf til fyrir mann sem hefur hlotið viðurkenningu sem *eitt helsta sagnaskáld álfunnar um sína daga* að leggja til atlögu við lögmál og leyndardóma sviðsins, það er mikill metnaður og mikil dirfska að gera það með þeim hætti sem sem Halldór Kiljan Laxness gerði það í heilan áratug”.

<sup>908</sup> Einarsson, “Vorið geingur í lið með kálfum,” p. 35. In the original: “Strompleikurinn er annars konar leikur en nokkur Íslendingur hafði samið til þessa dags.”

<sup>909</sup> Sveinn Einarsson. “Halldór Laxness og leikhúsið.” *Morgunblaðið*, January 10, 1989, p. 13. In the original: “Af þessari mynd gætu menn skilið sem svo, að þessi samskipti hafi verið sársaukafull og Halldór aldrei verið þar aufúsugestur.”

<sup>910</sup> Einarsson, “Halldór Laxness og leikhúsið,” p. 13. In the Icelandic original, the passage reads: “Þó að Halldór líti trúlega fyrst og fremst á sig sem sagnaskáld, þá hafa fáir eða engir samtímahöfundar átt betri hlut að því að gera okkar leikhús að ‘íslensku leikhúsi’ á undanförunum áratugum.”

for his plays to be staged more frequently, it seems that when just that is done, as for example with the 1991 production of *Dúfnaveislan*, the reception tends to be mixed.<sup>911</sup>

There is also a tendency to view Laxness' engagement with the theater in the 1960s as merely a prelude to his triumphant return to the novel at the end of the decade. Indeed, with each passing decade it seems as if Laxness' plays are placed a rung or two lower in the "established" hierarchy of his oeuvre, which assigns value to his disparate body of work through critical taxonomy that not only reflects but also shapes attitudes.<sup>912</sup> As to Laxness' aforementioned "triumphant return" to the novel, the triumph is inscribed in the narrative of

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<sup>911</sup>Auður Eydal, writing for *DV*, and "kj," writing for *Þjóðviljinn*, both mention the general reception of Laxness' plays in the 1960s at the outset of their reviews of the 1991 production of *Dúfnaveislan*, noting, in the case of the former that, Laxness' plays were by many considered "riddles" but, as many things have changed, "few will come up against the strange world that Halldór Laxness presents in the play today and feel lost," while in the latter review a single word is made to encapsulate the reputation of Laxness the playwright, "controversial". Interestingly, the reason given by Eydal for her optimistic view of the play's reception this time around is not that Icelandic theater audiences have grown more used to avant-garde art but rather that the play itself has "lived" among the populace for close on three decades, and the familiarity thus bred will ease the way into the text it seems. Eydal speaks of "flaws" while "kj" is more negative, being of the opinion that Laxness' play has "spoilt" while being kept in reserve and waiting. Súsanna Svavarsdóttir, reviewing the play for *Morgunblaðið*, is the only critic who speaks favorably of the original play, if somewhat absent-mindedly ("There really are only good things to be said about *Dúfnaveislan*"), and all three agree that the new stage version has to an extent failed, although "kj"'s review seems to offer a radical re-envisioning as the only pathway to a successful performance. Auður Eydal. "Hinn hreini tónn." *DV*, 23 September, 1991, p. 16. In the original: "Leikrit Halldórs voru mörgum ráðgáta þegar þau voru fyrst sett á svið enda seildust men langt yfir skammt í leit sinni að djúpvitrum boðskap [...] Ég held að fáir standi í dag agndofa gagnvart þeim skrýtna heimi sem Halldór Laxness sýnir okkur í *Dúfnaveislunni*." Second quote: "— og líka göllunum sem vissulega eru fyrir hendi í verkinu." "kj." "Tímarnir breytast." *Þjóðviljinn*. *Nýtt helgarblað*. 27 September, 1991, p. 3. In the original: "Leikrit Halldórs Laxness hafa löngum verið umdeild." Súsanna Svavarsdóttir. "Kuðungur skreyttur skeljum." *Morgunblaðið*, 22 September, 1991, p. 19. In the original: "Það er ekkert nema gott um *Dúfnaveisluna* að segja."

<sup>912</sup>The realist epics of the 1930s and early 1940s still retain their pride of place; indeed, *Sjálfstætt fólk* was recently voted the second greatest work in the history of Icelandic literature, coming right on the heels of *Njáls' Saga*. See "Njála er besta bókin." *ruv.is*. 10 April, 2014 (<http://www.ruv.is/frett/njala-er-besta-bokin> — retrieved on 1 May 2014). There has been a resurgence of interest in Laxness' late novels as well as his autobiographical texts, while his modernist interventions in the 1920s are, along with the social realist epics, the mainstay of Laxness studies, as evidenced by the fact that the only two works of Laxness' to have been the subject of scholarly monographs are *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* and *Sjálfstætt fólk*.

“crisis” prominent in critical engagements with and accounts of Laxness’ activity during the decade of the 1960s.

Between *Paradísarheimt* (Paradise Reclaimed), published in 1960, and *Kristnihald undir Jökli* (Under the Glacier), appearing in 1968, Laxness did not publish a single novel, making this by far the longest novelistic “drought” of a career marked by consistent productivity, the four years between the publication of *Gerpla* and *Bekkukotsannáll* (The Fish can Sing, 1957) being the previous record. As mentioned, “Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit” confirms Laxness’ abandonment of the novel so that he can concentrate on the theater. Rather than viewing and assessing the almost decade long period during which Laxness was engrossed by a new medium on its own terms, there is a marked tendency to read this time through the lens of his novelistic production. That is, faced by a formal dilemma that he is unable to overcome, Laxness abandons the richness of novelistic practice for a medium that is sparer and more disciplined, less forgiving of digressions and authorial intrusions. This, however, is only a temporary arrangement; much as in the typical heroic journey, the return home constitutes the ultimate aim of the wanderings, the return always involving a gain, be it an elixir or the rewards of a period of learning under a wizened old master; the latter convention can be traced from Gilgamesh’s time with Utnapishtim in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to the time Beatrix Kiddo spends with Pai Mei in *Kill Bill* (2003–2004).<sup>913</sup>

Thus, Laxness’ return to the form of the novel, with *Kristnihald undir Jökli*, can be narrativized and endowed with meaning as the result of an arduous

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<sup>913</sup> Joseph Campbell. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. London: Fontana Press, 1993.

journey involving an immense aesthetic struggle with formal constraints and a revitalization of his novelistic impulses. What's more, the experimental form of *Kristnihald undir Jökli* serves to authenticate the depths and seriousness of Laxness' reassessment of his own aesthetic philosophy and techniques; he has wrestled with those forces that are strongest within everybody and manifest themselves in the insidious question: why change a winning formula? Thus, from his exile and wanderings through the contested landscape of modern literature, he does not emerge as the grand old master of Icelandic letters but, rather, manages to place himself at the forefront of the modernist revolution that was underway and launched by authors at least a generation younger than himself.<sup>914</sup>

In his biography of Laxness, Guðmundsson describes the reception of the novel as follows: "Kristnihald undir Jökli beguiled the Icelandic literary world. In the beginning of 1969, critics awarded Halldór with the Silver Horse, the literary prize of the newspapers."<sup>915</sup> Guðmundsson goes on to explain how, in view of the fact that the plays that had taken up most of the decade had not been considered "convincing," and *Skáldatími* (A Poet's Lesson, 1963) had evoked such a political storm that its literary value was left by the wayside, the success of *Kristnihald undir Jökli* "silenced the doubters" and Halldór had yet again proven his talent "for renewal and fertile innovation."<sup>916</sup> "Triumph" may however not be the most precise word to describe the novel's reception; a number of significant critics,

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<sup>914</sup> For more on this, see Ástráður Eysteinnsson. "Fyrsta nútímaskáldsagan og móðernisminn." *Umbrot. Bókmenntir og nútími*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1999, pp. 56–91.

<sup>915</sup> Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, p. 708. In the original: "Kristnihald undir Jökli heillar hinn íslenska bókmenntaheim. Í ársbyrjun 1969 veittu gagnrýnendur Halldóri Silfurhestinn, bókmenntaverðlaun dagblaðanna, fyrir verkið."

<sup>916</sup> Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, p. 709. In the original: "Þótt nokkrir íslenskir gagnrýnendur hefðu skrifað mjög vinsamlega um leikritin, höfðu þau ekki þótt nógu sannfærandi og Skáldatími hafði vakið pólitískar deilur. Með Kristnihaldinu þagna efasemdaraddir, og hvernig sem mönnum líkaði bókin hafði Halldór sannað hæfileika sína til endurnýjunar og frjórrar endursköpunar."

including Ólafur Jónsson and Þráinn Bertelsson found the work to be flawed. Nevertheless, the critics, much as Guðmundsson points out, were overall positive and impressed by the work's formal originality and innovation. Even Bertelsson starts off by noting, "the book is superb in all respects when it comes to structure" as all formal conventions of the traditional realist work are rejected entirely.<sup>917</sup> He then rounds off his review by saying: "The most interesting thing about this book is that with it Laxness shows that he is endowed with that gift of the genius to be eternally young. He is not content to observe the times, rather he must be leading them."<sup>918</sup> In one of the more astute reviews, Jóhann Hjálmarsson concludes his discussion by saying that what the reader is presented with is the truly remarkable feat of seeing an epic writer incorporate a new narrative technique and handle it masterfully with the result that the novel is in many ways the most "fruitful and multilayered work" Laxness had produced for quite some time.<sup>919</sup>

We mentioned above that Árni Ibsen designated Laxness' early theatrical work as an "interlude." The reference to a short or a somewhat minor musical piece that is inserted between the parts of a longer composition was of course indicative of the time that passed between the first two plays and also spoke to the significance that Laxness would later ascribe to his early dramatic effort, *Straumrof*, which indeed was an "interlude," he would maintain, from the writing of the great realistic epics of the 1930s. However, despite Laxness' ambitions and

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<sup>917</sup> Þráinn Bertelsson. "Því meira, sem hlutirnir breytast ...". *Vísir*, 7 October 1968, p. 8. In the original: "Bókin er frábærlega gerð að allri uppbyggingu".

<sup>918</sup> Bertelsson, "Því meira, sem hlutirnir breytast ...," p. 13. In the original the passage reads: "Það athyglisverðasta við þessa bók er, að með henna sýnir Laxness, að hann býr yfir þeirri náðargáfu snillingsins að vera síungur. Hann lætur sér ekki nægja að fylgjast með tímanum, heldur verður hann að vera í broddi fylkingar."

<sup>919</sup> Hjálmarsson, "Veraldarfjallið," p. 12. In the original: "Kristnihald undir Jökli virðist mér að ýmsu leyti frjóasta og margbrotnasta skáldverk, sem lengi hefur komið út eftir Halldór Laxness."

considerable efforts once he turned his attention fully to the theater in the 1950s and 1960s, the consensus seems to be that his theatrical work never achieved — retaining the vehicle of the metaphor above — the status of a central allegro. Furthermore, scholarly interest in Laxness' theatrical work has been less than vibrant, constituting as a matter of fact what may be the central lacunae of Laxness studies.<sup>920</sup> Academics and Laxness specialists ranging from Peter Hallberg to Halldór Guðmundsson have of course done important work in this area, as have scholars with extensive first hand experience of the Icelandic stage, Stefán Baldursson, Sveinn Einarsson and Jón Viðar Jónsson being the primary examples, but much nevertheless remains to be done.

To a certain extent, the situation that has been outlined in terms of Laxness' plays is symptomatic of a tendency that was quite prevalent in Icelandic literary historiography in general, the marginalization of drama. On the occasion of the 1999 publication of the literature textbook *Sögur, ljóð og líf — Íslenskar bókmenntir á 20. öld* (Stories, Poems, Life — Icelandic 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literature) by Heimir Pálsson, a work intended to replace Pálsson's earlier *Straumar og stefnur í íslenskum bókmenntum* (Trends and Movements in Icelandic Literature, first published in 1979), that had for decades dominated pedagogy in literature in Iceland for students in an age bracket that ranges roughly from 14 to 18, Árni Ibsen wrote a substantial article, highly critical of the fact that the textbook all but ignores the work done by Icelandic playwrights during the entire twentieth

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<sup>920</sup> The realist epics of the 1930s and early 1940s still retain their pride of place; indeed, *Sjálfstætt fólk* was recently voted the second greatest work in the history of Icelandic literature, coming on the heels of *Njáls' Saga*. There has been a resurgence of interest in Laxness' late novels as well as his autobiographical texts, while his modernist interventions in the 1920s are, along with the social realist epics, the mainstay of Laxness studies.

century as well as paying no heed to recent scholarship on the theater.<sup>921</sup> This would change shortly, in no small measure thanks to Ibsen himself who contributed significantly to the writing of the history of Icelandic theater in a variety of ways, some of them already touched upon.

At stake here however are four areas of literary historiography and scholarship. First, there is the issue that Ibsen raises in his 1999 article, namely the privileging of the novel and poetry over drama. Then, almost as a subset of that very problematic, there is the matter of how Laxness the playwright fares within the circumference of works of literary history of the kind discussed above. Thirdly, the same question can be posed to literary historiography that focuses on the theater and, fourthly, there is the question of the fate of the plays within Laxness studies specifically.

It is of course not possible to make any conclusive or far ranging statements on these complicated literary historical problems but placing Laxness within the parameters of these four categories is nevertheless helpful in terms of summing up the conclusions of the previous sections. It is clear that, as Ibsen suggests, the theater in Iceland suffers in comparison to other literary genres, particularly the novel and poetry, as privileged forms of literary expression. There are historical reasons for this, perhaps most importantly the cultural capital that the Sagas have allocated to narrative prose — although it took Laxness to demonstrate this connection. Until his emergence, the position of “þjóðskáld” (national poet), a literary figure that was seen to speak in unique ways to the essence of the nation and its heritage, was as the name suggests

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<sup>921</sup> Ibsen “Bókmenntasaga úr gömlum heimi,” p. 34.

invariably assigned to poets. And there is nothing uniquely Icelandic about the primacy of poetic discourse within various literary systems. What is notable however is the boldness of Laxness' attempt in "Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit" to use the cultural capital of the Sagas as a generic "uplift" or infusion of artistic legitimacy to the theater; his own works, to be sure, but also the theater in general. In a way, he attempted to replicate the incredible success he had enjoyed in terms of transforming the novel into the primary and privileged literary expression of the country, but this time on behalf of the theater. He failed, of course, as various critics mentioned above have suggested, not always entirely persuasively, but then the blame rests with the direction the argument is taken in, rather than its grounds, namely that institutional factors may not have worked to Laxness' benefit in this instance.

A high degree of unprofessionalism and haphazardness characterized Icelandic theatrical life for the first decades of the twentieth century, and the long-awaited opening of Þjóðleikhúsið in 1950 may not have changed as much, or as quickly, as people had hoped. Icelandic playwrights were a rare breed for most of the century, indeed they still are, and those to whom they by necessity entrusted their works were, as just noted, not necessarily all that capable — the long-standing tendency of actors who gained prominence to take on directing duties being symptomatic of an institutional problem. Having been a pivotal figure in professionalizing the practice of writing, Laxness was again faced with an institutional framework that could be seen, if viewed kindly, to lag somewhat behind the times, being forced to bear the full problematic burden that is inherent in tiny communities, not to mention poor ones, where the talent pool is



limited and, to make matters worse, nepotism tends to trump talent, with a few exceptions, of course.

But however well or ill the medium fitted Laxness and his works, the fact that he turned to the theater as he did had an enormous impact. One might argue that, all in all, Laxness' theatrical work did not enhance his literary prestige, in fact it may, at least for a time, have dented it slightly, but his prestige certainly proved an enormous boon to the Icelandic theater during a period of artistic drought. Adaptations of his novels were routinely massive hits, with *Íslandsklukkan*, as noted above, serving as the artistic and financial trust fund of the National Theater for decades, to be dipped into at regular intervals.

It is thus not surprising that when it comes to the historiography of Icelandic theater that Laxness looms extremely large, and one might even say that it is in terms of the discourse of theatrical history that Laxness' reputation as a playwright has been recuperated. The same cannot be said of Laxness studies as a field, fledgling as it may be.<sup>922</sup> The engagement with Laxness' plays that follows below attempts to expand the field of Laxness studies — as defined, however problematically in the present context — to include and address with full seriousness aspects of Laxness' career that he himself took as seriously as anything he ever did. What this means is that the frame of reference is textual, the focus is on the text of the plays, not performances and the work of staging them, thus, directors and actors are not discussed. The grounding assumption is,

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<sup>922</sup> The distinction posited here between Laxness studies and those writing on Laxness' theater works under the umbrella of "the historiography of Icelandic drama," or some such moniker, is of course entirely artificial. There is no reason why the latter should not be viewed as a part, and an important one, of the former. However, as an exercise in hypothetical categorization and scholarly demarcations, it proves useful as there are divisions within Laxness studies, and certain areas are privileged, while others do seem marginalized.

in other words, that an excellent argument can be made for the seeing Laxness' plays as pure textuality, that their manifold rewards and problems are fully present in the text. To an extent, this goes against Laxness' own views on the theater but is roughly comparable to engaging with an "original" text rather than its various interpretations, which are ephemeral in nature: as might be reflected in the experience of the actors, some of whom no doubt were lucky not to have fallen off the stage, one or two sure to have flubbed their lines, a substantial portion perhaps frustrated by the half-empty theater, but all aware that what they created during their three hours on the stage no longer exists except as memory traces in an audience, of which a portion left during the intermission, while others dozed off, and the true connoisseurs — the ones who purchased a program and followed everything closely — are already arguing about the appropriateness of this or that actor in this or that role — a role that is going to be filled with a multitude of interchangeable bodies on a multitude of indistinguishable stages.

This might seem to present something of a difficult fit with the emphasis placed on the reception history of the plays above, on how critics responded to these works on the stage, since they were quite literally never reviewed as texts, although published as printed books. However, the reception of the plays does not provide grounds for analysis of the plays; the plays activate a variety of highly informative and interesting, symptomatic one might even say, discourses that are read in an ideological, political, social and gender contexts. From these, then, we move on to the plays proper, where the analytical framework laid out in the first section above will be discussed in more detail. As already noted, the

plays will be tackled in chronological order, starting with Laxness' first, *Straumrof*.

#### ***4. The Most Vital Force of Modern Life***

The new interpretative framework for *Straumrof* that will emerge in what follows involves the conjunction of two distinct but interconnected thematic strands: the role of technological modernity and Laxness' representation of gender politics in modernity. The latter involves the cultural shaping and construction of femininity and how discourses ranging from those defining social propriety to those whose relationship to power and violence is more direct come together to forge an "acceptable" idea of feminine sexuality and thus, also, what society will tolerate in terms of women "acting out." The aspect of the analysis that focuses on gender issues relies to an extent on the contemporary reception of the play but in fact the discourses that are identified have little, really, to do with Iceland but are part and parcel of much larger historical and social forces; tracing these involves traveling from "modern" sanatoriums to Ancient Greece.

The former thematic strand, focusing on the play's representation of technological modernity, is also deeply historical and requires us, as a matter of fact, to have a brief look at the historical background of Iceland's emergence into modernity. Discussing the two "strands" separately is somewhat misleading however as they are intertwined and inseparable and come together when accounting for the symbolic substratum of the play as well as its politics and narrative mechanisms.

In *The Culture of Time and Space*, Stephen Kern notes: “from around 1880 to the outbreak of World War I a series of sweeping changes in technology and culture created distinctive new modes of thinking about and experiencing time and space [including] psychoanalysis and the theory of relativity.”<sup>923</sup> The technological innovations that established the material foundation for a radical reorientation in modern consciousness included the telephone, the wireless telegraph, x-ray technology, the cinema, the automobile, the airplane and even the bicycle. These important markers of modernity are typical of the technological devices that populate Laxness’ dramatic works and, indeed, do more than invoke a “reality effect,” being, rather, constitutive elements of the meanings of the texts and demonstrate how Laxness, in text after text, attempts to come to terms with the “new modes of thinking” that Kern emphasizes.<sup>924</sup> *Straumrof* is a case in point, as Laxness thematizes the technologies of modernity with notable directness in the play.

Radio is a good example, being an instrument that “sublimated,” in the words of Rod Giblett, the “solidities of the earth [...] into the gaseous heights of the electromagnetosphere,” and is featured strikingly in the play.<sup>925</sup> *Straumrof* opens with a news broadcast so heavily sponsored as to give the impression of a deranged, incoherent world. The notion of the world as incoherent, deranged is, as a matter of fact, a trope that would recur in Laxness’ later plays, especially those written in the 1960s. News of executions are interspersed with advertisements for dietary supplements and as the play progresses, events on

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<sup>923</sup> Stephen Kern. *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, pp. 1–2.

<sup>924</sup> Roland Bathes. “The Reality Effect.” *The Rustle of Language*. Trans. by Richard Howell. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986, pp. 141–148.

<sup>925</sup> Rod Giblett. *Sublime Communication Technologies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. x.

stage are regularly halted to accommodate similar “updates”. Meanwhile a plot unfolds that in its melodramatic contours seems to derive precisely from the sinister domain that brings us the radio broadcasts.

No less important than the irrationality of the mediated world picture, a malevolent reflection of the technological abundance that characterizes the lifestyle of the lead characters, the upper class Kaldan family, is its ubiquity, the fact that the intrusion of sensational “facts” and advertisement jingles proves an inescapable feature of modern life, even in the supposedly peaceful countryside. In this sense, the function of the radio refers back to Laxness’ early essay “Þjóðkirkjan og víðboð” (The State Church and Radio, 1924), where the technological ability to communicate over a vast cultural field is discussed in an excited but still somewhat ambivalent tones. Shared between the play and the essay is the notion that as messages start traveling faster than transportation, the world loses some of its grandeur and integrity, local places become “placeless spaces” in global communication networks.<sup>926</sup> Significantly, the title of Laxness’ play refers to what Andreas Killen terms the most “vital force of modern life,” namely electricity – but ironically enough through the notion of its failure, the short-circuiting of the electrical grid.<sup>927</sup>

There are also references to a range of leisure activities; there is talk of a visit to the family hunting cabin and recollections of prior travels abroad. The dating habits of the daughter of the house are featured prominently in the first

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<sup>926</sup> A dynamic theorized in a remarkable fashion by Marshall McLuhan, most notably in *Understanding Media. The Extension of Man*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1998.

<sup>927</sup> Andreas Killen. *Berlin Electropolis. Shock, Nerves and German Modernity*. Berkeley and New York: University of California Press, 2006, p. 8. See also David E. Nye. *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880–1940*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1990, p. 35–50.

act, including joy rides in cars with men. New technological media are thus emphasized, as are recent wonders such as the automobile. Generational strife, unprecedented sexual freedoms and female mobility, and a cosmopolitan lifestyle are also among the thematic nodes subtly introduced into the text. Thus invoked is a sense of a new and changed social environment, emblemized by the autonomy and comfort of youthful existence, which is put on display and differs radically from the dour reality of most urban adolescents in the initial decades of the century, as well as mechanical copiousness and a technologically sophisticated cultural environment that opens up a discursive space referencing the project of modernization.<sup>928</sup>

It is worth emphasizing just how important mechanized methods of mobility are in the play, indeed, the picture depicted of travel, its ease and speed, and the way in which the inhospitable terrain of the Icelandic countryside has been “tamed” by the construction of roads that link the capital with sites of leisure for the urban population may even point to the future rather than the contemporary moment of the play’s staging. As a matter of fact, these instances of what we can term futurity are extremely significant in terms of the generation of meaning in the play.

The affinities with technological modernity that are on display in *Straumrof* do more however than position the text as a meditation on the discontents of civilization, new social experiences and artistic methods of communicating such experiences; the text proves a nodal point where many of the modernization concerns of the preceding decade are taken up and revised

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<sup>928</sup> Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon. *Wasteland with Words. A Social History of Iceland*. London: Reaktion Books, 2010, pp. 210–221.

while also being placed in a relationship with the ideological and conceptual charge that had already started to infuse Laxness' works as they engage with modernity's complex social formations and issues of social justice.<sup>929</sup> In our discussion of "Þjóðkirkjan og víðboð" we touched on a problematic involving technological modernity that, as already mentioned, Laxness wrestled with in a much more sustained fashion in his essay on Hollywood but, starting with *Straumrof*, this engagement would continue, although with gaps, pauses and transformation, throughout Laxness' entire career, right up to his last novel, *Guðsgjafaþula*.

However, in order to account for the way in which *Straumrof* activates the metaphoric register of technology it is necessary, for just a brief moment, to look at the modernization process in Iceland through the prism of the historical role of electricity.<sup>930</sup> A few of the points touched upon below may be familiar from chapter two but a general attempt is made to avoid repetition.

#### 4.1 *The Electric Sublime*

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<sup>929</sup> What we will see is that in text after text, work after work, Laxness grapples with the tensions between the lifeworld and system imperatives; art and the industrialization of culture; the heritage and the national versus cosmopolitanism, foreign trends, and the global; new leisure alternatives; communication technologies; urbanization; the new conflicts between the domestic sphere and the public sphere in modernity, and the reach of popular culture and its connection to the categories of youth and change, on the one hand, and commercialism, power and the engineering of consent on the other.

<sup>930</sup> David E. Nye's reminder that technology is not merely a system of machines with certain functions but rather a part of a social world is useful here, particularly what he has to say on the subject of electricity: "“Electrification is not an implacable force moving through history, but a social process that varies from one time period to another and from one culture to another. In the US electrification was not a thing that came from outside society and had an impact, rather it was an internal development shaped by its social context. Put another way, each technology is an extension of human lives; someone makes it, someone owns it, some oppose it, many use it, and all interpret it [...] it is therefore fundamentally mistaken to think of 'the home' or 'the factory' or 'the city' as passive, solid objects that undergo an abstract transformation called 'electrification'. Rather, every institution is a terrain, a social space that incorporates electricity at a given historical juncture as part of its ongoing development.” Nye, *Electrifying America*, p. ix.

Modernity's arrival in Iceland was ambiguous and muted in key respects, as was noted in the first chapter. And late — its belatedness is a notable, even a central aspect of Laxness' own writings on modernization. One of Laxness' favored rhetorical strategies when calling for modernization was what can be termed the discourse of misery, the practice of refuting pastoral idealizations with brute, naturalistically presented social facts. That Laxness wrote with considerable élan is important of course, but equally integral to the effectiveness of his disenchanted portrayal of contemporary life in Iceland and the historical past is the rich vein of misery that he could in fact mine.<sup>931</sup> Thus, for example, the tenor of plight, catastrophes, and mortality, so characteristic of centuries past, had not significantly abated at the end of the nineteenth century, a period of industrialization, urbanization, increased prosperity and security elsewhere in Europe.<sup>932</sup>

Until the turn of the twentieth century communication and travel remained hazardous as bridges and roads were mostly lacking, and “all transport in the interior of Iceland had to be done by pack-horses.”<sup>933</sup> Coastal shipping lanes were yet to be established, and lighthouses didn't exist. For that matter, neither did postal networks. In 1884 an expert in road building was engaged from Norway but the state moved slowly on his suggestions. Money transactions were largely unknown among the populace as there was no bank until 1885.

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<sup>931</sup> See for example, Halldór Laxness. “Af íslensku menningarástandi.” *Af menningarástandi*. Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, pp. 9–50.

<sup>932</sup> Thorsteinn Thorsteinsson. „Communication“. *Iceland: A Handbook. Published on the fortieth anniversary of the Landsbanki Iceland (National Bank of Iceland)*. Edited by Thorsteinn Thorsteinsson. Reykjavík, 1926, pp. 96–99. Magnús S. Magnússon. “Efnahagsþróun á Íslandi 1880–1990.” *Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun 1880–1990: ritgerðir*. Edited by Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Svanur Kristjánsson. Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands og Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1993, pp. 130–178

<sup>933</sup> Thorsteinsson, *Iceland: A Handbook*, p. 98.



Survival, much as in earlier centuries, depended largely on the weather, which more so in Iceland than elsewhere could not be relied on, and agriculture was something of a losing proposition in what may amount to the most inhospitable natural conditions for such activity in Europe. The economic and cultural life of Iceland was, in other words, without much promise for a good part of the nineteenth century, although important signs of vitality were also to be glimpsed, mostly however among Icelandic expatriates in Copenhagen.<sup>934</sup>

In his discussion of the neo-romantic period in Icelandic literature and the difficult social circumstances that surrounded the emergence of the literary movement, Guðni Elísson cites Árni Pálsson, a prominent cultural commentator of the interwar period, and Pálsson's striking description of how the social stagnation discussed above led to a sense of pessimism and despair in a whole generation of Icelanders growing up in the latter half of the 19th century: "The truth is that the idea that Iceland was in fact a doomed country — doomed to huddle outside European culture, the nation, like an outlaw, incapable of taking part in the work of progress of other nations — had taken root like a poison in the minds of most Icelanders."<sup>935</sup> The inability to partake in the great European modernization effort is portrayed as something of a criminal act, turning Icelanders into "outlaws," a sentiment that carries clear religious and ethical overtones, as well as an implied contrast with the medieval golden age when

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<sup>934</sup> Dick Ringler. *Bard of Iceland. Jónas Hallgrímsson. Poet and Scientist*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002, pp. 26–38.

<sup>935</sup> Árni Pálsson. *Á víð og dreif*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1947, pp. 333–334. Quoted in Guðni Elísson. "From Realism to Neoromanticism." *A History of Icelandic Literature*. Ed. Daisy Neijmann. Lincoln & London: The University of Nebraska Press, p. 309.

Icelandic *scalds* were celebrated in the Nordic courts.<sup>936</sup> Although a generalization, there is little reason to think that Pálsson's description does not at the very least capture a significant aspect of the national ambience in this period.

The shift that occurs around the turn of the century, and whose manifold processes Icelandic historians now commonly refer to as modernity establishing itself can in light of the above be viewed as taking place in a fairly condensed and accelerated fashion.<sup>937</sup> Furthermore, the changes occurred in spite of the fact that the long-standing power elite, established farmers and landowners rejected modernity, as symbolized by liberalism, the increased autonomy of the individual, urbanization and changes in production. Indeed, the initial stages of the independence movement of the latter half of the nineteenth century were heavily colored by cultural conservatism. Historian Guðmundur Hálfðanarson emphasizes that the incursion of the modern occurred despite the fierce resistance of the traditional elite and was largely motivated by the abject poverty of workers in rural areas.<sup>938</sup> Their migration to urban areas along the coast took place before technological progress (i.e. the motorizing of the fishing industry) had really made public life sustainable in these townships.<sup>939</sup>

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<sup>936</sup> On this period in Icelandic literature, see Vésteinn Ólason. "Dróttkvæði." *Íslensk bókmenntasaga I*. Ed. by Guðrún Nordal, Sverrir Tómasson and Vésteinn Ólason. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1992, pp. 191–264.

<sup>937</sup> Sigríður Matthíasdóttir: *Hinn sanni Íslendingur: þjóðerni, kyngervi og vald á Íslandi 1900–1930*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan 2004, p. 115.

<sup>938</sup> Guðmundur Hálfðanarson. "Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun." *Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun 1880–1990: ritgerðir*. Edited by Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Svanur Kristjánsson. Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands and Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1993, pp. 21–29.

<sup>939</sup> The notion of an urban setting needs to be placed in context. Villages by the coast counting perhaps several hundred people formed a vital alternative to life in the farming provinces, but were obviously starkly limited as centers of commerce and culture. Their importance lies in the fact that they constituted a space outside the rigid traditions and oppressive legality governing agricultural communities. Reykjavík remained the central repository of migration, growing by

Nevertheless, in the opening years of the twentieth century, the oppressive sense of purposelessness that Pálsson mentions was slowly abating. The realization that although Iceland was completely deprived of land-based natural resources such as coal, the country was well situated to harvest enormous reservoirs of energy for the production of electricity through the harnessing of water, played an enormous role in the shift; the medium of electricity being closely tied to notions of modernization and the rise of consumer capitalism, as will be discussed more closely below and in conjunction with Laxness' play.

As Andreas Killen suggests in his cultural reading of the electrification of turn-of-the-century Berlin, modernity is frequently conceptualized in terms of the discovery and manipulation of new energy sources, indeed, of all the scientific innovations of the second industrial revolution, none perhaps proved as multifaceted, and as influential in the long run, as the harnessing of electricity, the instantaneous transportation of energy and its conversion into a nearly infinite number of forms.<sup>940</sup> Marshall Berman, for example, identifies the central elements of the third and final phase in the development of modernity — urban expansion, migration, industrialization, and total war — as being grounded in a conception of change brought about by a massive investment in energy and emerging technologies that were dependent on new energy sources.<sup>941</sup>

Drawing an analogy between electrical power and economic formations, Wolfgang Schivelbusch proposes that the concentration and centralization of

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leaps and bounds, as agricultural workers sought new forms of employment, opportunities, and pleasures in the capital. See Hálfðanarson, "Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun", pp. 51–55.

<sup>940</sup> Christine Rider. "Introduction." *Encyclopedia of the Age of the Industrial Revolution, 1700–1920. Volume 1*. Edited by Christine Rider. London & Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007, pp. 1–13. For a useful primer on electricity, see Stan Gibilisco. *Electricity Demystified*. New York & London: McGraw–Hill, 2005.

<sup>941</sup> Marshall Berman. *All That is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity*. London & New York: Penguin Books, 1988, pp. 15–36

energy in high capacity power stations corresponds to the concentration of economic power in corporate monopoly capitalism.<sup>942</sup> The conjunction between commercialization and electricity, Schivelbusch continues, bears upon the way in which electrical lighting made the means of production, the factories, railway stations, wharves, building sites, as well as the shops, vastly more efficient, and, later, transformed everyday urban spaces and the interiors of homes, by replacing gas with a cheap, hygienic, safe and much more powerful alternative.<sup>943</sup> These matters were of concern to Laxness, as we have already seen in chapter two where we touched on his 1927 article “Raflýsing sveitanna” (The Electrification of the Provinces). There Laxness grapples with the problem of how electricity, as a resource both scarce and expensive, serves not only to bring things together (placing houses on city-wide grids, compressing time and space) but also creates fresh divisions, among them the separation between urban areas enjoying the multiple benefits of electrical technology, and rural areas which largely didn’t.<sup>944</sup> The essay of 1927 provides an important indication of how Laxness’ thinking shifted between his essay on religion and radio and *Straumrof*, how material and political perspectives become more firmly entrenched.<sup>945</sup>

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<sup>942</sup> Wolfgang Schivelbusch. *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century*. Translated by Angela Davis. Oxford & New York: Berg, 1988, p. 74. A narrative of the early years and formation of the electric power industry, and trust-building, is offered in Jill Jonnes’ *Empires of Light: Edison, Tesla, Westinghouse and the Race to Electrify the World*. New York: Random House, 2003.

<sup>943</sup> Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night*, p. 50–56. For the impact of electricity on modern production practices, see Nye, *Electrifying America*, pp. 185–238.

<sup>944</sup> Halldór Laxness. “Raflýsing sveitanna.” *Alþýðublaðið*, 8 March, 10 March, 14 March, 16 March, 17 March, 21 March, 24 March, 26 March, and 30 March, 1927. The urban/rural divide in electrification is addressed by Lucy Fisher in “The Shock of the New’ Electrification, Illumination, Urbanization, and the Cinema.” *Cinema and Modernity*. Edited by Murray Pomerance. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2006, pp. 22–23.

<sup>945</sup> As will be discussed more closely below, *Straumrof* is not a particularly vivid example of Laxness’ political “turn,” although the play is written in the midst of his productive epic realist

It is also important that throughout the initial phase of modernization in Iceland, from the mid 1890s to the outbreak of the First World War, electricity was viewed through the double prism of wonder and economic utilitarianism. In an article from 1894 entitled “Rafmagn á Íslandi” (Electricity in Iceland), the anonymous author suggests that opportunity for large-scale electrification is ample, and, as if to remind his countrymen that the object under discussion is quite a remarkable thing, he adds: “The inventions accomplished every day with the help of electricity are so strange they resemble fairy tales more than reality.”<sup>946</sup> Ten years later, Guðmundur Finnbogason, rector of the University of Iceland, spoke of how, through the harnessing of the immense power of the country’s national resources, Iceland could be made the equal of any large nation, equating the production of energy with geopolitical power.<sup>947</sup> Engineering feats such as dams and the construction of electrical suppliers marked the height of ambition and waterfalls came to symbolize Iceland’s hypostatized participation in industrialized modernity, and the possibility of a new kind of prosperity.<sup>948</sup> This was in keeping with the meanings associated with electricity, as Vincent Moscoe notes: “Only the most advanced societies had electrified machines and lighting. Darkness was a metaphor for the primitive; light was the exemplification of Christianity, science, and progress” and this,

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period. The essay on the electrification of the provinces is quite provocative however, and despite a somewhat different thematic accentuation, Laxness’ first play is still endowed with a suggestive political dimension.

<sup>946</sup> “Rafmagn á Íslandi.” *Þjóðólfr*, 1894.

<sup>947</sup> Quoted in Ólafur Ásgeirsson: *Iðnbylting hugarfarsins: Átök um atvinnuþróun á Íslandi 1900–1940*. Reykjavík: Bókmenntaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1988, pp. 13–14.

<sup>948</sup> Sigurður Ragnarsson: “Fossakaup og framkvæmdaáform. Þættir úr sögu fossamálsins. Síðari hluti”. *Saga*, 1977. Þórarinn Þórarinnsson. *Sókn og Sigrar. Saga Framsóknarflokksins 1916–1937*.

for Moscoe comes together in the notion of the “electrical sublime.”<sup>949</sup> However, in Iceland plans for the harnessing of waterfalls and other natural resources stayed on the drawing board for quite some time yet. Nevertheless, and for a brief moment, the opinion that Iceland needed to participate in foreign cultural movements, invest in social modernization and familiarize itself with prominent aspects of modernity, came to be widely articulated.

Electricity thus involved economic growth but also the possibility for the nation to at long last become a participant in modernity. This context is important when evaluating and interpreting the role of electricity in Laxness’ play and, in addition, how the work thematizes the proximity of the unmodern or the premodern to modernity. That is, *Straumrof* depicts a cultural situation where modernity is a brand-new and a fragile construct, hardly all there and existing in a state of constant tension with the traditional past. On the one hand, the play represents the sensation of being stuck in something resembling the eternal unchanging world of the medieval and early modern periods, enveloped in darkness and subject to historical paralysis but, on the other, it also deals with a world where the fishing fleet has been motorized, townships have sprung up along the coasts and the former provinces have become leisure areas, and cars can be seen on the streets of Reykjavík.

The somewhat threatening undercurrent is the possibility that the onset of modernity has been too quick, that the discontents that a highly civilized society imposes on its subjects become even more strenuous, more intolerable, if the preparatory period is cut short. Freud’s conception of modernity as being

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<sup>949</sup> Vincent Moscoe. *The Digital Sublime. Myth, Power, and Cyberspace*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2005, pp. 124, 121.

deeply at odds with itself is articulated by Laxness through personal conflicts and the deep-set existential crisis that face the subject amidst the plentitude of material comfort and technological goods that are offered by the capitalistic order. It is here that electricity comes to stand for the modern in a direct fashion and relates to the fundamental principles and ideals of the Enlightenment through its revolutionary powers to illuminate sites of human habitation, from individual domiciles to entire cities.

Wolfgang Schivelbusch notes that for the “mythic imagination,” nightfall calls forth forces very different from those that rule the day: “night is chaos, the realm of dreams, teeming with ghosts and demons as the oceans teem with fish and sea monsters”, and by dispelling these creatures of the imagination, electricity finalizes and makes “visible” the project of the Enlightenment.<sup>950</sup> Whether that is enough, however, is another question, one posed by Freud and articulated by Dagur Vestan at a late point in the play when, denigrating the influence of conscious choice and rationality in human behavior, he explains that, “Our personality, that’s just ripples on the surface, the rest is the deep itself.”<sup>951</sup> A central aspect of the play is the way in which Laxness places the mythic past, symbolized by darkness and the short circuiting of the electricity in opposition to the bright lights of modernity and has the tensions play out, in considerable part, within the conflicted interiority of the modern subject.

The relation between the technological urban imaginary of *Straumrof* and the actual social circumstances that defined the cultural horizon of the time (and the intersubjective, social horizon of the initial audience of the play) shed light

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<sup>950</sup> Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night*, p. 81.

<sup>951</sup> Halldór Laxness. *Straumrof*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1976, p. 122. In the original the passage reads: “Okkar eigin persónuleiki, það eru bara gárar á yfirborðinu, afgangurinn er djúpið sjálf.”

on the way in which Laxness contextualizes the play's events through an activation of the material signifiers of modernity. These discourses thus form the background of *Straumrof* whose diegesis implicitly posits a social world where many of the ideals of modernization that were prominent in the first decades of the century, as well as Schivelbusch's listing of items of social beneficence, have been realized. The reader is presented with the smoothly functioning urban lifestyle of the lead characters and, more fundamentally, the sense of Reykjavík as offering an urban experience — in large part through the invocation of the family's "getaway," a hunting lodge in the countryside. In order for a retreat to the country to be a persuasive lifestyle alternative there must be something to retreat from, i.e. the urban environment. The plentitude of the urban, which is an important constitutive element of the play, is thus invoked through a variety of means, including the way in which the absence of such markers can be gathered together and made substantial through the desire to escape and be rid of them.

#### *4.2 Daybreak, or, The Rise and Fall of Dagur Vestan*

As already noted, the central characters of the play are the Kaldan family, Loftur and his wife, the aforementioned Gæa, and their eighteen-year old daughter, Alda. Loftur Kaldan, while successful in business, still struggles with what are likely the economic ripples of the depression as well as ill health. There are only two other characters. Alda's fiancé, the aspiring artist Már, who appears only in the first act. His "competitor," the engineer Dagur Vestan, proves more significant as he not only replaces Már in Alda's affections but he also becomes, as mentioned earlier, her mother's lover. The effete and enervated artist Már is



the mirror opposite of Dagur in virtually all respects. He is uncomfortable in his own skin; wealthy but unhappy. He dreams of “becoming a man” and “creating mighty works” but appears utterly incapable of both.<sup>952</sup> He turns out to have feelings for Gæa and believes that she may be the force or inspiration that he needs in order to become an artist — he refers to a “mother’s love” in this context, something that he was deprived of as a child.<sup>953</sup> Dagur attracts Gæa because he desires her as a sexual being, not as a mother figure.<sup>954</sup>

The play is in three acts and the events take place in two distinct settings. The first act takes place in the home of the Kaldan family in Reykjavík and the latter two in a hunting lodge out in the countryside. The demarcation between the two settings — the country and the city, civilization and nature — is symbolic for the manner in which certain inhibitions are loosened as a step is taken outside of the constricting framework of bourgeoisie existence and, once such action has been taken and the play shifts between settings, the atmosphere also becomes more mysterious, even eerie. One might even say that the mood darkens as the transition to the countryside is emblemized by the short circuit of the title; in the evening the electricity goes out in the cabin. The connotative

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<sup>952</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, pp. 39–40. In the original the quotes read: „Hvernig á maður að *verða að manni* undir þessum kringumstæðum?” and “Veistu það, þegar mig dreymir um að gera stóra hluti, *að skapa voldug verk* —“

<sup>953</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 40. In the original: “*Móðurástin* Gæa, *móðurástin*.”

<sup>954</sup> As Dagur usurps Már’s place in Alda’s affections it is interesting to note how the two characters come to take on the historically overdetermined roles as the representative figures of the fundamental conflict of modernity, that of its fragmentation or split, Calinescu’s “two modernities,” where the artist finds himself at the margin of a capitalistic consumer society where the efficiency of technology and science have transformed the cultural spheres of value, rendering the meaning and relevance of the social contribution of artists increasingly complex and difficult to pin down. Vestan is however portrayed through a conflux of symbolic indices as the incarnation of modernization and mechanization’s new modes of harnessing and taming nature. By simple reference to the teleological law inherent in the ideology of progress, Vestan is the man of the future while Már, having symbolically failed to bypass the Oedipal stage, represents the crisis of art in modernity, how its commodity form constantly undermines its aspirations to autonomy. Matei Calinescu. *Five Faces of Modernity. Modernism. Avant-Garde. Decadence. Kitsch. Postmodernism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1987, pp. 1–60. See also Guðmundsson, “*Loksins, loksins*,” pp. 23–30.

scheme of the darkness that thus engulfs Gæa, Loftur and Dagur is however not simple. Certainly, the dark is menacing, as it may hide any number of uncanny threats and unnamable creatures and the night sky, much as Schivelbusch suggests, has always been a screen upon which mankind projects its fears. But the dark can also represent freedom, the liberating capacity to act unobserved, beyond the surveillance of social forces and administrative institutions, much as the trajectory of the play attests to. The darkness, the wild area of nature, and the fact that Gæa and Dagur are alone as evening unwinds motivate their transgression,<sup>955</sup> and here it should be noted that shortly after the short circuit, Loftur passes away and somewhat earlier Alda had borrowed the family car to attend a party in a nearby township.<sup>956</sup> Also of note is the fact that upon his passing, Loftur's corpse is removed to a backroom, where it remains for the rest of the play.<sup>957</sup>

When approaching the text, it is worth emphasizing that every name mentioned above is inflected with a symbolic dimension invoking various and disparate elements of nature and the environment. The names Loftur, deriving from the Icelandic word for "air" ("loft"), and Már, which means seagull, both

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<sup>955</sup> The way in which reality of modern social structures and their "discontents" are bracketed and, for a moment, removed in symbolic terms by the short circuiting of the electricity, can be read through prism of Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of the mythic and its contrasts to the administrated world. That is, they accentuate the way in which natural affinities and relationships, which exist in great multitudes in the world and connect all things, are replaced by a single way of viewing objects. This, as well, is a sterile, repressed, non-libidinal relationship to the world and to the other. Thus, from the "petrification" of the scientific world of their modern existence, Dagur and Gæa find themselves in the "supple" environs of a pre-technological dimension of human existence, a site where there can "be no over-valuation of physical acts," and thus they let their guard down and sleep together. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 7.

<sup>956</sup> As Dagur joins the Kaldan family in the hunting lodge in the second act, a love triangle comes into being. Although pursuing Alda, it turns out that a romantic connection between Vestan and Gæa is buried in the past. The memory of which has, nevertheless, been kept alive by both of them.

<sup>957</sup> The presence of a dead body throughout a significant portion of *Straumrof* points forward to an even more radical use made of this "device" in *Strompleikurinn*.

share the connotative range of the sky and the freedom of the open air, which may be considered appropriate for an artist on the one hand and a character that dies, thus becoming “spirit” or “andi,” related again to the Icelandic word for air as well as “breath.”<sup>958</sup> Gæa and Alda meanwhile reference the materiality of earth and the sea; Gæa being the unmistakable transliteration of Gaia, the Greek mythic personification of the earth, while “alda” literally means “wave.” The invocation of the basic elements (earth and water) seems to confirm the ancient binary of associating women with the earth, bodily functions and the material, while the masculine is inscribed into a connotative scheme involving higher and “airier” elements.<sup>959</sup> This oppositional pairing is important in the play but the text does not present it innocently or in a way that supports its classical meanings, rather, it is employed as a point of departure for a discussion of gender roles and their power imbalance and social construction.

Dagur Vestan is, aside from Gæa, the most striking figure in the play. He is handsome, confident and, as an engineer, professionally successful. Among other things, he designs wharves, structures of considerable symbolic value as they were fundamental to the first motorized industry in Iceland, fishing with trollers, which again served as the central impetus for economic expansion and urbanization and thus the entrance of modernity.<sup>960</sup> Vestan thus serves as the (masculine) avatar of industrialization, progress and the advent of modernity and, as an engineer, he combines the twin cornerstones of technological

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<sup>958</sup> Már is an old form of the nominative for “mávur” (seagull), now fallen into disuse. Another association of “Loftur” is that of someone who is insubstantial, which to an extent applies to the Kaldan family patriarch.

<sup>959</sup> S.P. Ortner and H. Whitehead. “Introduction. Accounting for Sexual Meanings.” *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*. Ed. by S.P. Ortner and H. Whitehead. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 4–11.

<sup>960</sup> Helgi Skúli Kjartansson. *Ísland á 20. öld*. Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2002, pp. 167–191.

development; the scientific method and its material manifestations, the hands-on work of bringing theoretical solutions to fruition.<sup>961</sup> Important as well is the fact that the notion of light is embedded in Dagur's name while "Vestan" references the global center of power and wealth.<sup>962</sup> Dagur Vestan, if interpreted liberally and without acknowledgment of temporal linearity, thus carries with him an uncanny premonition or suggestion of the normative modernization theories that would become prominent in scholarly discourse about a quarter century later.<sup>963</sup> The reference to light also functions to invoke its opposite — night and darkness — and can thus be read as a subtle invocation of the *Enlightenment*, which again fits with the above mentioned engineering feats.

It is noteworthy in this context that one of the key philosophical texts of the nineteenth century, and a text that constitutes one of the cornerstones of the self-consciousness of modernity according to Jürgen Habermas, namely *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1807) by G.W.F. Hegel, employs the metaphor of daybreak when depicting the revolutionary "break" that marks the emergence of modernity.<sup>964</sup> According to Hegel, the intellectualive

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<sup>961</sup> David M. Kaplan defines technology as "applied science" but also as a form of reality that is culturally constructed in the sense that whatever problem is being tackled by scientific inquiry and technological intervention is pre-determined and defined by human agents whose cultural embeddedness always entails value judgments. See "Introduction." *Readings in the Philosophy of Technology*. Ed. by David M. Kaplan. New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004, pp. xiv–xv.

<sup>962</sup> The name references the New World, that is, the United States (people spoke of going "vestur um haf" when they meant traveling to America). Not long had passed since Laxness himself returned to Iceland after more than two years in this part of the world. He had intended to accomplish great things so it is reasonable to assume that the name of Dagur *Vestan* held a specific and substantial meaning for the author.

<sup>963</sup> Modernization theories were discussed in chapter one.

<sup>964</sup> Jürgen Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Trans. by Frederick Lawrence. London and Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990, pp. 1–74. Jón Karl Helgason has discussed the inroads of modernity in the context of the literary theories of Georgs Brandes and "Verðandimenn." Hegel is referenced in that context, particularly how he employs the metaphors of day and night when discussing the development of history. See "Tímans heróp: Lestur á inngangi Georgs Brandesar að Meginstraumum og á textum eftir Hannes Hafstein og Gest Pálsson." *Skírnir*, 1989/1, pp. 113–114.

and subjective transformation that occurred as the world picture of the past was depreciated and modernity discovered that it could and would “no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch,” was like “the break of day” that “like lightning, all at once reveals the edifice of the new world.”<sup>965</sup> To be unshackled by the weight of tradition was for Hegel much like discovering a new world. Someone might at this point find himself or herself recalling Plato’s prisoner who escapes from the darkness of the cave out into the sun or the manner in which Nietzsche describes the death of Socrates as the “sun setting” over the entire cultural world of ancient Greece.<sup>966</sup> A rich tradition in other words is at hand where knowledge is associated with light, much as concepts such as enlightenment and illumination suggest.

It is nevertheless worth noting that the rotation of the heavenly bodies does happen to involve the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. Dagur Vestan’s name carries within it a degree of ambiguity. It cannot be said for certain that the connotative range in question involves the movement from darkness to light and edification, rather, in play as well is the reverse, that with Dagur Vestan we can glimpse the first hints of the fading day and subsequent twilight that slowly envelopes the rational subject that came into being with the Enlightenment; that the suggestion is towards the flaws or limitations of this

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<sup>965</sup> The first quotation: Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 7. The latter quotation: G.W.F. Hegel. “Hegel’s Preface to His System.” *Texts and Commentary*. Ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003, p. 20.

<sup>966</sup> Plato, *Republic*, Trans. by G.M.A. Grube and rev. C.D.C. Reeve. *Plato – Complete Works*. Ed. by John M. Cooper. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997, p. 1132–1135/514a –517e. The Nietzsche quote is from his university lectures where he is discussing the death of Socrates: “Death took him hence in full magnificence and glory [and thus] as the sun of the tropic sets [...] the line of original and typical ‘sophoi’ is exhausted.” Quoted in Walter Kaufmann. *Nietzsche. Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. Third Edition. Revised and Enlarged. New York: Random House, 1968, p. 397.

form of rationality. Dagur is not, it can thus be argued, emblematic of the dawn that heralds a new day. Rather, the combinatory effect of the given name and surname references the setting of the sun and the waning of the day, something that carries with it and activates a completely different range of meanings from those brought forth by the dynamics of an ordinary moment; these include myth, decline and entropy; at stake is an event marking an ending and the onset of night, the symbolic antithesis of the light of reason. As the tragedy of the play unfolds and Dagur's weaknesses become apparent, the way in which he is utterly in the sway of convention and ideology, the ramifications of his proper name, rather than his professional existence, prove themselves to be the dominant functions in the symbolic register.

At the end of the second act Gæa goes to be bed with Dagur, who by that time, as noted, is engaged to Alda, her daughter. It is clear that the night they spend together is extremely pleasurable and offers Gæa Kaldan a long sought after release. The emotional tensions revolve around the complicated situation that has arisen between mother and daughter and Dagur, their lover, but the stakes are raised incalculably when Dagur decides to inform his fiancé about the events of the night. The thought terrifies Gæa and the climax of the second half of the play is when Gæa kills her daughter with a gun in a fit of jealousy, or so her motivations were commonly interpreted at the time.

#### *4.3 Drive My Car*

Bracketing for the moment how the play shifts from a formal and mostly realist register to an expressionistically tinged psychodrama and tragedy as it comes to

a close, it is notable how important and tightly integrated into the materiality of the story world various signifiers of technological progress and change turn out to be; in fact the symbolic structure of the text, even the narrative arc itself, revolves around such “markers of modernity”.<sup>967</sup> The pivotal importance of the radio will be discussed below, and the title of the play, as already noted, invokes electricity while Alda’s second suitor, Dagur Vestan, is from the start associated with the modern through his work as an engineer. Indeed, as an engineer, Vestan combines the twin notions of technology and science, being engaged in the theoretical as well as the practical side of shaping the material world. It is therefore significant that his courtship of Alda commences with him “flaunting” his ownership and control of what Kristin Ross has referred to as the “the central vehicle of all twentieth-century modernization,” namely the automobile.<sup>968</sup>

As noted above, horses and horse drawn carriages were the main forms of transportation in Iceland, and this remained the case well into the 1920s, both for people and goods. In 1924 the number of automobiles in the country came to about 300. By 1940, the number had increased to 2,100 but in this period cars were used primarily for the transportation of goods, not people and it wasn’t until the 1960s that the automobile became somewhat widespread for private use.<sup>969</sup> When Dagur Vestan first meets Alda and invites her to try his new car, the gesture is therefore imbued with connotations of rarity, luxuriousness,

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<sup>967</sup> Marian Aguiar. “Making Modernity: Inside the Technological Space of the Railway.” *Cultural Critique*. Winter, 2008.

<sup>968</sup> Kristen Ross. *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996, p. 17.

<sup>969</sup> Magnús S. Magnússon. “Efnahagsþróun á Íslandi 1880–1990.” *Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun 1880–1990: ritgerðir*. Edited by Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Svanur Kristjánsson. Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands og Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1993, p. 179. See also, Örn Sigurðsson. *Íslenska bílaöldin*. Reykjavík: Forlagið, 2003; Sigurður Hreiðar Hreiðarsson. *Saga bílsins á Íslandi 1904–2004*. Reykjavík: Saga bílsins á Íslandi, 2004.

exclusivity and modernity.<sup>970</sup> Interestingly, however, leisurely rides in automobiles seem to be nothing new to Alda, who upon being invited immediately runs off to fetch her car gloves, the ownership of which signifies considerable familiarity with motor vehicles, as well as how much at home she is in the culture of modernity. It might be added that the fetching of the gloves confirms that Alda immediately understands Dagur to have meant the invitation as constituting an opportunity to drive his car, rather than a suggestion that she ride with him as a passenger, perhaps a more conventional form of motorized “dating”. Furthermore, Alda’s unhesitant decision to side-step the traditionally passive feminine role by not only accepting the offer of a day’s companionship from a (presumed) suitor but also taking charge of the means of transportation and her own mobility positions her as a modern woman, with a clear reference to Laxness’ earlier discussion of the shifting social position of women in modernity.<sup>971</sup> It is nevertheless important that the car does not belong to her and thus stands as a marker of male privilege and economic power.<sup>972</sup>

While being endowed with the conventional markers of male sexual prowess and privilege, the motorized vehicle is still somewhat ambiguous as it also signifies freedom from vigilant parental observation and the imposition of rules of female propriety. Going forth into the public sphere, Alda seems relieved to exit the family house, while Gæa’s stringent and disapproving reaction to her

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<sup>970</sup> A decade after the premier of *Straumrof*, in an article entitled “The Wonderful World of the Future,” Sveinn Sigurðsson expounds on how, once modernization has progressed even further than at present, automobiles will become the common place property of ordinary people. Sveinn Sigurðsson. “Undraheimur framtíðarinnar.” *Eimreiðin*, 3/1944.

<sup>971</sup> Halldór Laxness: Drengjakollurinn og íslenska konan. *Morgunblaðið*. 9/8, 1925; Halldór Laxness, “Frá arninum út í þjóðfélagið.” *Alþýðublaðið*, 2/9, 1927.

<sup>972</sup> The close association between automobiles and male privilege is discussed by Jean Baudrillard in the context of “traditional” family dynamics and gender roles; as well as how the car itself is often rendered as a woman-object in the discourse of advertisements (described as compliant, racy, comfortable, practical, obedient, hot). *The System of Objects*. Trans. by James Benedict. London and New York: Verso, 1997, pp. 67–69.



daughter's acceptance of the car ride also suggests that the sexual connotations that would later become part and parcel of motorized youth culture had already entered the social horizon. In a heavily regulated environment, where female behavior was strictly monitored and sexual mores stringently enforced, the car offered a brand new form of private space and environment for intimacy.<sup>973</sup>

Equally significant is Alda's later exit from the hunting lodge as she drives to town to spend the night with friends and, presumably, enjoy the nightlife. Sexual freedom is invoked again, as is the existence, just barely off-stage, of a vibrant youth culture. Alda's absence from the cottage is one of the factors that contributes to the circumstances that enable the tryst between Dagur and Gæa, which in turn leads to Alda's demise. The causal chain at stake, however, is not so straightforward and far from moralizing — but the narration of the play does position the automobile as a material aspect of technological modernity that is particularly conducive to fragmentation, in this case of the family unit. Indeed, the connotations thus invoked regarding mobility are deeply infused with the very concept of modernity. Jürgen Habermas, for example, situates and associates the emergence of modernity with a revolution in the technological overcoming of distances, noting that the capacity to traverse vast distances relatively quickly represents one of the “three monumental events around the year 1500 [that] constituted the epochal threshold between modern times and the middle ages.”<sup>974</sup> Clearly, between the momentous discovery of shipping lanes in early modernity and the technological leisure of the Kaldan family in the first

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<sup>973</sup> John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman. *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2012, pp. 456–487.

<sup>974</sup> Jürgen Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Trans. Frederick Lawrence. London and Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990, p. 5.

half of the twentieth, there lies almost the entire convoluted and complex history of modernization, involving, in a linear fashion, even if they resist complete narrative coherence, the movement from the country to the city (urbanization), the movement from the home into the workplace (female emancipation), and then the global migratory movement motivated by the economic centers of the West. As mechanization transformed mobility through newfound efficiency, spatial coordinates and understanding of geographical “facts” were reorganized; the world looked very different to someone on foot or dependent on trained animals than it did those denizens of modernity who found themselves the masters of technologies that made a hunting lodge in the countryside a reasonable addition to the domestic sphere.

The transformation that was brought about by the latest phase of mechanized transportation was however not received solely through the leisurely prism of vacation houses and youthful freedoms. On the contrary, Ben Singer has traced the discursive reactions invoked by the appearance of automobiles in the urban landscape, noting a pervasive atmosphere of anxiety centering on the speed and still virtually unregulated movement of the motorized vehicles, something that turned the already demanding urban environment into a chaotic whirlpool of confusion and mortal danger.<sup>975</sup> Indeed, in an early attempt to grapple with social acceleration, Henry Adams notes that

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<sup>975</sup> Ben Singer. *Modernity and Melodrama. Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, pp. 17–37.

an earthquake could be seen as a relaxing experience in comparison to the “ravages” of the automobile.<sup>976</sup>

At stake, however, are not only the new urban dangers and anxieties or the liberating capacity to overcome formerly imposing distances but also the manner in which the subjective experience of nature and the environment was itself affected, the sensory experience of the spatial milieu traversed, whatever its precise form, being for example transformed into an objective vista, not so much a landscape as an image to be gazed at (enjoyed or, conversely, met with indifference brought on by the unreality and repetitiveness of the “images”) through the railway or car window.<sup>977</sup> This is also representative of the process of fragmentation where a holistic sensory experience of the environment is broken up into a series of mechanically motivated and framed “views.” These new “perceptions” are articulated in a 1935 travel essay by Sveinn Sigurðsson, the editor of the cultural journal *Eimreiðin*, where the essay was published in 1935, entitled “Bílferð til Austfjarða” (A Car trip to the Eastern Fjords). Sigurðsson is thrilled by the new sway he feels himself having over distances, marveling at the speed and comfort of the car and the fact that in mere four days, he is able to traverse the distances from the capital to the coast on the opposite side of the country, 855 kilometers, as he notes with amazement. Taken by the natural vistas passed on the way, one image in particular is striking; looking out

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<sup>976</sup> Henry Adams. “A Law of Acceleration.” *High Speed Society. Social Acceleration, Power, and Modernity*. Ed. by Harmut Rosa and William E. Scheuerman. University Park: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009, p. 37.

<sup>977</sup> Wolfgang Schivelbusch. *The Railway Journey. The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*. Berkeley og Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986.

the window of his car, Sigurðsson notes that the landscape resembles a “color film on the screen.”<sup>978</sup>

The same of course applies to the industrialized, visually stimulating and increasingly fragmented metropolitan environment, which in its hectic multiplicity mirrors the disjointed view from a car window as it passes on the streets. Although the speed and shock of the modern urban experience would not however have been a pressing concern in Reykjavík in the 1930s, Laxness is interested in precisely the shifts in subjective experience enumerated above. Laxness’ reflections on the urban and cultural development of Reykjavík were discussed in chapter two and in *Straumrof*, in order not to disturb the play’s modern and technological ambiance (in addition, no doubt, to being motivated by the limits of the stage), Alda and Dagur’s motor excursion occurs off-stage. Their drive is therefore a “gap” in the text, to employ Wolfgang Iser’s concept, and readers are left to their own devices with regard to the details of the romantic expedition; the main point being that the play’s subtle cues may prompt a more modern urban imaginary to emerge than the historical situation would warrant.<sup>979</sup> The fragmentation discussed above in relation to the experience of mechanized mobility, and the transformation of the world into “scenes” is furthermore on display in *Straumrof* by means of the radio broadcasts, discussed further below, which frame a particular “view” of the world and thus serve to shape perceptions; in addition, even more so than the automobile, radio broadcasts overcome vast distances in a spectacular fashion.

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<sup>978</sup> Sveinn Sigurðsson. “Bílfærð til Austfjarða.” *Eimreiðin*, 3/1935, p. 311.

<sup>979</sup> Wolfgang Iser. “The Reading Process: A Phenomenal Approach.” *Modern Criticism and Theory*. Ed. by David Lodge. London og New York: Longman, pp. 212–228.

It is useful to stay a bit longer with the concept of mobility and the function of the automobile in Laxness' text. Recalling the above description of Iceland's harsh natural environment and the lack of transportation infrastructure, symbolized by the packhorse, mechanic mobility represented a revolutionary step, naturally, but the concept of mobility should also be expanded beyond the confines of the internal combustion engine and the automobile as such. Closely related, but still distinct, is a new category of cultural symbols that required mastering, including the regulatory icons in traffic, the new "rules of the road," and the way in which the contours of the urban environment changed (sometimes quite literally as entire cities were reconfigured to accommodate the automobile). Alda's ownership of driving gloves is furthermore indicative of how, through the semiotic domain of fashion, some of the meanings associated with the new technology could be incorporated into presentations of the self. The acceleration integral to mechanized mobility can also be seen as a material marker of the more general acceleration of modern life, theorized by Georg Simmel as being closely related to the emergence of a money economy, a transition that was manifested in formal and impersonal communication, which again enabled greater complexity in terms of community organization and thus population growth and the functioning of large social entities, such as cities.<sup>980</sup>

The ability to traverse formerly imposing distances with ease invokes a range of meanings that are relevant to *Straumrof*, as well as a number of Laxness' earlier essays. Indeed, several interpretations have already been offered with

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<sup>980</sup> Georg Simmel. "The Metropolis and Mental Life." *The Blackwell City Reader*. Edited by Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson. London: Blackwell, 2002.

regard to the structural role of the automobile as a an object, fabulous yet threatening, linking sex and death, and closely associated with modernity, mobility (not least gender mobility), class, wealth and freedom.<sup>981</sup> The general social acceleration that Simmel views as characteristic of modern societies and the money economy can also be seen to correspond to the shrinkage of distances and new perceptions, and thus brings the concept of speed to the fore, a concept that is useful to examine more closely.

Among the major repercussions of the industrial revolution is the production of artificial velocity. In time, as well, we would come to see the perfect synchronization of man and machine within the framework and confines of the factory and the conveyor belt, the capacity of both optimized in order to produce more machines; cars in the quintessential instance that gave the initial form of the process of mass production its name, “Fordism.” Demonstrating an unexpected affinity, Adorno and Horkheimer and Roland Barthes would, within a decade of each other, address the cultural impact of “Fordism,” with the former pair seeing automobiles as the preeminent emblem of the iron logic of consumer capitalism while Barthes read the highly designed 1950s Citroen as industry’s most perfect representation of commodity fetishism, its streamlining being reminiscent of the “seamless[ness]” of “Christ’s robe”.<sup>982</sup> Barthes thus points to how commodities take on the veneer of the sacred, much as Marx anticipated,<sup>983</sup>

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<sup>981</sup> That is, it is the movement from “metabolic speed” to technological mobility that grounds the transformation of the countryside into a site of leisure for urbanites in *Straumrof*, much as it does in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* and “Júdit Lvoff”.

<sup>982</sup> Roland Barthes. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York and London: Vintage, 1991, p. 88.

<sup>983</sup> “A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing,” Marx notes, but “its analysis bring sout that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties [...] a mystical character [that] reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects.” Karl Marx. *Capital. Volume 1*. Trans.

while new engines and new energies place the human subject, through technological prosthesis much like Freud discussed, in a historically unique position, with almost the entire material plane now “within reach.”<sup>984</sup>

Particularly interesting in this context is the intersection of technology and power, as addressed by “dromologist” Paul Virilio as well as Adorno and Horkheimer. Virilio, for example, notes that speed and mobility have always been signifiers of power, class privileges and means of domination, with elites being distinguished from commoners by their capacity to harness available technologies of speed (as is evident, for instance, in the etymological relationship between “knight” and “ride” – i.e. a knight is a man on a horse).<sup>985</sup> Taking a somewhat different approach and emphasizing the way in which modern technology is a manifestation of power, but a curiously dispersed version of power that has, as well as enveloping the globe, transcended the human capacity to monitor and control the forces thus unleashed, Adorno and Horkheimer note that “knowledge, which is power, knows no limits,” adding, with a nod towards King Thamus’ skepticism regarding new technologies in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, that “kings control technology no more directly than do merchants: it is as democratic as the economic system.”<sup>986</sup> It is no longer the human subject that belongs in the world and occupies it, but devices and structures of technology;

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by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin, 1990, pp. 163–165. Marx’s example of how objects, once placed in a relationship of exchange value, become “mystical” is a table that takes on strange and “grotesque” behavioral characteristics. Jacques Derrida offers a spectacular reading of this passage in his *Spectres of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. by Peggy Kamuf. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 154–176.

<sup>984</sup> Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer. *Pure War*. Trans. by Mark Politizzotti. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983, p 98.

<sup>985</sup> Virilio and Lotringer. *Pure War*, p. 115.

<sup>986</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 2. Plato. *Phaedrus*. Trans. G.M.A. Grube. *Plato – Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

technological objects, much in the fashion of modern capitalism, make of the subject a passive spectator and an object.

The statement, however, is ambiguous; the economic system, for Adorno and Horkheimer, is totalitarian, not democratic; nevertheless, it is not in thrall to or wielded by a single agent or set of agents, and thus dispersed and “democratic” in the sense that “something is provided for everyone so that no can escape.”<sup>987</sup> Technology functions likewise. Or at least the blinkered gaze of scientism, whose erection of the conceptual framework of instrumental reason corresponds to a considerable extent to Weber’s iron cage. The totalitarian aspect of technology can be seen currently, for example, in the way in which a technological interface to mediate social interaction on the internet, one that subsequently has become the mold through which nearly a billion people have squeezed the representation of their subjectivity in a digital environment, was designed by a twenty year old. And even if one were tempted to designate Mark Zuckerberg as the “king” of social media, the vast trove of personal information gathered by Facebook far exceeds his capacity to comprehend, the data having long since become the subject of complex algorithms; then monetized and sold simply in order to interact with a different set of algorithms belonging to other corporations, the internal complexities of which similarly escape the grasp of the individuals supposedly running the organization. The reach of the structure of domination is total, yet entirely impersonal.

However, if speed has historically been associated with social and economic privilege it has also, and equally importantly, been linked to freedom

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<sup>987</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 97.



in terms of the invocation of untrammelled mobility and the subject's ability to remove itself with great efficiency from social circumstances that might, for any number of reasons, be deemed inhospitable or negative, somewhat in the manner of Jack Kerouac's paean to the car and the open road.<sup>988</sup> The contradiction in play, however — one that is noted by Paul Virilio — is that the harnessing of technological energy in such a fashion is dependent on massive state and government intervention, as is the concomitant demand for the absence of any form of material obstructions that manifests itself in the transformation of land and nature into a system of roads and highways. Thus, for example, the car could do little to replace the horse or the wagon until a system of roads was in place, which in turn implies that the ostensible freedom of mobility afforded by the car is ultimately grounded in the existence of a logic and a structure that is always already in place for the traveler, limiting his choices and implicitly directing his movement.<sup>989</sup>

Indeed, implicit in the very concept of modernization is the striving for the (impossible) goal of perfect order, a coherent relationship between representation and reality, and the systematization of the resulting meaning-structure, founded on the full disclosure of the world into information systems and language. In several of his late works, Laxness deliberately problematizes the very logic grounding the drive for rationalization, showing how it also produces certain "side-effects" or symptoms which appear in the form of the incomplete and the uncertain, all the classifications, typologies and boundaries prove insufficient to the segregating task that reason sets for itself; language is

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<sup>988</sup> Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. London and New York: Penguin, 1996.

<sup>989</sup> Paul Virilio. *Negative Horizon: An Essay in Dromoscopy*. Trans. by Michael Degener. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1991, pp. 81-90.

polysemic and imprecise, while the scientific mapping of the real, rather than fully accounting for the empirical, continually reveals uncharted terrain. Representing these “side-effects,” are characters such as Jón Prímus in *Kristnihald undir Jökli* and Pressarinn in *Dúfnaveislan* who have created for themselves alternative spaces for a spiritual engagement in the cracks in modernity’s façade, “cracks” that sociologist Zygmunt Bauman associates with its liquidity and the ultimate entropy of complex systems.<sup>990</sup>

The title of *Straumrof* signals such a crack in modernity’s façade. Furthermore, the despondency of the ending of his 1934 play is complete; comparable perhaps to the tragic conclusion of *Silfurtúnglið*, but very distant from the peaceful equanimity that reigns in the late novels but close in spirit to the hopeless grappling with the moral and existential void of modernity that characterizes the three late plays. Of course the questions and problems posed by these works are different, but *Straumrof* and *Silfurtúnglið* do share a concern with gender and modernity, and the position of women within the patriarchal order, which in the latter play is represented through the culture industry while the former thematizes the subjugation of women within the framework of solid bourgeoisie values and a highly “civilized” social organization. It is therefore interesting that in *Straumrof*, technology is primarily associated with men and male activity. Loftur controls the radio, whose discursive range, as will be touched on in greater detail below, centers entirely on the male world of

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<sup>990</sup> While emphasizing what he terms the “solid” aspects of modernity — hierarchical bureaucracy, regulations and categorization among them — Zygmunt Bauman can be seen as working within a framework deeply indebted to Weberian perspectives, but his accompanying notion of “liquid” modernity signals a reworking of earlier sociological discourses, and a partial abandonment of the Weberian paradigm. See his *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.

business and politics, while Dagur is associated with the mobility of the modern automobile and engineering feats.

However, it is important to note Alda's role in this context. Recalling that, upon being invited for a ride by Dagur, she runs back inside to fetch her driving gloves and that later, in the hunting cabin, she takes the family car for a leisurely overnight outing to town. Technology is therefore not gendered in a monolithic fashion; what emerges however is that the structure of power and domination does not require the obvious oppression that would be involved in the direct and physical curtailment of women from civil society, mobility and the modern world; they are still, as Adorno and Horkheimer put it, "wholly encompassed by male logic," because modernity is a male enterprise.<sup>991</sup> No matter Alda's familiarity with technology, her social horizon is mapped out from the very first by the social paradigm of marriage.

There are other aspects of the problematic of speed, mobility, modernity and power that will be bracketed for the moment, but returned to in good time. Now, however, it is necessary to shift the perspective on the play just ever so much and bring three discursive strands to the foreground, textual and hermeneutic elements that were relegated to the sidelines as initial steps were taken towards the interrogation of the play's representation of technological modernity. The domains that we would now like to turn to are a closer investigation of the matter of female sexuality, sexual pleasure and gender relations; concomitantly we will examine the political and absurdist aspects of the play in more detail and, lastly, we will look at the way in which the

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<sup>991</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 87.

contemporary reception of the play — or, more correctly, a group of like minded and influential critics, but by no means all the critics — came up with or constructed an interpretation of the play that more than anything may explain its lackluster reputation in the decades that followed, and, indeed, may not yet have been fully overcome. In addition, the critical discourse offers a unique insight into the social horizon of experience that greeted the play, the ideological dominants that shaped ideas of femininity and feminine sexuality, and how Laxness' play was deeply enmeshed in all these discourses, although it was also subversive and created a space for itself that allowed for the formulation of a critique.

### ***5. Sexual Conduct and Sexual Misconduct***

As noted above, Laxness' theatrical work has not received anything resembling the scholarly attention afforded his novelistic output. But even in that context, it is difficult to account for the silence that surrounds *Straumrof*. In Árni Ibsen's chapter on Laxness' plays in the fifth volume of *Íslensk bókmenntasaga* (Icelandic Literary History) published in 2006, he addresses *Silfurtúnglið* and the three late plays insightfully but affords, in total, thirty eight words to *Straumrof*.<sup>992</sup> In his earlier one volume literary history, Stefán Einarsson engages with *Straumrof* in a subclause that comes to ten words, while in his groundbreaking 1948 literary history, Kristinn E. Andrússon requires only three.<sup>993</sup> In a chapter on the theater in a history of Icelandic literature published by a university press in the United

<sup>992</sup> Árni Ibsen. "Leikritun eftir 1918." *Íslensk bókmenntasaga V*. Ed. by Guðmundur Andri Thorsson. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2006, p. 235.

<sup>993</sup> Stefán Einarsson. *Íslensk bókmenntasaga. 874–1960*. Reykjavík: Snæbjörn Jónsson & Co. H.F., The English Bookshop, 1961, p. 415. Kristinn E. Andrússon. *Íslenskar nútímabókmenntir 1918–1948*. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1949, p. 341.

States, Ibsen again discusses *Straumrof* and there he designates it the “first modern play in terms of subject matter and parodic style”.<sup>994</sup> The remark is quite suggestive and one wishes the author had been afforded space to elaborate further. In the history of Leikfélag Reykjavíkur, published on its centennial anniversary, coverage of Laxness’ play is also extremely scant.<sup>995</sup>

It is not only that the academic discourse is somewhat meager but also that evaluations of the play tend to be (again) surprisingly negative. Jón Viðar Jónsson goes so far as to state that from the point of view of the tragedy, *Straumrof* “simply doesn’t make the grade” and is, at times, “exasperating.”<sup>996</sup> In an early overview of Laxness’ work as a dramatist, Stefán Baldursson treads lightly but it is clear that he finds *Straumrof* to be a minor work.<sup>997</sup> Theater scholar and playwright Hávar Sigurjónsson in his 1998 article in *Morgunblaðið*, cited above, spoke in different tones about *Straumrof*, having as a matter of fact largely complimentary things to say. He notes for example that the lead, Gæa Kaldan, must be seen as “one of the most powerful female characters in all of Icelandic drama.”<sup>998</sup>

Positive articulations such as Hávar’s interpretation of the female lead in *Straumrof*, and a general tone that suggests that he is rather fond of the play, are

<sup>994</sup> Árne Ibsen. “Icelandic Theater 1790–1975.” *A History of Icelandic Literature*. Ed. by Daisy Neijmann, Lincoln and London: The University of Nebraska Press, 2006, p. 561.

<sup>995</sup> Eggert Þór Bernharðsson and Þórunn Valdimarsdóttir point out that some of the hostility that met the play might have derived from resentment and prejudice towards Gunnar Hansen, a Danish director who was hired by Leikfélag Reykjavíkur and directed *Straumrof*. See *Leikfélag Reykjavíkur. Aldarsaga*. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1997, p. 112–115. See also Sveinn Einarsson. *Leikhúsið við tjörnina*. Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1972, pp. 31 and 67.

<sup>996</sup> Jónsson, „Var Halldór Laxness gott leikritaskáld?,” pp. 20–21. In the original the quotes from Jón Viðar read “Því miður nær *Straumrof* ekki á *nokkurn hátt máli sem harmleikur*”; and „Það er einkum í þriðja þætti sem skáldið reynir á *þolrifin*, því að þar verður leikurinn á köflum lítið annað en samfelldur móðursýkisvaðall fúarinnar”.

<sup>997</sup> Baldursson, “Uppþornuð sítróna,” p. 89. The word Baldursson employs is “silly” or, in the Icelandic, “kjánalegt.”

<sup>998</sup> Sigurjónsson, “Lífið á fjölunum,” p. 10. In the original: „[ein] af magnaðri kvenpersónum íslenskrar leikritunar.”

rare in the critical discourse. However, there is one notable exception and that is the reception of the 1977 revival by Leikfélag Reykjavíkur — the theater company that staged the play originally — on the occasion of the author’s 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. The performance was a popular success but the critical reception was even more remarkable.

Jónas Guðmundsson, the reviewer for *Tíminn* newspaper, called *Straumrof* a “masterpiece” and “probably the best play Laxness ever wrote.”<sup>999</sup> This assessment flew not only in the face of the critical consensus but also Laxness’ own evaluation of the play. Guðmundsson was not alone, however. Jóhann Hjálmarsson, writing for *Morgunblaðið*, agreed in all essentials with Guðmundsson, although he was more sparing when it came to the adjectives, but in a suggestive turn of phrase, he referred to *Straumrof* as Laxness’ “lost play” which had now “won a victory” against the tide of critical opinion. “These are better days for *Straumrof*,” Hjálmarsson continued and then rounded off a laudatory full-page review by stating that the work just might be “Laxness’ most cohesive play”.<sup>1000</sup>

“Most importantly, *Straumrof* is well constructed,” the reviewer for *Dagblaðið* notes, while in *Þjóðviljinn* *Straumrof* is introduced as Laxness’ “least known work,” a hidden gem that managed to attract an underground coterie of enthusiasts who, after coming across it by chance (or fate), fall under its “strange” spell — and here it should be mentioned that when published in 1934,

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<sup>999</sup> Jónas Guðmundsson. “*Straumrof* eftir Halldór Laxness.” *Tíminn*, 18. March, 1977, p. 11. In the original: “*Straumrof* er stórkostlegt verk, líklega bezta leikrit sem Halldór Laxness hefur ritað um ævina.”

<sup>1000</sup> Jóhann Hjálmarsson. “Persónudrama.” *Morgunblaðið*, 18. March, 1977, p. 12. First quote in the original: “Hið gleymda leikrit, *Straumrof*, vann sinn sigur.” Second quote: “Nú eru betri tímar fyrir *Straumrof*.” And the third: “Þetta verk er ef til vill heilsteyptasta leikrit Halldórs Laxness.”

the play's print run was indeed extremely limited, "tiny" according to Sverrir Hólmarsson, and since the text was not republished until 1977, to go with the new stage performance, it is safe to say that Hólmarsson's designation is a good one, *Straumrof* was indeed a "lost play."<sup>1001</sup> What should also be noted is the way in which the acclamatory discourse of 1977 carries within itself and keeps referring back to the initial 1934 reception through notions and phrasings such as "lost play," "[winning] a victory" and these being "better days" for *Straumrof*; how Laxness' "least known work" is now reaching the audience it deserves. It was almost as if there was a conscious desire to correct a cultural wrong or a historical oversight; to remedy some kind of error that had rendered the alignment of literary history with other cultural institutions and the cultural landscape as a whole, off-kilter and disjointed.

### 5.1 Text and Context

Pointing out that the almost universally laudatory reception in 1977 differed considerably from the initial reception of *Straumrof* is reasonable; the reviews were decidedly mixed during the play's initial stage run and in certain quarters it was downright excoriated. In the media coverage of the 1977 re-staging, however, there is a noticeable tendency to dramatize and exaggerate the negativity and harshness and, above all, the uniformity of the negative reviews that greeted the play when it opened. It seemed as if Laxness had been lucky not to be tarred and feathered and run out of town. "What we have in front of us are

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<sup>1001</sup> Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson. "Hvaða straumar?" *Dagblaðið*, 18. March, 1977, p. 4. In the original: "Straumrof er umfram allt vel uppbyggt leikrit". Sverrir Hólmarsson. *Þjóðviljinn*, 22. March, 1977, p. 8. In the original: "Það [Straumrof] var prentað í örsmau upplagi og hefur verið einna minnst þekkt og lesið af verkum skáldsins, nema hvað ýmsir sem hafa komist í bók þessa af tilviljun hafa lengi haft á því sérkennilegt dálæti".

two strands of critical opinion that diverge so utterly from each other that they can hardly be viewed as originating from the same work," Aðalsteinn Ásberg Sigurðsson observes in an article that compares the reception of the two stage versions, in 1934 and 1977.<sup>1002</sup>

This is of course far from accurate; as noted, the reception was mixed during the play's initial run but Laxness certainly had his supporters, as will be discussed further below. It is notable, and even to an extent admirable, how determined Sigurðsson is to create and hold on to the idea of a literary historical mystery, one that revolves around the cultural dynamics at play when a forty-year-old play, thoroughly dismissed when it opened, becomes a revered object among the cultural elite during its second run:

Our society undergoes continual change, some of which is called progress. These changes are either for good or ill and many are worthy subjects for research. People's literary taste and taste in art have changed substantially and it must be considered extremely noteworthy when a 40 year old play, one that enjoyed absolutely no success with audiences, is all of a sudden all the rage with connoisseurs of art. What the reasons are may be difficult to fathom.<sup>1003</sup>

Sigurðsson is grappling with the relationship between text and historical context, as well as change, the latter being perhaps the fundamental problem as it involves shifts in the organization of literary systems, the social order and sensibilities. Such changes are what Sigurðsson wants to account for but finding the correct angle from which to approach the problem seems difficult. We

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<sup>1002</sup> "A[ðalsteinn]. Á[sberg]. S[igurðsson]." "Straumrof fyrr og nú." *Vikan*, 16. tbl., 1977, pp. 12–13. In the original: "Hér er um að ræða tvö gjörólík viðhorf. Svo ólík, að vart er hægt að ímynda sér þau tilheyra sama verkinu."

<sup>1003</sup> S[igurðsson], "Straumrof fyrr og nú," p. 12. In the original: "Stöðugar breytingar eiga sér stað í þjóðfélagi okkar og eru sumar nefndar þróun. Ýmist eru þessar breytingar til góðs eða ills og margar hverjar eru verðug rannsóknarefni. Bókmennta- og listasmekkur fólks hefur tekið miklum breytingum og það hlýtur að teljast til sérstakra tíðinda þegar ríflega 40 ára gamalt leikhúsverk, sem áður átti engum vinsældum að fagna hjá áhorfendum, á nú allt í einu upp á pallborðið hjá listunnendum. Hvað því veldur er ekki gott að dæma um."



propose to follow Sigurðsson as he circles around the problem and eventually offers a solution — not as a matter of fact because the solution thus proffered is necessarily all that illuminating but rather because the problem itself, involving as noted above the relationship between text and historical context is interesting and has ramifications that extend to the present inquiry.

Pausing for a brief moment before proceeding with the discussion of Sigurðsson's article, it will be argued that while the range to start with seems potentially infinite, the most important and fruitful hermeneutical sites to analyze when approaching the above mentioned problem — how to rationalize the movement from close reading to historical context — are threefold; first there is the domain of reception (both the initial moment of reception but also subsequent encounters between critics and readers and a particular literary work); then production (in our case, the focus being on the theater, one might note that plays are traditionally staged with the aid of a menagerie of mechanical contraptions and by the first decades of the twentieth century, the possibilities available even to a backwater theater would have astounded the Elizabethans; in the twentieth century novels, to give another example, started being “produced” with images as primary building blocks, rather than words, that is, they were adapted for the screen), and then, third, the “meaning” of texts (the theme of slavery being read differently by a twenty-first-century reader of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) than it would have been by Defoe's contemporaries). Although by no means complete or perfect, the above distinction is useful when explicating a methodology — aspects of which are already on display — that will be employed to evaluate or frame certain critical articulations of Laxness' texts

as well as to provide a groundwork for what follows as we start to grapple with the significance and meaning of Laxness' plays.

Sigurðsson's initial move when confronted by the question cited above, why a work would speak with more force to a future audience than its contemporaries is the vague but frequent expressed notion that sometimes an "author is ahead of his time."<sup>1004</sup> Literary taste, generally speaking, tends to alter and shift with the passage of time, much as Sigurðsson points out in the quote above. Immense best-sellers, even zeitgeist-altering ones, can be forgotten within a generation or two, while, famously, works that were completely ignored during the lifetime of their author's and even longer become in time staples of the canon; Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) being the emblematic example here. Nevertheless, having made a gesture in this direction, the article posits a wholly different explanation.

It becomes apparent that for Sigurðsson, *Straumrof*, must always have been a masterpiece, the qualities that the audience respond to so enthusiastically in 1977 must surely have been present in 1934 — how else could they just "appear" forty years later, the thinking seems to go — or, perhaps it would be

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<sup>1004</sup> S[igurðsson], "Straumrof fyrr og nú," p. 12. In the original: "Ef til var höfundurinn á undan samtíð sinni." If viewed from a strictly rationalist perspective, speaking of a text (or any cultural artifact) as being ahead of its time would seem vague enough and, after a moment's reflection, illogical enough to give one pause about the value of employing this particular turn of phrase. One can be at the forefront of change, or lag behind the mainstream; one may even influence the direction taken in certain social arenas, but as there is absolutely nothing in a subject's interiority that is not entirely and wholly constituted by the flux of time whose outer limit is the present, and thus getting beyond that marked limit is impossible. Particularly as this phrase is usually not employed in a similar manner to those shouts of celebration, as if an important sports game had just been won, that tend to greet science fiction authors who are lucky enough to live to see perhaps one out of hundreds if not thousands of items of guesswork in their novels regarding the mechanical make-up of the future and how technology will develop, transform and change, both itself and society. The reference here, rather, is the avant-garde or the seer, someone close to us who nevertheless enjoys a uniquely perceptive view on or understanding of contemporary social, technological and political networks, precisely the institutional structures that constitute the "subterranean" or hidden foundation of modernity in the West.

more accurate to say that, since present in the text, the potentiality of expressing the work's brilliance must have been present during its initial run, whether ultimately utilized or not. The grounding assumption here is that the meaning of a text stays the same despite temporal, spatial and cultural shifts. Thus, the audience in 1934 responded the way it did not because there was something wrong with the play, nor was there anything wrong with the audience — it was the original theatrical troupe that dropped the ball: “It seems obvious,” Sigurðsson notes, “that the mistakes of the actors in 1934 occasioned the critical dismissal. And why were those mistakes made? Presumably the actors didn't grasp their roles as fully as our actors today do.”<sup>1005</sup>

As noted, Sigurðsson's article is in part discussed because it foregrounds something that is often left unspoken, namely how shifts in reception are not merely a usefully dramatic turn of events in a biographical narrative, for example, but a problem that should be addressed as such because it involves the relationship of a literary work to its social environment. Initially, however, Sigurðsson's engagement with the finer points of historical research does not seem very promising, at least as it relates to his account of the performance of the actors during *Straumrof's* initial showing. As a matter of fact, during the play's initial run, the actors were not at all viewed as a significant problem, as Sigurðsson would have readers believe, although some critics found fault with, particularly, Nina Stefánsson as Alda and, if to a slightly lesser extent, Þorsteinn

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<sup>1005</sup> “A[ðalsteinn]. Á[sberg]. S[igurðsson].” “Straumrof fyrr og nú.” *Vikan*, 16. tbl., 1977, pp. 12–13. In the original: “Það liggur því beinas við að álíta mistök leikenda 1934 aðalorsök þess, að leikritið fékk svo lítinn hljómgrunn. Hver var svo aðalastæðan fyrir þeim mistökum? Sennilega hafa leikendur ekki gert sér eins góða grein fyrir inntaki verksins og þeir leikarar sem fara með hlutverkin nú.”

Stephensen as Dagur Vestan.<sup>1006</sup> Even in these instances, however, is notable how kindly the critics treat Stéfansson who was making her debut on the stage with *Straumrof*. In *Nýja dagblaðið*, the reviewer starts by noting the youth of the actress, adding that she is taking her “first steps on the stage” and expectations of “artistic maturity” should therefore be “kept in check”.<sup>1007</sup> In *Morgunblaðið*, Kristján Albertsson, who on the whole gave an unfavorable review, indeed, one that we will be returned to below as it is one of the central contemporary statements on Laxness’ play, describes Stéfansson’s performance as “likeable” and says she took “naturally” to the stage, but that overall the performance was not very lively and “her enunciation was often inaudible;”<sup>1008</sup> however, as if regretting the severity of the criticism just offered, a hurried parenthesis follows where Albertsson qualifies the earlier statement: “but that is hopefully going to change in the future as she gets accustomed to the stage.”<sup>1009</sup>

Then, in the lead role, Soffía Gunnlaugsdóttir as Gæa comes in for enormous praise everywhere. Indeed, critics agreed by and large that although a respectable effort, the play’s flaws, those that there were, were to be traced back to Laxness himself and, to an extent, the director, the Danish Gunnar Hansen.<sup>1010</sup>

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<sup>1006</sup> Sigurðsson’s discussion of the play’s initial reception involves highly selective quoting from two reviews.

<sup>1007</sup> “K.” “Halldór Kiljan Laxness: *Straumrof*.” *Nýja dagblaðið*, 3. December, 1934, p.2. In the original: “Það er kornung leikkona og kemur hér fram í fyrsta sinn, svo að eigi má vænta af henni mikils þroska”.

<sup>1008</sup> Kristján Albertsson. “*Straumrof* Halldórs Kiljan Laxness.” *Morgunblaðið*, 1. December, 1934, p. 5. In the original: “Ungfrúna lék Nini Stefansson, hún var viðfeldin og náttúruleg á leiksviðinu, en leikur hennar nokkuð litlaus og framburður ekki alltaf áheyrilegur”.

<sup>1009</sup> Albertsson, “*Straumrof*,” p. 5. In the original: “en það stendur vonandi til bóta þegar ungfrúin venst leiksviðinu betur”.

<sup>1010</sup> The only exception was the review in *Alþýðublaðið*, which goes the same route as Sigurðsson does roughly forty years later: “A famous reviewer in Berlin once said that one important thing all theater reviewers must take to heart, and that was never to blame the actor for what was the author’s fault and never blame the author for what was the actor’s fault. It is worth keeping this in his mind, because although flaws are to be found in this piece, and these being substantial, it is still obvious that the actors are unable to draw forth from the play the value that it does have and what the author expected of them.” In the original: “Frægur leikdómari í Berlín sagði einu sinni,

Sigurðsson hypothesis, as indicated above, does thus not withstand scrutiny. Accounting for a work in more than a superficial way requires an engagement with the discursive formation that has come to being in historical terms and affects to a large degree the way that we contextualize, evaluate and comprehend works of art. Clearly, newspaper reviews are only an aspect of this discourse and often not the most important but in some instances, such as the present one, they can indeed play a central role. As we noted above, however, one needs to account for at least three aspects of the textual experience when navigating the relationship between text and context. There is the matter of production and reception, both of which Sigurðsson touches on, but then there is in addition the more contentious area of meaning or textual significance.

Initially, this third element of the textual configuration seems absent in Sigurðsson's article but upon closer inspection its outlines can be glimpsed in a peculiar moment in the text, namely Sigurðsson's inclusion of a somewhat eccentric inscription of a particular form of subjectivity to the actors ("[p]resumably the actors [in 1934] didn't grasp their roles as fully as our actors today do"), which is almost certainly a thinly veiled allusion to the fact that sexuality, sexual frustration, sexual pleasure and sexual incidents, and the ensuing drama that is motivated by these human elements, could be portrayed more freely on the modern stage than in the 1930s. Which, even if this deduction is correct, does little to subtract from the strangeness of the presentation of what would appear to be an actorly hive mind, safely stashed away in the past.

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að eitt meginatriði yrðu allir leikdómarar að hafa hugfast, sem sé það, að kenna aldrei leikurunum um það sem höfundum væri að kenna, og höfundinum ekki um það, sem leikaranum væri að kenna. Vert er að hafa þetta í huga að þessu sinni, því þó að gallar kunni að vera á þessu leikriti, og þeir miklir, þá er hitt og augljóst, að leikendurinn ná því ekki út úr leikritinu, sem það hefir inni að halda, og sem höfundurinn hefir til ætlast."

However, this is the moment when Sigurðsson's investigation into the disjunction between the reception of the 1934 and 1977 productions suggests that it might move in more interesting directions and examine, for example, the social meanings that underlie the way in which the play was read at these two historical moments.

The fact that Sigurðsson's article does in fact not move in such a direction should not constrain us and, indeed, its value is that it points towards a theoretical and a methodological problem that is actually worth pausing over for a moment. As we address the five plays by Halldór Laxness that are under consideration in this chapter, there is always going to be a heavy reliance on historical context, the way in which Laxness' plays address specific moments in Icelandic history, as well as history in a wider context, including the global politics of the Cold War. As to the history of the play's reception, that is a discourse that plays an important role in the way in which the texts are positioned and understood, both in terms of cultural history (the two moments of the stage performance of *Straumrof* are a case in point), but also as part and parcel of the discursive network that is in a sense inseparable from the text itself. This will be explained in a bit more detail below. Then we have the construction of Laxness the playwright, the way in which his contribution to the theater is generally understood and the status of his plays within his oeuvre; these are important factors in the way in which his work in general is approached and pivotal when an account is offered of his late work. Having said that, it should also be noted that it is by no means a necessarily straightforward matter just how one goes about connecting literary works to a wider historical context. One might even venture to say that a somewhat tense relationship has developed in

the past two decades between those who stake out their territory on the historical side of the “divide” and those who are textually oriented. It is fruitful to take a moment to briefly sketch out the issue of contention between historicist critics and textually oriented critics and thus also situate the present inquiry in this contentious field.

The former, the historicists that is, can be said with some simplification to view with suspicion interpretation and the close reading of cultural artifacts, those, that is, that are not “current” or contemporary needless to say, that proceed without what could be termed a firm grasp of the historical context that inflects the generation of meaning and endows the discourses swirling around within the borders of a text with a culturally specific connotative scheme (scholarly work riling scholars of this stripe could perhaps be encapsulated in article titles such as “The Postmodernism of Beowulf” or “Desdemona’s Handkerchief as the ‘objet petit a,’ or, Othello’s Desire to Desire”). What then takes place in “close readings,” a literary historian or a film historian might point out, is simply a free-style exercise in imaginative exegesis and word/idea associations; the text becoming something of a Rorschach test for the reader rather than a window into a historically specific milieu. For a reading to avoid the designation of simply being an entirely subjective game that the “hermeneutical specialist” is essentially playing with himself, a solid grounding in real historical structures — social, economic, political, cultural, ideological — is required to validate observations and interpretative hypotheses.

The textually oriented actor, one that is not unlikely to be a literary theorist, would likely have quite a bit to say on this subject to his historicist

colleague. Starting off, he or she might want to question the notion of a historical “reality” that stands as a clean-cut object against which literary texts can be measured,<sup>1011</sup> noting that after Hayden White, blue-eyed and Arcadian-like innocence when it comes to the “emplotment” of history is hardly a sustainable position, and, secondly, whatever conclusion we might eventually reach about the “reality” of history, it would still have rather limited applicability to the reading of literature. As Jonathan Culler once put it, the history of Danish kings and princes does absolutely nothing to explain Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

However, both approaches are limited; rigorously inquisitive is how theory likes to see itself but sometimes — those hostile to this mode of thinking like to point out — the “rigor” gets invested in the “charms” and intricacies of a random, newly invented vocabulary that is somehow supposed to function in a more precise and illuminating manner than the technical language already at hand. Admittedly the reasons why many modern theorists, particularly those associated with poststructuralism, choose to write in dense, opaque and often quite unfriendly prose, is the result of institutional pressure and peer pressure; for a time this was how one climbed the ranks in academia and not being versed in the “lingo” meant one was largely left out of the conversation. There are other reasons of course, the most important being that the new and the radical may require new and radical modes of expression, that in order to revise a long accepted conceptual terrain and then move along towards a destination that

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<sup>1011</sup> Approaching the past as if it simply “exists” in some true form that only awaits explication would, the textualist might point out, be naiveté of the worst kind. Concepts are invented, and there are enunciative modalities that influence quite heavily, some might say decisively, how to position subjects, what to pay attention to and what to elide, and just how, exactly, the content of the concepts we commonly use, is made meaningful. For more on this, see D.N. Rodowick. *Elegy for Theory*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2014.



involves the attempt to think differently (about history, sex, gender, race, etc.), some really dense linguistic patches cannot be avoided. Then there is that rare academic whose expressive capacity in writing resembles the great literary modernists in terms of linguistic facility, experimental voraciousness and aesthetic thrill, but also difficulty and enormous logical “gaps,” as Wolfgang Iser would have it, that demand intense participation on behalf of the reader and may indeed always be characterized, first and foremost, by radical ambiguity. Derrida of course is the primary example here. Then there is Adorno who after the Second World War took the stance that the ideology of instrumental rationality was ingrained in language to such an extent as to almost render it useless. In order to recuperate the subversive and critical capacity of language, it was necessary to work against it, defamiliarize it and force it into new shapes, contexts and expressive potentialities.

Dismissing the role of “art” in scholarly discourse and seeing no evidence of the ideological infection mentioned by Adorno, the more materially oriented scholar is also sure to find it easier not to lose his or her footing once the rivalry has been brought down to the nitty-gritty of, let’s say, the importance that the cheap printing and therefore affordable pricing of Byron’s *Don Juan* had when it comes to explicating its enormous fame and impact, and the “device” employed to reach the conclusion would not be a conceptual framework passed down from Hegel to Heidegger to Derrida, being of course “richly” complemented by each operator before being handed down; all one needed was information about the price of bread.<sup>1012</sup>

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<sup>1012</sup> Thus we get the common comical figuration of the “formalist,” or the “Marxist,” the “deconstructionist” and so on, who, with a handful of DVD’s and a flat screen, is determined to

Now however the theorist, having become increasingly incensed by the piling on of very familiar accusations of willful opacity and sophistry, might be tempted to point out that the techniques employed by the historian/cognitivist/or, and analytical philosophy always stay on the surface, dwell on the obvious, and the fact that they cannot account for ideology, gender “trouble,” desire, irrational impulses, self-destruction and the entire symbolic order is not even the worst of it, rather, the worst is that they are not aware of their limitations, having at some point reached the pat conclusion that all theories are “ideological” and thus always end up where they began, with the “answer” or conclusion or the results of the research pre-given by the “system” employed, the concepts available and the questions permissible to ask within the methodological tyranny that characterizes all systems and methods that believe they have found the one, true way to go about things. The rationalists, cognitivists and historians are themselves, of course, wholly free of ideology, the strictures of systematic thinking and can proudly show off their whole, not riven, and entirely coherent consciousness, a consciousness that never causes trouble, acts out, is unruly or seems to be hiding things from its owner. Subtext is hardly necessary here, it’s all on the surface, narrative cues, schemata and other clearly

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“unpack” the meaning of a text or a series of texts. The contrast that is thus activated is between a figure reminiscent of an old-style philologist, stridently opposed to interpretation that goes beyond puzzling out what particular words meant in this or that historical situation, and a couch potato who has, for example, mastered a particular idiom and a vocabulary, the Lacanian register, let’s say, and whose “interpretation” is then to retell the plot but employing a Lacanian conceptual register in doing so; the point of which, it seems, is roughly comparable to me recounting the plot of an American film in Icelandic to a US citizen; to give just one example, the “objet petit a” would then become “þrín eftir upphafningu í gegnum ást sem aldrei getur orðið, því þrín þrín aðeins að þrá”. The first phrase is in French, the second in Icelandic, and for someone who knows neither, and is in addition unfamiliar with psychoanalytic terminology, the entire communication is gibberish. Even were my utterance comprehended, the illumination afforded by my transposing elements of the film into Icelandic is miniscule to be sure. As to Byron and bread, see William St. Clair. “The Impact of Byron’s Writings.” *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*. Ed. by Andrew Rutherford. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1990.

definable textual aspects provide the text's forward momentum and the spectator, whose engagement with the text is framed within the enclosure of premeditated narrative cues, which for some unexplained reason he finds himself capable of understanding and following, no matter whether the referent is, say, quantum mechanics or a once daring black and wide comedy about the travails of a Swedish all-female volley-ball team.

The wholly rational figure who engages rationally with a rational text, and the glorious rational convolution that results from this conflux of reasonableness produces an interpretation that is the very picture of coherency, rationality — all in all, a handsomely put together piece of writing, indeed, the clarity, lucidity and the exquisite transparency of language all come together to produce a plot summary that could not only find a home but would also and without a doubt be offered the pride of place on Wikipedia.

While quite clearly employing rhetorical flourishes that verge on caricature, the depiction above of opposing methodologies aims to draw out attitudes often subsumed within an entire tradition of scholarly thinking and thus impossible to summarize without recourse to drastic condensation. Both approaches, it should be reiterated, are useful but there is a third way. A text is not an independent entity, carrying within itself meaning that is immutable and thus presenting the same set of meaning generating signifiers to successive generations of audiences and critics, which is what Sigurðsson assumes.

This is why historiographical and archival work is required when accounting for texts that are, in terms of temporality, substantially separated from the scholar. Furthermore, the reception of texts is by no means innocent or

somehow off in a sphere of its own, having little or no effect on the text. The early reception can prove pivotal. Powerful interventions, timely and persuasive early readings, tend to stay with texts, even “unconsciously,” in the sense that they become part of the generalized hermeneutical context or framework of the text and thus arrive, hand in hand, with the work to greet subsequent readers. Indeed, their circumference only increases with time as the initial hermeneutical encounter is soon joined by others and a reception history comes into being. Of course, it is also important to realize that the initial readership of a text does not enter into the reading experience without preconceived notions about the text, familiarity with the genre, popular tropes, a distinct sensibility and a certain social and cultural framework that shapes perceptions of the world. Miriam Hansen has termed this the “social horizon of understanding,” thus referencing all those elements that a community shares that will in a sense influence, inflect and adjudicate the experience and reception of cultural artifacts. Employing the concept of a “social horizon of experience” allows the scholar to avoid the unfruitful issue of the empirical spectator/reader/consumer, as, rather than focusing on the individual experience, partly because “we” are never the neutral recipients of an ordinary text, the attention shifts to “the hermeneutic constellation in which a historical spectator makes sense of what he or she perceives, how he or she interprets the [text in question].”<sup>1013</sup>

The hermeneutic constellation referenced by Hansen in this instance refers to, on the one hand, how the conflux of social structures that introduce us to the world, bring us up in the world, then turn to shape our understanding of it

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<sup>1013</sup> Miriam Hansen. *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 7.

in ways that are hardly conscious but constitute rather the baseline for our perception and cognitive workings out of the manifold complexities of everyday life and our comprehension and attitude towards more substantial social issues. Members of a community can be assumed to share a social and conceptual horizon thus understood and therefore, rather than engaging in empirical research on individuals, as touched on above, the investigation of the “horizon” is the most fruitful way to go when working with the initial reception of a work and then also the subsequent reception history. However, Hans Georg Gadamer has argued persuasively that the reconstruction of past horizons of experience is always bound to be moved from its original context because the historical context of the scholar in a sense “surrounds” the historical object:

„understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.”<sup>1014</sup> This “limitation” is what opens up or justifies the historically sensitive textual analysis that, conducted under the auspices outlined above, becomes a participant in developing the potential meaning that is inherent in each text, neglecting neither the historicization of cultural artifacts nor accepting the elaboration of the initial social horizon that greeted a text’s emergence. As scholars, then, we are at all times faced with texts deeply enmeshed and affected by historical structures and the history of the meanings, articulated for example by successive generations of literary or cultural critics, that are now at play within their borders.

When Sigurðsson thus mentions temporal distance as a key factor in the shifting terrain of critical opinion, he is of course correct, but the immediate shift

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<sup>1014</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer. *Truth and Method*. Second, Revised Edition. Trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London and New York: Continuum, 2006, p. 305.

away from the manner in which a text becomes a malleable entity precisely through the historically shifting terms of its encounter with an audience or a readership, and towards its monolithic status, by way of blaming the actors of the 1934 performance, provides a useful example of the dangers of ignoring shifting social horizons. Instead of declamations and statements, then, the comparison between the two historical moments that Sigurðsson is ostensibly discussing, if undertaken in the manner suggested above, would have included, with regard to the earlier historical moment, a discussion of the newly emergent bourgeoisie and Reykjavík as a poor township, the capital of a country that had not by that point achieved full independence. Shifting social mores would also have been important in this context, particularly when it comes to gender relations and women working outside the home. Of particular importance would have been conceptions of femininity, sexuality and sexual pleasure.

In terms of the latter moment, 1977, what would seem to strike us as particularly important is the trajectory of the second wave of feminism, with the 1970s representing what may well have been the absolute high point of the social movement for women's rights, at least in the Nordic countries. Many of the pivotal social battles of past decades had been won by that point, these often being concerned with basic human rights such as reproductive rights, maternity leave, legal standing in a variety of issues, matters of health care, and steps that had been taken to reveal the vast institutional gender discrimination that lay at the core of modern Western societies, structural and institutionalized. It is in this context that the central trajectory of the play, a woman's disillusionment with marriage, its strictures and the dehumanizing constraints placed on women within the bourgeoisie household, so shocking in the 1930s, were very much the

topic of conversation or, perhaps more accurately, the object of widespread protest and well organized and popular coalitions of women and men fighting for gender equality and justice. When it comes to the social horizon of the 1970s, the play's topic, so scandalous that it was banned for children, was now not only topical but the major issue of the day, the new face of the civil rights movement. All this made the play seem surprisingly topical.<sup>1015</sup>

There is another matter to consider, however, when reflecting on the disparity between the 1934 and 1977 reception of *Straumrof*, and that is the shift that has occurred in Laxness' stature and status within the Icelandic literary system. Giving Halldór Laxness a bad review in Iceland by 1977 would have been a thankless task for a variety of institutional and cultural reasons, and doing so on the occasion of the celebration of his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday would have been considered downright rude. After the Nobel Prize, the atmosphere around Laxness became not only noticeably more peaceful but in him, it often seemed, hopes were invested of national rejuvenation, the golden age of the Sagas was commonly invoked in the context of Laxness' accomplishments, and, although perhaps somewhat farfetched, hopes were invested in his figure that involved the very status of Iceland in the family of nations, or, in less homely and cozy terms, that in the harsh and rigidly regimented hierarchy of nations, where brute economic and military force was king, and ideals of democracy, co-operation and

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<sup>1015</sup> Brynja Benediktsdóttir, the director, noted that the play featured "an extraordinary understanding of female psychology," "As modern as the play seems now, it must have seemed quite avant-garde when first performed," the critic for *Vísir* noted, echoing the core of Benediktsdóttir's sentiment; in its emphasis on female psychological structures, without, one could argue, overt value judgments, the play seemed modern even decades after its initial run. "KP." "Stórkostlegur skilningur á sálarlífi kvenna": *Straumrof* Halldórs Laxness frumsýnt í Iðnó á miðvikudag." *Dagblaðið*, 14. March, 1977, p. 7. In the original: "Brynja Benediktsdóttir, sem leikstýrir verkinnu, sagði að í verkinu kæmi fram stórkostlegur skilningur á sálarlífi kvenna." "HP." "Straumrof í Iðnó." 18. March, 1977, p. 11. In the original: "Svo nútímalegt sem verkið er enn þann dag í dag á vissan hátt, þá hlýtur það að hafa verið framúrsteftuleikrit fyrir fjörutíuogfimm árum."

shared human values were basically for the birds, hippies and academics; that through Laxness' greatness Iceland might rise a level or two, to cease being left off maps and perhaps sit at the same table as the other Nordic countries.<sup>1016</sup>

When it came to a more intimate, local complex of meanings and social realities, the veneration for Laxness was considerably aided by the fact that the Nobel prize pretty much coincided with him taking a step back from the political fray and abandoning his support for the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, Laxness was by no means immune from criticism. His post-Nobel novels were never, I think it could be argued, received with the enthusiasm of his early work, and some received decidedly mixed reviews, including novels such as *Kristnihald undir Jökli* (Under the Glacier, 1968) and, more dramatically, *Guðsgjafapula* (The Rhyme of God's Bounty, 1972).<sup>1017</sup> The reaction to *Brekkukotsannáll* was also

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<sup>1016</sup> The hope that culture might "lift" Iceland up and out of obscurity is not a simply a hypothesis, rather, it was for quite a long time something that was of deep concern to various institutions and the government, resulting in a number of projects and investments. For more on this, see Ólafur Rastrick. *Háborgin. Menning, fagurfræði, og pólitík í upphafi tuttugustu aldar*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan og Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2013. On Laxness as a "cultural saint" in Iceland in the post-Nobel period, see Jón Karl Helgason. *Ódáinsakur. Helgifesta þjóðardýrlinga*. Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2013, pp. 139–168.

<sup>1017</sup> *Guðsgjafapula* was frequently described as a sort of sardonic take on Iceland's twentieth century history, with Gunnar Stefánsson referring to the text as a "cozy chat" that is however unlikely to "create any real turmoil in the minds of readers"; Árni Bergmann posits that the novel's message is simply that "Iceland is a joke" and he furthermore suggests that in order to celebrate turning seventy, Laxness "went on a humor-bender" — a metaphor that carries with it connotations of the author not being in full control of his faculties. The novel's structure is also "loose" according to Bergmann while Ólafur Jónsson speaks of its "unrestricted form". Judging by the context, the suggestion in both cases is that the work is undisciplined, shapeless, that it doesn't quite hang together. When making this point, the author's afterword is what is most often cited as evidence of his carefree/careless approach. Stefánsson is perhaps the harshest, speaking of the novel's "formal incoherence." It is thus clear that the text's unusual form and structure were not appreciated, and were even viewed as a blemish, the general thrust being that a humorous story that was enjoyable enough on its own terms had been let down by ill conceived narrational and structural devices. Gunnar Stefánsson. "Endurminning án skuldbindingar." *Tíminn*, 3. December, 1972, p. 10. In the original: "notalegt rabb" and "ekki fremur en önnur verk Laxness í seinni tíð líkleg til að koma verulegu róti á hugi manna." Árni Bergmann. "Blindskák og skrytla." *Þjóðviljinn*, 18. November, 1972, p. 7. In the original: "Ísland [sé] skrytla," and "að fara á mikið húmorkenndir". Ólafur Jónsson. "Um gagn sem hafa má af skáldskap." *Vísir*, 14. November, 1972, p. 7. In the original: "frjálslega sögusnið". The last quote, referencing Stefánsson, reads in the original: "frjálslega sögusnið."



rather muted.<sup>1018</sup> The clearest examples however of the fact that despite everything, the authorial figure of Laxness was not invulnerable, somehow removed from the reach of mere human criticism, was the reception of his plays, which as we have seen was at times quite hostile.

## 5.2 *The Body Electric*

It is also important to keep in mind that although the 1977 revival of *Straumrof* was successful, the hermeneutical reception strategies that were thus opened up by contemporary critics and the cultural discourse at large did not turn out to have a lasting effect on the play's reputation or the academic discussion, it would seem, as *Straumrof* still tends to be shuffled off to the side as something of an embarrassment in these discursive fields. Thus, in his 2006 biography of Laxness, Halldór Guðmundsson finds that the play suffers because the “characters never become particularly” interesting and the largest share of his

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<sup>1018</sup> Sigfús Daðason's review of *Brekkukotsannáll*, one of the very greatest essays ever written on Laxness, is fascinating for a variety of reasons; the sensitivity and play of imagination, rich, cordial, sympathetic to the most subtle of the novel's narrative turns, shades of characterization and, not least, the characteristics, function and deployment of style. And, on the whole, Daðason's review is positive, very much so, but it is clear that he is also engaging in a conversation with those less enamoured of the text than he is, and at times his “defense” sheds the considered guise of the great literary essay and becomes almost pleading, at the same time, his own lines of argument, while starting out from a strongly vigilant and protective stance, much like a defensive force that has positioned itself comfortably on the high ground, seem to lose confidence in themselves as the argument draws to a close, sometimes to peter out quite ineffectually. An example is Daðason's invocation of Ancient Hellenistic and Latin methodology of dividing style into the high style, the middle style and the low style — aesthetics that derived from Horace and Aristotle and their insistence that style should match subject — and aligning *Brekkukotsannáll* with the low style. At first the aim is clear; the low style captures the simplicity of the turn of the century life that the novel revolves around and also reflects to an extent the calm, the unruptured or riven interiority of key characters and also the way in which the high, epic style is unlikely to prove a fruitful method of expressing memories of childhood. But then, a page or two into his argument, Daðason starts to have to deal with problems; is the folkish tone sufficiently aesthetic? When compared to the stylistic feat of *Gerpla*, an achievement of almost unparalleled ambition and daring in Icelandic letters, doesn't the low-key, softly flowing, uneventful style of *Brekkukotsannáll*, well, seem dull? Once Daðason acknowledges the possibility of dullness, his argument doesn't recover. Sigfús Daðason. “Athugasemdir um Brekkukotsannál.” *Sigfús Daðason. Ritgerðir og pistlar*. Þorsteinn Þorsteinsson handled the publication. Reykjavík: Forlagið, 2000, pp. 53–77, here pp. 55–60.

coverage of *Straumrof* is devoted to pragmatic matters relating to the production of the play and institutional issues.<sup>1019</sup> Peter Hallberg comes to the conclusion that *Straumrof* is a flawed work, particularly if compared to Strindberg's *Fröken Julie*, which he posits as a direct influence.<sup>1020</sup> That *Fröken Julie* is an important paratext for Laxness' play is now understood to be a fact. The differences, as will be shown below, are equally important. However, what may give the reader a slight pause is the shift that Hallberg's analysis takes from the discussion of thematic affinities, intertextuality, the play of influence and, in a wider context, how a literary system functions precisely through relationships between texts and their flowing presence in language and culture, and settles in the realm of value judgment; there cannot be many contemporary playwrights who, if made to go toe to toe with Strindberg, would exit the ring standing and the least likely to do so are perhaps the ones who are indeed engaging in fruitful dialogue with his legacy and literary presence.<sup>1021</sup>

In other respects, Hallberg's analysis and conclusions are in line with what later became the critical consensus on the play — and may as a matter of fact have contributed significantly to the creation of said consensus.<sup>1022</sup>

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<sup>1019</sup> Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, p. 344. In the original: "persónurnar verða aldrei verulega áhugaverðar."

<sup>1020</sup> Peter Hallberg. *Hús skáldsins I. Um skáldverk Halldórs Laxness frá Sölku Völku til Gerplu*. Trans. Helgi J. Halldórsson. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1970, pp. 194–198. It should be noted here that as the discussion has involved the 1977 production of *Straumrof* that Hallberg's book that's referenced here was originally published in the mid 1950s and his relevance has to do with Laxness studies in general, not a particular staging of Laxness' first play.

<sup>1021</sup> When the play was put on stage in 1977 there was some debate on the issue of whether and to what extent it was indebted to Strindberg. Laxness himself however refuted the influence of the Swedish playwright on the grounds that *Straumrof* was not a misogynistic play, coming to the conclusion that it was a "woman-loving play" rather than a "woman-hating" play. This observation is interesting in light of the way in which reactions to the play in 1934 tended to portray Gæa Kaldan, the main character. This will be discussed shortly. See „GF.“ "Straumrof eftir Halldór Laxness." *Þjóðviljinn* 16. March, 1977, p. 5.

<sup>1022</sup> Hallberg's influence within Laxness studies and on the general perception of the author cannot be overemphasized. This is discussed in chapter 2 in much greater detail.

According to this view, the play is a detour in the context of the progression of Laxness' career, ambitions and creative work at that point in time, if not a downright aberration, particularly seeing how this is the decade that saw the publication of three of his four most beloved works — *Salka Valka* (1931–1932), *Sjálfstætt fólk* (Independent People, 1934–1935) and *Heimsljós* (World Light, 1937–1940) — epic novels that more than anything else have shaped Laxness' reputation and image in an enduring fashion.<sup>1023</sup>

It should be noted however that the definition of the concept of “detour” depends on a pre-defined conception of a destination. *Straumrof* can indeed be viewed as a detour if the endpoint that structures the retrospective organization of events, and endows them with meaning, is Laxness' later position as the nation's “poet laureate,” the cultural patriarch of the nation whose post-Nobel position was not only unassailable but, as touched on above, without a counterpart in the twentieth century.<sup>1024</sup>

By the early 1970s Laxness, once a menace to respectable society, enjoyed a uniquely preeminent place in Icelandic culture and had done so for close to two decades; talk of the presidency was persistent for a time, as Peter Hallberg notes.<sup>1025</sup> Of course, the Nobel Prize alone is not enough to explain the complex

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<sup>1023</sup> As noted above, Guðmundsson refers to dominant perceptions of Laxness' theatrical career as a “detour” in his biography (Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, p. 664), and so does “HP” in *Vísir*. See “HP.” *Straumrof í Iðnó.* *Vísir*, 18. March, 1977, p. 11. When it comes to Laxness' authorial image, see Ástráður Eysteinnsson, “Halldór Laxness og aðrir höfundar.” *Umbrot*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, pp. 1–23; Haukur Ingvarsson, *Andlitsdrættir samtíðarinnar. Síðustu skáldsögur Halldórs Laxness*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag og ReykjavíkurAkademían, 2009, bls. 23–75; Peter Hallberg. “Halldór Laxness á krossgötum.” *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 1/1968, pp. 38–43.

<sup>1024</sup> One would have to go back to the heroes of the sagas or their authors — albeit many of the latter remain unknown and the very notion of authorship may be questionable in this context — and the 19th century intellectuals, often associated with the journal *Fjöltnir*, who were central to Iceland's struggle for independence, in order to find individual personages endowed with a similar amount of cultural capital.

<sup>1025</sup> Hallberg, “Halldór Laxness á krossgötum,” pp. 38–43.

cultural dynamics that combined to turn Laxness into a cultural institution, and however smooth the surface may look and however unruffled Laxness' public image, life still retained its realism and tensions, struggles and contestations continued to inflect the personal and professional life; the most dramatic element being of course Laxness' slow and deliberate, even strategic, reconceptualization of his political identity.<sup>1026</sup> However, what can be asserted with complete certainty is that when it comes to Laxness' sacred status, his plays provided no positive impetus for the development whatsoever.

If, however, the teleological perspective is bracketed for the moment and Laxness' function as "modernity's advocate" within the Icelandic literary and cultural system is examined, *Straumrof* proves to be anything but a detour.<sup>1027</sup> Modernization was late gaining a foothold in Iceland and turned out to be a protracted business, although the transformation was swift in some areas and the demographic shift from the country to townships and the capital was felt quickly. As noted in earlier chapters, Laxness became a controversial figure at a young age due to his outspoken stance in favor of modernization and polemics for cosmopolitanism, opening the country up to influences from abroad.<sup>1028</sup> These positions were expressed in a series of articles published in widely read newspapers, primarily between 1924–1928, and were then followed by the publication of *Alþýðubókin* (The Commoner's Book) in 1929. The essay collection announced the radicalization of a number of Laxness' earlier positions while also shifting the ideological terrain on which he grounded his thinking. Laxness

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<sup>1026</sup> Jón Ólafsson. *Appelsínur frá Abkasíu. Vera Hertzsch, Halldór Laxness og hreinsanirnar miklu*. Reykjavík: JPV útgáfa, 2013, pp. 13–42.

<sup>1027</sup> Halldór Guðmundsson, "*Loksins, loksins*": *Vefarinn mikli og upphaf íslenskra nútímabókmennta*, Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1987, bls. 122. In the original: "boðberi nútímameningar".

<sup>1028</sup> This is discussed, primarily, in chapters one and two.

became more political by the end of the decade, as well as increasingly concerned with nationalistic issues and the heritage.

At any rate, although known for biting critiques and taking unpopular positions, Laxness' belief in modernization and progress, not least when aligned with the Marxist view that the trajectory of history was moving in the right direction (capitalism would crack from within and the dictatorship of the proletariat was the inevitable end-station), rendered his social convictions fundamentally positive. This applies with notable force to his writings on women's liberation and gender issues, a cultural sphere in which great strides had been taken in a relatively short span of time.<sup>1029</sup> When reading *Straumrof*, it is useful to keep these essays close at hand as "the problem of the modern woman," as it was commonly referred to at the time, is a key problem and thematic focal point for the play. Indeed, *Straumrof* represents a highly significant processing and revision of many of Laxness' most prominently held beliefs and positions from the 1920s.

Someone might at this point be tempted to raise a hand and offer the remark that the play has rarely been staged, in fact only twice, with forty years separating those moments. The inescapable subsequent question, inescapable really, would then be whether it was conceivable that the silence that characterizes the scholarly outlook and the play's absence from the stage is simply a form of politeness towards Laxness and his ill-conceived work.<sup>1030</sup> That

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<sup>1029</sup> Most important in this context are "Af íslensku menningarástandi," "Drengjakollurinn og íslenska konan," and "Frá arninum út í samfélagið." And from *Alpýðubókin*: "Syndin," and "Karl, kona, barn."

<sup>1030</sup> Jökull Sævarsson, „Laxness í leikgerð. Leiksýningar, útvarpsleikrit, sjónvarpsmyndir og kvikmyndir byggðar á verkum Halldórs Laxness“, *Þar ríkir fegurðin ein. Öld með Halldóri Laxness*,

the play's imperfection is so abundantly clear that it is hardly necessary to point a finger, to articulate them in words. The reception of the 1977 staging of the play would however seem to render such objections moot. A highly interesting picture also emerges if we turn away from the academic discourse of the last several decades and examine the contemporary reception of the play. Although the play was by no means a success, far from it as a matter of fact — there were only five performances — the play received immense attention and proved to be the springboard for a fascinating debate in journals, weeklies and newspapers on subjects ranging from the theater to a variety of more obscure and esoteric issues.<sup>1031</sup>

In light of the fact that Icelandic theater culture was still very much in its infancy when *Straumrof* was performed, and that Laxness had by then placed himself decisively at the forefront among Icelandic novelists and writers, it shouldn't come as a surprise that his first theatrical effort was considered newsworthy — although it still remains doubtful that a troupe of theater executives marched to his home in order to acquire the piece.<sup>1032</sup> As would long be the case, the reception of the play was to an extent colored by the political views of the critics in question, with fellow travelers and comrades being consistently much more enthusiastic than those who did not share the belief in the emancipatory power of the red light that was dawning in the east. It is notable, however, that even those who criticized the play rarely did so without considerable qualifications, more often than not even finding some aesthetic

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ritstj. Einar Sigurðsson, Reykjavík: Landsbókasafn Íslands – Háskólabókasafn, 2002, bls. 50–58, hér bls. 57.

<sup>1031</sup> Sveinn Einarsson, *Leikhúsið við tjörnina*, p. 143.

<sup>1032</sup> Sveinn Einarsson. *Íslensk leiklist II. Listin*. Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1996, pp. 19–150.

features that could be praised, whether relating to the text or the staging. The discourse surrounding the play was however by no means dominated by hostile commentary. Others were quite adamant about the work's strengths, pointing to *Straumrof's* modernity, a characteristic that manifested itself, among other things, in that the setting was "urban" and contemporary; the presence of a youth culture is manifest and what appears at first to be the family's carefree existence is complicated quickly enough. Many commented on the fact that the stamp of a beginner, someone taking his or her first steps in the theater, did not leave its mark on the play. In addition, *Straumrof* was found to be extremely provocative, "inductive to thought," as Ragnar Kvaran put it.<sup>1033</sup>

Nevertheless, *Straumrof* provoked extreme reactions, indeed, the production appeared to "shock" a number of critics quite severely, suggesting that the "charge" of the play was considerable. Critics were not the only ones so affected, as the weekly *Dvöl* makes clear when it alerted its readers to the fact that "the greatest part of the citizens of Reykjavík has turned against the play," — a stance that Sveinn Einarsson references when he writes that Laxness' stage work "shocked [the] bourgeoisie" and Halldór Guðmundsson when he notes that *Straumrof* was considered "highly scandalous".<sup>1034</sup> This is interesting if we consider that at stake is one of the least political — indeed, perhaps the most apolitical — fictional works that Laxness produced for decades (leaving aside the poetry and short stories). Indeed, it is doubtful that in the period from the publication of the first volume of *Salka Valka* (Þú vínviður hreini; Thou pure

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<sup>1033</sup> Ragnar E. Kvaran. "Straumrof. Leikrit HKL og frumsýning þess." *Alþýðublaðið*, 6. December, 1934, p. 5.

<sup>1034</sup> „J.J.," "Straumrof." *Dvöl*, 16. December, 1934, p. 11; Einarsson, "Vorið geingur í lið með kálfum," p. 24; Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, p. 344.

vine) in 1931 to the mid to late 1950s, he produced a work that on first glance seems as far removed from the social and political issues of the day. This will be returned to at a later point in the chapter, *Straumrof* is not at all apolitical,<sup>1035</sup> but its ideological stance is both less direct than usual and aimed at a somewhat different aspect of the social complex than was usual for the Marxist left wing discourse of the time.<sup>1036</sup> It would seem at any rate that the typical explanation for virulently negative reviews, usually a hot-button political issue of one sort or another, which, it was often said, diverted the cultural conversation, is not applicable in this case; the excess characterizing the negative reviews being thus something of a mystery.

Upon closer inspection however it is hard to miss that the disconcerting effects of the play all seemed to stem from the same root, namely the “uncontrolled” sexuality of the female lead character, Gæa Kaldan. As mentioned above, she goes to bed with Dagur at the end of the second act and, to an extent, she seems to be discovering the pleasures of sex for the first time. The next day, with Alda’s return and Dagur’s new commitment to honesty and ethical

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<sup>1035</sup> It is sometimes argued that politics “obscured” people’s views or perspective when it came to evaluating the artistic merits of Laxness’ works. This is a position that assumes as a prerequisite that there is such a thing as the apolitical reception of literature, or that aesthetic matters belong to a discursive order that is independent and separate from the social one. While one may not agree with this stance, and find its grounding assumptions somewhat problematic, it is still useful to keep in mind that it is not unusual for writers who deliberately focus on political issues and do so in a pugnacious fashion, to tend to elicit a reception that differs from that which greets works that move in a more subjective, less socially conscious territory. Having said that, it is important to qualify the statement made above because, although *Straumrof* does not function as a “political” work in the same sense as *Atómstöðin* or *Siflurtúnglið* in that hot button issues such as the presence of an American military base or whether Iceland should join NATO are absent, the text still remains highly politicized as it thematizes even more explosive issues, including female sexuality, the patriarchy and gender justice.

<sup>1036</sup> A number of commentators have read the play as a clear indictment of the bourgeoisie. Such a reading, in order to be persuasive, must account for three problems. Firstly, the fact that the heroine of the play is of the bourgeoisie class and her “release” has nothing to do with economic factors; neither is her “ailment” class based as loveless marriages can be found in all walks of life; secondly, the power structure that the play thematizes, the uneven social standing of men and women, and criticizes runs across class and, for that matter, nationality and cultural specificity; and thirdly, at no point does the text posit an alternative to the bourgeoisie mode of social life.



behavior, things come to a head and, in the end, Gæa tragically becomes the agent of her daughter's demise.

Not only has Gæa broken her marriage vows, according to some commentators, but she has done so in a manner that calls forth associations with incest, her lover being her prospective "son-in-law".<sup>1037</sup> In point of fact, she was not unfaithful when she slept with Dagur as her husband was dead at the time, albeit recently so, but this did little to rehabilitate her in the eyes of those who noticed. In place of treachery to the institution of marriage, necrophilia was now summoned forth to demonstrate the widow's unfathomable and even grotesque nature.<sup>1038</sup> The repugnance that was evident towards Gæa in a number of writings on the play is cause for some surprise; profanities and vulgarities flowed from the pen of respectable cultural commentators, all directed at a made-up character. Indeed, as will be touched on in greater detail below, some critics did find it difficult to keep the dividing line between reality and fiction firmly in place. Importantly, it's Gæa's sexual behavior that summons the bile; again and again critics iterate that her deviant sexual desires break through from some dark, primordial recess and in effect overtake her consciousness. The results are horrifying as the culmination of the play, the filicide, renders the true "nature" of women, motherhood, void. There is no question that people were sharply divided over Laxness' works, indeed, the activities of stringent factions, those who were for Laxness and those who were against, came to hold a prominent place in Icelandic cultural and political life for decades.<sup>1039</sup> In this

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<sup>1037</sup> It is important to keep in mind that Gæa and Dagur are about the same age; Dagur is considerably older than Alda, just as Loftur is considerably older than Gæa.

<sup>1038</sup> „G.J.,” “Halldór Kiljan Laxness: Straumrof.” p. 4; „X-Y”, „Straumrof”, p. 5.

<sup>1039</sup> Kristinn E. Andr sson. *Enginn er eyland. T mar rau ra penna*. Reykjav k: M l og menning, 1971.

case, however, one cannot help but wonder to what extent the fact that the critics and commentators who wrote on the play were most likely all men influenced its reception, and in particular this discursive strand of the reception.<sup>1040</sup>

This is where questions regarding the political function and effectivity of the play's textual consciousness become pressing; what is the textual stance towards women's sexuality? Can one discern a moral judgment being passed on Gæa, as was common in reviews of the play? Are discourses of prejudice and a general sense of discomfort and distaste when it comes to women and sex the driving force of the play? Or does the text interrogate the cultural construction of femininity and address the role played by tradition, images and ideology when the positives and negatives of gender roles are being defined? The text, it will be maintained, posits a complicated perspective on gender roles but its central thrust, however, is to question "natural" and "self-evident" notions of femininity, feminine sexuality and sexual pleasure. In the sections below that address *Straumrof*, it will therefore be argued that the latter of the two "options" presented above is in fact operative and, at the same time, the "scandalous" sexual themes of the play will be placed in a relationship with modernization and technology and the manner in which the subject was, in a relatively brief period of time, forced to reshape and recreate its existential framework. The upheavals of modernization had a profound and thoroughgoing effect on the status of women and the dynamics of gender relations and Laxness addresses these shifts

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<sup>1040</sup> When the names of critics are missing or only initials identify them, gender is difficult to ascertain. In some cases, ("G.J." is one such), the author will refer to himself in the masculine, but although that is a clue, it is also possible that it is only the grammatical gender that is in operation. That is, in Icelandic, women are often forced to refer to themselves in the masculine, particularly in the period when the reviews being discussed were written. Nevertheless, it is very likely that the cultural commentators of the major newspapers and magazines were men.

in the play by staging the collision between capitalistic ideology and traditional ethical systems.

The play is also notable for the relative directness of its engagement with the theories of Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis being one of the conceptual domains that fascinated Laxness in this period although he would later come to reject it in no uncertain terms (which is not to say that the psychoanalytic framework or its range of signification disappear from Laxness' work, indeed, they do not). This did not go unnoticed. Prolific cultural commentator and spokesman for modernization, Ragnar Kvaran, although not uncritical, took the play to be an important work and, in the wake of its premier, found it necessary, not so much to offer another review, but simply to discuss *Straumrof's* central thematic concerns as the critics had, according to Kvaran, missed its entire point. Kvaran maintains, for example, that *Straumrof* is the first play in Icelandic literature — and perhaps the first Icelandic literary work in general — to incorporate and significantly thematize in a consistent and a coherent fashion the Freudian psychoanalytical model of the mind.<sup>1041</sup> Kvaran also notes the play's handling of repressed female sexuality and, although not entirely comfortable with this aspect of the text, he positions it as a core aspect of the work and admires the daring required to tackle such a controversial subject. The text's engagement with psychoanalysis and its exploration of sexuality and libidinal economy, the features emphasized by Kvaran, in addition to the play's thematization of technological modernity, also illustrate a concern with the

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<sup>1041</sup> Kvaran, "Straumrof. Leikrit H.K.L. og frumsýning þess," pp. 3–4. On Laxness and Freud, Kvaran comments: "[Laxness] has, first among all Icelandic playwrights, ventured to express Freudianism — that is, the explanatory model offered by Freud and his followers of the influence of the primal drives in social life." In the original: [Laxness] hefir fyrstur allra leikritahöfunda hÉrlendra lagt út í að fara með Freudianisma — skýringar Freuds og fylgismanna hans á áhrifum hinna frumstæðustu hvata í mannlífinu."

problematic and fundamental disjunction that Freud discussed under the rubric of civilization and its discontents. It will also be argued that *Straumrof* can be productively read as a gendered rendering of Weber's iron cage.

### 3.3 *The Shock of Straumrof*

As has been indicated, the emotional arc of the play — the way in which the text dovetails into tragedy in the third act, a considerable distance thus clearly being traversed from the first act, which was essentially a light-hearted and sometimes comic depiction of modern, urban life — is extreme and reaches great emotional heights during the closing moments. The major turn or tonal shift occurs at the end of the second act when, just before the curtain comes down, Gæa throws herself into Dagur's arms. When the curtain rises again it is morning and Gæa is lying in bed under a duvet while Dagur, dressed in a robe, is sitting near the foot of the bed. The first words that pass between them are Gæa's exclamatory recollection of the night, phrased as a question, "Wasn't it wondrous?"

The sexual pleasure that Gæa thus invokes is in the course of the conversation that ensues associated with life, light and rebirth while her life before with Loftur is associated with numbness, death and being buried alive. "I have just returned to life," Gæa says, "we were made to love each other."<sup>1042</sup> Then she raises herself in the bed and wraps her arms around Dagur: "I would never have believed that something like that could exist. That happiness like this could

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<sup>1042</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 109, 112. In the original: "Ég er risin upp frá dauðum," and, "við vorum sköpuð til að elskast".

be real. It is not for mere mortals.”<sup>1043</sup> Gæa’s avowals could quite conceivably belong to the order of romantic expression that came to prominence in the discourse of love in the nineteenth century, concomitant with increased strictures and surveillance when it came to actual courtship. The conversation would then, for example, have occurred in the living room of nicely furnished bourgeoisie abode at daytime and although the couple would ostensibly have been left alone, their monitoring would have been flawless, with a virtual army of family members, chaperons and servants about the house.<sup>1044</sup> That Gæa and Dagur are having this conversation in bed, scantily clad, removes any vestiges of the thought that what is being expressed is the spiritual side of love. The tendency at the time was to depict the love life of women in a romantic light, in soft focus so to speak, but in *Straumrof* the sexual nature of the relationship is foregrounded.<sup>1045</sup>

In an article entitled „Réttar og rangar kynferðisskoðanir“ (Right and Wrong Attitudes Towards Sex”) by Friðrik Klaveness, which was published in the educational journal *Heimilisvinurinn* in 1906, there are rather detailed marital guidelines to be found, which emphasize and then reiterate the fact that it is always the male who initiates sexual congress and that the entire act is related to his needs and emotional make-up rather than that of the woman. It is however carefully noted that the affectionate embraces of the man may in time come to

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<sup>1043</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 108. In the original: “Ég hefði aldrei haldið að neitt væri til líkt því. Að önnur eins hamingja geti verið til. Það er ekki menskra manna.”

<sup>1044</sup> D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, pp. 74–75.

<sup>1045</sup> This aspect of the scene is touched upon in the theatrical review in *Vísir* where the reviewer notes that couple is “rather pleased about what happened to them during the night, about the nature of which little mystery remains by this point” and, continuing, the night of the electrical outage is compared to a “wedding night”. G.J., “Halldór Kiljan Laxness: *Straumrof*,” p. 3. In the original: “[þau eru] heldur ánægð yfir því, sem fyrir þau hefir komið um nóttina, sem nú er engum blöðum um að fletta hvað er” and then the concept of “brúðkaupsnótt” is employed.

arouse certain emotions in the woman but these “feelings” are not sexual in nature, indeed, they are in no way related to “pleasure,” rather, they are the expression of gratefulness towards the man for his “gift” of expressing his feelings for her in a physical manner.<sup>1046</sup>

The article, intended for sexual education, is typical for the discourse on women’s sexuality in this period and although it is published quarter of a century before the staging of *Straumrof*, not much had changed. Women’s sexuality, which for the longest time was enveloped to a suffocating degree in a veil of modesty and shame, was perhaps slightly less constrained but still in fact a highly volatile subject, as the reaction to the play demonstrates. Furthermore, it was not surprising to see the notion of female sexual desire being firmly rejected Klaveness’ article, that is, the very idea that women were sexual beings being denied, as that aspect of the discursive formation was part and parcel of the issue of women’s sexuality in general.<sup>1047</sup>

Historian Anne Higonnett has discussed just how problematic the depiction of women’s sexual pleasure was in the image based media of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In that context she notes that the creators of images — photographers, illustrators, painters — needed to closely map out the intricacies of the dominant value system and thus make an educated guess about just how risqué it was possible to be. The conclusion, invariably, was that no signs of female desire or pleasure must be discernable in the figure being

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<sup>1046</sup> Friðrik Klaveness. “Réttar og rangar kynferðisskoðanir.” *Heimilísvinurinn*, 1906, p. 35.

<sup>1047</sup> The concepts of modesty and shame should in this context be understood as an ideological device used to shut down debate, discussion, criticism and questions.

modeled, such a portrait was an “abnormality” and a “taboo,” and a grotesque inversion of the natural characteristics of women.<sup>1048</sup>

When it came to the natural characteristics of women, motherhood was of course foregrounded as the most important one; the primal essence of womanhood. However, in addition to child rearing sexual frigidity was considered a distinctly positive trait for women, much like amiability, modesty and subservience.<sup>1049</sup> Ideological control mechanisms require representations of negative qualities, characteristics to be rejected and denigrated, no less than they do representations of ideals to which the subject is meant to aspire. Thus, Barbara Creed has pointed out that “[a]ll human societies have a conception of the monstrous–feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject.”<sup>1050</sup> Without exception such image construction involves the female body being made shameful and disgusting, even a “failed and botched male” according to Aristotle.<sup>1051</sup> The debasement of natural bodily functions is a marked and constitutive element in what amounts to a massive and totalizing ideological campaign, one that reaches back as far as documents and testimonies will allow us to see, and invariably includes menstruation, female sexual drives, female sexuality, sex itself and elements associated with pregnancy and child birth. “Central to this positioning of the female body as monstrous [...] is ambivalence associated with the power and danger perceived to be inherent in

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<sup>1048</sup> Anne Higonnett. “Representations of Women.” *A History of Women in the West IV. Emerging Feminism from Revolution to World War*. Ed. by G. Fraisse and M. Perrot. Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 316.

<sup>1049</sup> Higonnett, “Representations of Women,” pp. 312–316

<sup>1050</sup> Barbara Creed. *The Monstrous–Feminine. Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 1. See also Mary Russo. *The Female Grotesque. Risk, Excess, Modernity*. New York and London: Routledge, 1994.

<sup>1051</sup> Prudence Allen. *The Concept of Woman: The Early Humanist Reformation, 1250–1500, Part 1*. Michigan and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002, pp. 77–79.

woman's fecund flesh, her seeping, leaking, bleeding womb standing as a site of pollution and a source of dread," Jane Ussher notes.<sup>1052</sup>

Then, with time, the struggle for equal rights commenced. This was presented as a grotesque attempt to transform women into men as well as something that undermined the very foundations of society and the natural order.<sup>1053</sup> As it is put in an article in *Skírnir* in 1909, women who concern themselves with such matters are heedless and negligent of "the duties, that the laws of God and men have bid them assume."<sup>1054</sup> Women are in other words expected to feel ashamed of their bodies, view the largest portions of civic society as off-limits, and accept that the demand for alleviation of systematic human rights violations were somehow antithetical to female nature. As we have already discussed, things are different in Laxness' play; female sexual pleasure is foregrounded and it is the woman who furthermore initiates the lovemaking. This provoked a considerable reaction among the critical establishment. That the play was dealing with sensitive matters was also acknowledged by the theater itself as the unusual step was taken of refusing children entrance; the play was "bannað börnum" — banned for children.

When it comes to *Straumrof's* reception, Guðbrandur Jónsson's review in *Vísir* is a clear example of the refusal to acknowledge sexual desire as being part

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<sup>1052</sup> Jane M. Ussher. *Managing the Monstrous Feminine. Regulating the Reproductive Body*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 1.

<sup>1053</sup> Susan Faludi, noting the strangely reversible nature of the progress of women's rights, employs the concept of the "backlash" to describe what thus seems an almost cyclical progress: "Different kinds of backlashes against women's mostly tiny gains — or against simply the perception that women were in the ascendancy — may be found in the rise of restrictive property laws and penalties for unwed and childless women of ancient Rome, the heresy judgements against female disciples of the early Christian Church, or the mass witch burnings of medieval Europe." Susan Faludi. *Backlash. The Undeclared War Against Women*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1991, p. 62.

<sup>1054</sup> "Ágrip af upptökum og sögu kvenréttindahreyfingarinnar í Ameríku." *Skírnir*, 1909, p. 72.



of the female make-up. In the review, Gæa is scrutinized under the auspices of psychiatry. Not, however, that an attempt is made to interpret or engage with the play employing the conceptual vocabulary and tools of psychoanalysis, to give an example, but rather that Gæa's sexual desire and behavior are discussed as symptoms of a disease and the discussion subsequently moves into the terrain of possible treatment options. Guðbrandur is concerned that Gæa receive the help she so clearly requires, a gesture of supposed beneficence that in one fell swoop wipes away the demarcation between fiction and reality. The review thus veers away from the narrative taking place on stage and into a rather lengthy reflection on what, at the time, constituted the modern state of psychiatric medical practice and treatment options available for females suffering severe or debilitating psychological problems, relevant issues for sure but of limited practical application for someone whose fictional and illusionary nature renders medical attention unhelpful. The moralistic tone that permeates the review is typical for a significant strand in the initial reception of the play:

[Laxness] thinks that [Gæa] is the image of woman in general, and that this is how women in fact are [...] but this is wrong; this is not how women are, fortunately, — women are not insane. But this woman is insane, and it can be proven by way of the author's description of her [which shows her] as a pathological nymphomaniac [which disease, fortunately] is well known to the psychiatrists of asylums who diagnose such women as 'exogen reaktionstypus'" [but in this instance Laxness] mis-identified the woman, by marking her for 'Reykjavík Theater' when she should have been addressed to the "Psychiatric Institution Kleppur'. Admittedly, on offer is a fairly decent description of a mad woman, but the only thing that concerns us when it comes to the poor people who are doomed to dwell in asylums, is that they not lack bare necessities and that they receive all the care possible, so that they may regain their health; aside from that they do not belong the world of humans and do not impact it.<sup>1055</sup>

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<sup>1055</sup> „G[uðbrandur]. J[ónsson].“ “Halldór Kiljan Laxness: Straumrof.” *Vísir*, 6. December, 1934, p 4. In the original: [Halldór] lítur svo á að [Gæa] sé ímynd konunnar yfirleitt, og að svona séu konur í heild sinni [...] en þetta er rangt; svona eru konur ekki, sem betur fer, — konur eru ekki geðveikar. En þessi kona er geðveik, og það er hægt að sanna það með lýsingu höf. á henni [sem sýnir að hún er] sjúklega vergjörn [en meinsemd þessi er] geðveikralæknum fullkunnug, þeir

The language of the medical sciences is employed to position Gæa as ill and designate her sexual behavior and pleasure as symptoms of derangement. That “pathological nymphomaniacs” should become social outcasts is a given but the man that Gæa sleeps with, Dagur Vestan, is neither suspected of suffering from satyriasis (and thus requiring immediate institutionalization) nor are his mental faculties placed in doubt. Attitudes such as these towards women’s bodies are emblematic of a widespread fear of women as sexual beings and agents, according to Andrea Dworkin, which she associates with “an existential terror of women, of the ‘mouth of the womb’, stemming from a primal anxiety about male potency”.<sup>1056</sup>

### **6. “Pathological Nymphomania” or Normal Sexuality?**

It does not really matter if the behavior that is under discussion is aligned with relentless promiscuity, diseased nymphomania or hysteria, the signified is the same: women’s sexuality is suspect and female interest in sex suggests a loss of control and that the strictures of society are not (going to be) heeded, something that invokes the further anxiety that these women may not remain pliable when faced with male authority, be it the authority of husbands, fathers, brothers or doctors. That’s why reactions take the form of attempts to regulate the sexual behavior of women and the connection made between sexual “intemperance” and mental illness as well as moral failure was clear and required a variety of

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segja að slíkt fólk sé ‘exogen reaktionstypus’ [en í þessu samhengi má fullyrða að Halldór] hafi skrifað vitlaust utan á konuna; hann hefir skrifað ‘Leikhús Reykjavík’ en þar átti að standa, ‘Geðveikrahælið Kleppi’. Hér er að vísu ágæt lýsing á geðveikri konu, en okkur varðar ekki annað um það vesæla fólk, sem á geðveikrahælum verður að dveljast, en að það skorti ekki lífsnauðsynjar sínar og að því verði veitt öll sú aðhlyning, sem miðað getur að því, að það nái aftur heilsu sinni, að öðru leyti er það utan við mannheima og setur engan svip á þá.”

<sup>1056</sup> Andrea Dworkin. *Woman Hating*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1974, p. 134.

institutional responses, ranging from medical interventions to the brutal bearing down of repressive state apparatuses.<sup>1057</sup> The slightest deviation from social norms and rules about female propriety and sexual behavior were rendered pathological and/or illegal. It is not, for example, all that long since prison sentences and enforced stays in psychiatric hospitals awaited women whose behavior transgressed the above mentioned boundaries, and there treatments included circumcision, surgical hysterectomy and lobotomy.<sup>1058</sup> It should also be noted that while “anxiety” does have an important explanatory role when it comes to gender politics and male brutality, it is still limited in the present instance as the discursive formations that are being discussed provide the “scientific” evidence that confirms the necessity, even the natural logic, of men retaining social power and continuing to dominate women. At stake is a striving for power, not for its own sake and not because it assuages some unconscious or oedipal anxieties or fears of the vagina but because it is better to dominate than to be subjugated; it is preferable to have slaves than be a slave.<sup>1059</sup> The stakes are

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<sup>1057</sup> We only have to recall the attitudes towards the so-called “ástandskonur” in Iceland during the Second World War and how the police as well as the Public Health Institute of Iceland persecuted women who were thought to be having a relationship with American soldiers. The forced relocation of girls to “rehabilitation centers” in the countryside was common and historian Þór Whitehead’s recent article shows how the state kept up massive surveillance on these women, indeed, Whitehead believes this to be the most comprehensive domestic spying program targeted at individuals ever conducted in Iceland. See Þór Whitehead. “Ástandið og yfirvöldin. Stríðið um konurnar 1940–1941.” *Saga*, 2/2013, pp. 92–142.

<sup>1058</sup> Andrew Scull. *Hysteria: The Biography*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 62–83. See also Ann Goldberg. “The Eberbach Asylum and the Practice(s) of Nymphomania in Germany, 1815–1849.” *Journal of Women’s History*, 4/1998, pp. 35–52; Peter Cryle. “A Terrible Ordeal from Every Point of View’: (Not) Managing Female Sexuality on the Wedding Night.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 1/2009, pp. 44–64; Sarah W. Rodriguez. “Rethinking the History of Female Circumcision and Clitoridectomy: American Medicine and Female Sexuality in the Late Nineteenth Century.” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 3/2008, pp. 323–347.

<sup>1059</sup> But things shouldn’t be oversimplified; economic interests intersect with values and the social structures that shape psychical apparatus. Thus, although one might think it safe to assume that the ideology and prejudiced mindset that’s been described was a relic of the past, and that the “fear” of women’s sexuality was mostly symbolic, an article published in the *The New York Times* last year suggests that one shouldn’t be overhasty when it comes to discounting the resilience of certain discursive formations and ideological constellations, or anxieties. The article

real and involve a range of issues from macroeconomics to social dynamics in the home and the interests at stake take on the guise of ethics, morals and so forth. Indeed, Helen King and Elaine Showalter have both shown that “women’s diseases” like nymphomania and hysteria enjoy a rather unique position in the realm of medicine in that, although the symptoms may vary, cures are always remarkably well aligned with dominant value systems and what is considered proper female behavior and constructions of female “nature”.<sup>1060</sup>

It is therefore interesting that the consternation and alarm that characterized the review of the commentator who directly linked Gæa’s behavior to “nymphomania” was severe enough for him to find it necessary to pathologize the disease. In other words, the fact that nymphomania was a medically designated illness was not enough, rather, Guðbrandur Jónsson holds aloft the notion of “pathological nymphomania.” This is indicative of just how inflammatory the subject matter was that Laxness deals with in the play. Jónsson was however not the only one who found it useful to reference medical discourse when describing the female lead. Gæa is “hysterical” in the opinion of Kristján Albertsson in *Morgunblaðið*, “K” in *Nýja dagblaðið* and the critic of *Alþýðublaðið*,

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describes the attempts of pharmaceutical companies to come up with a drug that could make women sexually aroused, basically a female Viagra. The twist is that what stands in the way is not so much science but institutionalized aversion to oversexualized women: “Over the last decade, as companies chased after an effective chemical, there was fretting within the drug industry: what if, in trials, a medicine proved *too* effective? More than one adviser to the industry told me that companies worried about the prospect that their study results would be too strong, that the F.D.A. would reject an application out of concern that a chemical would lead to female excesses, crazed binges of infidelity, societal splintering. ‘You want your effects to be good but not too good,’ Andrew Goldstein, who is conducting the study in Washington, told me. ‘There was a lot of discussion about it by the experts in the room,’ he said, recalling his involvement with the development of Flibanserin, ‘the need to show that you’re not turning women into nymphomaniacs.’” Daniel Bergner. “Unexcited? There May Be a Pill for That.” *The New York Times*, 22. May, 2013 [retrieved 19. February 2014].

<sup>1060</sup> Elaine Showalter. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980*. London: Virago Press, 1987, pp. 3–14; Helen King. “Once Upon a Text: Hysteria From Hippocrates.” *Hysteria Beyond Freud*. Ed. by S.L. Gilman et. al. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 3–90.

and Albertsson also ventures the opinion that the purpose of the play is to “describe the animal within women”.<sup>1061</sup> Albertsson goes on to discuss the “animalistic furor that engulfs the woman’s heart,” and posits that Gæa represents, or incarnates, the most fundamental, primordial and primitive essence of women as she “glorifies in her nudity.”<sup>1062</sup> What Albertsson is concerned with in this case is how the controlling mechanisms of civilization, or perhaps more to the point, bourgeoisie culture, have lost their influence as Gæa leaves the capital and arrives in the countryside; when she finds herself in wild nature in other words and expresses her sexual pleasure in a blatant fashion. This is where Gæa devolves, in Albertsson’s eyes, to being a “despicable” person and “worthless” — at the same time it is apparent that the concepts of nymphomania and hysteria have fused in “the night’s ecstasy”.<sup>1063</sup> Albertsson is furthermore certain that Gæa has never before “felt enjoyment,” that is,

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<sup>1061</sup> Albertsson, „Straumrof Halldórs Kiljan Laxness“, p. 4. “K,” “Leikhúsið. Halldór Kiljan Laxness: Straumrof,” p. 2; “X-Y,” “Straumrof,” p. 3. The concept employed in the original in all cases is “móðursjúk” or a close derivation thereof.

<sup>1062</sup> Albertsson, „Straumrof Halldórs Kiljan Laxness“, p. 4. In the original: “dýrslega bruna, sem æðir í brjósti konunnar” and “vegsamar nekt sína”.

<sup>1063</sup> Albertsson, „Straumrof Halldórs Kiljan Laxness“, p. 5. In the original: “auðvirðuleg,” “einskisvirði,” and “nautnavímu næturinnar.” The first mention of “hysteria,” as far as I have been able to ascertain, is in “Skýrsla um sjúklinga á sjúkrahúsinu í Reykjavík frá 6. október 1868 til 6. október 1879” (“A report on patients in the hospital in Reykjavík, from 6. Octpber 1868 until 6. October 1879”). J. Jónassen. “Skýrsla um sjúklinga á sjúkrahúsinu í Reykjavík, frá 6. október 1868 til 6. október 1879.” Supplement to the fourth issue of *Þjóðólfur*, 28. January 1880, p. 3. The pathology is however not explained in any way beyond simply being mentioned. In *Eir*, a quarterly journal on health issues for the general population, there appeared an article in 1900 entitled „Um samband sjúkdóma við kynferði manna, aldur og skyldleika“ (“On the connection of diseases to people’s sexuality, age and family ties”), where a further explanation was given: “Women’s nervous system is considerably weaker than men’s nervous system and women’s nerves are therefore much more susceptible to excitations from without. Furthermore, neurosis, hysteria and nervous exhaustion is also more common, and consequently listlessness and numbness is more common in women than in men.” “Um samband sjúkdóma við kynferði manna, aldur og skyldleika.” *Eir*, July–December, 1900, p. 113. In the 1920s it was common to denounce political enemies by accusing them of “hysteria” and, in light of the context, it is clear that the employment of the word “hysteria” equals neurosis or a nervous disorder. As a matter of fact, one might in this context speak of “political hysteria” as the discourse was gendered quite precisely, if also negatively. This was a way of feminizing and demasculinizing an opponent and insinuate that his temperament was unbalanced. See for example Erlendur Friðjónsson. “Móðursýki.” *Verkamaðurinn*, 18. August, 1925, pp. 2–3.

experienced sexual pleasure, but that now “her flesh is on fire.”<sup>1064</sup> The animal that Albertsson posits being unleashed under these circumstances is transformed into a predator in Guðbrandur Jónsson’s review, who also invariably refers to Gæa as the “crone” (while the play makes it clear that she is about 40), but, seeing how she is a predator, Már turns out to be “easy prey” and, once in the hunting lodge, she is perfectly placed as she is still feeling “predatory.”<sup>1065</sup>

Lost in the throws of lust, Gæa rejects her “mother’s love” according to Albertsson and is thus “transformed into a newly born female animal,” whose central characteristic is “selfishness” — a particularly unfeminine quality, as interest would also be considered.<sup>1066</sup> The fire that has rendered her flesh overheated and out of control results in the “lady going crazy” and going “insane” and thus, as well, a causal connection is posited between female sexual pleasure and insanity, as well as “losing control of the animal [...] inside oneself.”<sup>1067</sup> As if this weren’t enough, sexual pleasure is rendered as a harmful force that places the women’s mother instinct under erasure and leads to the demise of their offspring. The same notion is articulated in Guðbrandur Jónsson’s review who explains Gæa’s desperate measures at the end of the play by referencing “nymphomania” which “clouds her judgment” and thus renders her cognitively

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<sup>1064</sup> Albertsson, „Straumrof Halldórs Kiljan Laxness“, p. 4. In the original: “notið sín” and “nýr eld[ur] í holdinu.”

<sup>1065</sup> “[Jónsson],” “Halldór Kiljan Laxness: Straumrof,” p. 4. The phrase used by Jónsson in the original is “veiðihugur.” When Guðbrandur Jónsson employs the concept of the “crone” to describe Gæa, his rhetorical strategy is unobvious but strikingly brutal. His intent is to rob Gæa of her femininity and sexuality and transfer these “characteristics” onto her daughter, the reason being that Gæa is too old to behave in this way and the suggestion that her sexuality is therefore grotesque is equally clear.

<sup>1066</sup> Kristján Albertsson, „Straumrof Halldórs Kiljan Laxness“, bls. 4. In the original: “móðurástinni” and „umbreyttist [þar með í] nýfæ[tt] kvendýr“.

<sup>1067</sup> Albertsson, „Straumrof Halldórs Kiljan Laxness“, p. 4; „K,“ “Leikhúsið. Halldór Kiljan Laxness: Straumrof,” p. 2. In the original: “frúin ærist” and “sturlast” and lastly, “missa taumhaldið á dýrinu í [...] sér”.

deficient to handle a complex situation.<sup>1068</sup> The female subject was thus made “subject” to her body and bodily functions in a decisive and a derogatory fashion. She appears as anemic, feeble and weak-willed; her nervous system was fragile enough to be inherently deficient and pathological sexual desires could erupt without warning, often with terrible consequences.<sup>1069</sup>

Albertsson’s review, much like the writings of Guðbrandur Jónsson and several other critics, are inflected by the ethical censure and castigation that was a common part of the cultural discourse on female sexuality. It is interesting that only one woman, Soffía Ingvarsdóttir, took part in the discussion on *Straumrof*, as far as is known. Ingvarsdóttir was a municipal official in Reykjavík and a board member in Kvenréttindafélag Íslands (The Icelandic Society for Women’s Rights) for many years. She disagrees with Albertsson’s interpretation of the play and, in particular, finds fault with the assumptions he makes about female subjectivity. Among *Straumrof*’s most serious flaws, according to Albertsson, is

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<sup>1068</sup> “[Jónsson],” “Halldór Kiljan Laxness: *Straumrof*,” p. 4. In the original: “vergirnir” and “villir henni sýn”.

<sup>1069</sup> In the cultural discourse in Iceland at the time (West-Icelandic in this case), a curious manifestation can be discerned in the ways in which the concept of hysteria was put to use. In this instance the illness is read as a sort of “truth symptom,” that is, the pathology reveals the real nature of women. In a sense, this is not all that far removed from Kristján Albertsson’s interpretation of *Straumrof* in *Morgunblaðinu*. It is also interesting how the investigating male subject is provided with considerable support, namely the cultural capital of the preeminent literary giant of the age, Leo Tolstoy. In 1921, an article in *Lögberg* cites a letter from a doctor that is addressed to Tolstoy’s daughter where the subject is Tolstoy’s wife. Among other things, the doctor notes that, “As she grows older and her mental capacities weaker, her underlying nature is revealed. Most prominent are two corrupting characteristics (hysteria and paranoia). The former is manifested in emotionally hyperbolic opinions concerning her life experiences, and make her entire mental life revolve around herself. This goes so far as to cause her to sacrifice truth and her finer feelings, all in order to make her selfish plans come to fruition. The latter is revealed in her distrustfulness, which leads to wrong conclusions regarding everything that has to do with Leo Tolstoy.” Stefán Einarsson. “Tolstoy og konan hans.” *Lögberg*, 7. June, 1922, pp. 2–3. In the original: “Við aldur hennar og þverrun andlegs þreks, virðist hið undirliggjandi eðlisfar hennar opinberast. Og þar ber mest á tveimur spillandi einkennum (hysterical og paranoiac). Hið fyrra kemur fram í viðkvæmnislega ýktum skoðunum um reynslu hennar, er snúa öllum hugsunum hennar að hennar eigin persónu. Þetta gengur svo langt, að hún fórnar sannleika og betri tilfinningum í því skyni, að koma eigingjörnum áformum í framkvæmd. Hið síðara kemur fram í tortryggni hennar, er leiðir til rangra ályktana um allt það, er Leo Tolstoy snertir“.

the way the author employs the mental life and subjective experiences of a sick woman — read mentally ill — to depict the social and existential environment of the upper class, but once filtered through an unbalanced consciousness, social reality is automatically caricatured and rendered grotesque. Making his case, Albertsson compares Gæa to Sigurlínu í Mararbúð in *Salka Valka* (1931–1932) and is fairly sure that he can discern greater sympathy on the author’s part for the latter character. Ingvarsdóttir however points out that the play is concerned with a specific set of social circumstances and a particular milieu and foregrounds the “unhappiness” of women in a society that in many respects is hostile to their interests and well-being.<sup>1070</sup> She also argues that the comparison to Sigurlínu is hardly fair; the interiority of women who lead lives as disparate and different cannot be rendered employing the same literary means.

Ingvarsdóttir also argues that Gæa’s existential bankruptcy at the end is carefully supported by the play’s structure and underlying thematic and symbolic network, and that, furthermore, her purpose is not to caricature “people who happen to live in relative economic security,” as Albertsson had maintained.<sup>1071</sup> The opposite is actually the case according to Ingvarsdóttir who discerns in the text deep sympathy with Gæa. Lastly, she makes the point that Albertsson’s mode of reading has quite a lot in common with the very existential constraints on female subjectivity that the play criticizes, constraints that are manifested in “ethical and legal regulations that enwrap female nature” in the capitalistic order

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<sup>1070</sup> Soffía Ingvarsdóttir. “Um Straumrof.” *Nýja dagblaðið*, 14. December, 1934, p. 2; the second part of Ingvarsdóttir’s article was published a day later, 15. December, 1934, on page 5. In the quotations below the page number will specify which part is being referenced. See in this context as well Kristján Albertsson. “Hin nýja skáldsaga Halldórs K. Laxness.” *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, 25. September, 1932, pp. 295–297.

<sup>1071</sup> Albertsson, „Straumrof Halldórs Kiljan Laxness“, p. 5. In the original: “fólk sem lifir við sæmileg kjör“.



and modern bourgeoisie society.<sup>1072</sup> Ingvarsdóttir is pointing to the way in which Albertsson asks no questions at all about the implications of a man defining the essence of women authoritatively and, it seems, with no qualms whatsoever, that is, he speaks from a position of power that is unjustified but assumed to be natural.

Ingvarsdóttir does not respond directly to the designation of Gæa as “hysterical” and the connotative scheme brought into being by activating this particular aspect of medical discourse but seeks rather to redefine the elements that constitute Albertsson’s initial rationale for employing the concept. Ingvarsdóttir’s solution is elegant and executed with considerable grace by drawing together aspects of the play that depict a character whose psychological portrait is credible and also showing how the ending is the result of a tightly knit narrative causality: “Everything adds up to render it plausible and convincing that the troubled psyche of this unhappy woman should ultimately collapse.”<sup>1073</sup> Albertsson focuses on Gæa’s body while Ingvarsdóttir reflects on her social and experiential condition and environment. As a matter of fact, this disparity in methodology and point of view reflects the conflicts and tensions of the period within the medical sciences as to whether one should be looking for physiological or psychological causes for nervous diseases, commonly referred to as women’s ailments or maladies. This “debate” will be examined in greater detail below as the cultural discourse and the cultural “function” of “women’s maladies” in conjunction with theorizations about female sexuality represent key

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<sup>1072</sup> Ingvarsdóttir, “Um Straumrof,” p. 2. In the original: “sem fyrirmæli siðferðis og laga hafa sveipað utan um kveneðlið“.

<sup>1073</sup> Ingvarsdóttir, “Um Straumrof,” p. 2. In the original: “Allt er látið hjálpast að til að gera eðlilegt, að hið æsta geð, þessarar óhamingjusömu konu gangi úr skorðum.“

factors when analyzing *Straumrof*. The contemporary reception of the play frequently pointed to important aspects of the play but the value laden conclusions that followed do not derive from an intellectual void but are representative of attitudes and modes of thinking that have a long history.

### *6.1 Concerning the Animalistic Behavior of the Uterus and its Violent Convulsions*

Guðbrandur Jónsson maintains that Gæa's newly awakened sexuality transforms her into an "animal," wholly in thrall to her body, while the man only loses control momentarily — or, as may indeed be the case, Jónsson suggests, is seduced into sexual congress by the woman and he himself is thus not really guilty of an ethical lapse. Inherent in the position espoused by Jónsson in his review is an antiquated and male-centered epistemology about the "nature" of women, what might be termed the female "essence," but also including their bodies, consciousness and sexuality. The core of the epistemology in question is that female cognitive processes are like leaves blowing in the wind of corporeality. In an article that examines the position of medical science and natural philosophy on the subject of womanhood and female sexuality up until the "break" of modernity, Evelyne Berriot-Salvadore notes that "[f]or centuries, in fact, the treatment of women was based on an idea shared by physicians, moralists, and theologians: that woman was governed by her sexual parts."<sup>1074</sup> Of central importance here was the uterus, the "unusual movements" of which were to blame for many, if not most, of the neurological dysfunctions that plagued the

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<sup>1074</sup> Evelyne Berriot-Salvadore. "The Discourse of Medicine and Science." *A History of Women in the West III. Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes*. Trans. by Arthur Goldhammer. Ed. by G. Duby and M. Perrot. Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 361.

female sex. No wonder, really, as the uterus “like an animal, hurled itself about in every direction in violent convulsions.”<sup>1075</sup>

The concept of the wandering womb or “convulsive” uterus is of profound importance when it comes to the discursive formation of female maladies on account of its, quite frankly, unbelievable longevity, seeing how it first makes an impression in the Platonic dialogue *Timaeus*, probably written around 360 B.C. The dialogue ranges widely and Socrates, more so than usually, keeps back but near the end a comparison is made between the physiology of women and men. To reproduce and thus further the life of the species is a primary drive and what makes men’s sexual organ so difficult to control; indeed, the primal need in question will stop at almost nothing. The same physiological drives are operative with women, *Timaeus* then notes, but in their case it is the uterus, not the penis, that becomes restless and if nothing happens for an extended period it will lose control and “travel everywhere up and down her body” and, if worst comes to worst, the uterus will “block up her respiratory passages” and thus suffocate the unfortunate victim.<sup>1076</sup>

The dialogue is interesting because it really is only a matter of a hair’s breadth that female sexual desire is fully acknowledged and, furthermore, posited as normal — indeed, one might even argue that the step is taken fully, although it is assumed that a woman’s desire for sex is intimately tied to her natural role as a mother. This also explains the concept that was used for centuries to designate feminine sexual desire *Furor uterinus* — raging uterus —

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<sup>1075</sup> Berriot-Salvadore, “The Discourse of Medicine and Science,” p. 361.

<sup>1076</sup> Plato. *Timaeus*. Trans. by D.J. Zeyl. *Plato – Complete Works*. Ed. by John M. Cooper. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997, p. 1290/91 b–c.

and in a sense this concept is the precursor to the notion of nymphomania.<sup>1077</sup>

What stands out, however, is the way in which femininity was tied to sexuality in the conceptual realm, the latter viewed as part of female “nature;” in Ancient Greece, for example, *Furor uterinus* was invoked in the case of widows who had lost their husbands and were therefore sexually frustrated.<sup>1078</sup> Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir has also pointed out that up until the industrial revolution, women enjoyed “constrained freedom” but with the inroads of modernity there was a marked decline in “tolerance for women and men who transgressed boundaries of conventional femininity and masculinity.”<sup>1079</sup>

The notion that women are subject to the whims of their bodies, or can at least become the victims of their unruly desires, is clearly present in the reception of *Straumrof* but although the conceptual constellation that is at stake can be traced back to the cradle of Western civilization there are notable differences in the function ascribed to the embodiment of female consciousness. There is, for example, an important distinction to be made between

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<sup>1077</sup> The Latin “Furor uterinus” derives from original root of “hysteria” which is the Greek word for uterus, or “ὕστερα.” In *Riti þess konunglega íslenzka Lærdómslistafélags* (The Journal of the Royal Icelandic Scholastic Society) from 1789, the following passage is to be found: “Unquenchability (Nymphomania, Furor uterinus), is to be found in Iceland according only to those whose testimony is highly untrustworthy, and the name alone suggests how unlikely that is; never have I witnessed this disgusting ailment, but on the other hand I have noticed that even those who are relatively knowledgeable in the science of diseases tend to conflate this element with Hysteríam (an illness that cannot really be translated into Icelandic), although the symptoms are completely different.” Sveinn Pálsson. “Registri yfir sjúkdóma nöfn.” *Rit þess konunglega íslenzka Lærdómslistafélags*. Kaupmannahöfn: Johann Rudolf Ebiele, 1789, p. 203. In the original: “Brókarsótt (Nymphomania, Furor uterinus) uppástanda margir að til sé á Íslandi og nafnið sýnir það einnig; aldrei hefir mér gefist að sjá þennan viðurstygilega sjúkleika, en hitt hef ég orðið var við, að jafnvel þeir er nokkuð vita í sjúkdómafræðinni slengja þessu tilfelli saman við Hysteríam (einn kvilla er varla er mögulegt að íslenska með einu nafni) hverjir veikleikar þó ekkert eiga skyldi saman.”

<sup>1078</sup> Carol Croneman. *Nymphomania. A History*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000, pp. xvi–xvii.

<sup>1079</sup> Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir. *Nútímans konur. Menntun kvenna og mótun kyngervis á Íslandi 1850–1903*. Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun – RIKK and Háskólaútgáfan, 2011, p. 72. In the original: “ákveðins frelsis” and “úr umburðarlyndi gagnvart þeim konum og körlum sem fóru yfir mörk þess sem talið var karlegt og kvenlegt.”

constructions of femininity where sexual desire is assumed to play a part and, indeed, to be as natural in women as it is assumed to be in men, and those that associate femininity with frigidity and categorizes women's sexual drive as a disease. Shifts in the function of concepts and how different discursive formations articulate sexuality in radically different ways is the subject of Michel Foucault's three-volume history of sexuality. One of the things emphasized by Foucault is that the Enlightenment represents a rift in terms of conceptualizations of sexuality and how human sexuality was constructed as an object of knowledge. There was now a demand for an efficient discourse that could develop techniques for "producing the truth of sex" without the distortion of "ideology, or a misunderstanding caused by taboos".<sup>1080</sup> On the surface, the motivating forces were the thirst for knowledge and humanitarian ideals but Foucault points out that it proves difficult to separate knowledge from power structures and social administration, and there he is in agreement with precursors who emphasized precisely that no sphere of human activity was as heavily regulated as sexuality and sexual behavior.<sup>1081</sup>

Some might however be tempted to agree with Carol Groneman when she notes the "amazing confusion" that characterized medical discourse on female sexuality during this historical period.<sup>1082</sup> Modern readers are likely to be taken aback by the fact that the question of whether women were capable of rational thought processes was a prominent issue for debate in the Enlightenment. The fact that many thought the very notion ridiculous is evidenced by the fact that in

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<sup>1080</sup> Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*. Volume 1: *An Introduction*. Trans. by R. Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1990, p. 68

<sup>1081</sup> See for example the seminal work by John Gagnon and Williams Simon from 1976, *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality*, 2. edition. Chicago: Aldine Transaction, 2002.

<sup>1082</sup> Carol Groneman. "Nymphomania: The Historical Construction of Female Sexuality." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1993, p. 340.

*Les bijoux indiscrets* (The Indiscreet Jewels, 1748), Denis Diderot's first novel but he would of course become one of the most prominent figures of the Enlightenment, being one of the editors of the first Encyclopedia for example, there is a section where men debate what seems to have been a well known and widely accepted deficiency when it came to females expressing themselves using language — indeed, they were utterly incapable of rational dialogue. Thus, one of the characters, perhaps a bit giddy with wine, throws out for discussion the outlandish notion, or question, as to what would actually happen should women be allocated momentarily the masculine capacity for reasoned expression. He answers the question himself; should women be blessed with rhetorical capacity, it wouldn't be via the head and mouth that they would communicate but, it seems obvious, it would be the vagina that did the talking as that was the central and dominating organ in the female anatomy. While a brilliant concept for a 1970s porno flick, the attitudes thus represented naturally seem utterly alien, although there is no reason to think that Diderot was depicting a caricature of the cultural debate of the time.

It is in this context that Jean-Jacques Rousseau can be seen as quite friendly towards women in that he does not preclude rational cognitive processes in females, although there is a caveat. Women, he contends, have some difficulties when it comes to translating sensory input into concepts. While some might consider this a major hindrance, Rousseau suggests women look on the bright side and concentrate on those things that, in spite of everything, they are capable of, namely to “obey their husband, not to cheat, and raise children.”<sup>1083</sup> It

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<sup>1083</sup> Michèle Crampe-Casnabet. “A Sampling of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy.” *A History of Women in the West III. Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes*. Ed. by G. Duby and M. Perrot.

is important to focus on the function and utilization of the gender theories under discussion rather than their “truth content”.<sup>1084</sup> The definitions in ages past of female nature were grounded in a religious worldview, a social world that changed little between generations, and blatant violence and brutality. A more complex social infrastructure, urbanization, the financial independence of women and the equal rights and the women’s liberation movements required a different brand of ideology and administrative mechanisms. Of considerable relevance as well is the fact that from the historical break of the industrial revolution scientific discourse grew steadily in influence and authority until its tenets were held in similar esteem as religious doctrines, and then even greater as the nineteenth century proceeded. As Foucault points out, it took almost two centuries to “fine-tune” the new knowledge discourse on women and sexuality but once it all came together, the results were spectacular.

It is interesting to note in this context that in the early 1920s, Halldór Laxness read closely and engaged deeply with a once famous philosophical work on women and male–female relations that in many ways harks back to the discourse of the Enlightenment described above. The work in question is *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Sex and Character, 1903) by Austrian Otto Weininger, a text that enjoyed immense success for a brief period, partly having to do with the tragic but also romantic and sensational fact that Weininger committed

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Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993, pp. 328–330. Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir also discusses Rousseau and his attitudes towards women, see *Nútímans konur*, pp. 74–77.

<sup>1084</sup> Dictionaries usually define truth as that which is true. German philosopher Martin Heidegger is notorious for being obtuse and difficult but his discussion of the concept of truth in *The Essence of Truth* is however a monument to rigor and clarity and extremely useful in terms of widening and problematizing but also illuminating the notion of truth. See Martin Heidegger. *The Essence of Truth*. Trans. by Ted Sadler. London and New York: Continuum, 2002; the introduction is particularly helpful as Heidegger historicizes the concept of truth and goes systematically through different definitions, pp. 1–17.

suicide at age 23. The book is largely forgotten today, except perhaps as an interesting chapter in the story of how misogyny has manifested itself in various intellectual, religious and philosophical guises.

Weininger bases his entire philosophical system on a simple core belief regarding the deficiencies of womankind. Women are not fully human, it would seem, in Weininger's eyes.<sup>1085</sup> They have animalistic tendencies and lack basic cognitive skills and reasoning. One might say the young Austrian was still at this point moving within a framework that the founders of the Enlightenment might give their blessing but he soon proves that he can outdo almost anyone when it comes to depicting the heinous and abominable nature of women. They have no ethical sensibility and their moral compass is absent. In a curious twist, they are also highly deficient when it comes to spatial comprehension, finding it difficult to gauge distances, the circumference of things and their placement in space. Thus, managing to exit through a door without hitting a wall once or twice would be quite the achievement for a woman in Weininger's eyes. Their memory is also seriously impaired, in fact, the only experiences of which they manage to retain mental images are sex and childbirth.

Clearly, communion and contact between the sexes cannot bode well in Weininger's view of things and, as it turns out, that is putting it mildly. Having any relations with females only demeans the male, robs him of his masculine essence and sexual relations are downright ruinous. As Halldór Guðmundsson points out, Weininger's thought can have only one logical conclusion, and that is the extinction of the species; a fate one suspects the Austrian considered

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<sup>1085</sup> The discussion of Otto Weininger is based on the analysis of Halldór Guðmundsson in '*Loksins, loksins*', pp. 146–155.



preferable to the “normal” social interaction between the sexes by quite some distance. Peter Hallberg references Weininger when discussing the sexual politics of *Straumrof*, as he does in his discussion of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* as well. While the connection between Weininger’s ideas and some of the central motifs of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* when it comes to the depiction of women and female sexuality is beyond doubt, one needs to look much further afield in the case of *Straumrof* to account for the discursive formations that are at play in the text.<sup>1086</sup>

In classic works such as *Psychopathia Sexualis. Eine Klinisch–Forensische Studie* (*Psychopathia Sexualis. A Medico–Forensic Study*, 1886) by Richard von Krafft–Ebing — a foundational work in sexology — the scientism of modernity is clearly on display as human sexual behavior is carefully categorized and made into the subject of a complex taxonomy that is also grounded in value judgments and an ethical perspective, although these last are somewhat of stowaways in the text. Female sexuality is investigated under auspices of modern technology and Krafft–Ebing discusses female nymphomania at considerable length. Physiological symptoms are discussed, which is not surprising as case histories are the most common source of information, but interestingly enough some of the clearest symptoms derive from the social arena, more precisely the social behavior of female patients. Among the manifestations of nymphomania are „inclination for the society of men, personal adornment, perfumes [and] talk of marriage and scandals“.<sup>1087</sup> The illness of the women is also partly explained

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<sup>1086</sup> As to Peter Hallberg’s discussion of Weininger and *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, see *Vefarann mikli II*, pp. 61–75 and *Hús skáldsins I*, pp. 197–198.

<sup>1087</sup> Richard von Krafft–Ebing. *Psychopathia Sexualis. With Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct. A Medico–Forensic Study*. Trans. by F. J. Rebman. New York: Physicians and Surgeons Book Company, 1936, p. 481.

with reference to the fact that „ethics and willpower lose their controlling influence“.<sup>1088</sup> Most important however is the fact that Krafft–Ebing’s work provides “solid” foundations for the notion that disinterest in sex and/or frigidity is a natural aspect of femininity, as Higonnet points out above. „A notable interest in sex among women raises questions about the possibility of illness“, Krafft–Ebing notes.<sup>1089</sup>

The feminine “qualities” that are now constituted as favorable or made into examples of “true” femininity are the outcome of extensive ideological “work” that was conducted as the sociological role of women was refashioned in conjunction with a new urban and bourgeoisie lifestyle and the increased prosperity that business and various capitalistic enterprises afforded certain segments of the population. The bourgeoisie home and the family values that were in this context foundational for how the home was understood combined to frame the social role of middle class women and ideals of femininity. The shift involved a new understanding of private space, which now became a retreat and shelter, an abode removed from the hustle and bustle of public life — a place for lives lived in private and the site where the private self was fostered and cultivated. When, formerly, the subject was constituted by public activities and action, the modern subject was a reflective one, a private one, and the home was the site where these values were most fundamentally manifested. “Now for the first time private and public spheres became separate in a specifically modern

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<sup>1088</sup> Krafft–Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, p. 482.

<sup>1089</sup> Krafft–Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, p. 87.

sense,” Jürgen Habermas notes in the context of the development of urban middle class life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>1090</sup>

The Icelandic concept of “*húsmóðir*” (*housemother*) is suggestive in this context about the set of values that underlay the social function of women in this new environment and, furthermore, speaks closely to the English concept of “*housewife*,” which is similarly transparent, although the emphasis there is on the woman’s role as a wife.<sup>1091</sup> In both cases, the accentuation is on the home, the sphere of the family, and together the two concepts indicate the existential framework and the ideological constraints of the modern, bourgeoisie marriage. One of the things that makes *Straumrof* such an interesting text is the rigor with which the play interrogates marriage as an institution, and does so in the context of social interaction and relationships between the characters, their behavior and psychology.

It is thus safe to say that the lifestyle and social environment of the Kaldan family are imbued with all the hallmarks of the prosperity of the new upper middle class. The family home is electrified and includes a telephone; the family owns a car and enjoys economic security. On one level, the reader is being given a glimpse into an upper class Reykjavík household, with the trappings and comforts that would seem natural to that particular social class; the fact that the access to the technological ease offered by modernity is brought about (or “bought”) by the structural logic of capitalism is clear (the veneer of the household, the business activities of the family patriarch, the stage directions). In

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<sup>1090</sup> Jürgen Habermas. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Trans. by T. Burger. London and Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999, pp. 11 and 43–50.

<sup>1091</sup> On the generation of the concept of the “housewife,” see Celia Lury. *Consumer Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001, pp. 121–127.

other words, at stake is not simply a picture of utopian futurity where the goods of scientific progress are equally distributed among the denizens of the culture but a modern society where material goods are prizes to be competed for, perhaps even snatched at the expense of others. Nevertheless, it is also important to note the social perspective of the text and the political consciousness created by its totality. While the conclusion is tragic, the causality and logic leading up to the fateful ending are not associated with class dynamics or characteristics. In a later novel, *Atómstöðin*, Laxness would be much less generous, if that is the word, when it comes to the direct association between class privilege and damaged lives, and the immediate manifestations of economic domination — but in *Straumrof*, what is at stake is the structure of the social complex as a whole, Freud’s “civilization” in other words, which is all-encompassing and leaves no reason to think that, had the characters only been working class, awake to and aware of their class interests, their fates would have been different.<sup>1092</sup>

The upper class milieu of the Kaldan family represents the only vantage point on social life offered by the text. It is not only that the characters navigate the material world of modernity with ease, and that class politics and economic disparity are left unmentioned, but that there is no sense of an alienating lack or a social wound inflected by the removal of integral parts of the body politic.<sup>1093</sup>

Absences, of course, need not be “absent.” In fact, absences, much like Pierre Macherey has taught us, may offer the truly crucial vantage point from which to

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<sup>1092</sup> Interestingly, the play with which *Straumrof* is most often compared, Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*, involves a class dimension — Jean, Miss Julie’s transgressive lover — is working class. The fact that such obvious manifestations of the class struggle are not activated by Laxness is important, while rarely noted.

<sup>1093</sup> There is an important exception to this, which will be discussed below.

read a text.<sup>1094</sup> In *Straumrof*, however, Laxness' analytical framework, and this should be repeated, is not political or class-based, and thus the aforementioned representational strategy, rather than coming to emphasize the political through its absence, serves to bring about an internally coherent social world, one that differs from the "delayed" modernity that was to be found in Iceland in the inter-war years and, instead, offers a glimpse of how the "streamlined" urban modernity of Reykjavík might have felt like, had it been achieved, or would come to feel like, should it be achieved at some point in the future; the play is in other words endowed with an anticipatory or a preparatory dimension.

When Ólafur Jónsson, in his review of the play's revival, notes that *Straumrof* does not really seem to be of its time, that its textual world does not really invoke "the daily life of Reykjavík and its social culture in the depression," he is pointing to this very sense of anticipation and play with a vision of posteriority.<sup>1095</sup> There is however no trace of naivety or utopian wistfulness to the incorporation, even if deeply embedded, of the discursive register of modernization; on the contrary, the element of futurity and technological advance in *Straumrof* is anxious and problematic. This indicates a move away from previous concerns with technological infrastructure and mechanical baselines as measurements of social development, to reflections on the uses made of technology, once it has been activated and incorporated into the social complex in a variety of manifestations. Laxness is still invested in technology as a marker of modernity, but the conception of "scientism" and rationalization as the

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<sup>1094</sup> Pierre Macherey. *A Theory of Literary Production*. New York and London: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>1095</sup> Jónson, "Lér kóngur og frú Kaldan," p. 15. In the original: "Vísast má segja það um *Straumrof* líka að leikurinn beri ekki mikinn keim af samtíð sinni, reykvísku umhverfi og mannlífi á kreppuárunum."

ultimate solvent for social problems and the contradictions of the human condition is receding.

## 6.2 *"The Second Time as Farce"*

The notion of privacy is still, however, important. Loftur Kaldan, for example, turns the radio off with a grimace as the play opens, having listened briefly and it being clear that what he hears is strange and disturbing. The family patriarch clearly feels that the outer world has intruded into his private sphere, where it is not wanted. The broadcast in question is a news show. As such, however, it is immediately defamiliarized and rendered strange by the surreal level of sponsorship that envelopes the show; the intrusion of commercial interests being extreme enough as to give the impression of a deranged, incoherent world. News of executions are interspersed with advertisements for dietary supplements and as the play progresses, events on stage are twice more halted to accommodate similar "updates". While the irrationality of the mediated world picture that is presented as drifting across the ether can be seen as a malevolent reflection of the technological abundance that characterizes the lifestyle of the lead characters, it is the very ubiquity of the technology that in the beginning proves to be even more sinister, the fact that the intrusion of sensational "facts," advertisement jingles and grotesque ideological representations of social and political issues prove to be, quite literally, an inescapable feature of modern life, even in the supposedly peaceful countryside.<sup>1096</sup>

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<sup>1096</sup> The first broadcast is listened to in the Kaldan home in the capital but the latter two are received in the hunting cabin.

As Loftur turns on the radio, the domestic sphere is opened up to external and foreign influence, and particularly notable is the mixture and juxtaposition of the local and national on the one hand and, on the other, a cosmopolitan sense of a much larger geo-political context. This however needs to be contrasted with the initial sensory impression created by the broadcast, which, as suggested above, resembles nothing so much as an avant-garde “word soup.” If examined more closely, however, certain coherence emerges from the semantically erratic news hour, turning the initial sense of “white noise” into an ideological “signal”. Indeed, the heavily ideological discourse on display invokes Althusser’s later conception of “interpellation” in the way it stages a mode of social address that is superficially concerned with the dissemination of knowledge (“news”), but implicitly engaged in the construction of a form of self-identity for the audience through the manipulation of their conceptual horizon and psychological insecurities.<sup>1097</sup>

That Laxness renders the process entirely unconvincing should be read as a double gesture, firstly it reflects a critical attitude to towards ideological state apparatuses, to employ another Althusserian concept, the state here being seen as a tool, indeed, the most powerful tool invented by humans, which is wielded by particular elites, and, as well, a comment on the deep set contradictions that characterize the capitalistic social order that become apparent once its masquerade of rationality has been exposed, revealing a nonsensical way of organizing the social complex, that is, the disorganized and absurdist aspect of

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<sup>1097</sup> Louis Althusser. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus (Notes Towards an Investigation).” *Lenin and Philosophy*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001, pp. 85-126.

the propaganda is perhaps not meant to indicate that it is inefficient, rather that the powers being served are fundamentally irrational.

This is the initial broadcast:

... and it turns out that the majority of the stocks are forgeries. Thousands have lost their life savings. Slim down on Ruga. The trial of the Russian halfwit Laborsky commenced today, but he is accused of bombing the palace of the state-judiciary. Lead a healthy life – eat fish. Some of the most horrendous murders ever recorded ...<sup>1098</sup>

That the Wall Street crash of 1929 is being referenced — or an event endowed with a similar connotative range — as well as the depression that followed is beyond doubt. The beginning of the news item thus serves a plot function in that a hint is offered about the business problems of Loftur Kaldan. The subsequent message from the lifestyle/cosmetic industry (“Slim down on Ruga”) and the break it entails in the communicating of news is an indication of the social fragmentation that is conveyed and symbolized by the broadcast. Furthermore, as Daniel Boorstin has pointed out in his classic work on publicity and the image, sponsorship has been linked to the production of broadcast media content almost since its inception, but the deliberate abruptness with which it disrupts the flow of information in the present context is disorientating and highlights what seems to be the absence of any logical, ethical or institutional distinction between the political and democratic function of a news outlet and its commercial role as a venue for advertisements.<sup>1099</sup>

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<sup>1098</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, pp. 9–10. In the original the passage reads: “... og hefur komið á daginn að mikill þorri þessara verðbréfa eru falsanir. Þúsundir manna hafa mist aleigu sína. Horið ykkur á Rúga. Réttarhöld hófust í dag yfir rússneska hálfvitanum Laborsky sem er sakaður um að hafa sprengt höll ríkisréttarins í loft upp. Lifið heilbrigðu lífi — borðið fisk. Einhver hryllilegustu fjöldamorð sem sögur fara af ...”

<sup>1099</sup> Daniel Boorstin. *The Image. A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. 25th Anniversary Edition. New York: Random House, 1992, pp. 7–45.



This is further emphasized by the echoes of the Russian revolution — or possibly the prior terroristic campaign of the Russian anarchists — that are discernable in the following news item (or perhaps the notion of a “news-flash” would be more appropriate), dealing with a revolt against the establishment, the bombing of “the palace of the state–judiciary” by “the Russian halfwit Laborsky.”<sup>1100</sup> The clear and even absurd political slant to the recounting of the trial suggests a point of view aligned with the bourgeoisie and dominant economic structures, something that again indicates that the previous reportage of a stock swindle, rather than speaking truth to power or being motivated to reveal corruption on ethical grounds, is simply intended to communicate mercantile information to an audience of stake–holders in the capitalistic economy, a class whose interests depend precisely on the accurate dissemination of business and capital–related information.<sup>1101</sup>

The broadcast is therefore capable of a twofold address, “targeting” on the one hand stake–holders (and thus fulfilling a central imperative of modern media, communicating an accurate portrait of the economic environment to the elite and the owners of the means of production), and, on the other, the newly emerged category of the consumer, who is subject to another mode of address. That the consumer in question is gendered, as the advertisements for the dietary supplements and foodstuff strongly suggests, is not a coincidence either. As Celia Lury notes, the shift from housework as production to housework as consumption “involved the increasing purchase and use of commodities in place

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<sup>1100</sup> The playful class struggle connotations of “*Laborsky*” are in keeping with the way in which Laxness endows proper names with a symbolic function in the play.

<sup>1101</sup> A similar point is developed extensively by Jürgen Habermas when he traces the origin of the public sphere, see Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, pp. 14–20.

of home-made goods [and transformed] the home itself into a kind of temple to consumption.”<sup>1102</sup> Having access to the private sphere, the commercials that inflect the radio broadcast can be viewed in precisely the context that Lurie invokes, confirming the new conception of the home as a temple of consumption and the woman of the house as an “instrument” of consumer culture.<sup>1103</sup>

The play opens with the transcription of a radio broadcast and two further transcripts/broadcasts follow, one in the middle of the second act and then the last one at the very end; that is, much like a broadcast carries the audience into the play, another one ushers them out of the diegetic world. This is the second radio interlude:

... the most spectacular stock fraud has occurred. Some of country’s most highly placed figures are involved in the case. The forger Babel was located this morning in an old summer cottage on the beach. Drink the milk produced by the Unity. From the Behar district in India news have come of terrible earthquakes that occurred last night. Several cities are thought to be at risk, among them Púsa. Thousands, if not tens of thousands have perished. Slim down on Rúga. After a forty five day trial, the Russian halfwit Laborsky was beheaded this morning in the prison yard in Lipton, without warning and without any reporter being present. The executioner was wearing a dress, with a white ribbon and a hard hat. Lead a healthy life — eat fish ...<sup>1104</sup>

The repetitiveness of the two broadcasts is noticeable. The report of the stock swindle has developed somewhat; far enough at any rate to reveal that men in power have been compromised and one, the forger Babel, has, ignominiously

<sup>1102</sup> Lury, *Consumer Culture*, p. 125.

<sup>1103</sup> Lury, *Consumer Culture*, p. 125. The role of women in the emerging consumer economy proved to be vital but, as Lury points out, curiously without power. She refers to women as “instruments” of consumer culture rather than its “agents” as the family economy, much like the state and the labor market, are structured by conditions of inequality, where women are economically dependent on men.

<sup>1104</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, pp. 68–69. In the original, the text of the broadcast is as follows: “... stórkostlegustu verðbréfasvik hafa átt sér stað. Ýmsir æðstu menn landsins eru flæktir í málið. Falsarinn Babel fanst í morgun í gömlum sumarbústað á ströndinni. Drekkið mjólk Einíngarinnar. Frá Behar–fylki í Indlandi berast þær fregnir í dag að ægilegir jarðskjálftar hafi geisað þar í nótt. Ýmsar borgir eru taldar í hættu, þar á meðal borgin Púsa. Þúsundir, ef ekki tugþúsundir manna hafa farist. Horið ykkur á Rúga. Hinn rússneski hálfviti Laborsky var eftir fjörutfuogfimm daga réttarhöld hálshöggvinn í morgun í fángelsisgarðinum í Lipton, fyrirvaralaust og án þess nokkur fréttamaður væri viðstaddur. Böðullinn var klæddur í kjól, með hvíta slaufu og harðan hatt. Lifið heilbrigðu lífi — borðið fisk ...”.

enough, run away. His name, of course, indicates hubris and divine wrath coming down on humans in the form of a tremendous and destructive judgment although the present association seems at least partly to function at the level of jarring juxtapositions, a Biblical motif being incorporated into the grubby domain of financial speculation and stock market fraud. Again, there are news of catastrophes in foreign lands, this time a natural disaster of immense proportions rather than mass murder, but in both instances we note the way in which the local and peripheral is drawn into a global context of menacing events. This is in part the reason why Loftur Kaldan, in spite of being the ostensible owner of the technological instrument and the family member who is in charge of its use, is somehow threatened by it and the news it conveys, noting that the broadcast that opens the play disturbs “the peaceful parlors of people,” suggesting the degree to which his middle class existence is protected from the harsher realities of the world and that broadcast media represents an invasion into the private sphere, and this in spite of whatever value information about world affairs might conceivably hold for a man of business such as himself.<sup>1105</sup> The second broadcast also disturbs his peace of mind and he complains about having “purchased an expensive instrument meant for pleasure only to be subjected to material such as this.”<sup>1106</sup> It is after the second broadcast that he retires to the bedroom of the lodge, where he passes away.

We are also told of the fate of the Russian revolutionary Laborsky, the absurdity of the political discourse becoming even more apparent than in the

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<sup>1105</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 10. In the original: “Geta þessir menn ekki fundið neitt hollara til að varpa inni friðsamlegar stofur til fólks?”

<sup>1106</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 70. In the original: Maður er ekki að kaupa rándýr tæki sér til ánægju og láta svo gæða sér á þvílíku.”

previous broadcast through the description of his execution, whose illogical brutality illustrates what Adorno and Horkheimer termed the “savage rage” that forms the other, darker side of reason.<sup>1107</sup> The dietary supplements are advertised again and once more the discourse of public health is on display (“Lead a healthy life — eat fish”), which suggests simultaneously a straightforward advertisement and how the state attempts, for various ideological reasons, to shape and regulate the bodies of its subjects.<sup>1108</sup> The connection between the fishing industry, a source of unprecedented wealth in the Icelandic economy at this time and having direct ties to the highest levels of government, and the directive to consume, is calculated to invoke local social and political realities.

The last broadcast, the one that closes the play will be discussed below, but it is already clear how strategically Laxness employs the medium of the radio, both in terms of thematic content and structural deployment — the broadcasts serving in structural terms to frame the work and, in the middle, indicate a moment of immense dramatic importance, the shift from a focus on the family as a unit to the dramatic encounter of Gæa and Dagur Vestan. In light of the importance of the structural function of the radio and the repetition of the “news content” between the two broadcasts, it becomes clear that Laxness’ concern is to activate the radio as a central symbol for the play as a whole, rather than employing it simply as a prop or a device to set a mood or create an ambiance; although, of course, it does fulfill the latter function but in a way that

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<sup>1107</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 87.

<sup>1108</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the subject, in this case in the context of the British inter-war years, see Richard Farmer. *The Food Companions. Cinema and Consumption in Wartime Britain, 1939–1945*. Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2011.

incisively inflects the meaning generation of the entire play. Permeating the text, precisely because of the subtle presence of the radio, are issues of ideological domination and propaganda that posit the radio, much like Laxness anticipated in “Þjóðkirkjan og víðboð,” as an effective instrument of power because it reaches into “every home.”<sup>1109</sup> Loftur Kaldan’s lingering discomfort with the device invokes the division between the public and private, a central conceptual paradigm that has had a constitutive influence on the subject from ancient times right up through modernity, and it also brings to the foreground tensions between the local and global, tensions that speak to the material domain of the play, its incorporation of the automobile and the contrast between the city and the countryside.<sup>1110</sup>

### 6.3 “Are Women Going Mad?”

As we have noted, the concept of privacy, and its sanctity, is of central importance in the present context. Loftur’s initial reaction to the radio broadcast speaks to the modern notion of the private sphere and Gæa is also concerned about the privacy of the family. This is made explicit when she, trying to explain to her daughter what constitutes the essence of a woman’s happiness, focuses on the home not only as a family domain but one that represents a dramatic demarcation from civic and public life: “[o]ur home, that is the castle that your

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<sup>1109</sup> Laxness, “Þjóðkirkjan og víðboð,” p. 3.

<sup>1110</sup> Earlier, notions of civic performance and social consolidations of the subject were based on a certain notion of publicness; it was the public life of the individual that determined his status and importance. However, the public sphere functions differently, it is the venue for private individuals to participate in public affairs while retaining their status as private individuals. See Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, pp. 1–27.

dad and I have built for you.”<sup>1111</sup> Interestingly, a medieval architectural construction, a lasting symbol of feudal power and domination, is employed to illustrate the nature of urban living, a figuration that serves to remind us, much like the folk tale, of how the past can reach into the present and that Laxness endows the play with a latent political dimension.<sup>1112</sup>

That is, although the conflicts of the text are not obviously grounded in the hermeneutical logic of the economic infrastructure and the class struggle, the work is nevertheless political; the technological abundance of the Kaldan family and their level of material comfort is the bounty of a capitalistic economy.<sup>1113</sup> It might also be pointed out that once in the countryside, the impregnability of bourgeoisie codes and rules as figured in the castle has been replaced by an existential habitus that is much more difficult to defend against hostile forces, whether nature, external and internal, or fellow human beings. The range of meanings suggested by this single image thus involves the stability and power of the bourgeoisie and how, despite the various Enlightenment ideologies of emancipation, the role of the modern capitalist resembles and is in fact a continuation of age old structures of domination.

On the one hand, the home is presented as a fortress of solitude, a rampart around the private life of the family — and thus points forward to the understanding of the private that Habermas will articulate — and on the other hand the image also suggests that the values of the bourgeoisie, the rules that

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<sup>1111</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 32. In the original: “Okkar heimili, það er kastali sem við pabbi þinn höfum bygt þín vegna.”

<sup>1112</sup> Castles of course populate folk-tales in numbers second only to the cottage, but the historical register is primary in this instance.

<sup>1113</sup> As is discussed above, there are however limits to how far a reading of this sort can go and how productive it is likely to be.

guide social behavior and the tradition that grounds the family home, are protective measures that guard the subject from some threatening outside force. As the play will however make quite clear, the threatening force already resides within.

Gæa is shocked when Alda accepts Dagur's invitation for a car ride, as noted above, and tries to stop the outing, without any luck. Gæa is particularly agitated because the proposed joy ride conflicts with the already announced visit that Már is going to pay to his fiancée. To Gæa's mind, Alda is putting a solid relationship at risk for no good reason with her thoughtless flirting. Even more serious is her apparent obliviousness to unwritten but binding social rules and mores, the conventions and traditions of propriety that women are expected to adhere to. In an attempt to explain to her daughter the risks of promiscuity, Gæa uses herself as a role model and example of utmost female propriety. In her words, however, signs of the "infraction" that lies in her immediate future can be gleaned: "Where have you picked up such behavior?," she asks her daughter, "when have you ever known me to be interested in any other man than your father, even for a second? As god is my witness, I would consider myself completely lost the very moment I was touched by any other man, as long as he was alive — and even after he was dead."<sup>1114</sup>

Even though that which she claims not to want is precisely what she desires, Gæa is relentless when it comes to laying down the law for her daughter: "No woman can be happy, unless she gives over her entire life to the one that god

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<sup>1114</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 21. In the original: "Hvar hefurðu lært svona háttalag? Hvenær hefurðu vitað mig renna augum til annars manns en hans pabba þíns eitt andartak? Ég kalla guð til vitnis um það að ég mundi telja mig fullkomlega glataða manneskju á þeirri stund, sem ég yrði snortinn af nokkrum öðrum manni, að honum lifandi — og látnum."

has chosen as her life's companion. Because it is god, my dear Alda, who lets good people come together in love. Those who run after the feelings of the fleeting instant, those are sick and bereft human beings."<sup>1115</sup>

Happiness is defined by Gæa as a solid marriage where, furthermore, the choice of partner is up to God — God here being a synonym for the adroitness of the female subject who realizes that a woman's fate is to a considerable extent defined by just how dexterously and demurely she takes up, incorporates and makes into her own the dominant gender values. In light of later events it is highly ironic, even tragic, that Gæa is at this moment ready to pathologize female sexuality. Her attempt to explain social mores and how life really is to her daughter demonstrates the extent to which she herself is shaped and interpellated by ideology and the regulations of the patriarchy — as these were mediated through medical discourse of the kind we saw above in the case of Krafft-Ebing, to give an example, but the family was of course the most important ideological apparatus — a system that turns Gæa into the means through which to reproduce in her daughter the same values and behavioral patterns that determined her own life (marriage, child bearing, the home). That the ideological “work” thus enacted has not been in vain, despite Gæa's worries and Alda's disobedience, can be seen in that Alda is highly concerned by the fact that Dagur is divorced. Divorce is something that only “bad men” are associated

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<sup>1115</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 22. In the original: “Það getur eingin kona orðið farsæl, nema hún leggi alt líf sitt á spil með honum, sem guð hefur útvalið henni að lífsförunaut. Því það er guð, Alda mín, sem lætur gott fólk mætast í ástinni. Þeir sem hlaupa eftir skyndikendum augnabliksins, það eru alt sjúkar hamíngjusnauðar manneskjur“.



with, as well as the fact that marriage is the only goal that she can aim for, it seems, even by her own reckoning.<sup>1116</sup>

In the beginning of the play, Gæa is thus an excellent spokesperson for the epistemological and social steering mechanisms that defined female sexuality, women's "nature" and shaped the idealized qualities that were attached to an idealized image of the ideal woman by means of the family values of the middle class.<sup>1117</sup> Ideology of the domestic sphere is frequently mentioned in this context,

<sup>1116</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 25. In the original: "vondir menn".

<sup>1117</sup> It is very interesting to examine Laxness' theatrical review of Strindberg's *Fröken Julie*, published two years prior to *Straumrof*. While considerable optimism can be noted on the author's part when it comes to women's sexual freedom, several of the core ideas that would come to ground the play can also be glimpsed in an early incarnation: "From a bourgeoisie point of view, the [plot] was as if by necessity placed in the context of a number of clearly demarcated categories of decline, degeneration and corruption, — in other words, positioned as being a drastic exception to the norm, without any particular social significance and even devoid of general psychological value. It just so happened that the subject matter involved two forbidden elements — first, it was beyond the pale to describe a woman seducing a man, and, second, a girl of good background could not be shown to be interested in a social inferior, should she engage in the absolutely forbidden act of seducing a man. It is little more than a decade since Asta Nielsen, the incomparable, played this role, and still then the common understanding of Miss Julie was that she was degenerate, an exception and abnormal, and as if to underline the fact, she was made to wear pants, wear her hair extremely short, much like a ridiculous boy. But the world has grown corrupt. Now Mrs. Soffía Guðlaugsdóttir plays this role here in Iceland, as if the woman in question were simply normal, endowed with a fairly normal — at least not particularly unhealthy — desires, and nobody seems to be particularly troubled by the fact." Halldór Laxness. "Leikhúsið. Soffía Guðlaugsdóttir: Fröken Júlía, eftir Strindberg." *Alþýðublaðið*, 8 March, 1932, p. 3. See also "Laxness sem leikdómari. Leikdómar Halldórs Kiljan Laxness frá árunum 1931 og '32." *Safn til sögu íslenskrar leiklistar og leikbókmennta*. 1. bindi. Ed. by Jón Viðar Jónsson. Guarantors Jón Viðar Jónsson, Auður Laxness and Steingerður Guðmundsdóttir, 1998, pp. 18–19 [place of publication not designated]. In the original: "Frá borgaralegu sjónarmiði mátti það (söguefnið) ekki flokkast nema meðal ákveðinna fyrirbæra hnignunar, úrkynjunar og spillingar, — sem sagt fullkomið undantekningarfyrirbæri, án félagslegrar þýðingar og jafnvel án almenns sálfræðilegs gildis. Viðfangsefnið fól nefnilega í sér tvö forboðin atriði — í fyrsta lagi mátti ekki segjast, að kvenmaður drægi karlmann á talar, og í öðru lagi mátti fín stúlka ekki taka niður fyrir sig í því óleyfilega tilfelli, að hún drægi karlmann á talar. Það er ekki meira en röskur áratugur síðan Ásta Nielsen, hin óviðjafnanlega, lék þetta hlutverk, og samt var enn ráðandi sá skilningur á fröken Júlíu, að hún væri úrkynjunarfyrirbrigði, undantekning og furðuverk, og í samræmi við það, var hún látin ganga í buxum, með ákaflega stuttklipt hár, einsog og fáránlegur strákur. En svona er heimurinn orðinn spiltur. Nú leikur frú Soffía Guðlaugsdóttir þetta hlutverk hér úti á Íslandi, eins og það væri bara algengur kvenmaður með nokkurnveginn venjulegu — og ekki neitt sérlega óheilbrigðu — ástríðulífi, og engum virðist finnast neitt út á það að setja, heldur snýst harmur áhorfendanna einkum um það, að hún skuli sjálf að morgni þurfa að súpa seyðið af þessari skemtilegu Jónsmessunótt, — með öðrum orðum, að hún skuli ekki vera nógu „emanciperuð", nógu; fri af sér, nógu úrkynjuð, nógu spilt, — í einu orði nógu samræmd hinu hversdagslega, eins og vér þekkjum það úr nútmanum, sem snúið hefir allri þessari spillingu upp í venjulegan gang lífsins. Mér dettur ekki í eitt augnablik í hug að efast um, að þessi skilningur frú Soffíu Guðlaugsdóttur sé réttur. Auðvitað er söguefnið fyrir löngu orðið jafnhversdagslegt og dómkirkjan. Og það sem styrkir skilning frúarinnar á fröken Júlíu sem konu með nokkurn veginn

the central manifestations of which are, on the one hand, the idealization of women's domestic duties and, on the other, skepticism regarding women's capacity to work outside the home while fulfilling their roles as mothers at the same time.<sup>1118</sup>

It is to an extent incongruous that the economic formation that provides the grounds for the capital accumulation that makes lives of the sort led by the Kaldan family possible also incubates the destabilization or motivation that will threaten that same social existence. The traditions and social conventions the new middle class inherited were already being questioned at the same as the class itself was settling into place (essentially constructing a new social milieu), by the rise of the women's rights movement, for instance. An ideological conflict became palpable as the force that grounded the new world of family values, capitalism, revealed itself to be entirely disinterested in values, traditions, the heritage and the epistemology that defined women's nature and sexuality along the lines already discussed. "All that is solid melts into air," wrote Marx and Engels in an attempt to describe the fickle nature of this force.<sup>1119</sup> Already underway, therefore, was a confrontation between, on the one hand, a perspective on the world that grounded its values on traditions, conventions and essentialism and, on the other, the ideology of productivity, efficiency, growth, revenues and capital accumulation.

The values that Gæa represents at the beginning of the play are in other words a bad fit for the "rationality" and "requirements" of the new economic

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eðlilegu ástríðulífi, er hvorki meira né minna en orsakasamband verksins sjálfs, eins og í því liggur frá höfundarins hendi."

<sup>1118</sup> Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, *Nútímans konur*, pp. 80–81.

<sup>1119</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. Trans. by Samuel Moore. New York and London: Penguin, 2000, p. 223.

structure of capitalism. “The Angel in the House,” to reference the nineteenth century poem by Coventry Patmore that depicts an idealized picture of the selflessly devoted mother and submissive wife, did not satisfy the demands of capitalism for productivity, efficacy and consumption.<sup>1120</sup> The “angel in the house” was not a part of the economy, she did not contribute to its growth, and the fact that a large part of the production force and consumer population (women in other words) was, in effect, forcefully kept in such an unproductive position violated the core “values” of capitalism.<sup>1121</sup> As the nineteenth century progressed toward the twentieth, pressure grew, social strictures eased up, and soon enough women were streaming out of the home, the domestic sphere and the confines of the household and onto the labor market. An increasing number of women were afforded the opportunity of financial independence.<sup>1122</sup> Educational options grew as well and female suffrage was in sight.<sup>1123</sup>

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<sup>1120</sup> Coventry Patmore. “The Angel in the House.” Project Gutenberg: [http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4099?msg=welcome\\_stranger](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4099?msg=welcome_stranger)

<sup>1121</sup> This is however a considerable simplification because, as Joan W. Scott has pointed out, there is a long tradition of women engaging in work outside the home. In the wake of the industrial revolution and the increased demand for women to join the workforce, voices grew louder that maintained that women could not combine their duties as homemakers and work outside the home; the blame thus fell on factories and textile mills and the problem (in name at least) not the work as such but its location. Behind this of course lay the fear that traditional values and behavioral conventions would be destabilized and undergo change. Joan W. Scott. “The Woman Worker.” *A History of Women in the West IV. Emerging Feminism from Revolution to World War*. Ed. by G. Fraisse and M. Perrot. Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993, pp. 400–409.

<sup>1122</sup> It should be noted that the historical shift being discussed did not manifest itself to any notable degree in Iceland where women’s opportunities for financial independence remained highly limited in the nineteenth century.

<sup>1123</sup> The path towards educational reform was in some ways more complicated or ideologically riven than women’s move onto the factory floor. Machines could, where necessary, make up for physical strength but intellect was a whole another matter. Educational equality suggested an epistemological error in the male discourse on femininity, a flaw that reached back into antiquity but also, importantly, affected Enlightenment thinking as well as modern scientific thinking, that is, the position that women were fundamentally irrational and lagged far behind men in intellectual acuity. It is worth noting in this context that only a few years ago that the then president of Harvard, Lawrence Summers, stated that women were by nature less suited to the hard sciences. On that, see Michael Dobbs. “Harvard Chief’s Comments on Women Assailed.” *The Washington Post*, 19 January, 2005, p. A02

These historical currents did not of course bypass Iceland. In an article entitled “Tíðarandinn og búningur kvenna” (The Spirit of the Times and Women’s Clothing) and published in *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* in 1925, the author, clearly very upset, describes the way in which the outer appearance of women has changed in recent years. Particularly troubling are the “bob cut” and new fashions that show everything “bare and naked” and were therefore incontrovertible proof of women’s increased “promiscuity.”<sup>1124</sup> In light of the “unruliness” on show in the behavior of young women, the author of the article finds himself asking quite earnestly: “Are women going mad?”<sup>1125</sup> Among the reasons the unnamed author eventually proposes for the changing behavioral patterns of young women is the inefficacy, the sheer lack of manliness, of the young generation of men that were coming onto the scene, presumably pushing the author and his generation to the sidelines. What he sees, however, are enervated and pampered men, more feminine than rugged and, most importantly, they lack the energy to engage in the traditional manly “hunt” for women, leaving women with few choices. Incorporating “fashion” that renders them nearly nude is, according to this, a last ditch effort on behalf of the women to stir the blood of the young men of Reykjavík.

There is little doubt that the article should be read in conjunction with another article that was published shortly before in the same venue, *Morgunblaðið*, entitled “Drengjakollurinn og íslenska konan” (The Bob Cut and the Icelandic Woman) by Halldór Laxness. There, Laxness paints a picture of a

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<sup>1124</sup> “Tíðarandinn og búningur kvenna.” *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, 25 October, 1925, p. 5. In the original: “drengjakollinum,” “bert og nakið,” and “fjölyndi.”

<sup>1125</sup> “Tíðarandinn og búningur kvenna,” p. 5. In the original: “óreglu” and “Eru konur að ganga af göflunum?”

woman who is one with the modern era, a woman who revels in the opportunities afforded by modernity; she is willing to take on just the same jobs as men, she is interested in politics and culture. The modern woman, as depicted by Laxness, smokes, cuts her hair short and can not be bothered with anxious and convoluted conventions of yesteryear that used to determine how the sexes intermingled. Laxness is to a large extent concerned with female visibility; the modern woman takes to the public sphere without hesitation, works and enjoys her leisure hours in the urban milieu right beside the menfolk and is thus very noticeable, rather than modestly drawing back, she demands attention.<sup>1126</sup>

Women's short hair, the bobbed cut or the bob cut, became a symbol for an assortment of complex social and ideological shifts that were taking place. This explains the great number of articles written on the subject of women's hair in this period in Iceland by leading intellectuals and respected institutional functionaries. The frequency with which respectable men, not known for frivolous pursuits, penned articles on women's hair cuts is virtually unfathomable without this context. Novelist and playwright Guðmundur Kamban wrote a lengthy article, one whose horizon extended beyond the bob cut, entitled "Reykjavíkurstúlkan" (The Girl of Reykjavík) where he attempts to describe the new experiential world of the modern young woman in the capital and, at the same time, tries to defend the self-supporting woman who worked outside the home. He mentions that modernity entails a change in lived experience and social realities so enormous that they in a sense demanded of the "girl of

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<sup>1126</sup> Halldór Laxness. "Drengjakollurinn og íslenska konan." *Morgunblaðið*, 9 August, 1925, p. 5. The increased visibility of women in the modern urban environment in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the opening decades of the twentieth century is intimately tied to their new "mobilities" and the new consumer economy that was coming into being. Liz Connor, *The Spectacular Modern Woman. Feminine Visibility in the 1920s*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.

Reykjavík” that she make an existential “leap” into an unknown and unprecedented world, rendering her in all essentials unrecognizable afterwards. All these changes, radical and discomfiting as they might initially seem, were nevertheless an improvement for women, women gained important social experience and their horizons were widened immeasurably, as was the independence of the “girl of Reykjavík.”<sup>1127</sup>

A decade later Karl Strand described the “girl of Reykjavík” in an article in weekly magazine *Vikan* as happy *bon vivant*, “a challenging twinkle in her eye” and endowed with a new and freer attitude when it came to courtship and love.<sup>1128</sup> Not only men, needless to say, took up the issue of women’s rights in this period and the meaning of the shifts in social structures that were occurring, and what to make of the repercussions.

Among the pathbreakers were women like Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, perhaps the most important feminist of the decades around the turn of the century, and one might be tempted to venture that Bjarnhéðinsdóttir was the first to raise the issue of the “girl of Reykjavík” — or a closely corresponding figure — in the article “Nokkur orð um menntun og rjettindi kvenna” (A Few Words on the Education and Rights of Women), that appeared in *Fjallkonan* in 1885. There, Bjarnhéðinsdóttir takes up the issue of the “single woman” who is not made to “simply [...] be an ornament in a household, making no decisions of

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<sup>1127</sup> Guðmundur Kamban. “Reykjavíkurstúlkan.” *Eimreiðin*, 3/1929, p. 217. In the original: “stökk”.

<sup>1128</sup> Karl Strand. “Reykjavíkurstúlkan 1939.” *Vikan*, 2 February, 1939, p. 5. In the original: “ögrandi í augnaráði”.

her own and of no use to anyone.”<sup>1129</sup> When Laxness and Kamban published their articles in the 1920s, there was already a discursive tradition in place that constituted the background for their respective articles and gave them context, much as the magazine *19. Júní* exemplifies, a central venue for the discussion of issues relating to women, its politics radical and subject matter varied. It was founded in the 1910s.<sup>1130</sup>

In “Drengjakollurinn og íslenska konan,” Halldór Laxness staged a confrontation between the aforementioned “modern woman” and the more traditional representation of femininity whose defining feature was her “motherly calling” and the fact that “marriage” was of prime importance. One of the issues tackled directly in the essay is the contention that the home is the only abode that truly is in harmony with the nature of women.<sup>1131</sup> Controversially, Laxness stated that in the bourgeoisie home, the wife was the “the furniture that puts all the other furniture to shame.”<sup>1132</sup> In a radical ontological move, Laxness categorizes the wife along with the furniture that filled the home of the capitalist. On the one hand, Laxness illustrates the way in which, by viewing the wife as an ornament, she was in effect objectified, and, consequently, she became just one

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<sup>1129</sup> Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir. “Nokkur orð um menntun og rjettindi kvenna.” *Fjallkonan*, 22 June, 1885, pp. 44–45. In the original: “einhleypu konunni” and “til að vera einungis [...] skrautgrip[ur] inni í húsi, sem enga ákvörðun hefir og ekkert gagn getur gjört”.

<sup>1130</sup> *19. júní* ran from 1917–1929 and its most important backer was Inga Lára Lárusdóttir, teacher and municipality member in Reykjavík. See Herdís Helgadóttir. *Úr fjötrum. Íslenskar konur og erlendir her*. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2001, p. 31. The opposition to the views espoused in *19. Júní*, and articles such as the one by Laxness, was however widespread and it was commonly maintained that what people were witnessing was not progress but cultural decline, values were being undermined, the tradition and the past desecrated, and the heritage about to be lost — and the idea of women’s equality was largely to blame for all this. See Sigríður Matthíasdóttir. *Hinn sanni Íslendingur — þjóðerni, kyngervi og vald á Íslandi 1900–1930*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2004, pp. 121–143.

<sup>1131</sup> Laxness, “Drengjakollurinn og íslenska konan,” p. 5. In the original: “móðurlega köllun” and “hjólabandið”.

<sup>1132</sup> Laxness, “Drengjakollurinn og íslenska konan,” p. 5. In the original: “húsgagn húsgagnanna”.

more “thing” that “belongs” to the husband in much the same way as the cigar case, the library and the dining room table.

What makes Laxness particularly irate is the way in which the social complex quite happily shuffles the woman into her marriage home, usually straight from her parent’s home, without any substantial formal education (except in very narrow fields, strictly determined by ideology) and financially dependent, without the legal and civic rights and protections enjoyed by men. In this fashion she was subjugated to her husband by institutional factors, depending on him for her own fortunes as well as her children’s.

The opposing versions and images of femininity represented by Laxness in the essay on the bob cut — the respectable housewife and the modern woman — can be interpreted as symbolic for the internal strife discussed above, the conflict between opposing tendencies in the modern capitalistic society. The former, the housewife, is shaped by values whose history goes back centuries, although along with the industrial revolution came change to some of the aspects of this value system, the alterations even reaching certain core aspects, such as feminine sexual pleasure, as discussed above, but by and large things remained the same, the power relations and subservient situation of women didn’t change.

The latter, the modern woman, then reflects the radical nature of capitalism, women were an undervalued and underused resource and in order to gain a foothold to “activate” this particular social segment, scientific “knowledge” and religious edicts were pushed to the side. In *Straumrof* one might imagine that a similar binary was being posited between Gæa and Alda. Gæa criticizes her daughter’s liberal ways and sings the praises of the traditional role of women.



Alda on the other hand is perfectly at home in modernity; she parties, drinks and is in general highly interested in the leisure activities that modern culture has brought into being. She doesn't listen to her mother when she tries to stop her from socializing with Dagur Vestan, and as mentioned, their first date takes place in a car that Alda drives, suggesting a level of independence.

Later, in the hunting cabin, Alda also takes the family car for a leisurely overnight outing to town. Technology is therefore not gendered in a monolithic fashion in the play; what emerges however is that the structure of power and domination does not require the obvious oppression that would be involved in the direct and physical curtailment of women from civil society, mobility and the modern world; they are still, as Adorno and Horkheimer put it, "wholly encompassed by male logic," because modernity is a male enterprise.<sup>1133</sup> No matter Alda's familiarity with technology, her social horizon is mapped out from the very first by certain highly traditional social paradigms.

Up until his stay in the United States 1927–1929, Laxness tends to assume that in order to "liberate" Icelandic culture from the fetters of tradition and modernize society, it is necessary to get out from under the permanent social and economic stasis of the agrarian and farming culture that was still dominant and bring about a new system of values that was essentially in keeping with those elements that were driving the economic growth of industrialized and capitalist societies at the time: industrialization, urbanization, capital

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<sup>1133</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 87.

accumulation in order to financialize the economic system, the division of labor and specialization, competition and consumerism.<sup>1134</sup>

In the 1930s, however, Laxness does not only have a hard time accepting such a premise — these are postulates that were never made explicit in his writings but grounded them in a variety of ways and influenced his perspective on modernization — but he has turned on it wholeheartedly, repudiating almost that entire line of reasoning. When it comes to the social situation of women in modernity it may however be difficult to overlook or completely refute the above mentioned reading of history, in particular how the emergence of rationalization processes in the economic formation of the social structure seemed in some respects to provide the modern struggle for women's rights and equality with a solid social and economic foundation.

The depiction in *Straumrof* of a bourgeoisie family unit and the economic privilege enjoyed by the Kaldans is girded or infused by the text's struggle with the following paradox: How can it be that an economic order that subjugates the working classes may also be the motivating factor in a social struggle for justice and emancipation?<sup>1135</sup> The play makes the point that in fact the paradox is insoluble, at stake are two very distinct social forces and that the "alliance" of

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<sup>1134</sup> Magnús S. Magnússon. "Efnahagsþróun á Íslandi 1880–1990." *Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun 1880–1990: ritgerðir*. Ed. by Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Svanur Kristjánsson. Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands and Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1993, pp. 130–178.

<sup>1135</sup> It is necessary to note at this point that reasoning that underlies the above discussion represents a serious simplification of social and economic factors but also that the simplification is a conscious gesture and articulated in order to emphasize or isolate the fact that capitalistic logic did prove decisive in defeating elements of women's oppression that date back centuries and millennia. However, women and children remain to this day the underpaid workers of capitalism, frequently without rights or enjoying less protection than men. A system of social security is founded so that the workers can survive in their subjugation during lean years; women are brought out into the realm of work when it suits the forces of capitalism (not the women), as was the case during the Second World War. At stake is an immensely complex framework and the above discussion is not aiming to prove or illustrate the function of capitalism in any cohesive way, only point out a strictly demarcated aspect.

capitalism and the struggle of women for equality and rights did not as a matter of fact take place. Laxness manages to generate these meanings by enacting a radical shift in the progression of the play in the third act, where the tonal register of the text changes abruptly as do the narrative accentuations. The short circuit of the title does not only cut off the connection of the hunting lodge to the outer world and “civilization” but also the somewhat languid spirit that characterizes the play up until that point. What subsequently happens is something of an intellectual chess match or a duel of competing rationalities as represented by Gæa and Dagur — and beneath it all there are the distant rumblings of unconscious drives, distant but coming nearer.

The play’s depiction of capitalistic modernity will now be examined more closely and an interpretation of the conclusion of the play offered that combines social and psychoanalytical hermeneutic strategies. This allows the social critique that is embedded in the text to emerge. The ramifications of the fact that widely accepted social mores and values are challenged, primarily those that involve female sexual pleasure, will be discussed as will the fact that a clearly discernable streak of pessimism has replaced the optimism of Laxness’ 1920s writings on women’s rights. This will then also be tied into the text’s construction of technological modernity. Juggling these different themes, however, necessitates a brief excursion into the past, that is, we need to take a look at a segment of the play that as of yet is unmentioned but represents a highly significant and curious moment in the text, as well as carrying within itself remnants of a brutal and mythic past and bringing these right into the heart of modernity.

#### 6.4 *The Past: Enlightenment and Myth*

What needs to be added to the equation, following upon the above consideration of the automobile, speed and mobility, is the missing item in the binary pairing that endows technologies of modern transportation with a symbolic dimension, the conceptual “other” that allows for the rendering of the fast moving car as emblematic of modernity. The missing conceptual entity, it might be proposed, is immobility or stasis, and the related notion of isolation, which contrasts with the capacity of technologies of mobility to link places, people and communities.

These are issues that Laxness, as a matter of fact, is preoccupied with throughout the 1920s in his non-fiction writings, as the discussion of “Raflýsing sveitanna” in chapter two demonstrates. If we return briefly to the essay, we will recall that it describes a skiing trip that Laxness took through the remote eastern fjords and high country of the interior, and a night he spent in a desolate and utterly isolated cottage, a place closed off from all human contact during the depths of winter. Laxness presents the lives of the inhabitants as emblematic of the struggle for survival at its harshest. The invocation of the despair and miserable conditions that Laxness encountered were prefaced by a dramatic description of the physical feat involved in actually reaching it; Laxness’ life and his companion’s being at extreme risk, something that brings into relief the fact that the place is not merely isolated but literally lost to modernity.<sup>1136</sup> The almost unfathomable poverty of the cottage stands in stark contrast to the lodge

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<sup>1136</sup> The ideological stakes that underlie Laxness’ essay, in particular the debate he is obliquely engaged in with Sigurður Nordal, are discussed more fully in chapter 2.

owned by the Kaldan family, which exemplifies modern leisure and the freedom that inheres in untrammelled mobility, signaled by a road that conveniently — and even in the countryside — leads right up to the front door.<sup>1137</sup>

The godforsaken locale described in Laxness' essay and, particularly, the manner in which the cottage is figured as a throwback to another time or at least as something of a rogue presence in modernity, a symptom or remnant from a past that needs to be overcome, points to a very important moment in *Straumrof* where a similar "intrusion" of the past into the technological present is invoked through a supernatural folk tale related by Alda to Dagur. According to the story, a ghost haunts the lodge, a presence or spirit that, like so many of its kind, cannot find rest due an unredeemed historical injustice. Of note in this context are two things; the content of the ghost story, on the one hand, and, on the other, the method of its telling and reception. Dagur, for example, is supremely unimpressed by rural superstition, fitting, in a way, for an engineer and agent of modernity, and he seems inclined to shrug off the tale. It is clear that Alda is in for something of a hard time attempting to convince her agnostic listener. It is however her desire to do so that constitutes the initial surprise of the conversation, as it indicates that she herself, the modern woman whose wardrobe includes driving gloves, believes or is at least unable to dismiss the story, a reading that is supported by her last ditch effort to convince Dagur by noting that the haunting is accepted as a fact throughout that part of the countryside.

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<sup>1137</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, pp. 63–73.

When, still unconvinced, Dagur asks for more information, Alda recounts the story in full, which tells of a woman who lived on a farm where the hunting lodge now stands, alone with her child.

And then the famine came, as it always did in the old days, and there was nothing to eat except a fistful of grain that the old woman gathered from the grinder. So she killed the girl and baked a cake for herself out of the grain [...] when this was discovered she was hanged. And now she haunts the place.<sup>1138</sup>

Alda's concern to communicate the story and control its reception is not easy to explain, initially, except as, perhaps, an indicator of her desire to impress the older man. Once the thematic implications of the folk tale become clear, however, Alda's insistence is endowed retroactively with a degree of premonition; and the pressing need to tell Dagur — precisely him — becomes almost eerie. The tragic folk tale, furthermore, is imbued with several levels of meaning beyond its structural relationship to the ending of the play; one of which is the demystification of the cultural heritage when mediated through stories of rural yet cosmopolitan chieftains writing literary works of world historical importance. That is, the tale's depiction of lunacy and the shedding of any vestiges of humanity is far removed from national romantic models and presents a view of the past that emphasizes the poverty and miseries of the common people, an aspect of history usually left out of official accounts. Particularly important, as well, is the harshness of the disciplinary measures, as the lawgivers belong to the same elite social category as those who, later, are privileged enough to own a hunting lodge in the countryside — and on that very same spot.

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<sup>1138</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, pp. 21–22. In the original: “Það var þarna bær áður fyrri, það bjó þar kelling með krakka, sumir segja tvo, aðrir segja bara eina stelpu, og svo kom húngursneyðin einsog altaf áður fyrri, og það var ekkert til að éta, nema einn hnefi af mjöli sem kellingin sópaði saman úr kvörninni sinni. Og svo myrti hún stelpuna og bakaði köku handa sjálfri sér úr kvarnarsópinu, ég hef heyrt marga sveitamenn segja það, og þegar það komst upp var hún heingd. Og síðan geingur hún aftur.”

Indeed, constructing a place of leisure on a site of historical trauma is a symbolic gesture that can be read as an attempt to hide or rewrite the past. However, the remnant signifies that such rewriting is destined to fail, the past haunts the present and in its stubborn refusal to be relegated to the void of historical forgetting, it also stands in opposition to modernity, even as its negation in its “supernatural” aspect. It is significant therefore that among the structural dominants of the tale are the notions of immobility and stasis as well as isolation. Unlike Alda who leaves the lodge in the evening, driving away without trouble or hesitation, the mother in the story is bound in place, having nowhere to go.

The famine may have rendered travel futile, each place being as desperate as the one she would have been leaving, but the practical obstacles facing a mother with a child in a harsh terrain, one mostly without roads, bridges or shelter should not be overlooked. The isolation of the cottage is suggested by the implied time lapse between the crime and its discovery and the circular conception of history reflected in the cynical way in which the onset of the famine is described (“And then the famine came, as it always did”) is indicative of temporal stasis, as is the remnant itself, a ghost constituting a being that has come unstuck from time. In this context, furthermore, the hunting lodge becomes a liminal space. In one respect, much like Þingvellir in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* and “Júdit Lvoff,” it is connected to urban leisure, but it is also a place of radical uncertainty, in the mountains we find wild and untamed nature and the outer limits of civilization, where the past in the form of ghosts is retained.

There is another aspect of modern mobilities that is highly relevant in this context: technological communication media. Much like the speed of modern transportation technologies reconfigured spatial coordinates, the newly formed media “landscape” heralded a major cultural revolution, the radio constituting a unique breakthrough in terms of its wireless transmission of cultural content. Through electromagnetic radiation that traverses the globe and the all-encompassing invisibility of the delivery mechanism of modern mass media, radio constituted an absolutely unprecedented medium.<sup>1139</sup> It is important to note in this context that the action that literally sets the events of the play in motion is Loftur, the family patriarch, turning on the radio and the first words spoken on stage are a radio broadcast that emanates from the new technological communication device.

We also note that the stage directions that precede the commencement of the second act read as follows: “Hunting lodge. Radio telephone electricity”.<sup>1140</sup> This substantiates our earlier notion that the lodge occupies what could be termed a liminal space, connected through electricity and broadcast media to civilization but belonging as well to the wild and ungovernable, being ultimately perhaps outside the reach of the forces of sublimation that according Freud constitutes the safety valve of civilization. As the weather turns and the narration introduces a classic “McGuffin,” namely a loaded gun that references Chekov’s famous dictum, it becomes clear that the elements raging outside are intended to mirror the internal turmoil of the characters. That Gæa invokes the ghost story earlier recounted by Alda, just before Loftur retires, further amplifies

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<sup>1139</sup> Rod Giblett. *Sublime Communication Technologies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. x.

<sup>1140</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 57. In the original: “Veiðiskáli. Útvarp sími rafmagn”.



the ominous atmosphere and subtly indicates a connection between her and “Skotta” — the mother who killed her baby, a connection that the ending of the play bears out.

### ***7. “Radio, Telephone, Electricity,” or, The Discontents of Civilization***

One of the twentieth century’s best known theories about the relationship between modernity and capitalism is embedded in *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, 1905) by Max Weber. The question that grounds and motivates Weber’s text is why certain societies in the West found themselves virtually the lone agents to collect the benefits (exploit and harvest the riches) offered by processes of rationalization; processes that proved the impetus that moved these societies into positions of wealth and power in modernity — indeed, may even have brought about the “break” that we associate with modernity. Although Weber’s argumentation and his conclusions are not gendered, rather they are gender neutral, his famous metaphor that posits modernity as an iron cage can be turned into a useful hermeneutic tool in an analysis of Laxness’ play that pays particular attention to its gender dynamics.

As will be touched on below, it can even be maintained that of late it is not Weber’s intricate sociological analysis in the text, the way in which the breadth of his learning makes it possible to incorporate a wide variety of historical facts and collate significant moments of religious development in various places in Europe to offer in conclusion a hypothesis that responds to the question

articulated above and thus also to articulate the conceptual content of what he means by “the spirit of capitalism,” that captures the attention of scholars and modern readers, but a short passage near the end of the book where Weber looks ahead and reflects on the state of the capitalistic social formation in the historical moment of 1900. This passage, counting only a few pages, has turned out to be of equal interest as the preceding intricate scholarly framework, so arduously erected for our benefit. It is in this passage that Weber puts forward the aforementioned metaphor of the iron cage.

In a sense, Weber’s work features a protagonist, which is the white, Western male, and that the text’s “narrative” depicts how this representative figure managed to transcend a thousand-year-long struggle for survival, invariably brutal and bloody, as well as ignorance initially bred by lack of material means to observe and rationalize the world and then religion, as well as the seemingly endless historical stasis that makes all the centuries more or less alike, by activating and fully utilizing the human capacity for rational thinking, and to subsequently build cities, manage the forces of nature and, by and large, achieve for the aforementioned white, Western male a safe and rather comfortable existence.<sup>1141</sup>

At this point, the reader might be tempted to foresee a conclusion where the white, Western male subject, proud and erect, holds a victorious pose, celebrating himself and his achievements, contented and fulfilled knowing that

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<sup>1141</sup> The aspects of human culture that made this development possible was the historical happenstance that among a tiny segment of the European continental population during a particular but narrow window of opportunity, there was ascendant a mentality that made this population pocket open to and willing to try the “avant-garde” economic ideas subsequently known as capitalism.

the future will only be better. That however is not the case. Facing Weber at this point is a modernity that no longer represents the spirit of progress or lends its material aspect to be fashioned by the creative powers of human beings. In place of this modernity Weber describes a social structure that reifies the individual and makes him into a tiny and insignificant cog in a terrifyingly enormous machine, one whose entirety, function and purpose can no longer be grasped — this “machine” is therefore not only all-encompassing but also an all-powerful existential determinant, confining in its administrative discipline and strict control. This system is what Weber refers to as the “iron cage”.<sup>1142</sup>

In the historical trajectory that Weber attempts to come to terms with, a special emphasis is placed on the process whereby capitalism became the powerful force discussed above as it coalesced with the technological progress and scientism of the last two centuries.<sup>1143</sup> With the addition of mechanization and technological development, the aforementioned system, the modern economic order, is “perfected,” for Weber it becomes a “tremendous cosmos”.<sup>1144</sup> The new economic order, he continues, is “bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt.”<sup>1145</sup> This is also the moment when Weber signals the endpoint of Enlightenment ideals about the modern

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<sup>1142</sup> Max Weber. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. by Talcott Parsons. London and New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 181.

<sup>1143</sup> Something of the “chicken and the egg” dilemma presents itself here; technology and science made the forces of capitalism immensely more powerful than previously while it is of course also the case that the capital accumulation and rational “goals” put forward by capitalistic agents that spurred technological development.

<sup>1144</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 181.

<sup>1145</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 181.

subject as an independent, rational agent that to an extent is self-fashioned and whose possibilities of progress and development are limitless. This subject has disappeared, in its stead there is the prisoner of the iron cage, a subject that is tied to system imperatives from the moment it enters the world to the moment it leaves it.

That modernity should be posited as a prison or a cage where the bars are invisible speaks closely to the social consciousness of *Straumrof*. There is a sense in which a certain sense of the future infuses the text, as if the events on stage were not quite taking place in the “present” but rather some unspecified, near future. This particular feeling given off by the text can be termed “futurity” and its central characteristic is that the modernization processes and projects that Laxness discussed in the 1920s in his non-fiction all seem to have come to pass, which they of course had not, if we take a look at historical reality. “Víðvarpið” (radio) is commonplace, the Kaldan family having a broadcast reception set at their home in Reykjavík as well as in the hunting lodge; the provinces have been electrified. The lack of a transportation network along the coastline and in the interior or, really, just outside of Reykjavík, that played such a large role in Laxness’ modernization writings has not only been rectified but its state is beyond the wildest dreams of even the most optimistic of engineers in the 1920s and 1930s as paved roads have apparently become so widespread that a lane even reaches the front door of the hunting cabin, or so it is strongly suggested.

Young single women like Alda go for joy rides in the capital and can stay out for an entire night without everything hitting the roof. In spite of all this, *Straumrof* does not really paint a picture of the free, educated, technologically

savvy and prosperous world that the ideals of the Enlightenment called for, as well as Laxness proselytizing for modernization did in the 1920s. The technological mobility of modernity, automobiles and travels, in Iceland and abroad, to give a few examples from the play, do not as a matter of fact have their corresponding elements in the social reality and diegesis of the play. And this lack is of the utmost significance. The social experience mediated by the narrative expresses nothing so much as stasis and immobility. This is the gendered dimension of the play that reveals the promises of modernization and capitalism to be empty — as well as drawing together the present of the play and the mythic past invoked through the legend of Skotta. The differences prove less than one may at first assume.

It is interesting that ever since the initial run of the play in the 1934, commentators have noted the affinities between *Straumrof* and the theoretical apparatus of psychoanalysis. Shortly after the premier Ragnar Kvaran wrote an article where he maintains that the very epicenter of the work is to be found in its thematization of the unconscious and he furthermore points out that *Straumrof* is the first Icelandic play to directly invoke and present on stage psychoanalytic thinking.<sup>1146</sup> This is quite true and the play's dialogue with psychoanalysis is oftentimes made quite explicit and brought to the surface of the text in almost a playful manner, as is the case when Loftur says at one point that ghosts are nowhere to be found "except within oneself," a statement that is loaded with psychoanalytic resonances, particularly in terms of how psychoanalysis does not really believe the past is ever past, it cannot be

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<sup>1146</sup> Ragnar E. Kvaran, "Straumrof", p. 3. Peter Hallberg agrees with this reading in *Hús skáldsins* and although scholarly engagement with the play is meager to say the least, it is safe to posit that the connection to Freud forms a certain key reference point in interpretations of the text.

forgotten, exorcised or transcended in a conclusive fashion; everything is stored away in the timeless archive of the unconscious, from where the remnants of past experiences, thoughts and dreams “haunt” the conscious mind in strange ways.<sup>1147</sup> Later, speaking the exact same register, Dagur notes that “Our personality, that’s just ripples on the surface, the rest is the deep itself.”<sup>1148</sup> But while these general observations invite one to approach Freud’s great creation at really any point, the part of the psychoanalytic theoretical apparatus that interests us belongs to Freud’s late works, the metapsychological edifice that he erected in his last works — our eyes even drift towards one of his very last works — because there we find ruminations that are reminiscent of the thinking behind Weber’s image of the iron cage.

### 7.1 “We Can Only Welcome Death as a Deliverer.”

In *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (Civilization and its Discontents, 1930), Freud links the battleground of the psyche with the sociological environment of modernity and points out that ideals of freedom and the desire for pleasure and the release of the pent-up demands of the drives (desire that is brought into being through a conjunction of cognitive and unconscious processes) is bound to enter into an ever more antagonistic relationship with social and ethical disciplinary mechanisms as culture progresses along its modernizing trajectory and gets ever more complicated, intricate, bureaucratized, computerized. The necessity to repress and sublimate and disguise the energy of the unconscious

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<sup>1147</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 57. In the original: “nú hvergi nema í sjálfum manni”.

<sup>1148</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 122. In the original the passage reads: “Okkar eigin persónuleiki, það eru bara gárar á yfirborðinu, afgangurinn er djúpið sjálf.”

becomes ever more pressing as civilization grows more civilized, the social clockwork more complicated and the disciplinary systems more effective. The breathing space of the individual, his room to maneuver along some sort of a free mental or spiritual plane as well as to navigate a material existence that does allow for desire and its release, all this shrinks in modernity, even the space necessary for the basic growth to maturity becomes administrated and stunted.

The sublimation required, the repression demanded, the deferral that is necessary, eventually these actions of the conscious and preconscious mind lose their original purpose (building shelter, growing corn, gathering reserves, not making enemies, constructing aqueducts, managing a pizzeria), all of which was indeed for the benefit of the individual and the species, and turn into a caricature of themselves, simply reproducing the structures that brought them into existence in the first place. The discontent that is then produced becomes so powerful that Freud links it directly to the death drive: “when one surveys the aims of cultural endeavor and the means it employs, one is bound to come to the conclusion that the whole effort is not worth the trouble, and that the outcome of it can only be a state of affairs which the individual will be unable to tolerate.”<sup>1149</sup> So intolerable will the situation actually become, according to Freud, that a moment may come to pass, indeed, much sooner than we can imagine, when “we can only welcome death as a deliverer.”<sup>1150</sup> Weber’s iron cage has in Freud’s handling been transformed into the cell where a condemned prisoner awaits his execution.

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<sup>1149</sup> Sigmund Freud. *Civilization and its Discontents*. Trans. by J. Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961, p. 111.

<sup>1150</sup> Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, p. 41.

When one considers the intensely argued and often fierce history of modernity critiques that constitute a significant part of the work done in the humanities in the twentieth century, critiques that focus on structures of power, instrumental rationality, technoscience and the dominance of capitalism and whose “source” ranges from the Frankfurt School to poststructuralism, it becomes clear that the footprints of Weber are discernable throughout, no less so than is the case with psychoanalysis. It is of utmost importance, however, to keep in mind that these discourses are significantly gendered, being produced nearly entirely by men and bound to the experiential world of the masculine.

The question thus raises its head, almost by necessity, whether the purview and function of the administrative and disciplinary mechanisms that are in place, the moments when they exert brute force and the other times when interpellation and ideology are sufficient, not to mention institutionalized attitudes and the attitudes of institutions, as well as public policy, do appear in a different guise for men than they do for women, whether they function differently for men than women, even if for the sole reason that that the whole edifice, Weber’s “system” and “order,” are constructed by men? And this despite the fact nobody may as a matter of fact have an overview of the system as it developed in late modernity, nobody can offer a coherent picture or, indeed, see the coherence in the “order,” and everybody is subject to its steering mechanisms.

The answer seems, obviously, to be yes. If men, the sex holding all the threads of power in the world, and is at present in ownership of 98% of the world’s wealth, if man (and men) are nevertheless the subject of nefarious



ideological structures that shape and construct subjectivity to an extent that justifies the “iron cage” metaphor, then one might well assume that the yoke and oppression that are brought to bear on women are virtually intolerable and unthinkable, bordering on enslavement where the mask of civilization has bent taken off and brute force stands revealed.<sup>1151</sup> In their articulation of the dialectic of enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer address the gendering of social power dynamics, and the description below of the logic at stake in such a configuration speaks to the issue raised above, the gendering of the iron cage:

The instrument by means of which the bourgeoisie had come to power, the unfettering of forces, universal freedom, self-determination — in short, enlightenment — turned against the bourgeoisie as soon as that class, as a system of rule, was forced to suppress those it ruled [and this explains] the hatred of woman [...] who bears the mark of domination on her brow. [Women] live, although they could be eliminated, and their fear and weakness, the greater affinity to nature produced in them by perennial oppression, is the element in which they live.<sup>1152</sup>

The “system of rule,” the vast modern apparatus of bureaucracy and state power that constitutes the building materials of the iron cage, as well as the repressive

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<sup>1151</sup> In light of the gendering of the iron cage, it is tempting to simply try to come up with a new metaphor to describe the female experience of the cage, or the feminine version of the cage. The suggestion presented here is the Death Star garbage compactor in the first *Star Wars* movie. As readers may recall, the walls of the garbage disposal space start quite unexpectedly, if also slowly, to move in on the heroes, threatening to crush them to death. The deadly trash compactor may be viewed as gendered counterpart to Weber’s iron cage as it captures the essential difference between female and male experiences of structural and institutionalized oppression, in the case of the former, the chances are much higher that the mechanisms employed will turn out to be deadly. This becomes obvious when any statistical analysis on crimes against women are examined and it really is no surprise that Marilyn French, in her book of the same name, speaks of a global war against women. See Marilyn French. *The War Against Women*. New York: Summit Books, 1992. At the current moment, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has officially designated the institutionalized efforts underway in the US to reign in women’s liberties, curtail efforts underway to expand those liberties, and, most seriously, negate the victories already won as a “war on women”: “The “War on Women” describes the legislative and rhetorical attacks on women and women’s rights taking place across the nation. In includes a wide-range of policy efforts designed to place restrictions on women’s health care and erode protections for women and their families. Examples at the state and federal level have included restricting contraception; cutting off funding for Planned Parenthood; state-mandated, medically unnecessary ultrasounds; abortion taxes; abortion waiting periods; forcing women to tell their employers why they want birth control, and prohibiting insurance companies from including abortion coverage in their policies.” “War on Women.” (<https://www.aclu.org/blog/tag/war-women> — retrieved on 19 June).

<sup>1152</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 73, 88,

regimes that structure the “discontent” spoken of by Freud, imprison in the end the architects of the system and their descendants, but the fate envisioned by Weber and expounded by the first generation of the Frankfurt School is incomplete unless it is gendered; thus the importance of the second half of the quote. The systematic, cross-cultural, atemporal warfare conducted against women in all cultures is best described as hatred; the existential element assigned to women is “fear”.

To briefly invoke Calinescu and his notion of the two modernities, the artists he discusses and rebelled so romantically if hopelessly against modernity, just to give an example, focused to a large degree on the experiential crisis and existential constraints imposed by modernity on men — from Stendhal we move to Baudelaire to Joyce and the male modernists — while the obvious fact would seem to be that men, holding all the social power, had a considerably easier time managing its “intolerable” contradictions than did women who, in a manner of speaking, were the subjects of the subjects of modernity. In a particularly suggestive moment in *Straumrof*, Laxness manages to, if not encapsulate the thinking outlined above, to at least touch on many of its core elements when Dagur, late in the play, says to Gæa that “We are back in the middle of the world that has been built by men [...] we must submit to the laws of men.” This is meant by Dagur to be comforting.

Freud’s theoretical edifice is known for a male bias and a very troubling relationship with feminine psychology, and many failed and flawed attempts to get to grips with the psychic development and maturation processes of girls and women, although this would change with time. It is nevertheless useful to keep

in mind that most of Freud's best-known case histories deal with women, a fact that is perfectly in accordance with his own findings.

In turn of the century Vienna, given the repressive mechanisms in place to shape, control and define femininity, women would naturally be more in need of his assistance, he often stated, than men. And his conclusions, although therapies were often not quite concluded but rather brought to a halt before the psychoanalyst was satisfied that the process was finished, involved a paradigm shift from the scientific findings of his contemporaries and predecessors, not to mention figures such as Krafft-Ebing. Freud would thus, for example, note that "pathological nymphomania," rather than being a symptom of hysteria as that concept was previously understood and made manifest in obsessive and promiscuous sexual behavior, should be understood and treated with reference to the social repressive functions that crippled women as sexual beings, pathologizing their sexual nature and holding aloft ideals of frigid and ethereal femininity, totally disinterested in carnal behavior. The root of the disease, therefore, was to be found in the social environment of the patient and the disease itself was linked to specific and unique, and unconscious, adaptation processes that the harried psychological apparatus marshaled forth in order to survive. Rachel Bowlby puts it well when she notes that the "conventional social structure makes femininity a difficult goal to achieve for women".<sup>1153</sup>

In the third act of *Straumrof*, Gæa faces the bars of the iron cage. In the morning, Gæa expresses her wish to remain in the cabin with Dagur, to not to return to the urban environment of Reykjavík and her prior existence and

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<sup>1153</sup> Rachel Bowlby. "Still Crazy After All These Years." *Feminisms*. Ed. by S. Kemp and J. Squires. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 262.

commitments, indeed, her refutation of the bourgeoisie realities that determined her life prior to the tryst with Dagur is drastic and unambiguous: “What was my parlor at home? A calcified grave.”<sup>1154</sup> Prompting Gæa’s denouncement is Dagur’s question whether, should they remain together in the countryside, she wouldn’t “miss her pretty parlor,” the tenor of which indicates a degree of condescension, with Dagur also failing to grasp the extent to which, on the one hand, their union has impelled Gæa to rethink her life and, on the other, how the process of “rethinking her life” seems to simply involve expressing aloud resentments that have lain dormant but were never entirely out of mind, never completely repressed.<sup>1155</sup> Unlike Gæa, Dagur is ready to return to their “normal” lives, seeing the night they spent together as a counterpart of the electrical outage, a momentary short circuiting of the “grid” of normalcy that structures their lives:

What happened last night [...] is nature in its most perfect and original nakedness [...] beyond the laws of all of man’s civilized customs [...] shortly however the electricity will be back on again. And the telephone. And the radio. We are back in the middle of the world that has been built by men [...] we must submit to the laws of men ...<sup>1156</sup>

Of central importance in the above speech is the notion of return — the return to a world that has been “built” or made by men and, furthermore, that submitting to the value system that goes hand in hand with this world, infuses it as a matter of fact, is absolutely necessary. For Dagur this may not seem all that problematic a proposition; the lack of gender equality favors him and so, in his case, submitting to “the laws of men,” implies the free use of the technologies that

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<sup>1154</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 109. In the original: “Hvað var setustofan mín heima? Kölkuð gröf.”

<sup>1155</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 109. In the original: “Þú heldur þú myndir ekki *sakna fallegu setustofunnar þinnar* — heima?”

<sup>1156</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 121. In the original: “Það sem kom fyrir í nótt [...] er náttúran í sinni fullkomnu og upprunalegu nekt [...] handan við lögmál allra mannlegra siða [...] innan skamms er rafmagnið aftur komið í samband. Og síminn. Og útvarpið. Við erum aftur stödd mitt í þeim heimi sem hefur verið byggður upp af mönnum [...] við verðum að játast undir mannleg lög [...]”

afford man domination over nature, something that is suggested by his ease of association with markers of modernity such as the automobile and thus social mobility, in addition to the building of wharves. What faces Gæa on the other hand is at best to pick up where she left off and go back to an existence that is structurally designed to limit her choices and keep her enclosed, a prisoner of the domestic sphere, and she has already condemned as a fake, artificial life that unforgivably confines and restricts her existential freedom. To be rejected by her daughter and ostracized by polite society is a more probable fate, furthermore.

The Freudian paradigm discussed in *Civilization and its Discontents* clearly underpins the passage quoted above. Man's nature is constantly subject to the pull of the instincts whose immediate gratification is demanded at all times; this cauldron of appetite and desires being a remnant of his primal animal existence, the grounds of the biological life-force that manifests itself in the command for reproduction, as well as the wellspring of psychic energies whose sublimation constitutes the grounds of civilization. What is striking, however, is the way in which Freud's conceptualization of an irreconcilable tension is given a significant twist, one that might at first seem to play into a clichéd tradition of gendered representations with the man being aligned with civilization and technology (invoking here the telephone and electricity and the radio as virtual lifelines out of an untenable situation) while Gæa, as her name suggests, is associated with and finds her refuge in nature and wants to remain there.

If the narration is viewed in its totality, however, such an essentialist reading quickly gives way to the culturalist view, one that suggest that Laxness, while staying within the Freudian paradigm of the timelessness and ahistoricity

of the unconscious, is thematizing its regulatory mechanisms in a gendered context. That, in fact, a central concern of the play is to illustrate the way in which the rationalizing, capitalistic and bureaucratic structures that Weber attempts to capture in his metaphor of the “iron cage” and constitute the social ordering that Freud sees as grounding civilization and motivating the vicissitudes of the instincts, constitute male and female subjectivities in a radically different fashion.

Gæa’s critique of bourgeoisie values grows more heated and radical as the conversation/debate/argument/confrontation continues and develops. The economic privilege that Gæa had enjoyed now stands revealed as just another form of capitalistic power mechanisms and ideological indoctrination. What do her riches now mean to her? “I was buried alive beneath all this useless material garbage. No, I was dead. I was a rotting corpse in an ornamented grave.”<sup>1157</sup>

Gæa is perfectly aware of the choices she faces but at the same time she rejects their grounding assumptions. Her awareness of this is reflected in the way in which her supposedly “hysterical” tirade is in fact precisely analytical, focusing on social structures of propriety, ethics and acceptable behavior that reflect nothing so much as the vested interest and domination of the patriarchy, designating the “laws” invoked by Dagur as “false, vain behavioral conventions,” and, continuing to bring Dagur’s lofty idealist rhetoric down to the ground of material reality and gender power relations, offering the following summary: “You would think that I recognize this civilized society of yours, which you [men] have founded all around me, and demands nothing of me except that I

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<sup>1157</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 121. In the original: “Ég var kviksett undir þessu rusli. Nei, ég var dauð. Ég var rotið hræ í þessari skrautlegu gröf.”

move around with my eyes closed and that I lie lie lie [...] But I will, I shall tear this web of lies into pieces.”<sup>1158</sup> When it comes to critiques of modernity, men who complain of the iron cage are amply represented; the figure of Gæa however stands for women’s dependence on men in all spheres of life, a gendered iron cage of which Dagur Vestan is oblivious.

The web of lies that Gæa threatens/promises to tear to pieces is also in a sense Weber’s iron cage, all the mechanisms that come together to construct and structure femininity and endow its various dimensions, features, aspects, and corporeal functions with meanings can be summarized in that single word: “lies”. Gæa’s anger is directed against a social structure that values women so little that in order to relieve their birth home of their presence by catapulting them into marriage, it was (and still is in many places) traditional to offer a sizable payment to go along with the clearly not very valuable girl (dowry).

For thousands of years, medical opinion held that women’s cognitive faculties were under the sway of their physiology, especially the vagina and uterus. An important facet of what Gæa now rejects, what she rebels against, is not to have sovereignty over her own body, particularly when it comes to sex and sexuality and with whom she wants to share her body; that it should be someone else who has “power over it” as she puts it, with reference to her husband.<sup>1159</sup> “Civilized” society,” as Freud points out, demands that drives be repressed and an unconscious randomly searching cathexis stopped in its tracks, but in the case of women, the ideology was radicalized, made into a brutal device

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<sup>1158</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, pp. 126–127. In the original: “Ætli ég ætti ekki að þekkja þetta siðaða mannfélag ykkar, sem þið hafið stofnað alt í kringum mann, og einnski krefst af mér annars en gánga með lokuð augun og ljúga ljúga ljúga [...] En ég skal, skal rífa í tætlur þann lygavef.”

<sup>1159</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 110. In the original: “ef einhver þykist eiga rétt yfir mér, yfir mínu lífi, mínum líkama”.

of ideological violence, the sex drive itself was banished from the realm of feminine values. All this plays into the ideological framework that Gæa rejects in the third act.

Dagur's reluctance to stay in the cabin and that, in fact, he is not only eager to re-enter civilization but that he is also going to go back to her daughter reveals to Gæa that she is now for all practical purposes engaged in a rivalry with Alda for the affections of her fiancée. The conflict that thus arises is employed to articulate the sensitive subject of feminine sexuality, starting off with the classic binary of women being categorized according to their sexual experience. Dagur thus describes Alda as an "innocent and lovely child" while Gæa becomes in the course of the conversation a "shameless hussy" who "deserves to be whipped."<sup>1160</sup> Dagur furthermore indicates that he plans to admit his indiscretion to Alda, trusting "our cause to her judgment," as he puts it.<sup>1161</sup>

## 7.2 *Bourgeoisie Apocalypse*

The thought that her daughter is about to be made privy to her transgression, in conjunction with what initially may be jealousy aroused by the way in which Dagur speaks of Alda, Gæa commences on a sexual diatribe directed against her daughter, intending to undermine the image of Alda as an "innocent," but repelling Dagur in the process. While the incidents described by Gæa vary in nature and seriousness, most adhere to a realist framework in that they appear neither impossible nor necessarily made-up but, rather, might be construed as

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<sup>1160</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 124, 131. The two passages read: "Alda er næstum barn. Saklaust og elskulegt barn." "Blygðunarlausu kvensnift! Þú ættir skilið að verða húðstrýkt!"

<sup>1161</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 123. In the original: "að við játum fyrir henni það sem hefur gerst, að við leggjum málstað okkar undir hennar dóm."



accidents (running past a stranger not fully clothed when a child) or expressions of natural curiosity (teenage fumbblings), but portrayed in the most negative fashion possible.

Significant is not so much the precise content of representation offered by Gæa of her daughter but, on the one hand, that by articulating female sexuality in a negative register she slides, apparently without noticing it, into the framework of the discourse initiated by Dagur, namely the celebration of feminine virtue and sexual inexperience and, on the other, the projection of adult sexualized intent on minor and inconsequential episodes from the past indicates her own sexual frustration. Indeed, the intensity of her happiness after the night spent with Dagur and her subsequent critique of the rules of female propriety, discussed above and which include, in addition, a direct mention of the double standard of which Dagur is the literal embodiment, positing sexual profligacy as acceptable for men but forbidden to women, all serve to bring sex and sexual repression to the foreground.

The lack of female agency in the expression of sexuality is thus a central issue in the dramatic conflict of the play, as well as constituting a metaphorical dimension that grows into a consistent pattern; physical relations between Gæa and her husband in a loveless marriage are articulated as “death” — the lack of sensation in other words — with one of the most grievous wrongs done by Loftur against her, as noted above, being his assumption of ownership over her body. The experience of physical fulfillment with Dagur, on the other hand, is

compared the experience of emerging from the darkness into the sun, a “sun that must never set,” a subtle reference to the implications of Dagur’s name.<sup>1162</sup>

As the argument grows more heated and their relations descend from bad to worse, Alda arrives but before she can run into Dagur’s arms, her mother grabs a hunting rifle and fires, hitting and killing Alda. At this point the electricity comes back on, the telephone starts to ring and the radio is turned on. The third and final broadcast of the play ensues:

... and is considered one of the greatest stock market swindles in history. Slim down on Rúga. The government has announced that the Russian halfwit Laborsky was granted a particular honor when by being beheaded by a tuxedoed official, instead of being hanged. Drink the milk of the Unity. According to the latest reports the earthquakes in Behar turned the city of Púsa into rubble. Tens of thousands lie buried alive in the ruins. The holy river is spotted with corpses. Lead a healthy life — eat fish.<sup>1163</sup>

The third broadcast again picks up on the same news items as had featured in the first two. The noticeably unpersuasive interpretation of Laborsky’s execution serves yet again to demonstrate how the media functions as an ideological apparatus while the endless iteration of the same advertisements suggest in whose interest the news is manipulated. Reportage of the stock swindle continues, and the play concludes with an almost apocalyptic scenario where cities have been reduced to rubble and rivers are strewn with bodies, which is then juxtaposed with a final commercial imperative. That it should be the commercial imperative that closes the play indicates that the promise of

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<sup>1162</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 113. In the original: “Og nú höfum við fundið hvort annað — í þessum sólargeisla. Þessi sól má aldrei ganga undir.”

<sup>1163</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 138. In the original the passage reads: “... og er talin ein stófeldasta verðbréfafölsun sem sögur fara af. Horið ykkur á Rúga. Ríkisstjórnin hefur látið það boð út ganga að hinum rússneska hálfvita Laborsky hafi verið auðsýndur sérstakur heiður með því hann var hálhöggvinn af kjólklaeddum embættismanni, í stað þess að vera heingdur. Drekkid mjólk Einíngarinnar. Samkvæmt síðustu fregnum hafa jarðskjálftarnir í Behar jafnað við jörðu gervalla borgina Púsa. Tugir þúsund manna liggja kviksettir í borgarrústunum. Fljótið Helga er krökt af líkum. Lifið heilbrigðu lífi — borðið fisk.”

pleasure, always embedded in the address of capitalistic consumer culture but never firmly anchored to any single product and therefore false, has been abandoned and the true face of capitalism stands revealed as subjugation. Similarly, Gæa's last act symbolizes the discontent that inheres in civilization where desire, especially female desire, must be denied, repressed or sublimated.

The conclusion of the play must be read in light of the ideas and ideological systems that have been discussed above, particularly in the context of the repression of female sexuality and the "intolerable" nature of the iron cage. Gæa realizes just how drastic the repercussions will be for her "misstep"; the disciplinary systems are much more active and strict when it comes to women than men, as is evidenced by the fact that after having condemned Gæa Dagur Vestan simply plans to return to his former life and previous plans to marry Alda. It is in this context that the subversive defiance manifested in Gæa giving herself over to sexual desire becomes of pivotal importance as, ultimately, it represents not "love" or the beginning of a new relationship with Dagur but Gæa's discovery of the ideological misprision that has covered her body, keeping her sexuality a secret from her, that is, she discovers her body and her sexuality, which in the context of the symbolic register of the play has enormous connotative potential.

It is this that brings about a new perspective for Gæa on her life and social existence. It is as if the film of routine and convention had been torn from her eyes and once that has happened, once such a step has been taken, there is no going back; Gæa cannot return to her previous subjugated state, lose her independence and once again be objectified within an economic structure that

transforms the housewife into the “the furniture that puts all the other furniture to shame”.

Bourgeoisie reality is in a sense dissolved in the final movement of the play. The “father” — the symbolic manifestation of societal power and the patriarchy — has passed away and for just the briefest moment one might imagine that there was a crack in the façade of the patriarchy and the possibility of a different existence seemed to present itself to Gæa. This proved to be illusory. Gæa has burned all her bridges. Alda was extremely important to Gæa, and she devoted herself to preparing her daughter for the social role assigned to her. Now however it seems certain that her relationship with her daughter will be ruined and at the same time Gæa realizes that the path that awaits Alda (marriage, child rearing, the family home) is far from being the guarantee of happiness and security that she once supposed. Furthermore, that life is founded on values that are an ideological contraption and “a web of lies”. Gæa is faced with the prospect of her daughter repeating her own trajectory of a loveless and suffocating marriage (knowing of course that her future husband has already cheated on her), and becoming in Gæa’s words an “embalmed corpse” in opulent living arrangements.

Freud made a point of expressing how, faced with insoluble contradictions, the moment might come when death took on the guise of a deliverer. In a night-long *Furor uterinus* Gæa let go of the repressive conditions that framed her existence without however realizing that society’s power structures could not be shifted or altered so easily, deviation from rules of female propriety was a punishable offense, and she would be punished. She is lost. What

she faces is ruination. But instead of killing herself, Gæa's desperate last act — this now taking place in a highly symbolic register — is directed against her heir, the one who is supposed to replace her in the reproduction of the iron cage and her final act, therefore, we may read as a symbolic way to bring her world to an end, it's a bourgeoisie apocalypse. And at the end the reader should also be reminded of the myth of Skotta and how they share an unthinkable responsibility but the act of violence and insanity they committed reflects social conditions that are themselves violent and as a matter of fact hardly sane.

### ***8. The Culture Industries Revisited***

As has already been discussed, the American film industry became emblematic in Laxness' writings of a certain type of cultural and economic imperialism, something that is very much in evidence throughout the thematic patterning of *Silfurtúnglið* (The Silver Moon, 1954), which sees Laxness engage more directly with the logic of the culture industry than he had at any point since his émigré years. The play leaves little doubt as to its stance towards heavily financialized cultural production for a mass audience, so it is somewhat ironic that it should have become the basis for the first large scale Icelandic film adaptation of Laxness' works.<sup>1164</sup>

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<sup>1164</sup> The first film adaptation of Laxness' work took place as early as 1954 when Swedish director Arne Mattsson directed *Salka Valka*, a film based on the two volume novel of the same name. Subsequently it would be German television productions that brought Laxness' works to life in front of the camera. In 1973 *Brekkukotsannáll* was filmed by Rolf Hådrich and seven years later the same director tackled *Paradísarheimt* (*Paradise Reclaimed*, 1960). It should be noted that earlier in 1978, Hrafn Gunnlaugsson completed another film adaptation of a work by Laxness, *Lilja*, a short subject perhaps most notable for Laxness' own strangely hypnotic voice-over narration. Hrafn Gunnlaugsson's 1978 two and half hour TV adaptation of *Silfurtúnglið* can also be seen as a central precursor to the first stirrings of an Icelandic film industry. For more on the incipient Icelandic film industry, the role of literature in endowing the fledgling medium with a

Twenty years on the nose passed between Laxness' theatrical debut and his second play. The immense success of the theatrical adaptation of his novel *Íslandsklukkan* in 1950 may have spurred him to action in terms of playwriting but when *Silfurtúnglið* opened in 1954, Laxness has already situated himself as the nation's premier author, indeed, his "shadow," to reference a concept that was discussed in the introduction, has grown to immense proportions by this point. In a way, *Gerpla* (The Happy Warriors, 1952) is the work that shot Laxness up among the stars and into the literary horizon, the ambition was so immense, the difficulty of the project so palpable, and yet he brought it off. *Gerpla* is based on two major Old Icelandic Sagas, *Fóstbræðrasaga* (The Saga of the Sworn Brothers) and *Ólafs saga helga* (Saint Olaf's Saga) by Snorri Sturluson, yet it is not a historical novel in any conventional sense.<sup>1165</sup> "I had a rule not to normally use any words that could be proven not to have existed in Icelandic in the eleventh century,"<sup>1166</sup> Laxness notes describing the unique language and style of the novel. "[A]n experiment in language, an intertextual and metafictional adventure that defies the laws of realism," writes Ástráður Eysteinnsson when describing the *Gerpla's* textuality and formal features.<sup>1167</sup>

The style of *Gerpla* represents a serious attempt to invent a new literary language, midway between the modern area and ancient times. Laxness spent years getting tone and language right, and engaged like never before the help of his friend Jón Helgason, at the time one of the world's foremost experts on the

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modicum of cultural capital, and Laxness adaptations more broadly, see Björn Ægir Norðfjörð's unpublished Ph.D dissertation, *Icelandic Films* (University of Iowa, 2005).

<sup>1165</sup> An early reflection on the relation of *Gerpla* to the genre of the historical novel is to be found in Sverrir Kristjánsson. "Harmleikur hetjuskaparins." *Helgafell*, 4/1952.

<sup>1166</sup> Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, p. 566.

<sup>1167</sup> Ástráður Eysteinnsson. "Icelandic Prose Literature, 1940–1980." *A History of Icelandic Literature. Vol. 5 of Histories of Scandinavian Literature*. Ed. by Daisy Neijmann. Lincoln and London: The University Press of Nebraska, 2006, p. 418.

Icelandic literary heritage and the Icelandic language, to painstakingly rake through every sentence, every word, with a fine tooth comb to see if it fulfilled the criteria mentioned above and perhaps more importantly, all that the Laxness quote implies rather than says about the seriousness with which he undertook the writing from a technical/scholarly point of view. This was not postmodern playfulness, ironic appropriation, although the novel is ironic, and one should never be overly hasty in dismissing postmodern pyrotechnics as non-serious. Indeed, it functions in a variety of registers, irony being one, but *Gerpla* is also very funny and incredibly irreverent and critical towards its medieval models, and as the brutal adventures of the two vikings, Þorgeir Hávarsson and Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld, are recounted, the modern sensibility of the author, his abhorrence of what used to be considered a heroic deed (hacking down unarmed peasants) quite clear.

The method employed by Laxness invited direct comparisons between his work and the Sagas, a quick way to commit literary and career suicide one would think. Gunnar Gunnarsson's cycle of historical novels, to give a point of comparison, which deal with the settlement of Iceland and subsequent historical events read exactly like historical novels are expected to read, if very naïve ones in this case, and the florid and pretentious style is intended to function as a signifier of respect as well as to invoke a past epoch, particularly in the versions that Gunnarsson translated himself late in life. Laxness went an entirely different route, as indicated by Eysteinnsson above. Eysteinnsson also contextualizes *Gerpla* in a succinct manner:

In view of the popular conviction that modern Icelandic storytelling still exists in the same linguistic and narrative world as the medieval sagas, it is not surprising that some novelists have sought to restage the historical setting

and the heroic realism of the sagas. But *Gerpla* is a great deal more complex than most such modern 'sagas'; as a novel it is acutely aware of how recent history (modern warfare and the Nazi reverence for the Nordic relics) has problematized the reception of the Icelandic literary heritage. Thus, it becomes a troubled inquiry into the literary tradition generally taken to be the foundation of Icelandic culture. Laxness resends the traditional saga heroes — the king, the warrior, the poet — on their quests, but with a gruesome twist, turning heroic feats into acts of terror and senseless cruelty.<sup>1168</sup>

"We are all Greeks," said Percy Shelley as the new Hellenism took the English and German Romantics by storm in the nineteenth century.<sup>1169</sup> The ancient culture was venerated as the material manifestation of the perfection of the human spirit. And although poets and playwrights referenced the Greeks ("On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by Keats are cases in point; Goethe contemplated writing a play based on *Odysseus* but never did), the reverence was of a kind that did not necessarily prove an impetus for creative work. The main figuration and function of the culture of Ancient Greece was as an antidote to modern degeneration; Greek culture had to be reclaimed, rediscovered, reintroduced into the world and introduced into modern culture. There it might serve as a model, but it was unlikely that an established author would use the Greek classics as a springboard into "experimentalism" and then roundly reject the entire ideological edifice of the bygone culture.

On the academic side, reactions such as the one by German philologist Wilhelm von Humboldt proved paradigm shifting. As the minister of education, he founded *Altertumswissenschaft*; the Science of Antiquity or as we know the field today, Classics. I mention this in an attempt to isolate the uniqueness of Laxness' engagement with the heritage; there are similarities between the

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<sup>1168</sup> Eysteinnsson, "Icelandic Prose Literature," p. 417.

<sup>1169</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley. "Preface." *Hellas. A Lyrical Drama. The Complete Poetical Works by Percy Bysshe Shelley*. ([http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/shelley/percy\\_bysshe/s54cp/volume16.html#section85](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/shelley/percy_bysshe/s54cp/volume16.html#section85) — retrieved 17 June 2014).



obsessive philological archeological work of the Germans in relation to Greece and the Icelandic approach to the Sagas.

Much like a Greek statue, a Saga manuscript is imbued with what Walter Benjamin termed “aura” — something transcendental that defies replication and emanates only from the unique work of art.<sup>1170</sup> Having the Sagas firmly ensconced in a museum, a whole philological apparatus operating around the manuscripts, and their auratic status as the foundation and legitimation of Icelandic nationality firmly in place, the idea of going head to head with them on the page, refusing to be in their shadow but rather insist on incorporating them into one’s own textual strategy; it was an incredibly gutsy move and a unique literary gesture.

Indeed, Byron may have been the only romantic to really attempt to incorporate the authority and cultural capital of Ancient Greece into his own authorial function, which is what Laxness did, but still, Byron’s case is not comparable, since the sacredness of the original artworks was firmly in place for the aristocrat poet, just as it was for everyone else. Laxness approached the heritage differently, completely unbowed, rather as an expert fencer might come strutting out onto the mat and then spend a good half a minute looking his opponent over, curious but not awed. As Eysteinnsson notes above, Laxness turned the heroic feats that had warmed the hearts of generations of Icelanders through a millennia of mostly merciless hardships, indeed, made the heroes of the Sagas into contemporaries of every generation, role models, someone to

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<sup>1170</sup> Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version.” *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings*. Ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin. Trans. by Edmund Jephcott, R. Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and Others. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008.

quote, and, believing the Sagas to be true, the glorious ancestor that somehow manages to shine a little bit of light through the darkness of time and thus illuminate just ever so much a fleeting moment in the present, which as noted above (the present here being the period from the loss of independence in 1262 until the closing of the nineteenth century) was usually an extremely bleak affair, dark and cold. Thus when Laxness turned the feats of the Saga heroes into “acts of terror and senseless cruelty” he was not merely being revisionist, he was throwing mud at sacred objects, distorting their aura. As noted, this is of course where the modern point of view comes in, but this is also what disturbed an enormous swathe of his readers, the felt lack of respect in *Gerpla* for the Saga heritage, and the disquiet ranged from his fellow countrymen to members of the Swedish Nobel Academy.

In the introduction we spoke of how Laxness’ shadow fell on the entire literary twentieth century in Iceland. Employing the same metaphoric scheme, one might note that the shadow of the Sagas fell across the millennia on everybody. With *Gerpla* however Laxness stepped out of the shadow of Snorri Sturluson and, essentially, claimed his place beside him and the other historical greats. Although *Gerpla* was an unmitigated artistic triumph, Laxness still managed to rub a lot of people the wrong way, as noted above. This was his way. *Gerpla*, as a matter of fact, followed the most controversial novel of his career, *Atómstöðin*, which not only demolished the goodwill that *Íslandsklukkan* had created for Laxness across political divides, but was in a sense and among a certain powerful segment of society a work whose grievous offense was perhaps impossible to forgive; in the age of the Sagas an offense of this magnitude might have had bloody ramifications, which goes to prove Laxness’ point about the

essential barbarity and brutality of the period and the supposed “heroes”. Returning to the Nobel Prize, however, is interesting in precisely his context that on the day that marked the crowning achievement of his career, *Atómstöðin* arose from the ashes to leave its imprint on the festivities.

The front page of the daily conservative paper *Morgunblaðið* was dedicated to the news of the Nobel Prize, Friday October 28th 1955, as was only to be expected, this applied to every newspaper and news outlet in the country. Nevertheless, the feature front page article, written by Laxness’ erstwhile friend Kristján Albertsson, bluntly states that the honor that has thus been bestowed upon the nation, not just Laxness, “would have been still more potent had the author not written as tasteless and deceptive a novel about contemporary Iceland as *Atómstöðin*.” When Laxness receives the Nobel Prize, it is closing in on a decade since the publication of *Atómstöðin*. The rage and bile produced by the novel is still however strong enough to “interrupt” the lead story on the front page of the nation’s most widely distributed daily, as it recounts the biggest news story of the decade, if not of the latter half of the century. Laxness being controversial doesn’t even begin to cover it.

And in the work that followed *Gerpla*, *Silfurtúnglið*, Laxness was again fiercely political and one aspect or dimension of the play is specifically addressing the major political issue of the day, whether Iceland should join NATO, just as *Atómstöðin* had done previously with regard to the American military base. As mentioned above, the play has other targets and it is indeed a multifaceted work, routinely underappreciated, and the culture industries are a significant thematic concern. However, a fairly detailed discussion of Laxness

and Hollywood and his economic analysis of the culture industry was offered in chapter two, so there is no reason backtrack or repeat matters pertaining to those issues, but there is a dimension that's extremely important to the comprehension of *Silfurtúnglið* and *Atómstöðin* as well as the late plays, and that is the historical, cultural, economic and political situation in Iceland as it urbanized during the Second World War and enjoyed something of an economic boom, and how, just as it came to a close, the factions went back to their old antagonistic positions, except the fervor, rage and passion was even more palpable than before. This is the context into which Laxness addresses himself directly in the works he wrote in the post-war era, particularly those mentioned above, and it is necessary to spend a brief moment examining the social horizon of this period of intense political struggle and the birth of the Cold War, before assailing the literature.

### *8.1 Brave New World*

With the social infrastructure of European nations in ruins, and two thirds of the continent shortly to be engulfed by the Soviet Union, Iceland, a neutral non-combatant country, emerged near triumphant from history's most destructive episode; the Second World War.<sup>1171</sup> In the span of the war years, Iceland not only gained independence but enjoyed unprecedented prosperity. In 1939, it was Europe's poorest nation but at the end of the war, Iceland was among the wealthiest. Underlying these changes was the fact that from 1940 onwards, Iceland was an occupied country, first by the British and then, from 1941 to the

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<sup>1171</sup> Kjartansson, *Ísland á 20. öld*, pp. 134–169,

close of the war, by the United States. While the relationship between the army and the locals was occasionally rocky, and the occupation was initially an enormous shock, it is difficult to overstate the fundamental importance of the presence of the armed forces. The infusion of capital and the demand for, especially, workers but also light goods, were extremely important, but the outlets for exportation that were ensured by the Allies, in particular to Britain (but funded through loans by the US), were equally significant, if not more so, in purely financial terms.<sup>1172</sup> The economic effect of the occupation thus resembled something of a “New Deal” economic boon for Icelanders. A depressed economy was turned around by state intervention; the “state” being in this case successive warring nations who considered Iceland key to transportation lines and military mobility on sea and air.<sup>1173</sup>

The unexpected affluence and economic boom entailed a migration from the countryside to the capital, indeed, a demographic shift of an unprecedented scope occurred, significant enough for historian Helgi Skúli Kjartansson to identify 1940, the year of the occupation, as Iceland’s “modern breakthrough”.<sup>1174</sup> The entire social structure was turned upside down with the influx of military personnel, mostly soldiers, who at one point counted upward of 40.000, nearly all of whom were stationed in the south–west part of the country; in Keflavík and around Reykjavík, which in a nation whose total population at the

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<sup>1172</sup> Kjartansson, *Ísland á 20. öld*, pp. 201–229.

<sup>1173</sup> Valur Ingimundarson points out that for the initial four decades of the twentieth century, the United States was entirely indifferent to Iceland. However, after the war started and US military personnel had been stationed in Iceland for a while and, more importantly, leaders were getting some idea about how the war might progress, what its contours would be and what the strategies would be. At this point interest in Iceland rose quickly: “Military experts came to the conclusion that dominion over Iceland might become the decisive factor in modern day warfare.” *Í eldlínu kalda stríðsins. Samskipti Íslands og Bandaríkjanna 1945–1960*. Reykjavík: Vaka–Helgafell, 1996, p. 27. In the original: “Hernaðarsérfræðingar komust að þeirri niðurstöðu að yfirráð yfir Íslandi kynnu að skipta sköpum í nútímahernaði.”

<sup>1174</sup> Kjartansson, *Ísland á 20. öld*, p. 220.

time ran to 120.000, represented an enormous challenge in terms of social infrastructure, conventions of everyday life, traditions, and national identity.<sup>1175</sup> The contours of the nation were effectively being reshaped, through the structural and administrative reorganization of civic and everyday life that the presence of a foreign military power entailed, as well as the more drawn out and perhaps fundamental destabilization of the urban migration that was taking place simultaneously.<sup>1176</sup> The conceptual horizon of individuals was being recast in a radical manner. Anna Jóhannsdóttir and Ástráður Eysteinnsson discuss the dramatic, if not downright traumatic, dimension of the social change that was underway, even prior to the war:

For a span of several decades around and after the middle of the last century, a substantial proportion of the inhabitants of the capital and neighboring municipalities were people who had moved from the countryside and rural areas and settled in or around Reykjavík, at the precise point in time when the capital establishes itself as the unquestioned “center” of Icelandic culture, in a number of respects. This was another world than the one that the new denizens had left behind, where their childhood had unfolded, grown to maturity, and even spent the larger part of their working lives, in close proximity to nature

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<sup>1175</sup> For the historical context in Iceland, see Halldór Pétursson. *Kreppan og hernámsárin*. Reykjavík: Ægisútgáfan, 1969; Eggert Þór Bernharðsson. “Blóraböggjar og olnbogabörn: “Ástandskonur” og aðrar konur í Reykjavík í seinna stríði.” *Sagnir*, 1996, pp. 12–23; Magnús Þór Hafsteinsson. *Dauðinn í Dumbshafi: Íshafsskipalestirnar frá Hvalfirði og sjóhernaður í Norður-Íshafi 1940–1943*. Reykjavík: Hólar, 2011; Sólrún Jensdóttir. “Ísland í síðari heimsstyrjöldinni: leiðin til lýðveldis og inn á bandarískt áhrifasvæði.” *Frændafundur 2. Fyrirlestrar frá færeysk-íslenskri ráðstefnu í Þórshöfn 28.–29. júní 1995 / fyrirlestrar frá feroyskari-íslenskari ráðstevnu í Tórshavn 28.–29. júní 1995*. Ed. by Turið Sigurðardóttir and Magnús Snædal. Tórshavn : Føroya Fróðskaparfelag, 1997, pp. 208–216; Þór Whitehead. *Bretarnir koma*. Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 1999. Regarding the aftermath in Europe, see Anne Applebaum. *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944–1956*. New York and London: Doubleday, 2012; Adam Michnik. *In Search of Lost Meaning: The New Eastern Europe*. Trans. by Roman S. Czarny. Berkeley and London: The University of California Press, 2012.

<sup>1176</sup> Íslensk þjóðfélagspróun 1880–1990, pp. 52–55. See also, Helgi Skúli Kjartansson. “Fólksflutningar til Reykjavíkur 1850–1930.” *Reykjavík í 1100 ár*. Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1974, pp. 255–284; Jón Rúnar Sveinsson. *Society, urbanity and housing in Iceland*. Gävle : Meyer Information & Publishing, 2000. Guðrún Ólafsdóttir. “Sveit og borg – byggðarpróun.” *Íslenska söguþingið 28.–31. maí 1997. Ráðstefnurit II*. Ed. by Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson and Eiríkur K. Björnsson. Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands and Sagnfræðingafélag Íslands, 1998, pp. 327–333.

[...] was it not inevitable that the world view of these people would, to an extent, be fractured?<sup>1177</sup>

Iceland and in particular Reykjavík underwent an unprecedented transformation in this period, subject to the vagaries of the geopolitical scene but as noted earlier, seemingly winning out in history's most brutal lottery. Among the changes that made deep indentions in urban life was the newfound vigor of the union movement, which managed among other things to ensure substantial salary increases and, as labor became scarce in the countryside, farming and agricultural work was also forced to modernize.<sup>1178</sup> Inflation was a problem, but rather than evening out the wage advances it tended to foster consumer spending, introducing for the first time the inklings of a mass consumer culture in Iceland — constrained however by strict importation regulations.<sup>1179</sup> Housing shortages were chronic and municipal authorities did their best to halt the flow of new urbanites with a series of restrictive regulations. Part of the problem was also the shortage of building materials; it was simply impossible to build new houses in the capital.

Furthermore, as German forces occupied Denmark, the geopolitical situation was conducive to Iceland's severance of its last ties to its former colonial ruler. After 1918, these ties were mostly ceremonial, although they did

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<sup>1177</sup> Anna Jóhannsdóttir and Ástráður Eysteinnsson. "Landflutningar. Nokkrar athuganir á náttúrumenningu í íslensku borgarsamhengi." *Andvari*, 2008, p. 103. In the original: "Um nokkurra áratuga skeið, um og eftir miðja síðustu öld, var verulegur hluti af íbúafjölda höfuðborgarsvæðisins fólk sem hafði flust úr sveitum eða öðru dreifbýli og komið sér fyrir í eða nálægt Reykjavík, einmitt þegar höfuðborgarsvæðið festist í sessi sem óskoruð 'miðja' íslensks þjóðlífs í margháttuðum skilningi. Þetta var annar heimur en sá sem fólk hafði kvatt, þar sem það hafði átt bernsku sína, komist til þroska, og jafnvel varið drjúgum hluta starfsævinnar, í nánd við náttúruna [...] Hlaut ekki heimsmýnd þessa folks að vera klofin að einhverju marki?"

<sup>1178</sup> Kjartansson, *Ísland á 20. öld*, pp. 188–197.

<sup>1179</sup> Guðmundur Jónsson. "Hvenær varð neyslubjóðfélagið til?" *Þriðja íslenska söguþingið 18.–21. maí 2006*. Ed. Benedikt Eyþórsson and Hrafnkell Lárusson. Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, Sagnfræðingafélag Íslands, 2007, pp. 69–78.

involve the Danish crown handling the foreign affairs of Iceland, but what remained of the colonial affiliation was perhaps most significant in terms of national identity and Iceland's self image. On June 17<sup>th</sup> 1944 Iceland declared independence, and thus reached an important historical milestone in the midst of global disaster.

A popular coalition government was formed at the end of the war, commonly referred to as "Nýsköpunarstjórnin" (The Innovation Government), which brought together the right wing Sjálfstæðisflokkur (The Independence Party), Alþýðuflokkur (Social Democrats), which enjoyed close ties to the worker's movement, and the radical Sósíalístaflokkur (The Socialist Party). Nýsköpunarstjórnin faced as its major difficulty the problem of how to maintain the standard of living that Icelanders had gotten used to during the war, a somewhat incongruous and rare problem at the time in Europe. The solution, farsighted and one that was appreciated by the population at large, was for the state to invest wartime "profits" in two major areas, the social infrastructure and the industrial sector.<sup>1180</sup>

This involved, on the one hand, spending on social issues, which entailed, among other things, entirely revamping programs such as social security and unemployment benefits, and, on the other, modernizing various industries, including the fishing industry. The government, for example, purchased dozens of trollers from abroad and resold locally on good terms. Rounding off a series of advantageous events was the fact that Iceland became the premier recipient of the Marshall aid in all of Europe, a somewhat curious situation as the country

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<sup>1180</sup> Kjartansson, *Ísland á 20. öld*, pp. 201–229.



clearly was in less need of such assistance than many (if not most) other European nations. This last matter is interesting in the present context because it reflects not only the skillfulness (or avarice) of Icelandic politicians, but also the acknowledgment of the geographical importance of Iceland's midway position between the two continents, the Americas and Europe, as the Cold War was taking shape.

The global strategic placement of Iceland in the Cold War proved to be the decisive factor in its post-war history. The United States were determined to keep military bases in Iceland after the close of the war, an idea that was problematic for a variety of reasons, including the pride the nation took in its unarmed, peaceful and neutral existence in the international landscape, a position that was explicitly articulated by politicians as well as leading intellectuals, and seemed more important than ever in the wake of two world wars. Indeed, after the Second World War, Iceland was particularly insistent on keeping its neutral and non-militaristic image intact, a fact that influenced, first, whether or not to join the United Nations, founded in 1945, and then NATO, founded in 1949.

For Iceland to cede territorial rights and, essentially, to place itself under the wing of one of the two new global superpowers was, in the minds of many, a gesture that compromised the country's status as an independent nation, not only symbolically but also in terms of material real politics. Many examples from the war years could be — and frequently were — invoked to demonstrate that when push came to shove, the foreign military powers overrode with ease the will of the local government and ignored the Icelandic legal framework. There

was also the sensitive point for those on the left that Iceland's geopolitical position and figuration, having aligned itself with the American military, would have become in all essential aspects antagonistic to the Soviet Union.

The complicated issue of whether or not to allow the United States to remain in Iceland, notwithstanding the exact nature or number of its military bases, or whether, indeed, they would be military bases or transport locations, was divisive enough to cause the downfall of Nýsköpunarstjórnin, due to the Socialist party's inability to accept any form of significant co-operation with the US, viewing such co-operation, as indicated above, as being directly in breach of Soviet interest.<sup>1181</sup> Secretive and sometimes highly questionable agreements, from the perspective of a democratic government whose actions are shaped by civic will as manifested in free elections, were nevertheless made between the successive Icelandic government and the US in the years following the war. What was initially termed a transport station was in the span of a few years turned into a full-fledged military base. A deeply unpopular notion to begin with and extremely divisive for decades to come, the presence of the US military in Iceland became the lightning rod around which the politics of the Cold War were shaped. At one point, prime minister Ólafur Thors was sure his and his cabinet member's lives were at risk and, later, in an unprecedented event in Icelandic history, thousands fought in front of the parliament.<sup>1182</sup>

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<sup>1181</sup> Ingimundarson, *Í eldlínu kalda stríðsins*, pp. 47–58.

<sup>1182</sup> Guðni Th. Jóhannesson. *Óvinir ríkisins. Ógnir og innra öryggi í kalda stríðinu á Íslandi*. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2006, pp. 49–98. See also Valur Ingimundarson. "Samskipti Íslands og Bandaríkjanna og kalda stríðið á fimmta og sjötta áratugnum." *Íslenska söguþingið 28.–31. maí 1997. Ráðstefnurit I*. Ed. by Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson and Eiríkur K. Björnsson. Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands and Sagnfræðingafélag Íslands, 1998, pp. 231–241.

These upheavals did not pass Halldór Laxness by. Indeed, in the years following the war, few matters were of comparable concern to Laxness as the continued presence of the United States and its military in Iceland and the setting up of a transport/military base. “Nearly all of his writings, articles as well as creative work, revolved around these issues,” Laxness’ biographer, Halldór Guðmundsson notes.<sup>1183</sup> Indeed, Laxness literally flooded his usual outlets with articles protesting the agreement with the US, as well as giving speeches on numerous occasions, and it is safe to say that at no point had he been more inflammatory or extreme in his rhetoric. Weighing heavily on Laxness was the notion that cooperation with the US, and having a military base in Iceland, would make the country an important target in a nuclear war. At stake was thus not only loyalty to the Soviet Union, indeed, Soviet diplomats expressed extreme disappointment with Laxness’ apparent disinterest in matters involving the USSR, finding him intolerably nationalistic in his polemics against the establishment of an American military outpost in Iceland. It is clear, therefore, that in addition to the aforementioned issues, the prospect of global catastrophe was something that had come to preoccupy Laxness in a way that resembled his earlier devotion to spirituality and then the working class.

Laxness’ 1945 article “Gegn afsali landréttinda og eyðingu þjóðarinnar” (Against the Loss of Land Rights and the Destruction of the Nation) addresses these concerns. In the following passage Laxness articulates the danger he associates with an American military base:

Handing over docks and airports around Faxaflói to the US military, including Fossvogur in Reykjavík [...] would mean that our capital would be one of the

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<sup>1183</sup> Halldór Guðmundsson. *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*. Reykjavík: JPV Forlag, 2004, p. 505. In the original: “Nær öll skrif hans, greinar sem skáldskapur, snerust um þessi mál.”

first targets for nuclear attack in the next war. Military experts maintain that the next war will start without any prior warning, as it is believed that the one who can preemptively atomize the other will win [...] The unleashing of atomic energy has so transformed all realities of war and politics in the world that those who still think on these matters as it was still possible to do six months ago are now centuries behind the times. None of their ideas are compatible with the changed situation. Everything they say is irrational, — including the talk that has been discernable in Icelandic newspapers in the last few days, namely that we Icelanders will gain some form of “protection” through having here the military bases of a certain great power in the future. The only possible protection for people, should war break out again, is to be as far away as possible from military bases.<sup>1184</sup>

Laxness’ articulation of the vastly transformed global landscape in a nuclear age is certainly astute, and *Atómstöðin*, published three years after the appearance of this article, attempted not only to come to terms with a newly reorganized structure of global power relations but also to depict the chain of events that led to the “selling” of the country.

The concept of selling something that should not be sold links *Atómstöðin* and *Silfurtúnglið*, along with a plethora of other thematic elements, including the seething anger against those who allow or facilitate the senseless work of capitalism in corrupting and destroying that which is authentic, unique and pure. *Silfurtúnglið* premiered on 9 October 1954 and garnered strong reactions, which also fell along political lines. As we saw above, Laxness always maintained that he was not serious when he wrote *Straumrof*, his first play, but things were

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<sup>1184</sup> Halldór Laxness. “Gegn afsali landréttinda og eyðingu þjóðarinnar.” *Sjálfsgödir hlutir*. Önnur útgáfa. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1962, p. 84. In the original: “Afhending á höfnum og flugvöllum hér við Faxaflóa til Bandaríkjahers, þárá meðal Fossvogs við Reykjavík [...] mundi tákna það að höfuðborg vor yrði eitt af fyrstu kjarnspreingjuskotmörkum í næsta stríði. Hernaðarsérfræðingar segja að næsta stríð muni hefjast öllum að óvörum, sá telji sér sigurveginn sem verður fyrri til að atómíséra hinn [...] Lausn kjarnorkunnar hefur gerbreytt svo öllum raunveruleik stríðs og stjórn mála í veröldinni að þeir sem hugsa um þau efni eins og enn var leyfilegt að gera fyrir hálfu ári eru nú orðnir mörgum öldum á eftir tímanum. Eingin hugmynd þeirra samrýmist hinni breyttu aðstöðu. Alt tal þeirra er rugl, — þar á meðal slíkt hjál einsog heyrst hefur í íslenskum blöðum síðustu daga, að okkur Íslendingum ætti að vera einhver “vernd” í því að hafa hér hernaðbarbækistöðvar ákveðins stórveldis í framtíðinni. Það eina sem er einhver hugsanleg vernd í ef stríð verður aftur era ð vera sem fjærst hernaðarstöðvum.” Laxness’ mention of Fossvogur references the initial request of the US for military accommodation in Iceland, which was much more extensive than what was included in the eventual agreement.

different now. He was very ambitious on behalf of his new play and as Halldór Guðmundsson notes did his utmost to get it produced abroad. That the play did not travel, and did not really do all that well back home either, was a disappointment to Laxness.<sup>1185</sup> The fact that the play ran for two years in the Maly-theater in Moscow may however have been something of a solvent. As in *Straumrof*, there is a female lead and, again, as in *Straumrof*, she comes to a tragic end. The differences between the two plays are enormous however and in comparison to Laxness' first play, *Silfurtúnglið* is an epic production.

The next section will introduce the play through a discussion of the setting and the first act. From there we move to the cultural discourses swirling around the play during its initial run. Finally, we will engage with the political aspect of the text as well as the cultural critique.

## 8.2 Route to Stardom

It is a normal day. Óli has popped home from the bank across the street to have lunch with his father-in-law, Laugi, a retired politician. Lóa, the main character and Óli's wife, flutters about, worrying about the men-folk and fussing over her infant baby, whose cradle is prominently placed in the middle of the stage. The setting, a modest house in a small town in the countryside, suggests ordinariness and traditional lives. Lóa has dedicated herself to motherhood and the role of a housewife with fervor while Óli, absent-minded and a bit vain, has worked his way up from being a bus driver to a bank clerk. That the couple is nevertheless poor is made clear.

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<sup>1185</sup> Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, p. 585.

The routine of their day is interrupted by the arrival of Lóa's childhood friend, Ísafold Thorlacius, known as Ísa, a famous singer and the scion of a rich and powerful family in town. The reunion of the two friends, genuine as their attachment is, revolves to a great extent around Lóa's admiration for Ísa's worldliness and success, the fact that she has left the small town behind and travels the world as a celebrity.

Later, Ísa overhears Lóa singing a lullaby to her son, a homely song of her own creation, expressing a mother's love for her child, and in a curious reversal it is Ísa who then becomes fascinated by Lóa. There is something about the purity of the lullaby and Lóa's heartfelt rendering that touches a nerve — the song comes from the "heart" as Ísa puts it — and she asks for Lóa's permission to tell her manager about what she has heard.<sup>1186</sup>

The apogee of the first act follows when Ísa's manager and all-around impresario, Feilan Ó. Feilan, his curiosity irked by Ísa's report, appears at the remote house. He lurks about outside the house, spying on Lóa and manages to overhear her croon the lullaby. He then introduces himself and to Lóa's surprise, Feilan appears to have been immediately taken by the lullaby, enchanted and delighted, but it is equally certain that even at this early point commercial considerations are already playing a part. Lóa however is reluctant to believe that the attention afforded her cradlesong is altogether serious, "Well now, somewhere there must be limits as to just how much you can make fun of a silly

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<sup>1186</sup> Halldór Laxness. *Silfurtúnglið*. Reykjavík, Helgafell, 1954, p. 23. In the original: "Það er fólk sem hefur komist uppá lag með að raula eitt eða tvö erindi af hjarta, til dæmis við vinnu sína." Earlier, Ísa says to Lóa: "If only I had a single strand of your natural heart." The latter quote, in the original, reads: "Ef ég ætti bara eina taug úr þínu náttúrlega hjarta!" Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 16.

countrywoman,” she says after listening to Feilan for a little while.<sup>1187</sup> “I am offering to make you famous,” Feilan responds, “perhaps world famous, just like our friend Ísa, maybe even more famous. Ísa and I have a personal relationship with Mr. Peacock, the head musical director of Universal Concert Incorporated London Paris New York: cabarets, concerts, television, movies, and who knows what.”<sup>1188</sup> Already, Feilan has overwhelmed Lóa, what he talks about is so completely divorced from the reality that she is familiar with. Although a more seasoned or experienced person might be inclined to take the word of someone whose very first utterance, or thereabout, are promises of world fame with a grain of salt, Feilan is an unstoppable force. Even the skeptic we invoked just now, imbued with a healthy dose of intolerance for charlatans, confidence men and self-aggrandizing ego maniacs, would immediately be thrown off balance by Feilan’s listing, it verges on being a chant, of Mr. Peacock’s interests and ventures (“Universal Concert Incorporated London Paris New York: cabarets, concerts, television, movies, and who knows what”), Mr. Peacock being an American entertainment mogul. Either Feilan is insane or there is a grain of truth to the sales pitch.

And, indeed, he just continues: “I will then hire a major poet and award-laden composers and I will have a grand musical program created for you. London Paris and New York will be at your feet.”<sup>1189</sup> Lóa is intrigued, how could

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<sup>1187</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*. p. 41. The quote reads: “Nei heyrið þér mig nú, einhverstaðar hljóta að vera takmörk fyrir því hvað hægt er að narrast að heimskri konukind útá landi.”

<sup>1188</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*. p. 41. In the original, the quote reads: “Ég býðst til að gera yður fræga, kanski heimsfræa einsog hana Ísu vinu okkar, kanski frægari. Við Ísa erum í einkasambandi við Mr. Peacock, yfirtónstjórann í Universal Conceret Incorporated London París New York: fjölleikahús, hljómleikar, sjónvarp, kvikmyndir og hvur veit hvað.”

<sup>1189</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 69. In the original the passage goes like this: “og síðan leigi ég stórksáld og verðlaunaða tónsmiði og læt yrkja handa yður stóreflis saungskrá. Og London París og New York skulu liggja að fótum yðar.”

she not be? Feilan's intensity resembles a storm or a force of nature and the sheer grandiosity of the future that he depicts as lying just around the corner is obviously attractive if somewhat unrealistic. That's also where Mr. Peacock enters the picture. The future promised by Feilan is clearly dependent on Mr. Peacock. Later, the reader finds out that the figure in question is everything Feilan claims he is; a major power broker in a vertically and horizontally integrated entertainment concern that appears to represent a significant cross-section of the American (and perhaps global) entertainment industry.<sup>1190</sup>

The word "Universal" in the title of the company references not only the famous American movie studio, founded in 1912, but "overtakes" in a sense the original connotations of the film studio's name, that is, the all-encompassing reach of a global enterprise. Indeed, it is revealed later in the play that Mr. Peacock's international obligations and interests are so numerous that his life is virtually spent in an airplane.<sup>1191</sup>

Mr. Peacock's first appearance in the play, for example, is motivated by a brief layover in Iceland during an intercontinental flight, presumably for refueling purposes, a small window of time into which he packs a series of meetings.<sup>1192</sup> The association between Mr. Peacock and the airplane, indeed,

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<sup>1190</sup> This would reference the fact that the entertainment corporation in question seems to have integrated not only the various stages involved in the production, distribution and showing of cultural products (horizontal integration) but also managed to bring together different forms of cultural production, creating a support network between the different media (vertical integration). For more on the American studio system, its history and various integrations and disintegrations, see Douglas Gomery. *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*. London: The British Film Institute, 2008.

<sup>1191</sup> Mr. Peacock's brief stop is portrayed as a major event and, more importantly, as an opportunity that must be grabbed and utilized. From the other side, his response is a sense of weariness; he is clearly on his way someplace else.

<sup>1192</sup> Although not made explicit, the refueling hypothesis is reasonable in light of the technological capacity of airplanes at the time and, moreover, speaks to one of the central reasons for Iceland's importance to the US in the Cold War: as a refueling station for airplanes on their way (primarily) to Germany.



what appears to be a private aircraft, emphasizes his economic power and, furthermore, aligns him with the mechanical wonders of modernity, the way in which temporal and spatial configurations have been recast in the twentieth century. The airplane thus functions as a marker of modernity in a way that recalls the role of the automobile in *Straumrof*, where it was portrayed as a device of new and astounding mobility, which was not only central to the plot as such but served in a highly symbolic role as the register of class and indication of how nature, seen as an obstacle and impediment to human endeavors, could be overcome and dominated.<sup>1193</sup>

However, Mr. Peacock transgresses geographical and cultural borders in a manner that is more effortless and effective than anything dreamed of by the Kaldan family. He is, as a matter of fact, represented as an embodiment of the intersection between modernity, technology and power, a thematic constellation explored by Laxness in all four of his later plays. The process of modernization and cosmopolitanism are also relevant concepts here; not only are both career long preoccupations for Laxness but the former ties into the fundamental logic of the culture industry and while the traditional connotations of the concept of cosmopolitanism do not come in for criticism, Laxness is still intensely engaged with what might be termed the negative counterpart of cosmopolitanism, the internationalism that is part and parcel of Empire and manifested for Laxness in the establishment of NATO, the new military alliance run by the US. It is also significant that the second part of act four takes place in an airport hotel and that a pivotal part of Laxness' next play, *Strompleikurinn*, occurs in an airport. The

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<sup>1193</sup> As discussed earlier, the automobile plays a central role in *Straumrof* as an indicator of modernity, class and shifts in temporal and spatial experience. The airplane can be viewed as a radicalization of this connotative range.

role and significance of these and other locations closely associated with modernity, such as the organist's house in *Atómstöðin*, will be drawn together and discussed more closely in the conclusion.

That Mr. Peacock is also associated with the highest echelons of the culture industry introduces a direct link to Laxness' 1929 essay "Kvikmyndin ameríska 1928" (The American Film in 1928), which was in part the result of the author's experiences in Hollywood, as Laxness attempted to become a screenwriter in the film industry.<sup>1194</sup> The essay's institutional analysis — which is extensive, expansive and highly perceptive, as discussed in detail in chapter two — argues that American film production, as represented by Hollywood, is not only heavily politicized but serves as a venue for propaganda machinations on an industrialized and global scale. As such, Laxness maintained, movies influence social and class relations by normalizing and universalizing ideological positions that are at odds with the real-life interests of the vast majority of the film audience. Adorno and Horkheimer's contention in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that they take the culture industry more seriously "than it might itself wish to be" quite aptly describes Laxness' own method of expounding critically on the social implications and economic realities of Hollywood.<sup>1195</sup>

As Laxness sailed for Iceland in 1929, disappointed and disillusioned with the US and Hollywood, he nevertheless continued to ruminate on his experiences within the studio system and the immense cultural shift entailed by the cinema and communication technology — the meaning and social relevance of a media revolution that he had first touched on in his essay on radio, "Þjóðkirkja og

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<sup>1194</sup> Halldór Laxness. "Kvikmyndin ameríska 1928." Halldór Laxness. *Alþýðubókin*. Reykjavík: Jafnaðarmannafélag Íslands, 1929.

<sup>1195</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xix.

viðboð.<sup>1196</sup> The ideological distortion of mass media as an epistemological discourse, something that offered the audience a “picture” of the world and themselves, is thematized directly in *Straumrof* while *Atómstöðin* employs popular culture as a device for characterization and as a signifier and vehicle for imagery within a highly critical connotative range. In *Atómstöðin* American popular culture is in other words deployed very precisely and to clearly defined ends. Film magazines are a fixture in the Árland household and Mr. Árland’s elder daughter, the fourteen year old Aldinblóð, so named by Uglá, takes the images, fashion and attitudes displayed in the magazines and activates them in a desperate fashion in order to construct a personality or a front for herself, a look, a role in the world.<sup>1197</sup> This is of course not a fruitful avenue to go down when it comes to cultivating the self and Aldinblóð is thoroughly lost in Laxness’ novel.

The film magazines also stand as a reference to the American military base in Keflavík, and the decadent parties that the older Árland children host in their parent’s absence are populated by soldiers and officers from the base. The counterpoint to these manifestations of popular culture and movie “magic” is the modernist art that the organist introduces Uglá to. It is important to read *Silfurtúnglið* as a continuation of this engagement, indeed, its relationship to *Atómstöðin* is complex and deeply ingrained in the text — something that is discussed in earlier sections in this chapter. The play also stands as Laxness’ most direct engagement with the entertainment industry, both as a multi-

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<sup>1196</sup> Laxness’ essay “Þjóðkirkjan og viðboð” is discussed in chapter 2.

<sup>1197</sup> When Uglá enters the Árland household all four children are more or less lost. The close relationship that Uglá forms with them starts when she refuses to employ the annoying but fashionable (among the rich) nicknames with which they are stuck when she meets them so she renames them all.

national corporate business and an ideological force, since the publication of the aforementioned film–essay.<sup>1198</sup>

*Silfurtúnglið* presents the culture industry as a highly integrated but compartmentalized entity, one where an entertainment conglomerate cultivates a cabaret star while also promoting a television show and having interest in the film industry.<sup>1199</sup> This, as a matter of fact, is Universal Concert Incorporated's most notable and, perhaps, eccentric characteristic. A multi–national corporation with interests and talents involved in “concerts, television, movies, and who knows what” also deals in circus side–shows such as “the ape–man with the rattle–snake” — the ape–man's celebrated talent being, it seems, in addition to resembling our ancestors, the ability to bite the head off of slithering vertebrates — and, later, shows great interest in a homegrown but entirely fraudulent strong man.<sup>1200</sup> In a sense, the spectacular range of “acts” that UCI promotes and deals in serves to eliminate any notion of a stable value system or clear distinctions when it comes to cultural products.<sup>1201</sup> This is not done however in order to emphasize a postmodern “anything goes” sensibility but rather to highlight the nature of the culture industry; it is, first and foremost, a business and, secondly, it banishes from its environs “every single element that could possibly

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<sup>1198</sup> Árni Ibsen, writing about Laxness' late experimental plays beginning with *Strompleikurinn* (The Chimney Play, 1960) and continuing with *Prjónastofan Sólin* (Sun the Knitting Company, 1962) and *Dúfnaveislan* (The Dove Party, 1966), posits a direct connection between the plays and the essay on Hollywood, noting that these works all deal with “the lack of respect shown for life by the capitalistic profit perspective”. Árni Ibsen. “Leikritun eftir 1918.” *Íslensk bókmenntasaga V*. Ed. by Guðmundur Andri Thorsson. Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2006, p. 236.

<sup>1199</sup> Interestingly, the integration thus proposed refers both the past where various entertainment “acts” — classical ones such as circus attractions — and modern technological media such as the movies would be aligned and interspersed with each other. It also “looks” towards the future, in a sense, as television and film production, initially at odds, would find immense synergy in cooperation.

<sup>1200</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 114. The quote in the original: “sú sérstaka þakkarskuld sem við í Silfurtúnglinu stöndum í við þig fyrir *apamanninn með höggorminn* sem þú sendir okkur í fyrra.”

<sup>1201</sup> For more on this, see Neal Gabler. *Life: The Movie. How Entertainment Conquered Reality*. New York: Vintage, 1998.

correspond to the aesthetic tastes of civilized peoples,” as Laxness puts it elsewhere.<sup>1202</sup>

It is interesting to note in this context that within Feilan’s discursive framework, movies represent the utmost heights of cultural achievement and ambition as well as being the most direct route to the pinnacle of celebrity. Therefore, although his interests are varied and dispersed, the epitome of Mr. Peacock’s powers lies in his connection to the movie business. The career path that Feilan lays out for Lóa — something that he does repeatedly, every time in fact that her spirits are down and her commitment wavers — has the movies as its ultimate goal, the culmination of the their (or his) “strategy” is to turn Lóa into a film star. Shortly after Lóa’s first performance and while attempting to secure her future services, Feilan invokes “films — world wide,” which are then conspicuously associated with the trappings of celebrity: “Dresses and coats and all the most luxurious Parisian underwear that you could want, outer- and underwear, everything, a suite in the best hotel in the city, all travel will be free, constant access to a Cadillac — and of course money”.<sup>1203</sup> Later, when introducing his discovery to Mr. Peacock, Feilan states in no uncertain terms that “Never was there an fully formed movie star right from the beginning if not her.”<sup>1204</sup> Feilan as a matter of fact needs to convince Mr. Peacock of Lóa’s bankability, otherwise nothing will happen, and the accomplishment of this goal becomes the manager’s overarching purpose in the last two acts.

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<sup>1202</sup> Halldór Laxness. “The American Film in 1928.” *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*. Trans. Björn Þór Vilhjálmsson. 1/2, 2011, p. 150.

<sup>1203</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 78. In the original: “kvikmyndir — um allan heim [...] kjólar og kápur allure hálúxus- Parísarnærfatnaður eftir vild, alt yst sem inst, íbúð á skásta hótelinu í borginni, öll ferðalög ókeypis, stöðugur aðgángur að kádilják, — og penínga náttúrlega”.

<sup>1204</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 115. In the original: “Það var aldrei til alsköpuð kvikmyndastjarna ef ekki hún.”

That singing is Lóa's platform aligns the play with Laxness' 1957 novel *Bekkuhotsannáll* as well as the 1961 play *Strompleikurinn*, where opera singing functions in both cases as the art form that is going to propel the main characters, or in the case of Garðar Hólm — the flamboyant, mysterious and charming world famous singer who, it turns out, is none of those things but a tragic figure, having never in fact made a name for himself, his entire life is a lie — to have already propelled, to world fame.<sup>1205</sup> That Laxness has repeated recourse to singing as an art form in this context can be explained, aside from his personal interest in the practice as such, by the somewhat limited scope of Icelandic cultural life for a large part of the twentieth century. When it comes to portraying celebrity and popular culture, it needs to be noted that filmmaking was virtually unheard of until the 1980s and nothing resembling an industry came into being until after 2000.<sup>1206</sup> Taking voice and singing lessons however was a reasonable proposition, modest in terms of economics and did not require public institutions. Singing was thus perhaps the most convenient art form in terms of narrative plausibility when it came to dreams of artistic fame on an

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<sup>1205</sup> Laxness himself mentioned that *Strompleikurinn* shared a number of concerns with *Bekkuhotsannáll*. See Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, pp. 662–663.

<sup>1206</sup> Eggert Þór Bernharðsson. "Landnám lifandi mynda. Af kvikmyndum á Íslandi til 1930." *Heimur kvikmyndanna*. Ed. by Guðni Elísson. Reykjavík: Forlagið og art.is, 1999. Björn Þór Vilhjálmsson. "Sögur úr samtímanum. Íslenskar kvikmyndir á nýrri öld." *Tímarit um menningu og mannlíf*, 3/2001, pp. 4–11. Björn Ægir Norðfjörð. "Iceland." *The Cinema of Small Nations*. Ed. by Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, pp. 43–59. Important to note, as well, is a cultural context that was somewhat constraining, at least in the sense that Iceland's geographical isolation had long manifested itself in import restrictions and limited access to international media culture, let alone alternative or underground culture. Thus, once electronic media were established, first radio and then TV, the selection remained limited for decades (that is, one radio station, one TV station, both state run). Thus, when subversive, radical and alternative breakthrough occur in one art form after another, from the mid 1950s to the early 1980s, a culture still haunted by the remnants of a once defiant anti-cosmopolitanism seemed repeatedly to be taken by surprise. A useful work of cultural history in this context is Gestur Guðmundsson and Krístin Ólafsdóttir. *'68: Hugurfar úr viðjum vanans*. Reykjavík: Tákni, 1987.

international scale and the depiction of possible celebrity culture in the context of Icelandic artistic practice.

### 8.3 Meet the Press

As we have already gathered, Feilan was not disappointed when he met Lóa and heard the lullaby. There is something about Lóa that fascinates him; her ordinariness and genuineness, the fact that what she appears to be is as a matter of fact what she is. When Feilan arrives in the rural township and comes into their home in act one, Óli, however, is suspicious right from the start and gets increasingly agitated, eventually accusing Feilan of trying to “wreck” their home.<sup>1207</sup> Attempting to appease the irate husband, Feilan denies all intentions of undermining the institution of marriage, emphasizing his role as a businessman and complimenting the married couple in imaginative ways.

Included in the salvo of compliments is his account of Ísa’s return to Reykjavík and how she described Lóa: “I have found the song that we need in our day and age, not only in show business but in society.”<sup>1208</sup> Whether these are Ísa’s words or not — Feilan would not hesitate to ascribe whatever sentiments he thinks might placate the couple (the husband in particular) to his star — it is

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<sup>1207</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, pp. 51–52. In the original: “það er sveimér ekki leingi verið að brjóta í rúst eitt hús.”

<sup>1208</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 52. In the original the quote reads: “hún segir við mig í gærkvöldi fyrir sunnan: ég hef fundið lagið sem okkur vantar nú á dögum, ekki aðeins í skemtana lífinu heldur líka í þjóðfélaginu”.

notable how Lóa and her lullaby are represented as an alleviation or balm for an urban and modern malaise.<sup>1209</sup>

That modernity “needs” Lóa’s song might be seen as indicative of a fundamental lack in modern culture or perhaps that its core has been slowly eroding, and is now nothing but inauthenticity. What Lóa has to offer, above everything else, is the authenticity and purity of a mother’s love. The irony here is that if there is some flaw internal to modernity that is related to artificiality, the work of the culture industries does nothing but exacerbate the problem and Feilan’s immediate desire to acquire Lóa and her lullaby, a desire that takes on a literal form as we will see shortly, is a symptom of the malaise itself — Feilan sees something healthy and natural and, much like a disease, automatically sets on a course to destroy those very qualities. By acquiring Lóa it is almost a foregone conclusion that whatever it was that Feilan and Ísa saw in her will be extinguished. In this way, the whole enterprise suggests the quicksilver and dangerous nature of the culture industry. How it moves to co-opt what is “fresh” and unusual and new, which then serves to rejuvenate the conventional form of the cultural product by crossing tried and true commercial successes with a

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<sup>1209</sup> Indeed, whether the sentiments Ísa is supposed to have expressed are authentically sourced, they reveal certain truths regarding Feilan and his business enterprise. Firstly, the fact that something that Ísa found promising sufficed for Feilan to undertake a journey that under most circumstances could only be expected to end in failure suggests that Feilan respects Ísa’s judgment or, conversely, that her celebrity status and close relationship to Mr. Peacock makes it unwise to ignore her wishes and advice — quite possibly a combination of both. That Feilan then agrees with Ísa’s assessment furthermore suggests that she, much like Feilan himself, is experienced enough in the realm of show business to recognize a new talent once seen. This latter point indicates that Feilan’s recounting of Ísa’s initial judgment is probably not “fake” and that, furthermore, it constitutes the kernel of what the two of them find to be of central interest concerning the “talent” in question, what makes Lóa unique and valuable in their eyes. It should also be noted that Ísa’s relationship to Mr. Peacock is extremely important to the narrative undercurrent and thematic cluster that ground the play’s portrayal of women. This will be addressed in more detail below.



degree of unorthodoxy, which results in the development and change that the market demands.

The somewhat unlikely plot–point that the ordinariness or “authenticity” of a housewife in a provincial town should represent a commercial coup and immediate media sensation for Feilan can perhaps be understood in the context of the rise of image culture. Images of innocence and “authentic” personhood have thus long proven attractive commodities, as Mary Pickford’s collaboration with D.W. Griffith demonstrates, as do Norman Rockwell’s paintings and the turn–of–the–century stories by Horatio Alger depicting the lives of poor young boys who succeed in the world because of their adherence to the Protestant work ethic.<sup>1210</sup> It might be best however not to think of the play in terms of realism but rather a blend of styles, much like *Straumrof*, that include the burlesque, the allegory, comedy and the epic theater of Brecht.

Among the central problems posed by the text is whether commercial and popular culture can produce and mediate the narratives that bind a culture and a community together. The normative dimension of cultural values has been undermined in modernity, not least by the work of the culture industries, and as modernization gains velocity and traditional modes of life are, inexorably, rendered obsolete and are replaced by the impersonal structures of a consumer economy, nostalgia for the past and “bygone” values and existential forms comes to the fore, which may well be one part of why the modern world “needs” Lóa and her lullaby. When Feilan is in the rural household at the start of the play, he

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<sup>1210</sup> Richard Schickel. *D.W. Griffith: An American Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984, pp. 127–134, 378–412. Edwin P. Hoyt. *Horatio's Boys*. New York: Chilton Book Company, 1974; Laura Claridge. *Norman Rockwell: A Life*. New York and London: Random House, 2001.

celebrates the couple's exquisite ordinariness: "it is exactly a household like this one that I want to raise up and expand so that it may encompass the entire world".<sup>1211</sup>

The ordinariness of Lóa's household and Lóa herself stands of course in stark relief to Feilan's usual assortment of carnivalesque acts that, much like the vaudeville of old, or the circus, is in part a freak-show. As noted above however, this aspect of the entertainment industry — Mr. Peacock shares Feilan's penchant for bizarre physiological anomalies and feats of brute strength rather than artistry — is primarily articulated in a symbolic register, rather than as a grasp for verisimilitude. It's almost as if the carnivalesque aspect of the operation was the mirror image of its "soul" (although the conjunction of the culture industry and the notion of a soul is in itself a non sequitur); its essence at any rate.

When it comes to Feilan's intent to sell the rural innocence of Lóa and his aforementioned celebration of their poor township home, the feeling becomes prevalent that something just doesn't make sense. Of course, the references to authenticity and purity and motherhood, and even life in the provinces as somehow more organic and more in tune with the essence of the nation — the echoes of actual ideological discourses can be heard clearly here — are valid and the reader may imagine that these ideas, packaged correctly, would indeed have something going for them, an emotional punch, the awakening of nostalgia for something that one has never known. Consequently, it is possible to imagine Lóa being an attraction for the jaded urban city dwellers, particularly if what she

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<sup>1211</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 52. In the original the quote reads: "það er einmitt svona hús sem maður einsog ég vill hefja upp og víkka svo það nái útum allan heim."

carries within her has been lost in the lives of the sophisticated urbanites. But these binaries are kept at a distance, as if Laxness was playfully reminding the reader that, yes, these connotations cannot be avoided but they are not the point. Motherhood excepted, however, the notion of motherhood is pivotal to the text. The feeling, however, that something is off remains and the reader is left to ponder its source.

In part it may involve the fact that no sooner has Feilan acquired Lóa than he proceeds to change her, turn her into a commodity. Again, Laxness is criticizing the culture industry, and its tendency to destroy true talent but there is still more here that needs to be interrogated. Part of the mystery is Feilan Ó. Feilan. Indeed, the relationship between Feilan and Lóa represents one of the most complex aspects of the play. The riddles range from issues having to do with narrative cohesion, psychological verisimilitude and plausibility, the play's symbolic dimension, including the portrait offered of the culture industry and modern capitalism, and, not least, themes of exploitation and authenticity. Feilan is presented at the beginning as the clear villain of the piece, if charming, funny and efficient. One of *Silfurtúnglið's* triumphs, however, is the manner in which issues of exploitation are rendered problematic and ethically complex, and how unexpected depths are slowly revealed in the characterization of Feilan, making him into something more than the one-dimensional figure he promises to be at the beginning.

But as noted above, Feilan initiates his professional relationship with Lóa by starting to change her. At the same time, he is intent on making her a star, just as he promised, and one of the things he tells his protégée-to-be is to be

prepared for an avalanche of media attention. Feilan warns Lóa that “every day there will be a fresh news story [...] in the papers and a photo”.<sup>1212</sup> And no sooner has Lóa premiered her act than the media circus starts, something for which she is entirely unprepared.

Not minding Lóa’s state of mind overly much, however, Feilan, in the form of an introductory remark, tells the press that he has experienced “his share of artistic triumphs, kind sirs, but nothing that comes close to this one.”<sup>1213</sup> He then gives up the floor to questions for his latest discovery:

1. q.: Are you an opera singer or what?
2. q.: How much do you weigh and what should one eat to become an artist?
3. q.: Are you a soprano? Or are you a mezzo soprano?
4. q.: Are you leaving for abroad at all?
5. q.: Are skirts of burlap the fashion in the north country?
6. q.: Are you perhaps entertaining the notion of giving a concert in Paris?
7. q.: Are you romantic? Or are you a realist?
8. q.: What are your opinions of marriage as an institution, especially as it concerns female artists?
9. q.: Hmm, is she married, and to whom is she married, I wonder?
10. q.: Have you ever entertained the notion of a divorce?
11. q.: What, by the way, are your thoughts about all the isms in the arts, mam?
12. q.: Can you sing jazz hits?
13. q.: Respectfully, what is your opinion of Beethoven?<sup>1214</sup>

<sup>1212</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 41. The quote, in the original, reads: “Hvað varðar þann mann um heimili sem hefur fundið gullnámu frú? [...] Það skal á hverjum degi vera ný mynd af yður í blöðunum og ný frétt.”

<sup>1213</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 83. The original quote: “Ég hef lifað marga listræna sigra um mína daga, herrar mínir, en aungvan sem kemst í hálfkvisti við þennan hér.”

<sup>1214</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, pp. 83–84. In Icelandic: “1. sp.: Eruð þér óperusaungkona eða hvað? [//] 2. sp.: Hvað eruð þér þúngar og hvað á maður að borða til þess að geta orðið listamaður? [//] 3. sp.: Sýngið þér diskant? Eða kunið þér að sýngja millirödd? [//] 4. sp.: Eruð þér nokkuð á förum til útlanda? [//] 5. sp.: Eru svona strigapils móðins fyrir norðan? [//] 6. sp.: Eruð þér kanski að hugsa um að halda konsert í París? [//] 7. sp.: Eruð þér rómantísk? Eða eruð þér raunsæiskona? [//] 8. sp.: Hvaða skoðanir hafið þér á hjónabandinu, sérstaklega hvað snertir listakonur? [//] 9. sp.: Hm, er hún gift, og hverjum ætli hún sé gift? [//] 10. sp.: Eruð þér nokkuð að hugsa um skilnað? [//] 11. sp.: Hvað segið þér annars um alla þessa isma í listinni, frú? [//] 12. sp.: Getið þér sýngið hott? [//] 13. sp.: Með leyfi hvaða álit hafið þér á Beethoven?”

The press conference is a farce, utterly meaningless. The questions reveal a press corps that is absolutely unaware of whom they are talking to — although this might be Feilan’s fault, he wasted no time in building up a “persona” for Lóa. That might explain the weirdly professional questions. What is significant however is that the text shows the media to be essentially in collusion with Feilan and Silfurtúnlið. In other words, the two industries are revealed to exist in a symbiotic relationship. It is not even possible to designate one of them as the more dignified, let’s say, land based mammal, and the other as a parasite. Although the clamor and excitement, and confusion among the press corps, might perhaps indicate that Feilan has more distance, more control over events. And it might not be entirely correct to describe the press conference as meaningless. The fact that it was not coherent may not as a matter of fact touch in the slightest degree on what Feilan intended to achieve. At stake are the dynamics of celebrity, and they are not always rational. We will return to this shortly.

Again, much like in *Straumrof*, radio is featured prominently in a Laxness play, as the press conference is broadcast over the airwaves “live” and when Lóa’s inexperience threatens to derail the proceedings words are literally put into her mouth; lines are fed to her. The scene indicates in part how central a medium radio was in Iceland at the time.<sup>1215</sup> The prominence of radio also registers the absence of television, a medium that was in the process of

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<sup>1215</sup> A state run radio channel commenced broadcasting in 1930. Prior to that there had been several attempts by private parties to start up a broadcasting service but none was long lived. Gunnar Stefánsson. *Útvarp Reykjavíks. Saga Ríkisútvarpsins 1930–1960*. Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1997, pp. 57–62.

unseating radio in many countries but would not be widespread in Iceland for another decade and a half.<sup>1216</sup>

In addition, the press conference signifies the presence of fan culture and the logistics of stardom, the conjunction of which is captured in Daniel Boorstin's conception of the "pseudo-event," which refers to the way in which an event staged for the media, despite being untrue or only vaguely related to reality, gains, or overtakes, the real through the power of public exposure.<sup>1217</sup> This is precisely what Feilan is aiming for, creating a "star" out of thin air and transforming a simple lullaby into a massive commercial hit and a spectacle.<sup>1218</sup> His schemes are, as noted above, wholly dependent on the co-operation of the media and it is the media event — the press conference — that constitutes the

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<sup>1216</sup> It is interesting in this context that the single most dramatic change made in Hrafn Gunnlaugsson's 1978 television movie adaptation of the play is to turn Feilan's "cabaret," *Silfurtúnglið*, into a TV show of the same name. Addressing this shift in a newspaper interview, Laxness notes: "I employed a 'cabaret' as a setting, as, at the time, 'cabarets' were popular but television on the other hand didn't exist. In my opinion, it is therefore not a bad idea to transform the 'cabaret' into television, which is the 'Cabaret' of our time." "ATA". "Stílar og stefnur geta gripið mann eins og influenza." *Tíminn*, December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1978, p. 2. In the original: "Ég notaði 'kabarett' sem baksvið, en á þessum tíma var mjög mikið um 'kabaretta' en hins vegar var 'televisjónið' ekki til. Ég tel því ekki illa tilfundið að snúa 'kabarettum' upp á 'televisjónið' enda er það 'Kabarett' okkar tíma." See also, "Maður kemur náttúrlega ekki úr poppheiminum." *Dagblaðið*, 23. December 1978, p. 16.

<sup>1217</sup> Boorstin notes that "The pseudo-events that flood our consciousness are neither true nor false in old familiar senses. The very same advances which have made them possible have also made the images – however planned, contrived, or distorted – more vivid, more attractive, more impressive, and more persuasive than reality itself." Thus, Boorstin maintains, what happens on TV will come to overshadow what happens off it – the reality effect on offer in the medium of the image supersedes the real itself, the poverty of which in terms of spectatorship is brought home by such factors as the streamlining of experience, instant replay, and the avoidance of bad perspective or too brief viewing periods (among many other elements), in a word, technology focuses the desires of spectators into channels where they seem to reap greater and more manifest rewards. It must be noted in this context that Boorstin's primary focus is the image, whose technological mediation reaches a "high point" with motion pictures and, of course, television. However, the logic that manifests itself in the striking image derives from the mass production of illustrated magazines and newspapers, and the original "pseudo-event," for Boorstin, is the feature interview, which facilitates the transformation of an individual into a pseudo-event through self-figuration that is largely unconstrained by fact-checking or criteria of truth and validity. Boorstin, *The Image*, p. 36.

<sup>1218</sup> It is also interesting to note the distinction Richard Dyer draws (taking his central concepts from Leo Lowenthal's earlier work) between "idols of production" and "idols of consumption" — the former being politicians, artists, inventors who have "achieved something in the world," while the latter are associated with leisure and turning their own lives into objects of media consumption. See Richard Dyer. *Stars*. New Edition. London. BFI Publishing, 1998, p. 39.

most direct illustration of the pseudo–event, the point being however that a single episode, such as this one, has a ripple effect, the star image being for example a subsidiary effect.<sup>1219</sup>

The questions of the press, wildly eccentric as some of them are, may even indicate the extent to which the media has bought into the logic of the pseudo–event, the very thing that the media is supposed to manufacture. But we can already note in the press conference, brief as it is, the strange intersection of the personal and public that characterizes celebrity culture. The journalists are already mistaking Lóa for someone else, someone entirely different, a fact that somebody might be tempted to read as a definite first step towards stardom and the shedding of one’s old personality. The rise of the pseudo–event — for the pseudo–event is still on the rise in this period, Boorstin wrote his book about a decade after Laxness wrote his play — is also reflected in the triviality, pedestrian and niggling nature of the questions directed at Lóa. The questions, in between name–dropping Beethoven, concern the most minor and insignificant of details, or they mostly do. But that these details pertain to her life, that is what matters and elevates them from triviality into the register of the fascinating: the fairy dust of celebrity is already in the air. We might also note that it is precisely such interest that brought about the “science” of public relations and image management.<sup>1220</sup>

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<sup>1219</sup> Boorstin notes that the media comes to rely equally on the regular production of pseudo–events, seeing how reality proves consistently unreliable in terms of newsworthiness; thus an active production of content slowly becomes the norm. Boorstin, *The Image*, pp. 12–29.

<sup>1220</sup> Juliann Sivulka. *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Hampshire: Cengage Learning, 2011. The BBC documentary series *The Century of the Self* (2002) by Adam Curtis should also be mentioned as it offers an extremely incisive look at the development and rise of advertising industries, and arguing that these industries are essentially apparatuses for administrating and controlling people and populations.

A number of the questions posed by the journalists also draw attention to the gendered dimension of the culture industry, as it is unlikely that a male star would be interrogated in a similar fashion. Lóa is for example asked about her weight, marital status, clothes, and whether she is romantic, as well as being asked questions that relate more directly to what might be assumed to be her professional life.<sup>1221</sup> In this way, the text focuses on how celebrities are placed outside “normal” rules of social interaction, and the subtle intertwining of the personal and the public points towards an important theme that will be discussed more closely below.<sup>1222</sup>

In his essay on Hollywood from 1929, Laxness discusses the role of the media in the context of the promotional and manipulative exhortations of the culture industry as it wheels out its products to great fanfare, no matter how insignificant these works happen to be. The more lavish and grandiose the spectacle that is presented on the silver screen, Laxness suggests, the more implacable the publicity phalanx surrounding the movie is bound to be. The example Laxness employs to illustrate his thesis are the biblical films of Cecil B. DeMille and the attention afforded these works by the media. Tabs are kept on unruly critical voices, Laxness notes, but dissent is rare, as the media proves defenseless when faced with the barrage of an expensive and minutely

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<sup>1221</sup> Addressing this problem in terms of the entertainment industry is a rich tradition of feminist film criticism, dating back to the early 1970s and Molly Haskell's *From Reverence To Rape*, where she notes that women stars were “considered ‘over the hill’ at forty,” to the British film journal *Screen* and its psychanalytic framework — whose most famous individual contribution remains Laura Mulvey's essay analyzing the “male gaze” of the classic Hollywood narrative — have discussed in critical terms how women's interiority has consistently been identified with bodily characteristics and objectified in spectacle. See Molly Haskell. *From Reverence To Rape. The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. Second Edition. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 14; Laura Mulvey. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *The Sexual Subject. A Screen Reader in Sexuality*. Ed. by John Caughie and Anette Kuhn. London and New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 22–34.

<sup>1222</sup> Jackie Stacey. *Star Gazing. Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*. London and New York. Routledge, 1994.



coordinated publicity campaign, funded by the vast advertising budgets of the studios:

An enormous amount of wealth was wasted making sure the reception of these dim-witted desert tales would be positive and that magazines and newspapers would not print the complaints of intelligent people subjected to their boorishness. A journalist from New York told me, for example, that a close watch had been kept to ensure that nothing even mildly critical of *The King of Kings* was published, even though 100 per cent of the New York reviewers were oblivious to the sentimental religiosity and crude spectacle that supplement each other throughout.<sup>1223</sup>

The manipulation of the media, in other words, is an integral factor of the work of the entertainment industry. Nevertheless, the press conference was only one half of a conceptual whole; the other is a show that Feilan has just put the finishing touches on in the foyer of *Silfurtúnglið* that depicts Lóa's life, employing the expressive means of pictures, words and material objects. Memorabilia has been collected, private letters, clothes. Spectators are led through Lóa's life in an orderly linear and chronological fashion:

The show is divided into divisions, and posters with headlines hang over each division, as do enormous pictures of Lóa all the way back to childhood. On the

posters the following is written:

### 1. WHEN LÓA WAS SMALL

(accompanying this part are children's clothes and toys)

### 2. WHEN LÓA WAS CONFIRMED

(her confirmation dress is on show, the bible, collection of psalms, watch, necklace, flowers)

### 3. HER FIRST DANCE

(a harmonica, bottle of sherry and a mannequin in an outdated dress; red underwear hangs on the wall, pictures of film heroes)

### 4. LÓA'S HOUSE

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<sup>1223</sup> Laxness, "The American Film in 1928," p. 149.

(the front piece of a house, made of painted cardboard, looks like a pull out picture in a children's book, cows made of paper are in front)

## 5. LOVE LETTERS TO LÓA

(an adorned little case with an opening that can be peeked through.

Lower Headline:

THE NIGHT AFTER HER FIRST PERFORMANCE LÓA RECEIVED FIFTY OFFERS OF MARRIAGE, IN ADDITION TO ALL THE LOVE LETTERS

On the casket there is a special card saying KR. 2.00 EXTRA

A camera, lightening system and recorder stand at the ready.<sup>1224</sup>

The media blitz after the first show was the honey trap, leading punters to the Lóa show, which is where the real money is at, at least at present, while waiting for Mr. Peacock to come back and raise the stakes. Feilan is quite open at any rate about his hopes of making a bundle on the show. Several other things are also immediately notable. First, Feilan moves fast. And while he needs to manage Lóa, in the sense of talking her into and out of things, coddle and babysit her, and the opportunity for complete reification, turning her into a pure commodity, a celebrity in other words, has been postponed a little bit; Lóa is difficult at times. Well, the world of objects offers no resistance, and needless to say not a single thing in the show is authentic — except perhaps for the photographs.

Feilan has thus in a sense turned Lóa into a commodity by vicarious means; her life has been reduced to the equivalent of a boardwalk sideshow, as well as pack of lies. And her life, without her knowing it, has been monetized in a

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<sup>1224</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, pp. 87–88. In the original: “Sýningunni er skipt í deildir, og spjöld með fyrisögnum yfir hverri deild, sömuleiðis gríðarmiklar myndir af Lóu alt frá bernsku. Á spjöldunum stendur: 1. Þegar Lóa var lítil (því fylgja barnaföt og leikföng) 2. Þegar Lóa var fermd (hér er sýndur femringarfatnaður hennar, bibblían, sálmabókin, úr, hálsmen, blóm) 3) Fyrsta ballið hennar (harmónika, sérrífaska og sýningarbrúða í úreltum kjól, rauðar kvenbuxur á vegg, myndir af kvikmyndahetjum 4) Húsið hennar Lóu (forhlið á húsi úr máluðum pappa, áþekt mynd í ævintrýrabók, pappakýr fyrir utan) 5) Ástarbréf til Lóu (útflúrað og skræpótt skírn með túðu sem hægt er að gægjast onum. Undirfyrisögn: Nóttina eftir fyrstu upptroðslu bárust fimtú giftingartilboð fyrir utan öll ástarbréf. Á skríninu er sérstakt spjald og á því stendur: KR. 2.00 aukalega) Kvikmyndavél, ljóskastari og upptökkuvél með segulþræði til reiðu.”

peculiarly modern fashion, one is even tempted to say financialized because what is at stake is pure abstraction, a house of cards, the work of a charlatan who doesn't produce anything, make anything or add any value to anything, much like the financial speculators and bankers who would, roughly three decades after the publication of the play, become known as the "masters of the universe," thanks to a white suited relic of the New Journalism.<sup>1225</sup> This, needless to say, is how Laxness viewed the Hollywood royalty in the 1920s and here he has found a perfect vessel for the pretty emptiness of the culture industries.

Lóa however is less than pleased upon finding that the most private and intimate aspects of her life are now being paraded in front of strangers, that is, if any of these objects did in fact belong to her, which they do not. But if everyone believes they do, what is the difference? This is the insidious logic of the culture industry and the simulacra; at a certain point the image (or pseudo-event) overtakes reality. But to hang a young woman's underwear on a wall, having chosen the sexually aggressive and suggestive color red to boot, well, simulacra or not, that simply isn't done and Lóa explodes. The exhibition's suggestion that she was a teenage drunkard, having liquor when she was confirmed at fourteen, is another instance of Feilan transgressing codes of female propriety but that becomes a minor detail that pales in significance compared to the other item, the shocking debauched excess of the red underwear.

It should be noted that at this moment, Lóa is not in fact aware of the most egregious tactic or trick Feilan pulled while putting the show together, a

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<sup>1225</sup> The phrase was introduced in 1987 in the novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* by Tom Wolfe. Much like Gordon Gekko's phrase "greed is good," pronounced by Michael Douglas in *Wall Street* (1987) and a hit among Wall Streeters, the Wolfe moniker was gleefully appropriated by the very figures the novel mocked.

devious, heartless and utterly cynical maneuver but also touched by genius. The letters we noticed as item number five on the advertisement placard. By projecting the image of immense popularity and celebrity, Feilan manages to infuse at least some portion of the resulting libidinal energies unto Lóa's image proper, who becomes sexier, more popular and a more sought after celebrity. As a benchmark, to fully comprehend just how shameless Feilan is, we can engage briefly in the thought game that this is the US and the number of marriage proposals he claims Lóa received after her premier now need to be "translated" into the American context, and allowances made for disparity in population. The point being that an American chanteuse would have to receive 50.000 marriage proposals in a single evening to equal the number put forward by Feilan, clearly a preposterous idea.

Secondly, Feilan has constructed a way for guests to the show to feel like they are getting a rare and privileged view into Lóa's life. Third, as getting that "peep" into Lóa's privacy is hugely expensive (2.00 kr.), Feilan stands to make a lot of money. The "emptiness" discussed above is elegantly symbolized by the fact that the envelopes in the "love letter" casket all have a single blank page inside

As noted above, the exhibit shocks and dismays Lóa, and angers her, "is this rubbish supposed to have something to do with me?" she asks Feilan.<sup>1226</sup> "Your biography, mam! Do you think this could be pulled off better in print?" Feilan responds.<sup>1227</sup> Lóa is not appeased but this is a highly significant moment

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<sup>1226</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 92. In the original: "Á þetta drasl að vera eitthvað mér áhángandi eða hvað?"

<sup>1227</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 92. In the original: "Ævisaga yðar frú! Haldið þér að hægt væri að gera það betur á prenti?"

in the text because, faced with Lóa's intense displeasure, Feilan for the first time reveals his "other," less charming, more shark-like side. Whether she likes the show or not is inconsequential, he tells her. I can do whatever I want with your career, image and life, Feilan tells Lóa. It turns out that, yes, there is a contract; that perennial contraption to swindle young artists is of course among Feilan's strategic tricks and he now tells Lóa that she has essentially signed over to him the rights to her life. Even when it comes to the red underwear there is nothing she can do. This is when the "adventure" starts to lose some of its sheen for Lóa, and the change does not bode well for her. Even if the transfer of rights that the contract entails is not necessarily catastrophic, its symbolic freight is immense (Feilan owns her life) and discernably undermines her spirit.

#### *8.4 Organized Amusement and Organized Cruelty*

When at the beginning, Feilan promised Lóa that her picture would be in the papers "every day," he was not merely throwing stardust in her eyes. However, what he has in mind is very different from what Lóa anticipates, but his behavior right at the start, in Lóa and Óli's modest house, is nevertheless entirely revealing of his true intentions. Indeed, Feilan had no sooner expressed his certainty as to Lóa's "marketability" then he went on to expound further on the way in which she could be turned, not into a star, but a commodity:

Yes, this is the costume! (*adjusts her a little bit and takes a step backwards and examines her, one eye at a time*) And might I ask you to sell me the mop and this washing cloth and this broom; and of course the cradle; yes, the baby — oh

well, we can use a fake baby. Anyway, I will buy everything. (*takes out his wallet*) How much?<sup>1228</sup>

Among the many striking things in this brief speech is the fact that Feilan refers to Lóa's real clothes as a "costume." The word in Icelandic is "gervi" which, in addition to denoting costume also means "fake" or "false," a deliberate word play on Laxness' part and significant in terms of the play's overall thematic constellation, which involves questions about subjectivity, social identities and values, these being domains where questions of authenticity, truth and a solid ground for one's social existence are foregrounded.

The stage directions then show Feilan treating Lóa as an object, invading her personal space, "fixing her up" and looking her over with "one eye at a time" as the stage directions amusingly tell us.<sup>1229</sup> His subsequent offer to purchase various and sundry items of everyday domesticity that surround her, indeed, Feilan's desire to purchase the constitutive elements of Lóa's existence, stopping short of the baby itself simply because it is easily replicable, demonstrates a combination of cruel and solipsistic eagerness, alienation and an unfaltering belief in the power of money — as well as a desperate longing to claim ownership of something that is authentic or promises an unmediated linkage to genuine experience. Or just hyperactive greed and business acumen; the agents of the culture industry do not hesitate, it appears.

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<sup>1228</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, pp. 42–43. In the original, the quote reads: "Það skal á hverjum degi vera ný mynd af yður í blöðunum og ný frétt. Já þetta er einmitt gervið! (*lagar hana svolítið til og stígur skref afturábak og virðir hana fyrir sér með öðru auga í senn*) Og mætti ég biðja yður að gera svo vel að selja mér þessa skrubbu og þessa skjólu og þennan sóp; og svo náttúrlega vögguna; já barnið, — noja, við getum haft tuskubarn. Sumsé, ég kaupi það alt. (*tekur upp veskið*) Hvað mikið?"

<sup>1229</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 41. In the original: "*Lagar hana svolítið til og stígur skref afturábak og virðir hana fyrir sér með öðru auga í senn.*"

This last point is driven home later in the play when Feilan simply tells Lóa that from a “lawyerly point of view [she] belong[s] to us here in Silfurtúnglið.”<sup>1230</sup> The irony, of course, is that Feilan seems fundamentally incapable of appreciating “genuine” experience, as suggested by the structural juxtaposition of the concepts of “costume” and “fake,” and as we have already touched on briefly. It is possible that Lóa never means anything to Feilan beyond being a signifier of innocence and authenticity, with “innocence” and “authenticity” simply being the attributes of an image or a figure deemed marketable and in demand at the moment, while the concepts themselves are vacated of meaning the instant they are introduced to such a hostile cultural ecology.

The echoes from Laxness’ essay on the American film industry are again unmistakable in the thematization of the commodification of culture. Hollywood, Laxness wrote in his early essay, nurtures “the thirst for sensationalism” among the audience but has, on occasion, the sense to recruit genuine talent — Emil Jannings, Greta Garbo and F.W. Murnau are the examples in Laxness’ essay — as if, for a moment, the intent was to produce art that was “even slightly related to human life.”<sup>1231</sup> The talents of these incomparable artists turn out however to be wasted, their assigned roles derivative and repetitive; the tragedy thus being that they “are repeatedly marshalled forth without being put in the service of any ideal.”<sup>1232</sup> A similar process goes into motion when Feilan hears the lullaby — what he recognizes just might be genuine, a substrate of intense, primal

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<sup>1230</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 96. In the original: “Auk þess, frá lögfræðilegu sjónarmiði, þá eru þessi bréf eign Silfurtúnglsins einsog gervið yðar. Þér megið ekki gleyma því að hversu harðgift sem þér kunnið að vera fyrir norðan eða vestan eða ustan, þá tilheyrið þér okkur hérna í Silfurtúnglinu.”

<sup>1231</sup> Laxness, “The American Film in 1928,” p. 148, 157.

<sup>1232</sup> Laxness, “The American Film in 1928,” p. 156.

emotion, but his unerring instinct is to ruin it by transforming it into a commodity.<sup>1233</sup>

Notable in this context is the way in which Feilan introduces himself. “I am a vaudeville director,” he says proudly, “it is my job to find numbers.”<sup>1234</sup> The informal concept of a “number,” which designates a single act of song or dance, is highly suggestive in this context, as the notion, while not particularly dignified in English, is even more disparaging in the Icelandic circumstance, something that Laxness makes the most of as he invokes its reference to a set of generic symbols where there is no rational way of privileging the meaning of one figure above the meaning of some other (random) figure in the numerical order.

To an extent this of course resembles the Saussurean view of language; the distinction, however, being that while positive cultural connotations adhere to certain words and phrases (“mother’s love” being a good example, the word “good” as well), no such logic applies to numbers, “one” being no better or worse than “ten,” well, unless one is defending one’s avatar from attack by the roll of the dice in *Dungeons and Dragons*.<sup>1235</sup>

In a similar fashion, the “numbers” that populate the stage in *Silfurtúnglið* are interchangeable elements in a system that does take them into “account” but only in monetary terms. “[H]aven’t you grasped it yet, for Christ’s sake, that you are a number?,” Feilan shouts at Lóa when exasperated at her obduracy during

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<sup>1233</sup> A connection can also be made to the way in which cinema and American popular culture is portrayed as a new form of an urban leisure activity in *Atómstöðin*; in both cases there is something deeply inauthentic about the way in which the structures of commercialized entertainment are integrated into the daily lives of its consumers.

<sup>1234</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 43. The passage, in the original: “Ég er fjölleikastjóri. Mitt hlutverk er að finna númer.”

<sup>1235</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure. *Course in General Linguistics*. Revised Edition. Glasgow: Fontana, 1977.



her first run.<sup>1236</sup> Indeed, in a manner that recalls Victor Shklovsky’s phrase describing the complete automatizing of perception, namely its “algebrization,” Laxness, by activating the concept of “number” suggests not only the utter flattening of culture by its industrialization and rationalization but the concomitant cost to human dignity and values.<sup>1237</sup>

### **9. *Shame of the Nation***

Lóa resists Feilan’s “advances” in the first act, showing him the door in the end, but as early as the close of the first half of the first act, after her run-in with Ísa and their conversation about the high-life of celebrities — and the as yet highly unlikely notion that anything will come of Ísa’s words about bringing Lóa and her lullaby to the attention of her manager — there are suggestions that for Lóa a life of glamor and showmanship has its attractions. The final stage directions of the section describe Lóa playing a game of sorts, walking around as if on stage and singing her lullaby in a newly affected manner.<sup>1238</sup> Because of this brief interlude, Lóa’s demurrals sound a little hollow when Feilan returns in the second half of the first act. Indeed, as he leaves, she asks him confidentially if it would be all right for her to call him at a later point. In the reception of the play, these moments are commonly read as typical for women’s general difficulty when faced with temptation, be it an expensive dress or a glamorous life on the

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<sup>1236</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 67. In the original: “Já, en eruð þér ekki farin að skilja það enn manneskja, að þér eruð númer?”

<sup>1237</sup> Victor Shklovsky. “Art as Device.” *Theory of Prose*. Trans. by Benjamin Sher. Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990, p. 5.

<sup>1238</sup> This is how the stage directions describe Lóa’s entrance: She “comes in af a short interval, acting strangely, in the manner of a singer entering the stage, and sings portions of the lullaby with traces of artistic inflection”. Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 39. In the original: “kemur inn eftir skamma stund með annarlegu fasi, líkast saungkonu sem kemur frammá pall, sýngur hendíngar úr vöggukvæðinu með votti af listrænum tilburðum”.

stage. These segments of the opening act are highly significant and we will return to them once a context within which to place them has been established.

Important gaps remain as act two opens and Lóa is in Reykjavík, being pushed to perform in *Silfurtúnlið*, despite knowing absolutely nothing about show business and being, as indicated above, uncomfortable with the entire process. As her performance becomes an enormous success, Lóa adjusts to the demands of the industry, and is even led to believe that the aforementioned international entertainment conglomerate, Universal Concert Incorporated, will sign her to a contract, which would then ensure her path to stardom.

The “adjustment” required to bring those ambitions to fruition turns out however to mean her ruination as, having abandoned her family while knowing her baby is seriously ill, Lóa must endure the news of the death of her son at the end, as well as having to come to terms with the true core of the business to which she has given her allegiance, as she is literally prostituted to Mr. Peacock, the media mogul. Herein can also be found the thematic concerns that were highlighted at the time of the play’s initial run, namely its critique of commercialism and consumerism and its political and nationalistic charge, particularly in the context of the series of controversial agreements with the US about, first, a transport station and then a military base in Keflavík, and then a few years later Iceland joined NATO.<sup>1239</sup>

Although *Silfurtúnlið* is not quite as direct as *Atómstöðin* in its depiction of Iceland being “sold” to a foreign superpower (“sell the country, bury the bones”), its representation of something unique and precious, and absolutely

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<sup>1239</sup> Ingimundarson, *Í eldlínu kalda stríðsins*, pp. 17–77.

irreplaceable, being peddled to a global capitalistic enterprise (“London Paris New York”) is close enough for there to be no mistaking the thematic affinity between the two works. Laxness himself commented on the fact that *Silfurtúnglið* stakes out a position towards the political and social situation of Iceland in the years following the Second World War, and the debate over the continued presence of the American military and Iceland joining NATO. In an address at the headquarters of the Soviet Public Television on May 12<sup>th</sup> 1955, he for example discussed how the “the lives of nations” can be compromised by the temptations of a capitalistic system that corrupts even those aspects of human relations and social life that in their essence cannot — or should not — be reduced to market value.

This is how Laxness explains the genesis of the play, here referred to as *The Sold Lullaby*:<sup>1240</sup>

I wrote the Sold Lullaby because I had seen so many human tragedies, big and small, in the lives of individuals as well as of nations, where people let them induce [sic] to put on the market, as some kind of general merchandize [sic], those things that are the dearest and innermost treasure of the human heart.<sup>1241</sup>

The mother and the lullaby, pure and primordial and patriotic; they stand in for the nation and the artistic expression of its spirit; the purity of the expression of the lullaby as sung by Lóa in the privacy of her own home being in fact

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<sup>1240</sup> Laxness refers to *Silfurtúnglið* as “The Sold Lullaby” when discussing it in his correspondence abroad, as well as under other circumstances, such as speeches given abroad. The play has however never been published under that title. While that title is more thematically direct, arguments could be aroused for a more direct translation of the title, the foremost being, probably, that *The Sold Lullaby*, rather than functioning in the direct and confrontational manner of for example, *Death of a Salesman*, sounds like a Christmas Carol or a children’s fairy tale. *The Silver Moon*, meanwhile, retains a certain mysterious and symbolic ambiance that is worth holding on to.

<sup>1241</sup> Halldór Laxness. “An address for the Soviet Television about Sold Lullaby,” 12. Maí 1955, 1 bls., vélrit. LBS 200 NF. Halldór Kiljan Laxness, skjala- og handritasafn. B. Handrit / BD. Leikrit / *Silfurtúnglið* (2).

reminiscent of how Laxness in a famous essay describes the essence of Jónas Hallgrímsson's poetry as the sublime manifestation of a national spirit, "the embers of our origins," and how Hallgrímsson "steps forth in the humble grace of authenticity and writes his poetry inspired by the core of our consciousness."<sup>1242</sup> Much as Hallgrímsson is the unassuming "son of the valley," Lóa is the "unknown voice of an inauspicious county that got lost behind the world," and, according to Feilan, her lullaby encapsulates the feelings of love and safety recognized by "everybody who has had a mother".<sup>1243</sup> Laxness' liberal use of the plural of the first person pronoun in his essay on Jónas Hallgrímsson is intended to foster a connection between the reader of the essay and its subject but the assumed commonality is also relevant to Lóa's rendering of the lullaby, which transcends subjective experience to become the expression of primal emotions and speaks to a deep longing shared by everyone who listens.<sup>1244</sup>

The description of the "fight" to bring the bones of Jónas Hallgrímsson ("ástmögurinn") to rest in his homeland in *Atómstöðin*, and the consequent uses made of his corpus and corpse in order to facilitate the workings of power, serves as an ironic reminder of the double edged nature of the nationalist discourse; how easily icons sacred to the self-identity of nations can be turned against what they should stand for, against their "essence" and against their nation, at least that was the case in Laxness' opinion. That the "essence" in question exists in some form, even if not entirely in keeping with the times, is

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<sup>1242</sup> Halldór Laxness. "Um Jónas Hallgrímsson." *Alþýðubókin*. Þriðja útgáfa. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1949, p. 50. In the original: "En í ljóðum hans er fólgin glóð upphafs vors; hann geingur fram í auðmjúkri tign raunkendarinnar og yrkir út frá kjarna vitundar vorrar".

<sup>1243</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 67. In the original: "allir sem átt hafa móður."

<sup>1244</sup> Jónas Hallgrímsson was given the title "bard of Iceland" in a recent book on his life and works, and the honorific is justified as no contemporary literary figure, except possibly Laxness himself, has achieved a similar stature in modern Icelandic culture. Dick Ringler. *Bard of Iceland. Jónas Hallgrímsson poet and scientist*. Madison: University Of Wisconsin Press, 2002.

nevertheless not placed in doubt in the novel. In *Silfurtúnglið*, however, the existence of such an “essence” is much more problematic, even though, in the beginning and through the text’s initial thematization of the lullaby, the similarities between the two works in this regard do seem to outweigh the differences. The fundamental “negativity” of *Silfurtúnglið* will be returned to below.

However, the most common reading of *Silfurtúnglið* in the critical literature on Laxness’ works sees it, as indicated above, as a thinly veiled allegory of the loss of national sovereignty and the manipulations that lead to a betrayal so complete as to constitute a caesura with all ethical paradigms. Laxness attempts to address the subsequent contradictions and the inescapable cognitive dissonance that result when one gives up what, deep down, one knows is right and just; how despite a range of self-justifications and defense mechanisms, existential crisis follows. This, then, is the tragedy of Búi Árland in *Atómstöðin* and perhaps Lóa in *Silfurtúnglið*.

Whether we can compare Búi and Lóa is an interesting question. At the end of *Atómstöðin*, Árland is a ghost in the Ibsenian sense, that is, he carries death within himself.<sup>1245</sup> He has lost Uglá and he is probably aware that his dreams of Patagonia, the exotic place he is always saying that he will visit, that he will tear himself up and out of his daily routine and the empty routine of his life and go on an existential adventure, leaving all the ugliness and badness in his life behind. For him Patagonia represents rebirth but it is also just a chimera, not real, the trip will never come to pass. Indeed, Patagonia has a similar function for

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<sup>1245</sup> I am referring to the way in which Captain Alving carried “death” within himself in *Gengangere* (Ghosts, 1881), that is, he was infected by syphilis, which his son Oswald then inherits.

Búi Árland as the island Fiji does for Truman Burbank in Peter Weir's 1998 film *The Truman Show*, it's the transcendental signifier that marks the end of the signifying chain, the cessation of the deferral of meaning, and thus also the satisfaction of desire, once and for all.

Another way of putting this would be to say that the fact that Truman lived on a film lot was the motivating factor that endowed Fiji with meaning, that is, it was the inauthenticity of his existence that made Fiji necessary, just as the artificiality is, unbeknownst to himself, the reason that he is so deeply, consistently depressed and unhappy. Árland is unhappy for precisely the same reason; the capitalistic ideology that he has given himself over to is just as much a figment of the imagination as Seahaven is in the movie. But while Truman doesn't have more than a sneaking suspicion of the real conditions of his existence, Búi Árland knows that his side is destined to lose in the great ideological battle of the age. This makes the weight he bears all the heavier, and transforms him (perhaps) into a tragic figure. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, he is simply an empty shell of a man. *Silfurtúnglið* ends with Lóa having lost everything, her dreams have turned into a nightmare, her life apparently wasted and her grief unbearable. But are they comparable? Are their fates (judgments) the same? And thus their infraction, do they also share the same guilt?

Peter Hallberg would probably answer in the affirmative. For him, Lóa chose badly, just as Búi Árland did. Both were faced with a choice, two worlds, in *Atómstöðin* it is capitalism and communism, in *Silfurtúnglið* it is domesticity and motherhood or chasing after fame. For making a bad choice, Hallberg believes

Lóa has brought shame down on herself and her fate, if not justified, is of the kind that its vessel and bearer need not be mourned. In a packed passage that both emphasizes the correspondence between Universal Concert Incorporated and The North Atlantic Treaty Organization and condemns Lóa as a traitor to her womanly duties, just as those who are giving away Iceland's independence are traitors to their nation, Hallberg writes: "[i]n a league of the powerful, Iceland might well expect a fate similar to Lóa's with Universal Concert Incorporated. The shame of Lóa is thus the shame of the nation. Her child in the coffin represents the generations yet to come, the future of the nation."<sup>1246</sup>

The concept of "shame," as employed by Hallberg in an admittedly heavily politicized context, nevertheless brings to mind the discourse surrounding *Straumrof* during its initial 1934 run, when a flock of critics agreed that Gæa should be the one to carry the weight of the sexual shame, although Dagur Vestan was presumably quite as active during the night as she was. For Hallberg, Lóa's shame is abandoning her family and thus, it is suggested, causes her infant son to die. That the infant's death is somehow her fault colors Hallberg's evaluation of her, much as it did critics and reviewers during the play's initial run. By rejecting motherhood she rejected her infant son, and the shock of a mother's rejection was just too much for the tiny baby, is the logic then.<sup>1247</sup> In point of fact, Óli was there with their son the entire time and did everything

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<sup>1246</sup> Hallberg, *Hús skáldsins* I, p. 212. The Icelandic translation: „Í samtökum hinna völdugu gæti íslensk þjóð væntt sama hlutskiptis og Lóa hjá Universal Concert Incorporated. Smán Lóu er þannig smán landsins. Barn hennarí líkkistunni (sú líkkista kom reyndar hvergi við sögu í sjónvarpinu) eru komandi kynslóðir, framtíð þjóðarinnar.” The two extremes that we can associate with this hermeneutical tradition are, on the one hand, that the play has nothing at all to offer in addition to the allegorical political message, and is therefore quickly depleted as a work of art, and, on the other, that the focus on the political allegory has obscured our vision of the play's true content, the political allegory in this latter reading being completely inconsequential.

<sup>1247</sup> This line of thinking is on offer in Jón Nordal. “Silfurtúnlið eftir Halldór Kiljan Laxness.” *Þjóðviljinn*, 12 October, p. 7.

humanly possible to save him; there were doctors, medicine, hospitals. Lóa being there would not have made any difference, it seems reasonable to assume, but then that is not the point. At stake are the ideologies of femininity, Lóa was the “angel of the house” before she absconded with Feilan, betraying everything that is holy and good in women, her own very essence even.

### *9.1 A Cultural Famine of Disastrous Proportions*

Whether fair or not, the burden of guilt is thus placed on Lóa and, it would seem, the textual cues and steering mechanisms of the text could be read to support such an interpretation as the casket is literally brought to Lóa in Reykjavík at the end, almost as if she was expected to admire her handiwork. The conclusion of the play will be discussed in more detail below. For now, however, we are simply scouting, raising questions and identifying moments in the text that are significant and need to be collated together to see if a cohesive reading, different from the dominant ones, can be made to reveal itself. However, to reiterate briefly, the invocation of “shame” seems closely connected to the dominant interpretative tradition that sees Lóa as a “fallen woman,” a “prostitute,” and a lost soul when the play comes to a close. However, it will be suggested below that its connotative register is misplaced and the values thus invoked are in fact undermined by the text.

But it is important to keep in mind that Laxness’ play is nevertheless a narrative of trauma and loss and thus at stake, as well as the immediately political dimension, is the expression of subjectivity constrained and twisted by social structures and power relations, specifically female subjectivity. We have



already started to address how the play specifically positions female subjectivity through our brief discussion of the concepts of “temptation” and “shame” and — as is becoming something of a refrain — this is something we will return to below.

Of all of Laxness’ plays, *Silfurtunglið* is the most extensive and epic in terms of complications of staging and the number of featured characters.<sup>1248</sup> Its success, however, was modest at the time of its premier although its afterlife has been interesting. Thus, while not exactly unpopular during its initial run, the reviews tended to line up according to political affiliations, with right wing newspapers being harshly critical, while those on the other side were generally positive.<sup>1249</sup> In *Vísir*, Hersteinn Pálsson noted that many “mediocre authors have done as well or better,” while in *Morgunblaðið* Sigurður Grímsson writes that the play is “brutal” and “devoid of artistry,” defeated by its propaganda function.<sup>1250</sup> From the other side, Loftur Guðmundsson stated in *Alþýðublaðið* that *Silfurtunglið* was a play of international relevance, while, in *Tíminn*, Jónas Þórbergsson described *Silfurtunglið* as “stylistically brilliant”.<sup>1251</sup>

<sup>1248</sup> *Silfurtunglið* for example features twelve speaking roles, all of them significant.

*Strompleikurinn* features eleven speaking roles, ten of them significant.

<sup>1249</sup> Halldór Þorsteinsson notes that one could do a blind reading of the reviews of *Silfurtunglið* and pinpoint with exactitude the politics of the reviewer. Curiously enough, in light of this, he adds that although everybody who addresses the play at all mentions its political dimension, that it is “critical,” even “propagandistic,” but, at the same time, “as if a shameful taboo were being touched upon,” no-one articulates or expounds on the exact nature of the propagandistic critique — to the extent that an observer not familiar with Icelandic politics would have no idea, based on reading the reviews, what exactly constituted the controversy aroused by the play. Halldór Þorsteinsson. “Silfurtunglið veður í skýjum.” *Friðs þjóð*, 20. November 1954, p. 6.

<sup>1250</sup> Hersteinn Pálsson. “Þjóðleikhúsið: Silfurtunglið. Eftir Halldór K. Laxness.” *Vísir*, 11 October, 1954. In the original: “en margur miðlungshöfundur hefur gert jafn vel og betur”. Sigurður Grímsson. “‘Silfurtunglið’, leikrit Halldórs K. Laxness frumsýnt í Þjóðleikhúsinu.” *Morgunblaðið*, 12 October, 1954, p. 9. In the original: “áróðurinn er í sjálfu sér meinlaus og missir algerlega marks vegna þess hversu nakinn hann er og *brútal* og *sneyddur því listfengi*, sem höfundurinn annars á í svo ríkum mæli.”

<sup>1251</sup> Jónas Þórbergsson. “Þjóðleikhúsið: Silfurtunglið. Leikrit í fjórum þáttum. Eftir Halldór Kiljan Laxness.” *Tíminn*, 12 October, 1954, p. 5. In the original: “stíllinn er stórkostlegur.”

Notable, however, is the somewhat lukewarm nature of even the positive reviews; complimenting Laxness on his style was, by this point, an almost meaningless gesture. This is particularly notable in *Þjóðviljinn*, a newspaper whose close relationship with Laxness lasted for decades. While of course positive over-all, the reviewer (identified by the initials “Á. Hj.,”) nevertheless notes that “Laxness has not worked extensively in the theater and no-one should therefore be surprised that *Silfurtúnglið* is not a literary masterwork comparable to his most famous novels.”<sup>1252</sup> To this is added the observation that Laxness’ “bitterness” comes close to capsizing the equilibrium of the work and that the lead character, Lóa, is not entirely convincing. As a rhetorical gesture, invoking inexperience as an excuse for ineptitude never works and, to be fair, the reviewer for *Þjóðviljinn* does not go quite so far but the gesture of comparing *Silfurtúnglið* to Laxness’ most highly regarded novels is nevertheless a transparently polite way of voicing reservations. When it is suggested that the humor vacillates towards “bitterness” and that the central character of the play is perhaps somewhat flawed, reservations have been replaced by outright criticism.

Particularly smarting, however, is Jónas Jónasson’s review in the magazine *Spegillinn*. Recalling Laxness’ words in an interview prior to the opening of the play to the effect that there was considerable “hunger,” in the sense of demand, for good plays in European theaters at the moment, the essayist goes out of his way to mock what is then posited as Laxness’ charitable attempt to relieve the cultural malnutrition of the continent:

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<sup>1252</sup> “Á. Hj.” “Silfurtúnglið eftir Halldór Kiljan Laxness.” *Þjóðviljinn*, 12 October, 1954, p. 7. “Halldór Kiljan Laxness hefur lítt fengist við leikrænan skáldskap um dagana og þarf engan að undra að Silfurtúnglið sé ekki listrænt stórvirki á borð við frægustu skáldsögur hans.”

In the interview, the author preemptively countered future critics by revealing that serious troubles afflicted the great and big world [outside Iceland] and that these are manifested in a terrible shortage of theater plays, a draught that was virtually in the process of extinguishing all life. As a defensive gesture, this was a smart rhetorical move as nobody is likely to be mean to a charity event.

When the play was staged, it became clear that the references to hunger were a serious understatement; it was inconceivable that anything resembling conventional deprivation could be the issue, but rather a famine of disastrous proportions, when people eat their shoes [...]<sup>1253</sup>

Suggesting that the work, in order to be “consumed” with pleasure, requires a spiritual and cultural state of virtual starvation must count among the harshest assessments of a significant theatrical production in Icelandic critical history.

## 9.2 Interpretational Turpitude and Revisionist Readings

When revived on the occasion of the quarter centennial of Þjóðleikhúsið in 1975 the reviews were more positive and when a television movie based on the play premiered shortly thereafter, reactions were again rather favorable.<sup>1254</sup> Writing about the play’s revival, Jónas Guðmundsson notes that since its first staging, *Silfurtúnglið*’s status within the Icelandic theatrical tradition has been that of a

<sup>1253</sup> “Úr heimi leiklistarinnar: Silfurtúnglið eftir Halldór Kiljan Laxness.” *Spegillinn*, October 1954, p. 171. In the original the quote reads: “Í viðtali þessu sló höfundur þann varnagla í væntanlega krítík að upplýsa, að nú væri illt í efni úti í þeim stóra heimi, þar sem væri hið sívaxandi leikritahungur, sem ætlaði helzt allt lifandi að drepa, og væri það fyrst og fremst ástæðan til útkomku leiksins. Var þetta dálítið sniðug varúðarráðstöfun, því að engum dettur í hug að fara að skamma góðgerðarsýningar. Þegar svo verkið kom á fjalirnar, kom, það í ljós, að þetta með hungrið var hóflega til orða tekið, og hér gat ekki verið um að ræða neitt venjulegt, skikkanlegt hungur, heldur hrein og klár Móðuharðindi, þegar menn leggja sér til munns skóbætur, sem áður er búið að slíta upp til agna, og verður jafnvel gott af.”

<sup>1254</sup> “Silfurtúnglið í Þjóðleikhúsinu.” *Vikan*, 1954, p. 15; “bvs.” “Silfurtúnglið — hugarflug og hugrekki bera ávöxt.” *Morgunblaðið*, 28 December, 1978, p. 12; “Silfurtúnglið.” *Morgunblaðið*, 24 December, 1978, p. 44; “Silfurtúnglið — mannlífið í hnotskurn.” *Morgunblaðið*, 21 December, 1978, p. 24; “IHH.” “Maður er náttúrlega ekki úr poppheiminum’.” *Dagblaðið*, 23 December, 1978, pp. 6–7; “Hneykslunarhellan Hrafn.” *Helgarpósturinn*, 1978, pp. 35–36. See also, Gísli Sigurgeirsson. “Í skjóli bakvið heiminn.” *Dagur*, 27 January, 1986, p. 9; Reynir Antonsson. “Túnglið tælandi.” *Helgarpósturinn*, p. 27.

“forgotten” or a “lost” play.<sup>1255</sup> We may recall that the exact same phrasing was used to describe *Straumrof* upon its revival two years later. To an extent, Guðmundsson could be referring to any one of Laxness’ theatrical works, their reception having been famously muted, with the exception of *Dúfnaveislan*, but his point is nevertheless specific to *Silfurtúnglið*. He is referring to the intense focus at the time of the play’s initial staging on its contemporary references — its thematization of national independence, the American military presence in Iceland and Iceland joining NATO— and he is also suggesting that the accentuation of this clearly important aspect of the work to the detriment of all other textual dimensions and meanings, had the effect of obscuring the multifaceted reality and thematic complexities of the work as a whole. It was thus history and politics that rendered the work, in Guðmundsson’s words, “opaque” and, essentially, difficult to understand, rather than complications belonging to the text itself.<sup>1256</sup>

What Guðmundsson might be suspected of overlooking in this instance is the fact that politically freighted works tend to incite reactions that are different from those that greet less “confrontational” and polemic texts. At stake, as well, is the cultural horizon of the initial audience, for whom the political implications of the play would have been downright inescapable. It is much easier decades later to see “clearly” — although the present may well be obscured by the very things that Guðmundsson suggests audiences should have the maturity to transcend. Guðmundsson also declines to elaborate further on his thesis by, for example,

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<sup>1255</sup> Jónas Guðmundsson. “Silfurtúnglið á öðru kvertéli.” *Tíminn*, 30 April, 1975, p. 9. The phrase being referenced is “Silfurtúnglinu, á fyrsta kvartéli árið 1954, vorum við hinsvegar flest búin að gleyma. Það var týnt”.

<sup>1256</sup> Guðmundsson, “Silfurtúnglið á öðru kvertéli,” p. 9. In the original, “Það verður líka að segjast eins og er, að á fyrsta kvartélinu var leikurinn *torskildari* en hann er nú”.

explaining why the dark shroud of “opaqueness” should descend on *Silfurtúnglið*, alone and uniquely among Laxness’ career-long history of producing controversial works.<sup>1257</sup> He seems furthermore inclined to refute almost entirely the importance of the play’s geopolitical strata, indicating that, now that audiences have the benefit of a temporal distance from the historical situation that inflected both the play and its reception, it becomes possible to shed this layer of the text, much like a snake sheds its old and useless skin, and focus on what is the work’s “true” subject matter.

There are, it is obvious, problems with Guðmundsson’s approach to the play. It is nevertheless worth pausing for a moment to reflect upon his reading because, quite out of left field, he makes an observation that is striking in its suggestive reach and difference from the discursive mainstream of commentary on *Silfurtúnglið* during its initial run as well as during its 1975 revival.<sup>1258</sup> The play, he states, “in fact deals with very simple things. It is simply about working outside the home.”<sup>1259</sup> Again, Guðmundsson proves somewhat difficult to agree with entirely, as not all readers will accept his point about the play being “simple” — let alone his grounding assumption that its political dimension is an encumbrance best ignored — but his point about the thematic importance of the movement from the domestic sphere into the public sphere is enormously astute.

The public/private split has already been touched upon in the above discussion of the figure of the celebrity and it will be a constitutive aspect of the

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<sup>1257</sup> It would also seem that although Guðmundsson’s comment about the play becoming the “victim” of its own political content can be taken as a critical commonplace, something that is more or less applicable to a range of works, it is peculiarly germane to *Silfurtúnglið*, whose status within Laxness’ oeuvre has never been high.

<sup>1258</sup> There have been other stagings of the play, but the 1975 revival and the filmic adaptation by Hrafn Gunnlaugsson are, arguably, the most important reinscriptions of Laxness’ play.

<sup>1259</sup> Guðmundsson, “*Silfurtúnglið* á öðru kvertéli,” p. 9. In the original, *Silfurtúnglið* “fjallar í raun og veru um mjög einfalda hluti. Það fjallar einfaldlega um vinnu utan heimilis.”

analysis of the play that is offered below. And although problematic, one might agree that to a degree, Guðmundsson does identify what might be termed a “simple” yet crucial aspect of the play in that his reference is not to a deeply embedded symbolic structure or an “obscure” theme but something that is literally the engine of the plot, the fact that Lóa leaves the domestic sphere to venture out into the world — but foregrounding this aspect of the play (rather than, for example, the political allegory) was by no means a “simple” gesture to make at the time for precisely the reasons addressed by Guðmundsson himself.

Before addressing more fully the implications of Guðmundsson’s insight concerning the importance of the concept of the public sphere, which his essay unfortunately fails to pursue or develop in a rewarding enough fashion, it is useful to examine what stands as perhaps the most significant evaluation of the play in the immediate aftermath of its staging and appearance in book form — two events that nearly coincided, the book being published on October 8<sup>th</sup> 1954 and the play enjoying its premier a day later— namely poet, translator and editor Einar Bragi’s contemplative essay in progressive and modernist magazine *Birtingur*, “Hugleiðingar um Silfurtúnglið og fleira” (Reflections on Silfurtúnglið and Other Things).<sup>1260</sup>

The importance of Bragi’s essay lies in its highlighting of two important aspects of the play. These are, on the one hand, the linguistic and formal register, approached by Bragi through the idealist vocabulary of whether or not the text

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<sup>1260</sup> Einar Bragi was a member of the “atom poets” group that emerged in Iceland in the 1950s, renewing the formal parameters of Icelandic verse, which had long since become staid by that time but were held onto with greater devotion than most other places. This is mentioned because the name of the group was initially fostered upon them in what was meant to be a derogatory fashion, the reference being the “atom poet” in Laxness’ *Atómstöðin*. Rather than rejecting the moniker, the young poets embraced it.

manages to rise to “poetic heights,” and, on the other hand, the narrative dissonances, the oscillation between employing farcical and melodramatic narrative devices and structures that, for Bragi, point to the lack of an authorial vision and control.<sup>1261</sup> Although Bragi moves his discussion of *Silfurtúnglið* along tracks different from those of Guðmundsson, certain conjunctions are nevertheless to be found between the arguments of the two critics and these will be employed below as the springboard for an alternative reading of the play.

### *9.3 National Emancipation and Nihilism*

Bragi’s essay is notable not so much for its negative appraisal of *Silfurtúnglið* but the manner in which the critical evaluation is argued and grounded in a carefully articulated context, which positions the work within an international problematic involving what Pascale Casanova terms “small literatures”.<sup>1262</sup> As Casanova deploys the concept, it does not so much invoke or involve geographic circumference as it does a sense of literary “provinciality,” which is defined by the trendsetting cosmopolitan centers that dominate the ideological workings of the world republic of letters.

Furthermore, and as noted above, his essay remains a central contribution to the hermeneutical tradition of Laxness’ play. This is why it bears emphasizing that it is of course not a productive endeavor to attempt, roughly six decades after the publication of a critical essay, to refute its points in a misguided effort to “redeem” a work that one may believe is misunderstood by a critic or

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<sup>1261</sup> Einar Bragi. “Hugleiðingar um Silfurtúnglið og fleira.” *Birtingur*, 1/1955, p. 35. In the original: “Víðast hvar skortir Silfurtúnglið svo tilfinnanlega skáldlega hafningu, listræna reist”.

<sup>1262</sup> Pascale Casanova. *The World Republic of Letters*. Trans. by M.B. DeBevoise. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004, pp. 175–205.

commentator or “unfairly” ejected from the canon. That, indeed, is not the intent here. As noted above, Bragi’s approach to the text is savvy and represents what can essentially be viewed as the first volley in a conversation about Laxness’ play. It is in this context that the episodes, narrative signposts and formal elements identified in Bragi’s essay as moments of critical importance to the generation of meaning in Laxness’ text can, rather than being viewed simply as argumentative points in a contestation of value judgments, serve as the springboard for a series of questions about the deep structure of the play and, ultimately, whether Laxness’ ambitions are in fact as limited as his detractors would maintain.

As an aside, Einar Bragi makes a surprising admission when he mentions that he was expected to review *Silfurtúnlið* when the play was originally staged but after having seen it performed and read the text as published in book form, decided against it. Laxness’ stature at the time, especially among left intellectuals, made him a highly problematic subject of criticism; indeed, negative criticism of his work always ran the risk of being read not as the expression of a coherently articulated point of view concerning aesthetic matters but as a coded political attack.

Nervousness did not however play into Bragi’s decision to decline the opportunity to review Laxness’ play. Far from it. Bragi makes clear that it was the magnitude of what he perceived to be Laxness’ failure that rattled him; it created cognitive dissonance. How could such an author produce such a flawed



aesthetic object?<sup>1263</sup> Bragi was so genuinely shocked and taken aback by

Laxness' work that he needed time to reflect on the implications:

These ruminations represent an attempt to find an answer to the question why Halldór Kiljan Laxness' new play, *Silfurtúnglið*, is so feeble and sluggish. I was planning to write a review of the play and its performance. I abandoned the idea however after having read the play and seen it performed because at that point I was already aware that *Silfurtúnglið* would not enrich our already poor playwriting tradition.<sup>1264</sup>

Bragi starts by positing a historical and transcultural framework for his interpretation that speaks in no uncertain terms to the political realities of Iceland in the post-war years, and thus also Laxness' themes in the play. In a brief but concise overview of seminal moments in the recent history of three European nations — Norway, Ireland and Spain — Bragi posits a connection between national independence movements and democratic reform movements and moments of artistic renaissance or resurgence, aligning a country's rediscovery of its national pride with achievements in the arts. All three countries were peripheral to dominant literary culture in the decades around the turn of the nineteenth century, nevertheless they managed, according to Bragi, to overcome or work through a history of political subjugation and humiliation to achieve significant political and social improvements as well as a remarkable series of artistic triumphs on the stage.

Realizing that contemporaneity or simultaneity does not equal causality,

Bragi identifies a number of factors that may explain the connection between

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<sup>1263</sup> What seems to rescue *Silfurtúnglið* at the last minute from being assigned to the entirely worthless category are a four redeeming qualities that Bragi summarizes in half a paragraph — in a critical essay that stretches over three magazine pages, double columned.

<sup>1264</sup> Bragi, "Hugleiðingar um *Silfurtúnglið* og fleira," p. 34. In the original: "Þessar hugleiðingar eru nánast tilruan til að finna svar við því, hvers vegna hið nýja leikrit Halldórs Kiljans Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, er ekki burðugra en raun er á. Ætlunin var að ég ritaði grein um leikritið og sýningu þess. En ég hvarf frá því ráði vegna þess, að þegar ég var búinn að lesa leikritið og sjá það leikið var mér orðið ónotalega ljóst, að *Silfurtúnglið* hafði sízt orðið til að auðga hinar fátæklegu leikbókmenntir okkar."

social emancipation and the flourishing of the arts, factors that range from the value of memorialization to the revolutionary capacity of inspiration and motivation, as well as the immense value of what tends to be unearthed in such periods; a new drive makes itself felt to take a look at the past and, quite often, serious work starts to collect and preserve folk tales, legends, rhymes and various other forms of literary expression that function almost as a living connection to the past; *this* is how they thought and reflected, *this* is the value system by which they lived, they had *this* kind of humor! (“they” in this instance simply being generations past).

Indeed, reclaiming the literary heritage is for Einar Bragi a pivotal issue, the authors he discusses — Ibsen, Yeats and Lorca among them — are all posited as sharing a deep engagement with the historical and national past and frequently employing myths and national legends in order to articulate in a symbolic fashion the essence of what in each case is viewed as constituting the essence of the social bond that makes a people a nation.<sup>1265</sup> It is this celebration of selected aspects of the past and thus the creation of a historical and national imaginary that falls into alignment with the politics of a particular historical moment that Bragi sees as securing the “unlikely” success of the plays and playwrights he discusses.

The description of the three theatrical traditions and how a strand of patriotic and democratic fervor, manifesting itself in a desire for national independence, rediscovering a culture displaced and silenced by colonial oppressors, and a degree of national essentialism, is privileged speaks clearly to

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<sup>1265</sup> Einar Bragi references Henrik Ibsen and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson in the Norwegian context; John Synge and William Butler Yeats in the Irish context, and Federico Garcia Lorca in the Spanish one. Einar Bragi. “Hugleiðingar um Silfurtúnglið og fleira.” *Birtingur*, 1/4, 1955, p. 33.

key facets of the Icelandic struggle for independence, in particular the role of culture and the literary heritage. Or so one might think, at least until one recalls that Bragi is concerned with a theatrical tradition in all three instances, so the Sagas might simply not be eligible. A double shame in light of the fact that nothing resembling a theatrical tradition existed in Iceland around the turn of the century, let alone the last decades of the nineteenth, which is the period of his earliest examples, and such a tradition was still missing when Laxness came forward with *Silfurtúnglið*.

This does however remind us, if a reminder were necessary — we have borne down on this point several times already — that the Saga heritage was foundational when it came to the conceptualization of Iceland as a nation, and a newly independent one at that, just as it had been important during the centuries of colonial rule, if for other reasons. The Sagas allowed for the tracing of linguistic continuity for close to a millennium; there was *Landnámabók* (The Book of Settlements), which describes and accounts for the settlement of Iceland in the ninth century, including a list of 3000 proper names. For a newly independent country, this was solid ground, ready for foundational work.

And from a certain point of view the Sagas were the only thing of value in a country that was tremendously, unbelievably poor in addition to being a subjugated colony (the two issues were interconnected); a country that produced nothing, made nothing, allowed sheep to wander free and graze during the summers but couldn't fish in some of the richest fishing grounds on the planet, lying just off the coast, because there were no maps, lighthouses, docks, or sturdy enough boats. The Icelandic elite was a small number of rich families,

some church estates (Skálholt, Hólar), and a tiny set of colonial officers based in Reykjavík. The rest were virtual serfs, workers enslaved by a law called *vistarbönd* (a settling ordinance) that decreed that all those who did not happen to be landowners, and that would have been the majority, were required by law to take on work on farms and freeholds for no pay where they, furthermore, had absolutely no status, no prospects, no rights and were entirely dependent on whatever farmer happened to own the land and held their contract. These folks had one day a year when they could move and travel freely, which is when they could seek alternative employment. The distance that can be covered on foot in a single day ... well, in addition there were almost no roads. The atmosphere must have been fairly prison-like. *Vistarböndin* defined the social environment in Iceland up until the nineteenth century.

In addition to the serfs there were subsistence farmers scattered across the country, frequently on utterly hopeless small plots way up on a heath — in a country that even today is the most sparsely populated in all of Europe due to the fact that most of it is uninhabitable. The rest is harsh, devoid of natural bounty, offering few agricultural opportunities, and is extremely difficult to get around in due to the glaciers, glacier rivers, heaths, mountains, lava fields and a multitude of other natural obstacles.<sup>1266</sup> Icelanders have also had to deal with relentlessly foul and dangerous weather. A routine did eventually establish itself where every several decades a fairly substantial part of the population would die on account of starvation, famine, plagues and natural catastrophes.

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<sup>1266</sup> In historical terms there is also the lack of roads, a problem that stretched virtually into the twentieth century, as well as a lack of houses, rest stops — any infrastructure, really.

When placed against this background the value of the Sagas becomes even clearer. Not only had the Saga writers created literary works of what is taken to be eternal aesthetic value, they did so while neighboring countries, read the rest of the Nordic countries, did nothing of the sort. As there are not many things in which Iceland excels when compared to its Nordic neighbors, this last detail is often mentioned; it seems to give comfort. It also fell to “us,” that is, the medieval scribes, to record the history of the Nordic countries, which they did to a remarkable degree. Norway, for example, knows quite a bit about what happened in Norway between 850 and roughly 1180–1190. The reason? Snorri Sturluson wrote a history recounting the events of the period, *Heimskringla* (A History of the Norse Kings). Again, these are the things Icelanders used to treasure, more so however in the past than nowadays. A bit nobler is the role the Sagas played during the struggle for independence in the nineteenth century, when the country really had to justify its existence and the manuscripts were a tremendous inspiration and ideological bedrock.

The realization that Iceland did not even qualify for entrance into a conversation about theatrical traditions, although Einar Bragi does not see it that way, is a stark reminder of the constraints, limits and restrictions, and also the somewhat unique nature and unpredictability of Icelandic culture and its literary system. We will return shortly to Bragi and the discussion of theatrical traditions but before doing so it is useful to bring Casanova’s conception of “small literatures” back into the conversation as Casanova, surprisingly enough, shares a certain outlook on literary history with Einar Bragi but also because her thinking on the world order of literature allows us to expand the discursive parameters a bit. At the outset it is also useful to clarify certain grounding

elements of her spatial/geographic conception of the literary order and literary history. When Casanova speaks of “small literatures,” what she has in mind is a structural relationship to literary power where the richest spaces are also the oldest. A nation whose national classics achieve universal status becomes a dominant player on the literary map; these factors then combine with the political domain in a mutually supportive fashion, and thus all around power players in geopolitics and culture emerge.

Her paradigmatic example of a dominant power in the world republic of letters is France. Indeed, Paris sets the Greenwich meridian of literature, meaning that standards that originate there are accepted globally and the “time” function in the metaphor refers to the basic issue of whether a text is considered outmoded or fashionable, provincial and embarrassing or acceptable to the cultural elite. Casanova’s conjunction of spatial structures and temporal structures in this fashion does not for instance shed flattering light on Einar Bragi’s chosen examples, as he has picked out essentially nineteenth century figures as paradigmatic at a historical moment when the Greenwich meridian is set firmly on modernism and the post-war avant-garde movements.

“Small literatures,” emerge from a position of lack, they are at the periphery on the map, “the creative liberty of writers from peripheral countries is not given to them straight away: they earn it as the result of struggles,” Casanova notes.<sup>1267</sup> She then employs one of the very same examples that Einar Bragi does (even picking up on the same colonial factor as he does) to illustrate how shifts within the power structure can take place: “Thus between 1890 and

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<sup>1267</sup> Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, p. 177.

1930, in a literarily destitute country under colonial rule, there occurred one of the greatest literary revolutions — the ‘Irish miracle’ — marked by the appearance of three or four of the most important writers of the twentieth century.”<sup>1268</sup>

Two of Bragi’s three examples (Ireland and Norway) would be classified as “small literatures” by Casanova, and Iceland most certainly would, the issue of a “small language,” one of the criteria that Casanova considers, coming into play as soon as Iceland is introduced. What Bragi is describing when he iterates the revolutionary zeal of these three countries that were all fighting for independence around the turn of the century, much as Iceland was, and how important cultural capital proved to be in consolidating a victory, is very similar to the struggle that Casanova sees as almost the automatic inheritance of all writers belonging to this category.

### ***10. Extinguishing Proud Youthful Happiness***

Einar Bragi is particularly interested in theater, as has become apparent, but his general sense when looking around in the mid 1950s was that no sign of the vital energies that were unleashed in the other countries and should have been unleashed in 1944 could be discerned in Iceland — in one place he verges on describing the typical Icelander as a somnambulist. And he condemns the entire field of Icelandic playwriting in one fell swoop in the article: “Here, in the first decade of independence, no play has been written that can be considered worth performing on the stage of the national theater — let alone one that could be

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<sup>1268</sup> Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, p. 84.

considered fit for export. What can explain this fallowness?"<sup>1269</sup> The question that concludes the quote is a leitmotif of sorts in Bragi's article, repeated in slightly varied guises throughout. The repetition becomes, it seems to me, accusatory by the end. We will return to this thought.

Bragi and Casanova share an emphasis, perhaps not all that common, on a fairly direct relationship between the state of a national literature and the historical situation of the nation in question. If the reason for the revitalization of Irish, Spanish and Norwegian playwriting could therefore be traced to social upheavals and transformations, the same, it emerges, is true of the crisis of the Icelandic theater. That is, the state of the Icelandic theater reflects a historical situation, one that is corrosive and malicious, however, rather than inspirational and emancipatory:

The root of the lack of plays — as of all other ills in Icelandic society at present — is in my opinion the surrender of national sovereignty. The betrayal of the republic extinguished the proud youthful happiness of the nation [...] the writers and the artists were unable to witness these events with the dull eyes and cold look of disinterest [that was the response of a large segment of the population but they] were shaken to the core. But why is there no sign of this in the plays that are written?<sup>1270</sup>

For Einar Bragi, Iceland is clearly undergoing a moment of crisis and the population at large has failed a supremely important test; to remain the true and faithful keepers of the nation's hard-won independence. Artists are the only

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<sup>1269</sup> Bragi, "Hugleiðingar um Silfurtúnglið og fleira," p. 33. In the original, the quote reads: "Hér hefur ekki á fyrsta áratugi lýðveldisins verið samið neitt leikrit, sem sýningarhæft geti talizt á sviði þjóðleikhússins — hvað þá boðlegt til útflutnings. Hverju má þessi ördeyða sæta?"

<sup>1270</sup> Bragi, "Hugleiðingar um Silfurtúnglið og fleira," p. 34. In the original: "Undirrót leikritaskortsins — eins og alls annars ills í íslenzku þjóðlífi í dag — er að mínu áliti afsal landsréttindanna. Svikin við lýðveldið slökktu hina stoltu æsku- gleði í brjósti þjóðarinnar [...] skáldin og listamennirnir hafa ekki horft á þessar aðfarir með sljóum augum og köldum kæruleysissvip, heldur tekið sér þær mjög nærri. En hvers vegna verður þess lítið sem ekki vart í leikbókmenntunum?"



ones, he suggests, whose response has appropriately registered the immensity of the national trauma. Conspicuously absent, however, are the playwrights.

Bragi asks a question (why the dearth of good plays?) and the question is contextualized within a triangulated transnational space of literary fervor while it also presupposes a framework that includes a long struggle for independence and the energies released when the goal was achieved, recently therefore — except as noted earlier, no release seems to have occurred. Missing from this framework, however, in addition to the ardor of independence, is a rich cultural heritage, the Sagas. Admittedly, the article's existence is ostensibly motivated by a recent play but Bragi is still obligated to follow his reasoning where it leads and not cherry-pick his evidence. And the Sagas, one could argue, are an important factor in the development, quite remarkable in many respects, of the Icelandic novel in the twentieth century — and more generally speaking a fairly vibrant literary culture.<sup>1271</sup> This is studiously ignored as the theater remains the sole focus of the cultural inquiry.

However one looks at it, the omission is problematic. The Sagas are an enormously complex and powerful cultural implement; being for example responsible for tourism to Iceland in the nineteenth century. And when Laxness was awarded the Nobel Prize, the Swedish Academy emphasized that his greatest accomplishment was to have revived the spirit of the Sagas in modern times. If Bragi had wanted to model Iceland against the three nations with an eye

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<sup>1271</sup> Iceland also turns out to fit rather uneasily into Casanova's spatial scheme, precisely due to the fact that among its historical holdings is precisely what Casanova describes as the preeminent component when it comes to positioning a literature centrally, namely that the richest (in terms of cultural capital) spaces are also the oldest. This does not of course remove all the problems that Casanova quite acutely surmises can affect peripheral authors: the decision whether to emigrate or not, take up a different language or not, whether to be assimilated into a larger literary order and thus possibly betray their heritage when kinship to the hip Parisian is claimed, and so on.

to the actual material manifestation of a literary renaissance, he should simply have shifted gears and genres but stayed with the same author, and discussed the novel. Moving from Laxness to *Gerpla* to the Sagas is one way to go, a path that is wholly in the famous “Laxness shadow” but when Norway puts Ibsen forward, Ireland Yeats, and Spain Lorca, well, there is no reason for Iceland to be the only nation to play fair. In other words, while clearly not a threat to France, the space of literature is the one realm where Iceland does not really have to be riven by inferiority complexes and anxieties.

By picking a literary mode that had no tradition, no active and practicing writers who specialized in the field, and having received for the first time a solid governmental backing only five years previously when *Þjóðleikhúsið* was completed, Bragi had stacked the deck so thoroughly against, well, Iceland — this is an argument that forces one to put forward an entire nation as one’s avatar or himself; presumably Einar Bragi would have been okay had he been required to speak in somewhat more positive terms about the state of Icelandic literature — that humiliating defeat was guaranteed. When Bragi asks, “why is there no sign” of the tumultuous political events of the day “in the plays that are written?” the immediate response might well be to point out that the Icelandic theater remains equally silent on nearly all subjects. Playwriting did not exist in Iceland in the middle of the twentieth century as a consistent literary practice within a vibrant milieu of writers engaged with the stage, and it hardly does today. And why joining NATO and allowing a military base should paralyze drama but not poetry or the novel is something of a mystery.<sup>1272</sup>

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<sup>1272</sup> To be fair, Bragi is aware of this flaw in his argument and he tries to respond by speculating that theatrical audiences have been intellectually and morally bamboozled to such an extent by

Bragi identifies three reasons for the insufficient quality of Icelandic drama. The audience is currently ill prepared to receive ambitious works. The widespread and systematic corruption that characterized politics in this period resulted in appointments to Þjóðleikahúsið that were highly detrimental to theater culture in the country and its future prospects. Bragi mentions the director of the theater and the board, and notes that the only thing these men have in common is never having worked in anything that resembles a theatrical environment before; the director is a high school teacher and two other teachers were appointed to the board which was then rounded off with a third member, this one a master builder, and not of the Ibsen variety. Third is the belief, apparently held by writers who have made a career in other modes of literature, that they can just waltz on in with a newly written drama but in reality knowing nothing about the theater or the art form. "It is almost as ridiculous to set out to write a play without having fully immersed oneself in the art form as it would be for someone to plan to play first violin in a complex orchestral piece the first time the instrument was picked up," Bragi concludes.<sup>1273</sup> Laxness comes in for particular criticism on this account in the concluding paragraph of the article:

When H.K.L. writes novels he starts by thoroughly familiarizing himself with oral and written sources that relate to the subject at hand, he will travel across countries and continents, if necessary, to get a feeling for the setting, and so forth. The results are also in keeping with the effort. When he had decided to try the new and difficult machine and sate the world's hunger for plays, he should have employed a similar methodology: start at the beginning, familiarize himself thoroughly with the possibilities and governing laws of the

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the government and powerful segments of society that it is, at least for the time being, incapable of fulfilling its function as an audience. It is a strange argument that invites exactly the same response as the problem that it is trying to explain did: why only theater audiences? Why are readers of novels and poems not similarly disoriented as theatergoers?

<sup>1273</sup> Bragi, "Hugleiðingar um Silfurtúnglið og fleira," p. 34. In the original: "Það er allt að því eins fráleitt að ætla sér að semja leikrit án þess að hafa aflað sér staðgóðrar þekkingar á lögmálum leikhússins og reyna að leika fyrstu fiðlu í flóknu hljómsveitarverki í fyrsta skipti sem menn snerta slíkt hljóðfæri."

theater, take part in organic theater work. Playwriting is no servant of literature but its equal.<sup>1274</sup>

Einar Bragi is either unaware or he chose to ignore the fact that this was Laxness' second play, not his first, and that he had been an avid theater goer for four decades by this point, writing theater reviews for a Reykjavík daily for a period, subsequently essays, that he counted Brecht among his friends and was as familiar with what was going on in the theater world, not the one in Reykjavík but the international scene, as could be expected of someone who lived on a remote island, more than a thousand miles from a good theater.

It was briefly mentioned above that the frequently reiterated question, why aren't Icelandic dramatists producing work of international stature, might strike some readers as somewhat accusatory. Were one to pursue that line of thinking the above quote could indeed be read as accusatory, although in a bizarre register, as it would, it seems, come down to Laxness to write the work that redeems the Icelandic theater, but apparently he is just too lazy to put in the effort that he routinely does in his novels. This, however, is an ungenerous reading of Bragi's sentiments.

Bragi's preference for a trained or learned playwright is perfectly fine but should not be made into a general rule. One of the reasons why *Finnegan's Wake* (1941) by James Joyce is by and large taken seriously is that Joyce had demonstrated at the age of 23 with *The Dubliners* (1914) that he could write

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<sup>1274</sup> Bragi, "Hugleiðingar um Silfurtúnglið og fleira," p. 35. In the original: "Þegar H.K.L. semur skáldsögur, byrjar hann á því að þaulrannsaka munnlegar og skriflegar heimildir um söguefnið, tekur sér ferð á hendur um lönd og álfur, ef með þarf, til að kanna sögusviðið o.s.frv., enda er árangurinn eins og til er stofnað. Þegar hann hugðist reyna hið nýja vandmeðfarna tæki go seðja leikritahungur heimsins, hefði hann þurft að beita áþekktum vinnubrögðum: byrja á byrjuninni, kynna sér til hlítar möguleika og lögmál leikhússins með því að taka þátt í lífrænu leiklistarstarfi. Leiklistin er nefnilega engin ambátt bókmenntanna, heldur þeirra jafningi."

prose at a Shakespearean level— apologies for the generic confusion, Shakespeare didn't actually write prose, but his function as a signifier of quality is what matters here — and Richard Ellman does not mention periods spent rigorously studying the short story. Joyce is of course not a pedestrian representative of literary practitioners but the point is that one can safely assume that artists, much like members of other professions, come in different stripes and while Bragi's prescription might suit some well, others would not benefit.

A more serious concern however with the assumptions that ground Bragi's approach to the theater, touched upon fleetingly above, is that his model of the intersection between social emancipation and justice on the one hand and, on the other, artistic expression in the world of the theater, admirable as his chosen examples happen to be, seems to have its roots in the past, the nineteenth century in particular. It might be argued that, contrary to this model, even in opposition to it, Laxness' play attempts to address a modernity that has undergone dramatic shifts and changes, the onset of a nuclear age being one; an age that has also seen the most sublime ideals of the Enlightenment come to an end in death camps, "Tristram og Isolde are dead. They perished in Buchenwald," the atom poet noted in *Atómstöðin*, and this stance towards the present, namely that the past is lost to us, is also an important thematic undercurrent in *Silfurtúnglið*.<sup>1275</sup>

While being acutely aware of the role of the nation, Laxness is nevertheless addressing a historical situation that is characterized by the double negative of a nihilistic futurity and the evacuation of substantive meaning from

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<sup>1275</sup> Laxness, *Atómstöðin*, p. 86.

past models, with the values of the past being similarly problematized, resulting in an existential crisis of temporal lockdown where the regulative ideals associated with the future and, as mentioned, past ideals have, on the one hand, lost their promise and, on the other, they have lost their legitimation and authority.

While conceptions of independence and national identity are important in *Silfurtúnglið*, it can thus be argued that Laxness diverges in a fundamental way from the tradition invoked by Bragi in that he realizes, on the one hand, that national independence takes on a new and less “shiny” veneer in the age of globalization, and that, on the other, modernity is in crisis — after two world wars, the humanist measurements of yesteryear are no longer applicable. Thus, rather than looking towards national independence movements when constructing the thematic constellation of *Silfurtúnglið*, Laxness looks instead to Brecht, the absurdist movement, and other instances of theatrical innovation and experimentalism as well as the increasing reach and power of the culture industries. This particular referential range is not addressed at all by Einar Bragi.

In light of the fact that no political issue was as important to Laxness in this period as the one invoked by Einar Bragi in the above passage, and the fact that Bragi felt equally strongly about the perceived loss of sovereignty to a foreign military power as Laxness did, it is ironic that an argument involving a lack of political commitment should be mustered in an attempt to explain the lackluster nature and imperfections of a play that was motivated in part by the very feelings of injustice and political incredulousness that Bragi expresses as being the only coherent response to “the betrayal of the republic”.

### 10.1 *Sentimentality and the Sensation(alism) of Uplift*

Bragi is not oblivious to the irony involved, however, or the fact that, in a sense, Laxness' play is — or could have been — just the work that he is asking for and lamenting the absence of. This is what brings us to the crux of his critique, which is that *Silfurtúnglið* fails at precisely the moment when it should have been great. In what would appear to be quite the gracious gesture, Bragi prefaces his criticisms by listing what for him are the play's strengths and qualities. The first of which is its political content and of the four "positives" identified, this is by far the most important as it is the aspect of the play that responds to Bragi's demand for politically active literature for the theater. His gesture, however, proves contradictory. Having just suggested that Icelandic playwrights are insufficiently committed, he goes on to identify Laxness' clearly articulated political stance in *Silfurtúnglið* as its primary quality, while the overarching reason for the play's failure must also be the fact that its political edifice, its relationship to the social complex, is severely flawed.<sup>1276</sup>

Indeed, no sooner has he acknowledged the play's aggressively articulated political stance than he notes that, although perhaps ruffling some local feathers, the genuine powers that be, such as Stjórnarráðið (the offices of the Icelandic prime minister) and the White House in Washington D.C., in the United States, need not be overly worried as, one presumes, although Bragi does

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<sup>1276</sup> Bragi, "Hugleiðingar um Silfurtúnglið og fleira," p. 34. In the original: "Það hefur komið í ljós, að ýmsum aðdáendum Feilans og Peacocks þykir silfurníð Kiljans skrambi hvasshyrnt. Höfundurinn virðist því hafa náð tilgangi sínum að nokkru leyti, og er það vel."

not say it directly, the work's overall clumsiness defuses its critical intent.<sup>1277</sup>

This particular rhetorical joust counts as one of several spectacular misses in the article — most would say that no matter what an Icelandic author wrote, the White House would stay calm — Einar Bragi does applaud the attempt to produce a socially conscious play, but good intentions cannot redeem what in his opinion is a fundamentally unsound work.

This returns us to the two domains identified by Einar Bragi as being central to the play's failure, namely the lack of poetic uplift, the fact of the lowliness of the text's address (a concern based in large part on language, also and to an extent formal concerns but may also touch on the play's thematic cluster) and a disorganized and flawed narrative structure, one that must take responsibility for the characters and their vulgar behavior (here the concern is mostly thematic and tonal, but also structural in terms of over-all coherence and interlinkages, and the movement or "flow" of the drama from start to finish). This critical "binary" — resembling in a way the double nature of the Saussurian sign, with the signifier and the signified coming in for criticism, each in its own way — offers an opportunity for the analysis of pivotal aspects of the text, its grand themes as well as the details embedded in the background texture.

The invocation of semiotics is not haphazard, it should be noted. Much as the semiotic sign is a referent lacking concrete meaning, being only endowed with its sensible aspect through the workings of a system based on difference,

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<sup>1277</sup> Bragi, "Hugleiðingar um Silfurtúnglið og fleira," p. 34. In the original: "1. Ádeilan í því er réttmæt og tímabær [...] Allt um það get ég ekki ímyndað mér annað en húsráðendur Stjórnarráðsins í Reykjavík og Hvítahússins í Vosington þykist mega vel við una eftir atvikum, svo kyrflega sem höfundurinn hefur gengið frá hinni dýpri ádeilu leik- ritsins. 2. Málið er þjált í munni og mikið til laust við bókmálskeim. 3. Hraði leiksins er í bezta lagi, — já meira að segja helzti glannalcgur í miðþáttunum, nálgast þar á köflum kjánalæti sem draga athyglina frá boðskapnum. 4. Tilsvör mörg eru snjöll og einkum smellin, eins og vænta mátti."



Einar Bragi's polemic, once it reaches *Silfurtúnglið*, becomes somewhat abstract, as if leaving the sphere of the diachronic and aiming for the synchronic kernel of truth.

Another way of putting this would be to say that, somewhat like Hegel and Judith Butler, Bragi turns out to be averse to concrete examples, and thus general enough in terms of his enumeration of problematic themes and formal elements in the play as to invite the reader to fill in the gaps with examples of his or her own. In what follows, therefore, Bragi's essay will motivate a series of hypotheses that may — or may not — be an accurate articulation of the textual elements that underlie his critique; whether in fact they do is not the issue, the goal is a productive and persuasive dialogue about the text, which will in turn call forth in an organic fashion an alternative reading of the text.

We will thus start with what Bragi suggests is the debased nature of the text, its vulgarity, before addressing the problem of the dissonance of the voice(s) of the text, the undeniable fact that the narrative mixes different modes and tonalities and even generic identities, including the farcical and the melodramatic.<sup>1278</sup> When considering the former critique — that the play's discourse lacks "artistic elevation" — three fundamental aspects of the text are involved. Firstly, although *Silfurtúnglið* is often described as a comedy with tragic

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<sup>1278</sup> It seems clear that a combination of discursive/linguistic and thematic elements motivate Bragi's evaluation and critical position, and that, furthermore, these features of the play are particularly important in terms of what for Bragi causes the text to fail to meet or live up to the historical paradigm sketched above in the context of the three countries that enjoyed such a notable theatrical revival. It is interesting, however, that the aspect of the play that comes closest to meeting Einar Bragi's criteria, namely the lullaby sung by Lóa, is not discussed in the essay.

undertones, it is remarkably bleak, indeed, as Hallberg notes, Laxness “may never have written a work equally pessimistic.”<sup>1279</sup>

It needs to be kept in mind that the thematic and methodological framework that Bragi posits as instrumental to the theatrical awakening that occurred in the three countries mentioned — a cultural triumvirate that constitutes the reclamation of the historical past, the revaluation of folk tales and the preservation of traditional poetry — is likely to position Laxness’ work at something of a disadvantage.

This is reflected in the hyperbolic and heavy-handed irony that Einar Bragi employs when noting that the power elite on the two sides of the Atlantic will probably not lose sleep over the play’s subversive capacity. Rather than mining the rich vein of a nation’s past in order to (hopefully) hit upon the artistic ore of its admirable essence, which can then be marshaled forth in an inspirational and uplifting context to dramatize a political problematic, Laxness, it would seem, goes off on a wild goose chase, attempting to make the modern and globalized entertainment industry function as the central symbolic apparatus and manifestation of Iceland’s fate in an emerging Cold War.

Bragi’s demand is not for a return to “national romanticism” but rather for a textual consciousness that is aware of the social, historical and political context into which the play will emerge as an aesthetic discourse. The authorial position that Bragi implicitly articulates is thus not limited to a set of rules or decrees but there is nevertheless a suggestion that a text should be socially inflected and thus have a function that resonates beyond the merely aesthetic,

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<sup>1279</sup> Hallberg, *Hús skáldsins I*, p. 189.

whether that function is “embedded” in the text or ascribed to it for “outside” reasons. However, the degree of existential exhaustion that characterizes *Silfurtúnglið* stands in direct opposition to this insistence on a literary work’s “positive” social engagement.

In this respect, *Silfurtúnglið* differs from *Atómstöðin* and its final message, uttered by the organist, that flowers are eternal and that mankind will continue to strive for a more just world. Indeed, whenever a character is faced with an ethical dilemma or a test in *Silfurtúnglið*, he or she will invariably fail to pass it. This applies to the leads no less than it does secondary characters. The character of Laugi, Lóa’s father, is a case in point. Representing the political class, he for example finds it quite easy to explain and encapsulate his ideological stance, “society should be flashy,” he says and extrapolates by noting that he has always hated the poor, and, although being poor and working class himself, he prides himself on the fact that throughout his political career he demonstrated complete solidarity with the rich at all times.<sup>1280</sup>

A character such as Laugi might be expected to be set up for mockery through a juxtaposition with an alternative, a figure that in some fashion represents the qualities that Laugi lacks. Alternatively, in a register more reminiscent of Ibsen, Laugi’s maleficence and hubris could be positioned within a moral framework that, however oblique and multifaceted, is nevertheless an integral feature of the “steering” mechanisms of the text, the work having a “moral” in other words, and thus employs the figure to articulate a form of social critique. *Silfurtúnglið*, however, is not only devoid of any gesture whatsoever

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<sup>1280</sup> Laxness, *Straumrof*, p. 19. In the original: “Ég vil hafa flottheit í þjóðfélaginu.”

towards a positive alternative to the problem of political apathy — or, even worse, the problem of its ludicrous state once the ideological apparatuses of domination have emerged entirely victorious — and the commodification of culture, but it also lacks any clear bearings for value judgments.

This last point may sound surprising in light of the fact that the play ends with the death of Lóa's child, a resounding moral condemnation, it might be assumed, and what subsequently appears as the mother's utter desolation. If a morality tale, such an ending would communicate a lesson; if a tragedy, such an ending might induce a cathartic cleansing. In *Silfurtúnglið*, neither of these alternatives are on offer; there is no lesson and there is no emotive cleansing.

The authorial directions at the close of the play are a striking indication of precisely this. Leaving the staging of the final scene of the play "open" and thus subject to directorial interpretation, Laxness explicitly posits two alternative endings. In one, the coffin of the child is foregrounded, in the other, foregrounded is the fact that Óli is pursuing Lóa as she stumbles away. These two ways of bringing the play to a close were generally thought to constitute, on the one hand, a "tragic" ending and, on the other, a "hopeful" one. What should be noted, however, is the distinctly nihilistic nature of the author's gesture. While, clearly, there is an emotive effect at stake — bringing the curtains down on a coffin — but aside from that there is no reason to think that anything regarding the content of the play differs between the two endings.

In a sense, looking to Nietzsche's conception of the tragic mode, one might perhaps argue that the more "positive" conclusion serves as an aesthetic buffer to the existential mercilessness of being in the world, but the act of offering up

two endings renders such an argument incomplete and, more importantly, serves to question precisely whether art should have such a function. If the two endings varied or affected the content of the play, it might even be suggested that the gesture served a deconstructive function, highlighting the constructedness of the text.

As both endings, as will be argued below, articulate the same message of despair, however, offering what amounts to an illusory choice, what replaces the possibility of experimental (even postmodern) freedom is a sense of the hopelessness of the entire human endeavor, or, more precisely, the manner in which modern technoscience, global capitalism and the culture industry have closed off all avenues of escape. It seems almost too much, in addition, to note that fact that the most effective, capable and intellectually vibrant characters in the play are the ones representing the decline of modern culture, in particular Feilan Ó. Feilan; Mr. Peacock is an effectively dehumanized monster.

Indeed, Feilan is arguably the dominant figure in the play, having by far the lion's share of stage time and the most memorable pieces of dialogue. Throughout the play, his lines serve as a form of ventriloquism for the discourse of the culture industry, in particular the way in which lofty notions of aesthetic aspiration, the value of style and theme and the social meaning of art, to give a few examples, can be co-opted and made into empty ciphers serving commercial imperatives and whose intent is manipulation, obfuscation and the inducement of passivity in the audience. This indeed is the "huckster" part of Feilan, his role as a cog in a vast multinational corporate entity, a characteristic that, furthermore, is on display from the start. "If nature has endowed one with

something unique, then it does not belong to that person anymore. It belongs to the world,” he says upon first meeting Lóa, continuing, “[you are] blessed with something that is greater than technique, [you have] naturalness.”<sup>1281</sup>

In what amounts to a rush of clichés, Feilan invokes notions of the artist’s work — the creation of beauty — as something of a sacred vocation as well as a responsibility to society. Next, he activates an aesthetic criterion that elevates Lóa above professional artists through a discourse of primitivism, a discursive register that can be traced from Montaigne in the sixteenth century to Picasso in the twentieth.

As will be discussed more closely below, this approach is not entirely facetious on Feilan’s part but it also serves a clear strategic function in terms of building up Lóa’s confidence and courage. When assessed in the context of Feilan’s promotional activities in act two, his entire persona seems transparent enough and he can be viewed as the representative of any variety of social, cultural and political ills. Indeed, his speeches, frequent and extensive, are unquestionably the play’s single most striking thematic feature and perhaps its most vital dimension. They are also reminiscent of how Adorno and Horkheimer describe the culture industry’s preferred mode of address: “everything is directed at overpowering a customer”.<sup>1282</sup>

What is notable however is that Laxness reveals unexpected depths in what might otherwise have been something of a caricature, an avatar or a mouthpiece of the culture industry, when Feilan finally comes into contact with

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<sup>1281</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, pp. 43, 48. The first quote: “EF náttúran hefur gefið manni eitthvað umfram aðra men, þá á maður það ekki leingur sjálfur. Heimurinn á það.” Second quote: “Konan yðar hefur það til að bera sem er ofar kunnáttu, hún hefur náttúru.”

<sup>1282</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 133.

Mr. Peacock. There are two moments in the text that are important here. The first involves Feilan's "strongman"— a typical circus attraction — who fascinates Mr. Peacock while Lóa's fails to raise his interest. It is clear that monetary interests are at stake but Feilan's utter surprise and disappointment upon finding that Mr. Peacock's judgment is questionable enough — impaired enough — to choose a toothless fake whom he himself picked up from a life not too far removed from vagabondage, and who most definitely is not a "strongman," above what, it is now revealed, he considers not only an "attraction" but something of value that he himself believes in — or might believe in, the reader cannot be entirely sure.

This moment of incredulity when Feilan comes face to face with the unknowability of corporate and bureaucratic decision-making reveals a new side of him; perhaps Feilan is not the corporate henchman the reader assumed him to be, indeed, it is not unimaginable that informing his effusive but also highly manipulative discourse on art and culture is a glimmer of true appreciation and understanding of what makes for great art and genuine aesthetic experience.

The second instance is Feilan's frank revelation, late in the play, of what "his" industry is really about, while also being the one moment when, it could be argued, he articulates a non-reified perspective on culture and human values:

Truly great art depends on not letting any personal scruples stop one; to be ready to throw into the marketplace all that is most intimate and at the same time common to all and shared by everybody; climb the statue of Ingólfur Arnarson if necessary; and an endless procession of ordinary men and women will arrive with their nickels and dimes and purchase a ticket to see their own ordinariness blossom in the one whom God gave sincerity of expression.

On the surface this is just as cynical an expression as anything else we have come to expect from Feilan. What makes this unique among Feilan's many exegeses on the practice, meaning, monetary value, demands and logistics of the industry of culture is the simultaneity of its brutal directness ("depends on not letting any personal scruples stop one"), its suggestion that nationalism and the veneer of patriotism is golden at the box office but does not require substance or internal content — can be performed in other words ("climb the statue of Ingólfur Arnason if necessary"), and how the "target" audience will arrive, almost as summoned, if the right emotional and ideological buttons are pushed ("an endless procession of ordinary men and women will arrive"). The crux of the speech, however, its twist in a manner of speaking, is the remunerative dimension that Feilan articulates when he invokes the value of "sincerity" — the ability of the artist to embody and reflect back upon the audience its "own ordinariness". This ability is facilitated by "sincerity" of "expression" and the reading of the utterance poses an interpretative problem.

In a sense, this is the sentiment that Feilan has been expressing throughout the play, the imperative of the market. The irony being that he always seemed incapable of grasping the true nature of the authenticity of Lóa's lullaby, which he promoted and sold with gusto, and thereby destroyed. At this point in the play, however, a reiteration of this point might be assumed to be unnecessary, no longer strategic, it was made in act one — and coming on the heels of the blatant admission we see above concerning the inner workings of the culture industry, the entire conception of "marketing" could be reassessed in terms of a populist aesthetic, one that holds that artistic expression without an



audience, no matter how significant or transcendent, remains somehow pointless, without a clear reason to exist.

If this reading is accepted, at least provisionally, two further alternatives emerge. On the one hand there is the possibility that Laxness is, with a somewhat unexpected gesture, trying to recuperate the humanity of the figure who stands for and represents the culture industry. If in fact the case, the narrative development would be difficult to endorse and one of Einar Bragi's central critiques of the play, namely that character development was rudimentary, would seem justified. At the same time, Bragi's critique indicates that something along these lines underlies his reading. The other interpretation, however, retains the notion of Feilan's "sincerity" but views it, not so much as a rhetorical device, but as a symptom; indeed, as the text's final condemnation of structures of social domination that do as a matter of fact incorporate "classical" or "conventional" notions of beauty, expression and value, precisely because these can be transformed into vehicles for ideological inoculation, imperial politics and representations that implicitly support the domination of instrumental rationality and exchange value in a capitalistic economy.

In other words, Feilan is not redeemed in this scenario, we rather get a glimpse into what makes the industry of which he is a part so effective; its philistinism is only the outer layer, underneath there is the pulsating desire to co-opt and incorporate all art — thus also and automatically nullifying its unique particularity — an endeavor that is highly successful. Although Lóa does not represent high art she does stand for unmediated authenticity of expression. The one mode of aesthetic articulation that Feilan might have trouble with is the

avant-garde, practices that consciously and actively resist dominant social structures as well as “traditional” structures of representation and expression. This is the aesthetic counterpart of the organist’s attitude towards life in *Atómstöðin*; being utterly disgusted by society, he has withdrawn completely.

The bleakness of the ending of *Silfurtúnglið* and the retroactive effect the ending has on the narrative, that is, Lóa’s collapse at the end, the coffin and the overall hopelessness reaches back to envelope everything; from this perspective the reader may note that at absolutely no point in the play, except brief ones in the beginning of act one, is happiness represented. This is one of the ways in which the text performatively stages the defeat of the romantic ideal, as well as any hope that the transmission of authentic culture through the mechanisms of the culture industry is possible. The child is dead, Lóa is ruined, Óli is devastated, Feilan has failed; virtually the only one who is reasonably happy at this point is Mr. Peacock, who has gotten drunk, gotten laid and is leaving the entire sad scenario behind as he gets on his plane.

### *10.2 Sexual Economies*

The third aspect of the discursive register of the play that is relevant in the present context involves its depiction of sexuality and sexual exchange. Clearly, the political allegory is already gendered and sexualized, as evidenced by the juxtaposition between the Keflavík agreements and the NATO membership on the one hand and prostitution on the other and Lóa being represented in this context as the abused and exploited figure of the “motherland” or the nation.

We might however recall Jónas Guðmundsson's suggestive insight at this point, namely that fundamentally *Silfurtúnglið* is “about working outside the home.” When, at the end, Lóa realizes that she is expected to “entertain” Mr. Peacock in his hotel room, and goes ahead and does precisely that, a thematic strand involving women and social power structures that runs throughout the play reaches its dramatic culmination. Shortly before the fateful “transaction” is decided upon, the audience is given a glimpse of how Mr. Peacock goes about evaluating female talent for his “universal” entertainment corporation:

Hello baby [beibi]. (examines her, grips her chin, forces her mouth open and inspects her teeth, ruffles her hair, feels her up here and there and asks) Real? (removes her coat, pinches her dress in different places so that her shape becomes more apparent, takes off her shoes, feels her calves, lifts the skirt of her dress to mid-thigh) [...] When we get new girls, we usually start by checking they don't have false teeth, false hair, false breasts, false thighs, — I sometime examine a hundred a day.<sup>1283</sup>

The examination conducted by Mr. Peacock is reminiscent of Feilan's initial meeting with Lóa but the shift that has occurred is nevertheless important. The “auditions” that Lóa gives for the two men, one at the beginning, the other at the end, are separated by, as if on a corporate organizational schema, the dividing line between the production floor and management. The activity of both parties centers on the exploitation of women and indicates the wholly disproportionate power structures that characterize the workings of the culture industry.

Feilan's frantically insistent gestures of commodification while a guest in Lóa's home at the beginning of the play represents the starting point of the production process; its conclusion is a spectacle for mass consumption where

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<sup>1283</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, pp. 119–120. In the original: “Helló beibi. (skoðar hana, tekur um hökuna á henni, þuklar hana hér og hvar og spyr) Ekta? (færir hana úr kápunni, tekur fellingu í kjólinn hennar hér og hvar svo að vöxturinn komi betur fram, færir hana úr skónum, þreifir á kálfulum hennar, lyftir kjólfaldi hennar uppá mitt læri) [...] Þegar við fáum nýjar stelpur, þá erum við fyrst vanir að gánga úr skugga um að þær hafi ekki falskar tennur, falskt hár, fölsk brjóst, fölsk læri, — ég prófa stundum hundrað á dag.”

the figure at the center, Lóa, has been rendered unrecognizable, or, in other words, turned into a celebrity, an image. In a sense, the “grooming” started at that very moment, and while Feilan, looking about in the northern household wasted no time in reducing the core aspects of Lóa’s existence — her rural background, her role as a mother— to the brutal functions of exchange and market value and wonders, at the same time, how to “package” the reality he has just encountered in the form of consumer goods.

Mr. Peacock on the other hand represents the brutality of the system once unmasked and divorced from its multiplicity of professional, industrial, managerial, economic and rational alibies and functions. It is here that the “savage rage,” to reference Adorno and Horkheimer, of the patriarchy emerges, the naked hunger and demand for power and the pleasure taken in its wielding, as well as the fundamental role that the subjugation of women plays in the establishment and maintenance of male privilege.<sup>1284</sup>

The text addresses the fact throughout that the culture industry objectifies women and exploits their sexuality. As Lóa enters Silfurtúnqlið for the first time, for example, she emerges into the world of glamour, nightlife, and showgirls. She is led to the changing rooms, where three showgirls are busily preparing for their stage entrance, and the conversation that she overhears is mundane, if unappetizing (a rat is on the loose), but what is emphasized is the scant, very scant, attire of the showgirls. The point that the attraction on offer in Silfurtúnqlið is female sexuality is thus made cleanly and clearly; women’s bodies are being put on show for the enjoyment of men. This particular aspect of

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<sup>1284</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 87.

*Siflurtúnglið*, the role and function of the “show girl,” is something that Laxness continues to ponder in the late plays, as will be discussed in the sections devoted to them.

This, of course, is the reason why Lóa and her “act” is out of the ordinary, so “new;” she is not offering nudity and sex but the loving embrace of the mother. That the “difference” between her and the “showgirls” is only skin-deep, indeed, a matter of marketing and promotion, rather than any deep seated interest on behalf of the corporation to celebrate motherhood, uphold traditional values, nurture artistry, or offer an alternative to a media environment that is taking its first steps towards the eventual domination of sex and violence in entertainment. That none of this applies is of course demonstrated and proven by Lóa’s encounter at the end with Mr. Peacock.

Miscalculating what Feilan expects of her costume-wise, only minutes pass before he is literally attacking her and tearing her clothes off. Although a “professional” issue —Lóa’s stage attire — ostensibly raises Feilan’s displeasure the violence has unmistakable sexual overtones, with the connotations of rape being invoked. And from the first act, Lóa’s friend, Ísa has, both subtly and not so subtly, indicated what producers expect of women when they audition; the casting couch being a virtual stage prop when she describes her experiences in the “industry” — leaving on trips with culture industry bigwigs, spending the night in hotels, quite clearly not alone, and so forth. Which is what Lóa encounters in the final act. Not only is she treated and inspected like cattle by Mr. Peacock but, then, she is expected to perform a sexual function/favor, but only after having been reduced to one among “a hundred a day” — a description that

recalls the discussion above of the how she is reduced to the concept of a “number.”

When Lóa is described as someone who “works outside the home,” an enormous range of historical and socio-political issues comes to the fore, not to mention problems of gender stratification, the social experience of women and female subjectivity. As noted, the most common reading of *Silfurtúnglið* emphasizes that Lóa, being naïve, abandons the safety of home and hearth for the cruel world of work where she falls victim to unscrupulous men, giving up her virtue in the twofold sense of selling her lullaby and her “affections,” then also losing her humanity through her failure as a mother.

This reading is most convenient one for the political allegory that sees Iceland’s travails reflected in Lóa’s tragedy — and is most directly articulated by Peter Hallberg. There are problems with this reading however, and a good way to commence a somewhat different approach is to recall the organist’s response to Uglá’s concerns about Kleópatra’s promiscuity in *Atómstöðin*: “Promiscuous women don’t exist [...] That is superstition. On the other hand there are women who sleep thirty times with one man and women who sleep once with thirty men.”<sup>1285</sup> The statement is made by an enigmatic character for sure, and derives from another text, one that however stands in a very close intertextual relationship with *Silfurtúnglið*, but it is still worth keeping these words in mind, should one be tempted to think that Laxness in this play had failed to find any subject of more pressing import to him than the promotion of restrictive and

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<sup>1285</sup> Laxness, *Atómstöðin*, p. 27. In the original: “Lauslátar konur eru ekki til, sagði organistinn. Það er hjátrú. Afturámóti eru bæði til kvenmenn sem sofa þrjátíu sinnum hjá einum karlmanni og kvenmenn sem sofa einu sinni hjá þrjátíu karlmönnum.”

reactionary bourgeoisie conventions regarding female propriety and sexual behavior.

### *10.3 The Two Worlds*

At stake in Laxness' play is not female virtue, the sanctity of female purity or the transgressive nature of heterosexual sexual relations when the woman is not married. The critical consensus concerning the central role of the corruption of Lóa's purity, that her moral fall is the axis around which everything revolves, is also failing to grasp the depth and extent of the existential bleakness that suffuses the play. This stance functions in harmony with another long standing hermenutical "truth" about Laxness' plays, namely that they are structured around the lines of "two worlds". In the case of *Silfurtúnglið*, it is not difficult to identify the supposed elements of the binary; on the one hand we have the countryside and the peaceful township where Lóa lives with Óli and their baby. *Silfurtúnglið* and the culture industry are then the other world. In *Straumrof* there was the bourgoise home and the wildness of the hunting lodge. This reading of Laxness' plays has become so pervasive that its persuasiveness is assumed to verge on simply being an accepted fact.

It is however difficult to think of a more constricting, useless and sterile structuring device than this one, the apparently crowning fictional device of Laxness' late period. Everything is black and white. There is the good world and then there is the bad world. There is no dramatic tension, no moral conflict or ambiguity; no ethical danger because the choice is so clear. The reader is always safe, never compromised because, really, the choice isn't a choice at all, and so

forth. *Straumrof* for example reveals the Kaldal family home in Reykjavík to have been a “calcified grave” for Gæa, a domestic prison. The dangerous and wild and liminal space of the lodge however is where she experiences life changing happiness. It doesn’t end well, but the reason for the tragic conclusion is not that Gæa, Dagur and Alda were accidentally in the wrong “world,” had they simply been in town things would have turned out differently. More to the point, given a hypothetical scenario where this did indeed turn out to be the case and Alda is not killed, does that reduce the tragic force of the play? If Gæa were simply forced to return to her empty life as a useless ornament, the piece of prize furniture that really is the pride of the patriarch?

If we now look briefly at the opening of *Silfurtúnglið*, when Lóa is tending her baby and her father is over for lunch and a visit. If we bracket for a moment the fact that babies are very nice and examine the rest of the set up with a detached eye, it is not difficult to see why, a little bit later, Lóa decides to go with Feilan. If Dagur is a “wake-up” call for Gæa in *Straumrof*, Ísa fulfills a similar if considerably less dramatic role for Lóa in the later play. Pulling back we also note what surely amounts to an overflow of male presence in the tiny house. Óli and Laugi are sharing a laugh, but then later Róri, Lóa’s brother-in-law and a drunkard who has spent long years in prison for the murder of Lóa’s sister, enters the house uninvited.<sup>1286</sup> When Feilan joins the group, there are four men for a single Lóa. The threat of Róri is unspecified and abstract, but his presence is not wanted. Lóa’s father is a morally vacuous gasbag, and Óli is, to put it kindly, a failure despite having reached the position of clerk at the bank. More import however than his position in the bank is the position of the bank — it’s across

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<sup>1286</sup> The backstory that is thus indicated, dramatic as it sounds, is never entirely fleshed out.



the street from their home. Óli literally keeps an eye on the house and Lóa throughout the day. Her father is a frequent visitor we gather, whose visits tend to stretch out a bit across the day. The oppressive social structures thematized in *Straumrof* through attitudes towards sex are in part given material form in the very setting of the play. Getting out is an escape, not a fall. In what constitutes a nicely carried off circular development, the final scene invokes just the setting discussed above. Lóa is drunk, she's been kicked out by Mr. Peacock and Óli has arrived

Óli: Lóa, I am offering to take you back home again and make up, to forgive you.

Lóa: You forgive me? A world famous woman, the woman with the enormous contract; the woman who beds the king of the apes; the woman who is hired for nothing less than London, París and New York! Ha ha ha! Says he is going to forgive me — and perhaps take me back to his home in a small, hateful and morally upstanding small town where the frozen faces with the staring eyes monitor the back door while the bank monitors the front.<sup>1287</sup>

That Lóa is horrified and disgusted by her experiences in the culture industry and feels violated — and is racked by more than little self hate — is beyond question. The latter part of her diatribe is however just as true. This is what was needed for her to articulate thoughts that violate all social strictures and values and, essentially, the trappings of the entire world. She is rejecting the normality of what everybody accepts as normal existence. She finds it oppressive; male structures of dominance are in place and palpable although their manifestations are different then they were in *Straumrof*. The house she shared with Óli has become “his” house, a loaded shift that indicates the self evident nature of the

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<sup>1287</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 154. In the original: “Óli: Lóa, ég býð þér að taka þig heim aftur og sættast við þig og fyrirgefa þér. / Lóa: Þú fyrirgefa mér? — heimsfrægri konunni; konunni með stóra samninginn; konunni sem liggur með drotni apanna; konunni sem er ráðin uppá ekkert minna en London, París og New York! Ha ha ha! Segist ætla að fyrirgefa mér — og taka mig kanski heim til sín í lítinn ógeðslegan og siðferðilega háttstandandi kaupstað þar sem freðandlitin meðaugun starandi vakta bakdyrnar en útbúið framdyrnar.”

social tradition that the men should always be the official, legal owners of everything and it also underlines her firm rejection of her prior existence. Her experiences in the culture industry may have been awful but they are not sufficient to make her prior life of quiet domesticity look attractive.

Most importantly, the easy division between the artificiality of Silfurtunglið, the cabaret and the culture industry and the “authenticity” of the little house out in the fjord is revealed to have been an ideological construct. Lóa’s life prior to Feilan and Silfurtúnglið was just as artificial, just as much of a lie and just as much a manifestation of the patriarchal power relations in society as the culture industry and Mr. Peacock are.

If we now look for a moment at the language of the play itself, constituting one of the work’s flaws in Einar Bragi’s opinion. It should be noted however that the value and thematic function of the “uncouthness” of the play’s language is not entirely dismissed in the essay — Bragi is for example complimentary when describing how Laxness manages to distance himself from the stiffness that tended to accompany deliberately “elevated” language that, to an extent, was still *de rigueur* in Icelandic literary production at the time, in novels and poetry no less than plays.

It is however necessary to move beyond such superficial considerations and offer a series of interpretative statements as to the meaning and function of the various linguistic valences in the text. First, it is clear that the text constructs a conceptual edifice that suggests that language can be flattened out and reduced to a caricature of itself; this is what we see in Silfurtúnglið when what ostensibly should be cultural discourse is rendered in the language of a circus barker from

the past. Second, what happens to language is indicative of the effects of the administration of culture by multinational conglomerates; just like language is flattened, so these capitalistic rationalizing structures prove highly corrosive to previous ideas of cultural authenticity. Third, this is one register in which “vulgarity” or the low discourse of marketing and advertisement — or the inflammatory invocation of the casting couch — serve an aesthetic purpose in the text.

These textual characteristics should furthermore be read as a daring and highly successful attempt to express something about the language and discourse of the culture industry, how the language of marketing, advertisements, showmanship and spectacle may in fact represent the flattening or emptying out of the real human and emotional experience of reality, that is, its subjective dimension which is to such a large extent mediated through language. The fact that Laxness manages to enact the feeling of emptiness that he portrays at the level of theme and plot through language, its emptying out — particularly in the case of Feilan’s many lengthy interventions — speaks to the performative and self-reflexive nature of the play as a whole. Its language represents cultural bankruptcy, its plot is indicative of existential despair, and its characterization leaves absolutely no hope for subversive or emancipatory action.

The workings of the culture industry, as the fate of the lullaby demonstrates, are insidious while its fate also indicates the way in which the industry, somewhat like a shark that must move constantly in order to stay alive, seeks out pockets of authenticity and subcultures not yet enveloped by the capitalistic drive of consumer society, and incorporates them, transforms and

turns into a commodity, ruining the uniqueness of the cultural form in question.<sup>1288</sup>

Before leaving the domain of language it is important to reflect upon what may be among the key concepts of the text, so all pervasive that the reader quickly ceases to register them. These are the vaudeville and the fairground, entertainment forms that occupy a rather lowly place on the totem pole of cultural hierarchy. These institutions and sites are nevertheless the pivotal antecedents of modern forms of entertainment, such as the cinema, and have themselves never entirely disappeared. They are also of central importance for the generation of meaning in the text. The establishment of the title, of which Feilan is the proud proprietor, *Silfurtúniglið*, is described as a “fjölleikahús,” a concept that invokes a number of cultural, linguistic and historical questions and connotations, partly because neither “vaudeville” nor “fairground” have an exact counterpart in Icelandic, and “fjölleikahús” does not correspond to any well known concept of a site of entertainment in English.

The etymological problem, and the question of translation — involving as they both do notions of cultural exchange, a subject that had preoccupied Laxness since the writing of his essay on Hollywood — are worth probing a bit further. The most common English–Icelandic dictionary (published by Iðunn) does not feature an English translation of the term “fjölleikahús” and the concept is not to be found in the paradigmatic Icelandic dictionary, *Íslensk orðabók*.

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<sup>1288</sup> Whether or not language is in fact capable of mediating subjectivity in a form other than a distanced and alienated one is not the question — critics and philosophers disagree on this point and while there is no immediate pressure to resolve the issue, there is not either any pressing reason to assume that linguistic expressivity does not function on a spectrum ranging from bureaucratic missives to Shakespearean sonnets, and that the difference between these two registers is significant in human terms. The truth value of the text’s critical conceptualization of the culture industry’s corrosive effects is similarly unimportant; what is important is that such a critique is one of several key thematic strands and needs to be addressed on its own terms.

Under the listing of “fjölleikar” however there is a mention of “fjölleikahús”. “Fjölleikar” itself is not a straightforward concept (made up of the combination of “fjöl,” meaning “many”, and “leikar,” meaning “games” or “competition”) but is explained, in *Íslensk orðabók*, as a series of entertainment acts, ones of a particular nature, namely “air aerobics, magic [and] the exhibition of trained animals”. This description, being of course reminiscent of the circus, which in Icelandic is simply “sirkus” (and not included in the aforementioned English–Icelandic dictionary, perhaps by reason of obviousness), but this is not however entirely in keeping with Laxness’ own preferred translation of “fjölleikahús,” which is “cabaret”.

Following Laxness’ example, references to *Silfurtúnglið* as a “kabaret,” rather than a “fjölleikahús,” became more prominent around the time of the revival of the play in the mid 1970s and the play was also produced for television. The concept of the “cabaret” adds an entire connotative range to the notion of “fjölleikahús” — the “translation” being, as has perhaps already been indicated, Laxness’ own and is not “seconded” by any dictionary apparatus. However, it is precisely in the realm of the circus where the most direct — indeed, the only — linguistic synonym for “fjölleikahús” is to be found in the entire literature of Icelandic dictionaries and linguistic databases.

In a slim volume entitled *Íslensk samheitaorðabók*, a dictionary of synonyms that, despite its lineage to the University of Iceland, must count as among the slightest thesauruses ever published, as well as one of the most eccentric, lists “fjölleikahús” as the single synonym of “sirkus” (and vice versa). It

is also clear that the most popular acts featured in *Silfurtúnglið* belong in the circus, rather than the more elegant and sophisticated environs of the cabaret.

When Lóa joins Feilan's line-up, she finds herself in the midst of a colorful cast of characters, the only thing shared between being, really, how they invoke a past historical context (a strong man who can bend iron; an "ape man" who, perhaps accidentally, bites the head off a snake) and how unfit they really are for the age that is upon them, the age of television, publicity, and stream-lined celebrity, that is acts carefully packaged by teams of agents and managers.

There is, therefore, a deliberate temporal disjunction embedded in the notion of "fjölleikahús," one that is accentuated even further if we note the word's relation to, on the one hand, the concepts of "markaðssvæði" (fair or market) and "sýningarsvæði," (exhibition area) both of which are the Icelandic translations for "fairground" and, combined, serve as an excellent description of *Silfurtúnglið*, and, on the other, "fjölleikasýning" which is the Icelandic translation of "vaudeville" and clearly relates closely to Laxness' concept, "fjölleikahús" — indeed, Laxness' term manages to combine significant cultural connotations that derive from, on the one hand, the paired concepts of the fairground and the vaudeville and, on the other, the circus.

While this was perhaps not an excursion that was rewarded with an epiphany or a revelation, it does demonstrate the intricacies of Laxness' language use and how entire cultural traditions can be embedded in a single word.

Turning to the second domain identified by Einar Bragi, that of narrative dissonance and genre confusion and that these characteristics are indicative of a

lack of authorial vision and control. Einar Bragi does as a matter of fact focus on the melodramatic elements of the play and hardly mentions other discourses, aside from the tragedy, naturally, and the same is also true of the critical reception both during the play's initial run and its restaging in 1975. To limit the scope of what follows, focusing on the way in which the text activates the mode of the melodrama should be sufficient in terms of demonstrating that, rather than dissonance and lack of vision and control, the text is precise and thought out, if also challenging and experimental.

As the play closes, the audience finds Lóa ruined. With her son dead, Lóa has decided to join her brother-in-law, Róri, the homeless bum mentioned above in the context of Lóa's home in the north country, in a life of destitution on the streets. Thus she leaves the stage, which then falls into darkness. The final words uttered are those of Óli, who is calling after his wife, having not given up on her. It is interesting to note in this instance that the stage directions afford the director a choice in how to render this particular sequence: "If the director wants to emphasize the tragic rather than the hopeful, it is permissible to make the child's casket be visible in low light in the center of the stage for about half a minute, during which there is silence."<sup>1289</sup> Whether or not the casket is highlighted, the sudden shift that the last segment of act four takes into the register of the melodramatic is notable. Indeed, the utter despondency of Lóa activates a register of heightened sentimentalism and emotionalism that differs from the previous acts. The extreme nature of the final moments of the play is expressed astutely by Loftur Guðmundsson when he notes that the ending

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<sup>1289</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 156. In the original: "Vilji leikstjórinn leggja meiri áherslu á harmleik en vongleði er heimilt að láta líkkistu barnsins sjást í daufri skímu á miðju sviðinu einsog hálfu mínútu í þögn fyrir opnum tjöldum."

signifies nothing less than that the “future [...] has died”. Einar Bragi on the other hand describes the closing episode of the play as “highly sentimental” and “cheap.”

The problem here is that the predicates of the concept of the “melodrama” are employed as shorthand to identify flaws in the text, much as the notion of “vulgarity” above. In both instances the referential framework involves something akin to “cheap amusements” and an unwarranted grab for the emotions. It is possible however that the right questions are simply not being asked. That the melodrama is, on one level, obvious and unsubtle is for example not contested by Peter Brooks in his classic text, *The Melodramatic Imagination*. What is contested, on the other hand, is the meaning ascribed to these characteristics. Brooks notes how the mode depends on unabashed self-revelation and exhibition in its “desire to express all,” and that this imperative often manifests itself in what in the context of certain modern literary forms can be considered a clumsy method of exposition, namely that characters are simply placed in the middle of the stage or at the center of the narrative, and are then afforded the space to “utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings.”<sup>1290</sup>

Such directness challenges the aesthetic assumption that narrative causality should be the mechanism by which subjectivity is revealed and articulated, or that it should emerge piecemeal from a fragmented but intimate portrayal in the modernist style. Brooks however makes it clear that it is a mistake to view the melodramatic form as a failed attempt to achieve the goals of

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<sup>1290</sup> Peter Brooks. *The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Jersey: Yale University Press, 1995, p. 11.



realistic narrative, or to problematize the expressive capacity of language in the manner of the modernist movement. The melodrama, rather, stands as an alternative to these aesthetic forms, and is neither primitive nor coarse. The “obviousness” of the melodrama is a response in reverse to the “opaqueness” of the modern secular age, the ontological dilemma that comes to the foreground when meaning and value systems —the substantialist world-picture — has been destabilized and placed in doubt, but not, as Nietzsche noted, completely overthrown.

For Singer the melodrama expresses the desire for secure existential anchorage — the confirmation that human activities are meaningful — in a secular world that is grounded on the rejection of such certainties. This is why the melodrama pushes and takes the articulation of language to its most extreme point in terms of emotional intensity. However, rather than representing a simplistic belief in the truthfulness of emotions and the security of conventional narrative, the melodrama is the manifestation of, simultaneously, existential desperation and the weak hope that the innermost core of humanity, reachable only through the activation of a range of emotional intensities, can serve a foundational role in our understanding of the world and the constitution of our subjectivity.

In Laxness’ play, the activation of the melodrama as well as the many touches of the absurd — nearly everything that takes place in *Silfurtúnglið* is tinged by the absurd — serve just such a purpose, that is, the attempt to push language and the conceptual expression of the narrative to address something that is unthinkable at the same time as it may be the ultimate cause for

existential desperation. Much like in *Atómstöðin*, this would be the new technological capacity of man to destroy the world and enact the annihilation of the species; first man split the atom, then the earth, a post-apocalyptic saying might go. The melodrama becomes a mode for the expression of the fact that the unleashing of atomic energy has changed everything, as Sontag noted when she spoke of the “imagination of disaster” and the world has been rendered irrational, causing anxiety and confusion, much as the loss of the religious world view did during an earlier phase of modernity.

*Silfurtúnglið*, in other words, poses the question of what, if anything, can endow a historical situation that has become irrational with a grounding of some sort that offers the possibility of affirming human values and giving meaning to life. The manner in which Feilan introduces Lóa to the stage for the very first time is interesting in this context:

Ladies and gentlemen, I have the honor tonight to bring you the voice from the depths of the nation’s existence, the nameless and unknown voice that we have forgotten because we are always preoccupied by the famous and learned voices that are advertised on posters; and because we have been taught that nothing less than the atomic bomb can create peace and happiness in the world [...]<sup>1291</sup>

While Feilan’s discourse can never be assumed to be “genuine” or is entirely to be trusted — that he for example voices what appears to be distaste for conventional advertisement practices is in itself nothing but a promotional tactic — he becomes the appropriate vehicle for the articulation of the irrationality that is inherent in this early articulation of the “MAD”-doctrine, “mutually assured

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<sup>1291</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 69. In the original: “Herrar mínir og frúr, ég hef þann heiður hér í kvöld að flytja yður röddina úr djúpi þjóðlífsins, hina nafnlausu ókunnnu rödd sem við erum búnir að gleyma af því að við erum alltaf að hugsa um þessar frægu lærðu raddir sem eru auglýstar á plaggötum; og af því að okkur hefur verið kent að ekkert minna en atómbomban skapi frið og lífsgleði heiminum”.

destruction,” that some believed would ensure permanent peace between the conflicting nuclear powers.

There is another possible interpretation of his comment on the atom bomb, namely that the road to peace and happiness lies through atomic war, that is, the disappearance of humankind. While only a tentative gesture in *Silfurtúnglið*, this thought becomes increasingly important in Laxness’ subsequent plays, particularly *Prjónastofan Sólin*, which closes with a depiction of an utterly unemotional apocalypse.

This is not the only time Feilan finds it expedient to reference the atom bomb. When thanking Ísa for leading him to Lóa, he employs somewhat unusual figurative language to express his appreciation:

My sincerest thanks, Ísa, for your discovery, heck, I think the atom bomb itself has been completely overshadowed, you have led me to a gold mine, that is, if anyone would be so far behind the times as to talk about gold. This person [Lóa] is a uranium mine, at the very least, she is nothing less than plutonium, she is literally heavy water —<sup>1292</sup>

It is also remarkable how Laxness combines two entirely different discursive registers in Feilan’s speech. On the one hand there is the invocation of the conceptual language of the scientific breakthrough surrounding nuclear power and then, on the other, the suggestion of the discourse of the culture industry and how its female stars are figured as “bombshells” and “sex bombs”. This brings to mind the second important function of the melodramatic mode in the play, namely its relationship to the culture industry and the way in which Laxness employs certain melodramatic tropes as structuring devices (from the

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<sup>1292</sup> Laxness, *Silfurtúnglið*, p. 75. In the original: “Þakka þér innilega fyrir þessa uppgötvun Ísa, svei mér bara ef ekki atómbomban er alveg gersamlega fölnuð, þú hefur vísað mér á gullnámu ef nokkur maður væri svo á eftir tímanum nú á dögum að tala um gull, þessi manneskja er úraníumnáma minst, hún er blatt áfram plútóníum, hún er bókstafllega þungt vatn —“

sub-genre of the mother melodrama for instance) and as an opening to the thematic depiction of the working of the culture industry. The most important of these involves the play's central symbol, the lullaby.

As has been noted, Lóa is taken aback by the attention garnered by something that she herself did not give a moment's consideration, the seemingly spontaneously generated lullaby that she sings to her child. As an ancient and global form of expression, the lullaby is associated with a set of signifiers that simultaneously marginalize it as a piece of expression and render it inconsequential and open a window that allows for veneration that can become extreme, verging on fetishization.

That is, on the one hand the lullaby belongs to the domestic sphere, lacks an authorial signature and is related to oral culture as well as the domain of women. Its target audience is hardly conscious and its aim is to extinguish consciousness (if only for the night) as opposed to raise or provoke it, while, on the other, the lullaby also represents what is universally codified as the purest and most sublime emotion known to mankind, the love of a mother for her child. This, then, is nature in its most beatific mode, a primordial condition that signifies life, nurture, safety, comfort, and innocence, not to mention the continuation of the species. And the fact that lullabies seem almost self-generated, a common characteristic of oral culture, in the sense that they pass between people, families and generations without an authorial signature makes them a uniquely shared cultural artifact that does not belong to anyone while at the same time it belongs to each individual in a highly personal and meaningful fashion — commonly materialized twice in a lifetime, when the person is on the

receiving end of a lullaby and when later in life he or she sings or hums it to a loved one.

The lullaby is thus clearly a form that is open to extremes of feeling and cultural signification. This is what Laxness activates through the melodramatic register; the lullaby allows the text to manifest a range of beatific connotations and pure emotionality, approaching something resembling a core of goodness that justifies human existence. The culture industry is rendered in an equally fraught manner, its melodramatic register referencing the threat of the void, the way in which humankind, through its actions, proves again and again the meaninglessness of the universe. These are the forces that the *Silfurtúnglið* articulates through the language of melodrama and its iconography of domesticity and unhappiness and tragedy; with the casket at the end tipping the scales in favor of existential darkness and the void.

### ***11. "The Artistic Discharge of the Nausea of Absurdity"***

When discussing the nihilism of the late plays, form is of central importance. In all three texts the mimetic principles of the realist tradition are abandoned. Perhaps slightly unusual is the fact that, when accounting for the content and form of the three late plays, the fundamental reality of the stage is of considerable importance. It is almost as if the matter of how Laxness chooses to marshal his forces and what stylistic register he chooses to activate, one or many in fact, needs to be grounded in the foundation that is the material and historical framework of the dramatic mode, namely the space of the theater and the

theatrical traditions that have developed over time. Yet another way of putting this would be to say that it is only after having ensured that the foundation is solid, that Laxness proceeds to build the rest, floor by floor. The foundation, again, is the materiality of the theater. This is all by way of responding to a question that has not been posed yet but hangs over the proceedings: what motivates the break that separates the three late plays from what came before?

It is clear enough what provokes the break that marks the beginning of Laxness' engagement with modernity as a problematic, rather than a promise; there the rupture of the war and the aforementioned twin catastrophes of the onset of an atomic age and the reality of the Holocaust form a clear line of demarcation that Laxness picks up on immediately and thematizes in his powerful post-war novel *Atómstöðin*. Near the end, the organist gives a bouquet of flowers to Ugla, and thus poses the question whether it is possible to keep the humanistic flower of hope alive in a world where capitalism has extinguished the light of enlightened rationality, indeed, corrupted and deformed it to the extent that it has become the very antithesis of its own ideals. When discussing this scene earlier, we along with Peter Hallberg read the flowers as a hopeful sign, positioning Ugla as emblematic of, or at least signifying the possibility of a future set apart from the capitalist ethos and corruption she witnesses in the capital, as well as the literally suicidal games the inept government is playing.

The doomed Árland family represents capitalism in miniature; the patriarch Búi, desperate and unhappy in his prosperous surroundings, holding the reins of power in government without any deeply felt purpose or reason to be doing so, has nothing to live for as he realizes that the social order he has

pledged himself to has a quickly upcoming expiration date. The lady of the house is unhappy enough for it to resemble madness and the children are all lost, ruined by the environment they have grown up in. All this is a comment on capitalism, however, not the existential crisis brought on by the events of the war.

The symbolic importance of Búi Árland and the organist is clear but by no means oppressive; the critique leveled against the values Búi represents is also familiar but accomplished because Búi is a richly drawn character, not merely a cipher. Less obvious is the nature of the alternative that the organist provides to Búi Árland and his corrupt cronies. The organist's freedom from moral orthodoxy, traditional thinking and behavioral conventions is laudatory but his stoicism, his seeming refusal to take a stand in the here and now, in other words, his supreme indifference to the present, may in the end be just as short-sighted, as doomed to failure, and as destructive as Búi Árland's capitalism. That he should sell his house and give the proceedings to Ugly so that she can set her imprisoned lover free is no indication that his lofty indifference has been pierced; material goods and money mean nothing to him. Nevertheless, the organist has found a path that allows him to weather the shipwreck of humanist ideals and beliefs.

With only one exception, the novels that Laxness publishes in the period after the Second World War share a growing disillusionment and an increasingly strong nihilistic sensibility.<sup>1293</sup> Laxness' intervention in the Saga heritage, *Gerpla*, is for instance remarkable for the merciless way in which it reveals the heroic

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<sup>1293</sup> The exception is Laxness' 1970 novel *Innansveitarkrónika* (Chronicle of a County), a strange work that is in many ways hard to define as it partakes of different discourses as it recounts the fate of a nineteenth century church in Mosfellsdalur.

medieval world to have been one of cruelty and inhumanity. But, as is the case in *Atómstöðin*, there is still firm grounding for values in the medieval narrative; the occasional humanistic rose is to be found, we might say with reference to the organist's bouquet, as Vésteinn Ólason articulates in an article on Laxness and the heroic ideal:

*Gerpla* leaves no doubt whatsoever that the heroic ideal that combines killing and other wartime feats with the blind obedience to a ruler is despicable and life in the service of such an ideal is not only absurd and worthless but literally harmful and wrong [...] But despite his revolt against the worship of violence in heroic tales he [Laxness] has found in ancient Icelandic heroic tales and poems a valuable core that he incorporates into some of his greatest works such as *Sjálfstætt fólk* and *Gerpla*: a deep empathy with the one who has lost everything but retains his humanity and dignity.<sup>1294</sup>

Of course, fierce condemnation of brutality and barbarity needs a firm foundation from which to pass judgment. If in addition Laxness found a model for empathy in the Sagas, which he then transposed into works from *Sjálfstætt fólk* to *Gerpla*, well, then there is certainly an alternative on the table to nihilism and moral vacuity.

In *Brekkukotsannáll*, which is the second novel Laxness wrote that is narrated in the first person, and follows directly upon the first, the aforementioned *Atómstöðin*, life in Reykjavík in the opening decades of the twentieth century is depicted in a quiet, nostalgic manner. The narrator Álfrímur is raised in a family that typifies traditional values but outside of the family sphere there is one figure in particular that captures his attention and

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<sup>1294</sup> Vésteinn Ólason. "Halldór Laxness og íslensk hetjudýrkun." *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 3/1992, p. 39. In the original: "Gerpla tekur af öll tvímæli um að sú hetjuhugsjón sem samþættir manndráp og önnur styrjaldaafrek fylgispekt við höfðingja er forkastanleg og líf í þágu slíkrar hugsjónar er ekki einungis fáránlegt og einskis vert heldur beinlínis skaðlegt og rangt [...] En þrátt fyrir andóf gegn dýrkun ofbeldis í hetjusögum hefur hann fundið í fornum íslenskum hetjusögum og kvæðum verðmætan kjarna sem hann tekur mið af í sumum mestu snilldarverkum sínum eins og t.d. *Sjálfstæðu fólk* og *Gerplu*: samkenndina með þeim sem hefur glatað öllu en heldur mannleika sínum og reisu."



imagination, Garðar Hólm. Hólm is a world famous singer whose fortunes were initially made possible by the generous support of a local retail concern, Gúðmúnsensbúð, an economic power in the context of the general poverty that the novel depicts.

Upon meeting, Garðar Hólm is everything a young boy could hope for in his idol and role model; he is flamboyant, charming, knowledgeable in the ways of the world and larger than life, yet kindly and patient. The last means the world to Álfgrímur who himself is a talented singer and plans on a career just like Hólm's. It is thus a shock when Álfgrímur learns that it is all a façade. Garðar Hólm cannot in actuality sing and his supposed "triumphs" abroad are simply publicity stunts (read: lies) manufactured for the media and maintained and promulgated by Gúðmúnsensbúð whose economic interests are tied to Garðar Hólm's image; what we have here is the culture industry in miniature, a parody that presents Gúðmúnsensbúð as the world's smallest studio, with only one star under contract, who cannot perform. Hólm's tragedy is exacerbated by the fact that he understands and appreciates the realm of beauty that he is excluded from, and his hopeless search for the "one true tone" makes him simultaneously tragic and pathetic.

The same motif provides the conclusion to *Guðsgjafapula*, which is a rollicking tale spanning decades, and one of Laxness' funniest and most extroverted. It is also perhaps his most melancholic work and the one most concerned with the passing of time, mortality and the tragedy inherent in the fact that the private universe of an individual's consciousness and memories cannot be saved from the void that is death. At its center is Bersi Hálmarsson, also

known as Íslandsbersi (The Bear of Iceland), an entrepreneur in the burgeoning fishing industry in the decades after the motorization of the fishing fleet.

Íslandsbersi enjoys fabulous wealth at one moment while at the next he is likely to be penniless; neither condition however affects him in the slightest. The unnamed narrator, a writer taking his first steps, meets Íslandsbersi by coincidence when young, at which point the latter makes the narrator promise to write his biography. As the decades pass, their paths occasionally interlink and the narrator's tale does in the end fulfill the biographical agreement, if in an unusual fashion.

What the narrator discovers, never acknowledged by Bersi Hjálmarsson, is his abandonment of his first family, in particular his daughter Bergrún who dies young. When, much later, the two meet for the last time in Hjálmarsson's palatial residence in London, the host at that point "burdened to the breaking point by more wealth than had ever been accumulated by one man in Iceland," the atmosphere is melancholic. Bersi is sitting in a luxurious chair, surrounded by all the trappings of wealth, trying to play the violin that used to belong to his daughter.<sup>1295</sup> It is not going well, however: "This isn't good enough, he said. I am not trying to capture just anything. There is one tone that matters. I am going to try again. He stayed at it for a long time but was never happy."<sup>1296</sup> As their time comes to a close, somewhat later, Bersi Hjálmarsson reaches for the violin again, and these are the words with which the novel closes, "He sat for a long time with

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<sup>1295</sup> Halldór Laxness. *Guðsgjafaþula*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1972, p. 291. In the original: "sligaður undir meiri auðlegð en nokkru sinni hefur safnast á eins manns hendur á Íslandi."

<sup>1296</sup> Laxness, *Guðsgjafaþula*, p. 302. In the original: "Þetta er ekki nógu gott hjá mér, sagði hann. Það er ekki sama hver tónninn er. Það er einn tónn sem skiftir máli. Ég ætla að reyna aftur. Hann reyndi leingi en var aldrei ánægður."

the violin on his knees and plucked the strings, trying to reach that unique tone that was reminiscent of Bergrún Hjálmarsson.”<sup>1297</sup>

In *Brekkukotsannáll* and *Guðsgjafaþula* the notion of a “true tone” stands for artistic achievement that allows for the past to be retained in symbolic form — and thus fixing time’s wreckage to the extent that is humanly possible. It is also clear that while *Guðsgjafaþula* forecloses any possibility of achieving the “true tone,” the same does not apply to *Brekkukotsannáll*.<sup>1298</sup> Indeed, the wonderful world that is Álfgrímur’s boyhood, the “lost” years of his youth, will not pass into oblivion, to be forgotten as scandalous finitude has its way, but will later be recaptured and rendered eternal through art — this much the retrospective first person narration testifies to.

In *Paradísarheimt* (Paradise Reclaimed, 1960), the last novel that Laxness wrote before embarking on his nearly decade-long sojourn into the world of the theater, he is much closer to portraying the inefficacy and emptiness of ideals without a corresponding counterpoint from a different realm that serves to redeem the narrative. It tells of a nineteenth century farmer who, in search of transcendental values, tries first to enact the heroic legacy of the Sagas and then falls under the sway of a charismatic Mormon missionary. Determined to take the Mormon faith, he travels to Utah in the United States and then arranges for his family to follow. During the trip his wife dies and his daughter is raped, and once she arrives, is married off in a polygamous fashion as the fourth wife of a

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<sup>1297</sup> Laxness, *Guðsgjafaþula*, p. 302. In the original: “Hann sat lengi með fiðluna í hnjám sér og fitlaði við streingina og var að reyna að ná þessum sérstaka tóni sem minnir á Bergrúnu Hjálmarson.”

<sup>1298</sup> The failure to find the “true tone” in *Guðsgjafaþula* is reflected on the macro-level of the narration, as the narrator himself knows that what he has brought forth in textual form as Bersi’s biography is incomplete, insufficient, a series of broken pieces that, once put together, do not constitute a whole and cannot capture the meaning of the life.

Mormon elder. Having lost his daughter to the religion that he is now disillusioned with, the farmer returns alone to his plot of land which has deteriorated into the uninhabitable, which is where the novel ends.

But, to pick up the question from before, if, right from the moment when the organist gives Uglá the flowers, and all through *Gerpla*, *Brekkukotsannáll* and *Paradísarheimt*, there was still a flicker of hope to be found in Laxness' works, what changed? The answer is twofold, one aspect is literary, the other extra-textual and biographical. Let's elaborate on the latter first. On 4 November 1956, the army of the Soviet Union invaded Hungary to crush the uprising that had in short order toppled the government and spread across the country. Thousands were killed, mass arrests followed, all public opposition was suppressed. Earlier that year Nikita Khrushchev had given his famous speech "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences." The combination of the two events rendered Laxness' political commitments, these having admittedly been growing less ardent and impassioned for quite some time, meaningless.

The other reason requires us to hark back to the discussion of Laxness' essay "Persónulegar minnisgreinar um skáldsögur og leikrit." As we may recall, his bone of contention in the essay is "the interloper with no name and a very uncertain passport who is always present" in a novel or a fictional prose text — poetry as well, although that is not mentioned — which Laxness terms "Plús Ex". "Plús Ex" represents the narrator as well as whatever traces there are of a narrating or structuring consciousness behind or above the narrator; an obvious example of the former would be the first person narration of *Atómstöðin* or the omniscient narration of the traditional realist novel. Traces of a structuring

narrating consciousness can for example be discerned in the handling of time (who decides the temporal gaps that are just exactly right to keep the pace of the narrative satisfying?) and how Ugla's narration is shared with the reader (Ugla's mind is the source of a ceaseless stream of narrative; who decides when we join with her and when Ugla goes about her business without us peeking over her shoulder?). And who created this undefined, unnamed place from whence the narration springs in the past tense? Where exactly is Ugla while she is telling us the story? Only "Plús-Ex" knows. In fact, any text with a "voice" of any kind that can be traced to an origin is encumbered by this entity that Laxness finds to be so much in the way; the creature seems to create a bottleneck when it comes to the relationship between the text and the reality it seeks to invoke, the mediation involved in the activities of "Plús Ex" prevents language from being the transparent window it is sometimes said to be.

### *11.1 Unprotected Art*

Laxness may seem to be expressing frustration over the fact that language is a randomly constituted symbolic system with no direct connection to lived experience and reality; an ancient source of complaint that got renewed attention in the Romantic period.<sup>1299</sup> Perhaps so, but then only up to a point. At

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<sup>1299</sup> Umberto Eco's *La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea* (*The Search for the Perfect Language*. Trans. by James Fentress, Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993) depicts the interest during the Middle Ages in a perfect language, the pre-Babel language and the one God used for creation. According to Eco the desire for this originary communicatory tool became a subject of study in the early modern period. Moving in a not entirely dissimilar terrain, Gerard Genette has written on the long-held belief that language stands in a direct relationship with the world, or, more precisely, imitates the world. See *Mimologics*: Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993. The science fiction novel *Embassytown* (New York: Del Rey, 2012) by British novelist China Mieville features an alien race incapable of conceptual thinking, that is, they cannot subsume the particulars of reality under abstract concepts, which makes communication something of a problem for them. Everything they say must then be true in the

the heart of the matter is, I think, a different kind of artificiality whose intrusion frustrates Laxness. That is, if it were the actual limitations of language that “Plús–Ex” represented, work in the theater would be limited alleviation (one can, I suppose, imagine a theater solely of gestures and mimicry). The figure that bothers Laxness may be the creation of language but it is not language as such that is at stake. “Plús–Ex” is a fungible narratological entity whose most obvious manifestation is a novel’s narrator but in addition it serves in the different roles discussed above. In that sense, “Plús–Ex” is more all–encompassing than any narrator and that is also why the route of the Sagas, that is, being as objective as possible, giving the narrator no existential leeway, is bound to fail as a way to counter his presence. “Plús–Ex” always slips in and sheaths itself onto the narrative, covering it completely, and thus comes in between the intimate encounter of author and reader, somewhat like a condom.

Laxness would, one believes after reading the essay in question, be quite happy to read his stories aloud to an audience, as that would eliminate “Plús–Ex” as a problem because the corporeal presence of the author can be seen as the pure and undiluted source for the narrative. In an oral culture, nobody worries

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most literal fashion. It is their somewhat cramped linguistic situation that makes them tolerate humans on their planet as these visitors prove quite willing, for a little green, to do the work necessary for the natives to speak. Thus, if they want to have a saying that indicates just how unlikely something is to happen, they might come up with something like: That’s about as likely as a girl chopping down a tree with a machete. To be able to say that, they then pay a girl to try to cut down a tree with a machete — preferably she’ll keep at it forever for once she stops they stop being able to use the expression. The book opens with a quote from Walter Benjamin’s essay “Language as Such and the Language of Man” which has become quite well known but is deeply marked by Benjamin’s greatest flaw which is the infusion of theological nonsense into his arguments and observations; here he claims that the Word of God at the moment of creation somehow endowed all things with a linguistic dimension. See *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926*. Trans. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. The Romantics recast the concept of the symbol and made it in effect bypass the limitations of language by containing within itself whatever it was that it pointed to. See here by M. H. Abrams. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971.

about where the narrating presence originates from because it is sitting cross-legged opposite you in the village circle. And this, in a way, brings us to the theater, which, if we continue with the metaphor, represents unprotected sex.

The theater as noted above is where Laxness discovered finally how to shake this unwelcome hanger-on. But there is more to it than overcoming a bothersome technical problem. A central “effect” of the presence of “Plús Ex,” although not addressed directly by Laxness in the aforementioned essay, is the fact that its presence and function cannot but lend coherence to a narration. As a mediating presence, “Plús-Ex” imposes coherence by the very act of mediation (quantified in grammatical or layout terms; an “act” of mediation being anything from several sentences to a page), each act constituting a promise of continuation. The reader can be certain that he or she will not be left high and dry, more is coming, and that it will be causally related to what came before, and what will follow — and if not, we immediately make the incoherency of the text coherent by aligning it with the practice of the avant-garde or experimental art in some more recent context. To an extent the same of course applies to the theater, a character will usually pick up the conversation when another one pauses; there is a plot that must be kept going. However, one does not get the sense that there is one dominating consciousness that is pulling all the strings and arranging everything before your eyes. The major reason is of course the aforementioned lack of a narrating presence but also the dispersal of the figure of the author onto the figures of the director, producer, actors, and so forth.

Put more precisely, the presence of a textual consciousness, “Plús Ex,” and the sense of safety that he/she/it generates, no matter how disquieting the

text may be in all other registers, simply through its function of leading the reader onwards, controlling and shaping the narrative, creates a sense of a force that is present and which the reader can trust to ensure the eventual creation of narrative coherence (or, if found lacking in coherence, it can be blamed, or as noted above, simply put into a new context). The promise of coherence and rational progression through a narrative from a clearly demarcated beginning to an equally clearly demarcated end, corresponds in many ways with the Enlightenment and ideals of rationalization (reason, coherence, linearity, the production of sense rather than nonsense — and most importantly, a rational subject as protagonist, one whose past affects his present state and whose present state is in flux as he is learning, maturing, especially of course in the form of the *Bildungsroman*).

The absence of this textual narrating consciousness and its insistence, continual insistence, on coherence and rationality in narrative progression, poetic construction, an article's argumentation, if noticed and activated, can open up new creative spaces for an author. Not being required to embed the characters in a linguistic existential environment that then needs constant attention (playwrights usually describe the set in quick strokes, once, and then set the characters free) creates a sense of distance; concentrating on happenings and dialogue, and less on style and world building, is conducive to a different dynamic than a novelist might be used to, and so on. One can imagine any number of possibilities. For Laxness, it will thus be argued, the release from



“imposed” coherence results in a new perspective on the role of values and humanism.<sup>1300</sup>

As we will note below, the theater of the absurd is understandably invoked in tandem with the late plays. At the margins, Laxness’ perspective also intersects with some of Antonin Artaud’s reflections on the theater, particularly the concern, important to Artaud throughout, that in the theater, performance should replace representation. Thus, during his reflections on the problems facing realism in various arts in the late 1920s, in particular the artificiality of representation, Artaud alights on the immediacy of the medium of the theater and the way in which “presence” manifests itself on stage. His focus is on the phenomenological “nature” of the theatrical setting, which he believes is real enough to counter the “illusionary” dimension of the theater:

The objects, the props, even the scenery which will appear on the stage will have to be understood in an immediate sense, without transposition; they have to be taken not for what they represent but for what they are.<sup>1301</sup>

There must, he insists, be a way to escape, subvert or manipulate in new ways what Frederic Jameson termed the prison house of language, that is the role mediation can be seen to play as a barrier between intention and execution (a barrier that is then raised by or grounded in ideology, ethics, tradition, morals, and the interests of power, to name a few discursive and real-world formations that might come into effect). Derrida responds to this strain in Artaud’s thinking

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<sup>1300</sup> Someone might ask about *Silfurtúnglið* and how Laxness’ 1954 play fits into this developmental schema, or, more precisely, why it seems not to fit. At stake of course is a development. Laxness does not emerge a fully formed playwright out of thin air. We have also shown just how radical *Silfurtúnglið* in fact is, and how it has consistently been undervalued and unfairly dismissed. Finally, the ideological endgame of 1956 had not yet occurred.

<sup>1301</sup> Antonin Artaud. “Manifesto for a Theater that Failed.” *Antonin Artaud. Selected Writings*. Ed. by Susan Sontag. Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1976, p. 160.

in his essay, “The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,” where he describes the affect that Artaud is reaching for as follows:

Theatrical art should be the primordial and privileged site of this destruction of imitation: more than any other art, it has been marked by the labor of total representation in which the affirmation of life lets itself be doubled and emptied by negation. This representation, whose structure is imprinted not only on the art, but on the entire culture of the West (its religions, philosophies, politics), therefore designates more than just a particular type of theatrical construction [...] What does it mean to break this structure of belonging? Is it possible to do so?<sup>1302</sup>

A correlation between subjectivity, performance, and performativity seems almost by necessity to be embedded and embodied in the theater through the notion of presence, primarily the presence of the actors in the same space as the audience.<sup>1303</sup> Artaud’s understanding of the nature of theater centers on the notion that its articulations are not bound by the mechanisms of representation because of the ontological fact of presence; actors do not signify, they are, for Artaud. Over the decades, several of them spent in an asylum, this focus on presence resulted in “the monistic intelligent body” becoming the centre of a “metaphysical order,” according to Adrian Morfee, which involved “total identification with the body” and the certainty of “the failure of language to say life”.<sup>1304</sup>

Laxness had his doubts about language’s capacity to express reality, doubts that are manifested strikingly in the late modernist masterpiece *Kristinihald undir Jökli*. But at no point does he come anywhere near Artaud’s

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<sup>1302</sup> Jacques Derrida. “The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation.” *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 234.

<sup>1303</sup> The theater is here distinguished from drama, the written text of the play. To divest a play of such associations, and render the reflexive reaction of a human consciousness faced with another human consciousness inoperative, which is to ascribe free subjectivity to it, analogous to what oneself enjoys, requires radical measures.

<sup>1304</sup> Adrian Morfee. *Antonin Artaud’s Writing Bodies*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 212, 216.

level of manic loathing of language. But where I see a point of contact is that both found the basic, material and formal structures of the medium to offer a valuable alternative, even an escape route from oppressive convention and traditional expressive frameworks, albeit their conclusions were radically different. This will be returned to below and then in the context of the Greek classics.

### *11.2 Theater of the Absurd*

The absurd has been invoked repeatedly. And, indeed, most critics agree that the thematic bleakness of Laxness' late plays aligns them with the theater of the absurd. Emerging in Paris in the middle of the twentieth century, the mode is usually associated with Eugène Ionesco and Samuel Beckett. Trausti Ólafsson summarizes the characteristic features as being the depiction of characters whose "lives are absurd," in the sense of being meaningless, characters who are furthermore "stuck in their bodies," meaning that affairs of the mind and spirit are foreign to them, "their language is marked by the death rattle of meaninglessness, and rather than being approached through some notion of a humanist essence, they are simply shown partaking in 'situations'."<sup>1305</sup>

At the time of *Strompleikurinn's* initial run, however, only one critic, it seems, made the connection to the theater of the absurd, Gunnar Bergmann in *Vísir* who notes that Laxness has learned a thing or two from "the most recent

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<sup>1305</sup> Trausti Ólafsson. *Leikhús nútímans. Hugmyndir og hugsjónir*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2013, p. 230. In the original: "Líf þeirra er absúrd, þær sitja fastar í eigin líkama, tungumál þeirra einkennist af dauðahryglu merkingarleysis, og þær birtast fremur sem einhvers konar verur í kringumstæðum en að eðli þeirra sé lýst."

[developments in theater], such as Ionesco”.<sup>1306</sup> Others agreed that the play was a biting satire and a social critique but found it difficult to define it further. That the work was bleak was commented upon on a number of occasions, with Ólafur Jónsson noting that the play’s conclusion represented “pessimism’s perfection,” adding that nowhere in Laxness’ entire body of work was “hope” shown to be “as remote”.<sup>1307</sup>

Sveinn Einarsson discusses the theater of the absurd in some detail and notes that Laxness had long “been sensitive to the fertile and productive literary currents” as they made their first tentative inroads from the literary margins, often quite far removed from where Laxness himself was located of course.<sup>1308</sup> Einarsson adds that in addition to French Absurdist Theater, Brecht also became famous in this period, his influence traversing the world with the speed and effect of a cyclone. “Halldór Kiljan Laxness had his eyes and ears open for both of these main currents and this is evident in his major theatrical works”.<sup>1309</sup> Hávar Sigurjónsson agrees with Einarsson’s assessment, emphasizing as well the absurd and the epic.<sup>1310</sup> Discussing *Strompleikurinn*, Stefán Baldursson states

<sup>1306</sup> Bergmann, “Strompleikurinn eftir Halldór Kiljan Laxness,” p. 5. In the original: “þótt hann hafi og lært af hinum *nýstárlegustu*, svo sem *Ionesco*”.

<sup>1307</sup> Jónsson, “Kringum Strompleikinn,” p. 15. In the original: “Í leikslok Strompleiksins er *bölsýnin á hinn bóginn fullkomin*”, and “Þetta um bölsýnina, hún er að vísu ekkert nýjabrum í verki skáldsins þótt hún hafi sjaldan verið jafn einlit og hér, *vonarneistinn aldrei jafn fjarri*.”

<sup>1308</sup> Einarsson, “Vorið geingur í lið með kálfum,” p. 31. In the original: “Frá unga aldri *hafði hann verið næmur á það sem var að gerast frjótt í bókmenntum umhverfis hann*”.

<sup>1309</sup> Einarsson, “Vorið geingur í lið með kálfum,” p. 32. In the original: “Halldór Kiljan Laxness hafði opin augu og eyru fyrir báðum þessum megin stefnum og sér þess merki í helstu sjónleikjum hans”.

<sup>1310</sup> Sigurjónsson, “Frá Strompleik til Dúfnaveislu,” p. 86. Sigurjónsson notes, “the three [late] plays are the result of very conscious reflection where he [Laxness] has familiarized himself with the theories and methods of the central theatrical personages and writers of the continent at that time. It is clear that writers such as Samuel Beckett, Eugéne Ionesco and Bertolt Brecht have, each in their own way, influenced him.” In the original: “og leikritin þrjú sem um ræðir eru greinilegur afrakstur mjög meðvitaðrar þælingar þar sem hann hefur kynnt sér kenningar og aðferðir helstu leikhúsmanna og leikritahöfunda álfunnar á þeim tíma. Er ljóst að höfundar eins og Samuel Beckett, Eugéne Ionesco og Bertolt Brecht hafa hver með sínum hætti haft áhrif á hann.”

unequivocally that the theater of the absurd is an influence, and that it subsequently comes to dominate in *Prjónastofan Sólin*.<sup>1311</sup> Laxness himself put it thus: “This play, *Prjónastofan Sólin*, is full of all kinds of modern hell.”<sup>1312</sup>

Halldór Guðmundsson, however, takes a strong, contrarian stance here, insisting that

The perspective on life that is portrayed in Halldór’s plays has nothing to do with the absurd, although the works do borrow some formal aspects from the movement. Halldór was after all a believer in humanism and human society, and did not think that all values had been removed from the world as some of the so-called absurd-writers did.<sup>1313</sup>

It is not clear how a theatrical work can borrow formal aspects from a movement such as the theater of the absurd while remaining absolutely untouched by its perspective on the world. Jón Viðar Jónsson minimizes for example the Brechtian influence that was commonly invoked due to the incompatibility of the emancipatory ideology of Marxism and the despairing outlook of the playwrights designated as absurdist.<sup>1314</sup> The contention here and in what follows is of course precisely the opposite to the one maintained by Guðmundsson: the late plays represent a world devoid of values and the crisis that ensues is the thematic and philosophical center of the plays.

When pinning a classificatory designation on the plays it is worth noting

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<sup>1311</sup> Regarding *Strompleikurinn*, Baldursson writes “The influence of absurdism has become discernable (for instance in Ljóna’s lengthy monologue at the beginning of the play). About *Prjónastofan Sólin*, he has this to say: “The air of absurdism in *Prjónastofan* is stronger than in the author’s other plays.” Baldursson, “Uppþornuð sítróna og tvær rauðar jólakúlur,” pp. 98, 101. In the original: “Áhrifa absúrdisma eða fjarstæðustefnu er tekið að gæta (t.d. í löngu eintali Ljónu í upphafi leiksins).” The second quote: “Fjarstæðublær *Prjónastofunnar* er sterkari en í öðrum leikritum höfundar.”

<sup>1312</sup> Laxness, “Heimur *prjónastofunnar*,” p. 84. In the original: “Þetta leikrit, *Prjónastofan Sólin*, er fullt af allskonar nútímahelvíti”.

<sup>1313</sup> Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness. Ævisaga*, p. 670. In the original: “Lífssýnin sem birtist í leikverkum Halldórs á ekkert skylt við absúrdismann þótt verkin sæki sitthvað til stefnunnar í formi. Halldór var þrátt fyrir allt trúaður á mannúðarstefnu og mannlegt félag, en leit ekki svo á að öll gildi væru horfin úr heiminum einsog sumir svonefndra absúrdhöfunda.”

<sup>1314</sup> Jónsson, “Var Halldór Laxness gott leikritaskáld?,” p. 27.

how Laxness himself defines them. On the title page of the printed editions of each play, just below the title, the author provides his own generic typology. *Strompleikurinn* is thus a “[c]omedy in three parts,” and the same goes for *Prjónastofan Sólin* while *Dúfnaveislan* is described as “[t]heatrical entertainment in five acts”.<sup>1315</sup>

These designations are significant because they appear to stand in such stark opposition to the fact that not only are the works not comedies (that is not to say they are not humorous) but comedies have a structural problem when dealing with bleak, tragic or apocalyptic subjects, it would seem, namely that they tend to have a happy ending — which again, none of these three plays has. However, a brief thought from Nietzsche on the theater of the Ancient Greeks might offer a clue, “when the danger is greatest,” he says, meaning despair, “art approaches [and offers] the comic as the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity,” — the comic here becomes a way to avoid confronting reality, whose absurdity is nauseous.<sup>1316</sup>

Among the works that the concept of “nausea” invokes immediately is Jean–Paul Sartre’s novel *La Nausée* (Nausea, 1938), which however offers a somewhat more positive overall portrait of existential nausea than Nietzsche is aiming for.<sup>1317</sup> In a world bereft of meaning, Roquentin needs to find the will to

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<sup>1315</sup> In the original, these are “Gamanleikur í þremur þáttum” and “Skemtunarleikur í fimm þáttum”.

<sup>1316</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy or, Hellenism and Pessimism*. Trans. by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1967, p. 60.

<sup>1317</sup> Understanding the true existential terror and furious meaninglessness of existence, the Greeks assuaged anxieties, at least to an extent, with the theater: “The Greek knew and felt the terror and horror of existence. That he might endure this terror at all, he had to interpose between himself and life the radiant dreambirth of the Olympians. That overwhelming dismay in the face of the titanic powers of nature, the Moira enthroned inexorably over all knowledge, the vulture of the great lover of mankind, Prometheus, the terrible fate of the wise Oedipus, the family curse of the Atridae which drove Orestes to matricide: in short, that entire philosophy of

make his own meaning, find his own path or commitment and thus justify existence through action. What for Nietzsche summarized the wisdom of the Ancient Greeks, however, was a short parable, which goes like this: King Midas asks the minor deity Silenus (or Seilenos), what is most desirable for man? The response was as follows: “‘What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach, not to be born, not to be, to be nothing,’ the tutor to the wine god says, and then continues, ‘but the second best for you is — to die soon.’”<sup>1318</sup> Extrapolating from this, the nausea of absurdity is now indissoluble from modernity. That is, the nausea brought about the insanity of atomic weapons and the nausea that grips anyone who pauses to reflect on the Holocaust are now the reality of the modern subject, the existential terror of the age.

How to navigate the unfathomable desperation that grips the subject when, faced with the knowledge that the world is out of joint and must — should — be put right, knows that there is no hope of doing so? Nietzsche envisions comic art as the answer, a great cultural lie that makes brutal existence bearable. Another alternative is Bakhtin, when the Russian dialogist posits laughter as an almost involuntary reaction against “cosmic terror,” — the only reaction that a shocked cognitive apparatus is capable of providing.<sup>1319</sup>

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the sylvan god, with its mythical exemplars, which caused the downfall of the melancholy Etruscans — all of this was again and again overcome by the Greeks with the aid of the Olympian middle world of art; or at any rate it was veiled and withdrawn from sight.” This is why Nietzsche speaks of “redemption through illusion” and the need for “pleasurable illusion”. In other words, at stake is the concept of artistic representation — whose fundamental “manifestation” is illusion — and how it engages with the inexorable progression of tragic fate and makes man still want to live. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 42, 45.

<sup>1318</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 42. As a surprising number of characters pass away in the three plays, in one case all of them, or nearly so, and the event of death is, if anything, happy, or at least among the more jubilant in the plays, this second interpretation of the comic seems more in keeping with Laxness’ plays than that of Sartre’s novel.

<sup>1319</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 335.

### *11.3 Lost Paradises*

The late plays all take place in what may be described as a post-apocalyptic world, where values have collapsed and meaning diffused into nothingness. The notion that certain human values, as well as the value of the human, not to mention hope, should be posited as not quite out of reach — a stance that characterizes Laxness' work in the 1950s — has been abandoned. The plays “stage” a debate about the oppositions, contradictions, blind spots and various forces that have led to the morally bankrupt world that is depicted in the texts. The opposition between exploitative capitalism and spiritual asceticism is taken up again through male characters whose paths are destined to cross and thus result in conflict and hostilities — but mostly debates. Women are shown to have much less power and less room to maneuver, to be in effect pawns in the conflict underway. Modernity is addressed in despairing terms, the opposites are stark, the conception of what it means to be human is up for grabs.

One way in which the post-apocalyptic tenor is registered in the texts is through the depiction of the domestic sphere, the home. As an entrance into the three texts, investigating the concept of the home in these instances is fruitful. The home is for example the center of the mapping process that Pierre Bourdieu pioneered and serves to outline the social networks and discursive fields that make up his conception of the habitus. Bourdieu explains the concept of habitus thusly:

A system of lasting, transposable dispositions, which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely



diversified tasks, thanks to analogical transformations of schemes permitting the solution of similarly shaped problems.<sup>1320</sup>

While we are clearly not about to embark upon a sociological mapping of made-up worlds, the concept of the habitus is useful because it emphasizes the necessity of approaching the characters of the plays as emblematic of a social and cultural and perhaps even philosophical context. Habitus in other words references a structure of the mind that has been formed and brought into being by a variety of influences.

We will therefore start off as if we believed that the characters presented in Laxness' texts are subjects in the modern sense, as individuals with a habitus that can explain a considerable bit about them. Even when the notion of subjectivity proves problematic when dealing with the characters, as it will, the notion of habitus is still valid, it may even offer a way of mapping the wounds and craters that modernity leaves when done with its destructive work.

The family household, as we noted in the discussion of *Straumrof*, is endowed with a new meaning in modernity; it becomes the private sanctuary of private persons whose subjectivity is cultivated through activities such as reading, engaging in pedagogical activities and, for men, spending time with children. Charles Rice combines an analysis of the emergence of the concept "interior" to describe a particular domestic spatial figuration and shifts in the "interiority" of the new middle class:

In this way, the interior emerged in a domestic sense as a new topos of subjective interiority, and framed newly articulated and increasingly widespread desires for privacy and comfort, for the consolidation of specific gendered and familial roles in life, for the linking of a consumer culture to the attainment of domestic arrangements that demonstrated acceptable norms,

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<sup>1320</sup> Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Trans. by Richard Nice. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 83.

and for practices of self-representation in the context of domestic life. Indeed, the domestic interior as such emerged from the beginning of the nineteenth century. This is not to say that furniture and its arrangement, or indeed domestic habits and mores, did not exist before this time. Rather, the interior conceptualized a particular emerging and developing consciousness of and comportment to the material realities of domesticity, realities which were actively formed in this emergence.<sup>1321</sup>

Women, meanwhile, were still expected to take responsibility for the domestic sphere, and the considerable variety of responsibilities that this actually entailed should not be underestimated. Monika Elbert has examined the turn-of-the-century literature on motherhood in the United States and her conclusion is that the ideology that was promoted was not only uniform, it was monolithic. This is a representative example of the valorization of feminine domesticity:

But it is to woman, to whom, as wife, mother, educator, nurse, and home-keeper, the training of the human body in infancy and the ministries of the sick-room are specially committed [...] Woman is the Heaven-appointed guardian of health in the family.<sup>1322</sup>

The traditional functions of the home were maintained but with the rise of the middle class a new domestic code was put in place to rationalize the enormous economic and social shifts that were taking place as capitalism gained velocity and the population of urban areas took the lead over the countryside: "it was appropriate for men but not for women to leave home in pursuit of wages [because] the home required women's moral and spiritual presence on a full-time basis [and] the apparent uncoupling of economic significance from the home [was explained] by sentimentalizing woman's place within it."<sup>1323</sup>

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<sup>1321</sup> Charles Rice. *The Emergence of the Interior. Architecture, Modernity, Domesticity*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007, pp. 2-3.

<sup>1322</sup> Monika Elbert. "The Sins of the Mothers and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Covert Alliance with Catharine Beecher." *Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Her Contemporaries Literary and Intellectual Contexts*. Ed. by Cynthia J. Davis and Denise D. Knight. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004, p. 111.

<sup>1323</sup> Polly Wynn Allen. *Building Domestic Liberty: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Architectural Feminism*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988, p. 15.

Taking off from Proust's axiom that the "true paradises are the paradises that we have lost," the one paradise that every adult has lost and longs for, one might say, is the paradise of childhood — childhood being one of modernity's greatest inventions — and as a concept it is also uniquely tied to notions of the domestic sphere and the home, while also being infused with an unrivalled nostalgic charge.<sup>1324</sup> This feeling of childhood domesticity, secure and perfect, is evoked beautifully by Walter Benjamin in his reminiscences of his Berlin childhood:

In the stove a fire was lighted. Soon the flame — as though shut up in a drawer that was much too small, where it barely had room to move because of the coal — was peeping out at me. Smaller even than I was, it nevertheless was something mighty that began to establish itself there, at my very elbow — something to which the maid had to stoop down even lower than to me. When it was ready she would put an apple in the little oven to bake [...] I would wait patiently until I thought I could detect the fine bubbly fragrance that came from a deeper and more secretive cell of the winter's day than even the fragrance of the fir tree on Christmas eve. There lay the apple, the dark, warm fruit that — familiar yet transformed, like a good friend back from a journey — now awaited me.<sup>1325</sup>

The diminutive size of the narrator keeps getting good-naturedly referenced but what is striking is how the stove, described in minute detail, has taken on a magical life of its own, rewarding patience with the "bubbly fragrance" that trumps even the smell of the fir Christmas tree. The simile at the end, where the transformation of a friend back from a journey is referenced, clearly derives from an experiential realm far removed from the winter morning being described but the distance thus brought into view only serves to underline the force of the memory since its vivacity, its sensory extravagance has clearly withstood the ravages of time.

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<sup>1324</sup> Marcel Proust. *Within a Budding Grove*. Trans. by C.K. Scott Moncrieff. New York: Vintage, 1970, p. 132.

<sup>1325</sup> Walter Benjamin. *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*. Trans. by Howard Eiland. Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 61–62.

For us, however, the framework for the memory, its setting, is of paramount interest. The happy safety brought about by the family home underlies and grounds the entire episode and this is a dominant trope in twentieth-century popular culture. It is safe to say that such idealized images are not on offer in Laxness' three theatrical texts, although the concept of childhood is central to one of them (*Dúfnaveislan*) and adolescence to another (*Strompleikurinn*), but by moving into the domestic sphere and the private, family home, we are dealing with important and meaningful aspects of the texts.

The immediately striking characteristic of the homes in the three late plays is how little they have in common with the traditional bourgeois home or the rural homestead. The domestic settings in all of them, as a matter of fact, share a distinctive veneer of the un-domestic — even anti-domestic — and are thus removed from the imaginary that is commonly associated with the domestic sphere and the private home, exemplified by the Benjamin quote above, and qualities heralded as integral to the bourgeoisie home such as “unpretentiousness and honesty of feeling [as well as the] utmost coziness and comfort in the layout of rooms.”<sup>1326</sup> On the one hand this signifies a world where human lives have been utterly reified and where we find markers of the destructive capacity of the Enlightenment ideal. On the other hand, their unstableness and transformative and radically untrustworthy nature points to the lack of solid foundations in the texts.

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<sup>1326</sup> The importance of precisely the things that Benjamin encapsulates in his modest autobiography had not escaped the attention of professionals, which is why a prominent German architect around the middle of last century includes an ambitious emotional palette when describing his designs. Rice, *The Emergence of the Interior*, p. 82.

In *Strompleikurinn*, for example, the Ólfer family lives in a military barrack, one of the many abandoned by the US military after the war ended and the soldiers stationed in Iceland relocated to the military base in Keflavík. Tens of thousands of these barracks, made of corrugated iron, were imported during the war by the British and then taken over by the Americans. If they can be said to be endowed with a degree of iconicity it would be because of the instantly recognizable iron arches that frame the front of the buildings, reaching to the ground on both sides (thus creating the effect of “half-a-barrel” that Laxness references below). The barracks were usually erected in groups, effectively creating a make-shift neighborhood and thus constituting what was called a “kampur” — a camp. The camps were taken over by the Reykjavík poor during a time of intense housing shortage in Reykjavík after the war and soon became Reykjavík’s ghettos, socially troubled areas whose inhabitants were discriminated against in a variety of ways, institutional and personal.<sup>1327</sup>

The stage directions include a description of the interior of the corrugated barrack, which reads as follows:

Deteriorated military barrack from the war, where the center of the ‘half-a-barrel’ is a lodge-like area, with four rooms separated off on either side by make-shift walls. These are pinkish grey and rickety. A painting of a foreign forest, haphazard and out of touch with the surroundings. Household items from the bankrupt estate of a bourgeoisie home in the provinces. Other decorative items on the walls: pictures of movie stars and princesses, pinned to the wall and giant American almanacs with photos of scantily clad women. Hanging on a wall is a small medicinal cabinet with three crosses. A medicinal vial stands on a table. The dominant item in the room is an enormous British chimney on the right side of the lodge with a fire enclave the size of a man to the side, a stack of firewood next to it. The parlor and front door is to the left,

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<sup>1327</sup> Eggert Þór Bernharðsson. *Undir bárujárnsboga. Braggalíf í Reykjavík 1940–1970*. Reykjavík: JPV útgáfa, 2000.

also two other doors: the entrance to aunt Gunna and, further to the back, the doors to Ljóna. Two doors on the right side, one of them to the kitchen.<sup>1328</sup>

The most important information concerning the main characters, Mrs. Ólfer and her daughter Ljóna, that is embedded in the above description is that of their downward social mobility. The family has known better times; as Mrs. Ólfer never tires of repeating, they used to be a respectable family, people of means. This would then have been in some township out in the countryside, and thus a central facet of their habitus is revealed.

In addition to items that point to the bankruptcy in their past, remnants of the departed military abound, the posters of film stars, the painting of a forest (there are no forests in Iceland so there is no need to belabor the exoticism of this particular painting) and the “giant American almanacs” featuring pin-ups in various stages of nudity. While the fact that all this has been kept by the family suggests the direness of their situation, presumably having these objects, un-domestic as they are and bearing witness to an intensely male existence, is preferable to emptiness, it is also worth noting that the text brings attention to the commodification of female sexuality right at the outset.

The combination of the chimney in the middle of the main room, the name of the community of barracks — camps — the fact that a dead body is hidden in the chimney, the scatterings of ash, and the timing of the events, which are taking

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<sup>1328</sup> Laxness, *Strompleikurinn*, p. 1. In the original: “Niðurníddur herbraggi úr stríðinu, þar sem miðhluti endilángs “tunnuhelmíngsins” er skáli, en fjögur herbergi afþiljuð sitt á hvora hlið. Grábleik tötraleg texþil. Málverk af útlendum skógi, tilviljanlegt og sambandslaust við umhverfið, fóru úr þrotabúi borgaralegs heimilis utan af landi. Önnur veggjaprýði: myndir af filmstjörnum og prinsessum uppfestar með teiknibólum og flennistór amerísk veggalmánök með myndum af fáklæddum kvenmönnum. Á vegg hángir lítill meðalaskápur með þremur krossum. Meðalaglas stendur á borði. Þúngamiðja herbergisins er gríðarstór ensk kamína með mannhæðarháu eldholi hægra megin á sviðinu, kubbahlaði hjá. Anddyri vinstra megin en auk þess tvær hurðir aðrar: dyr til Gunnu frænku og, nokkru nær baksviðinu, dyrnar til Ljónu. Tvær hurðir hægramegin, önnur veit frammí eldhús.”

place when the memory of the Second World War is very fresh, cannot but bring to mind the Holocaust. The connotative scheme does not function by creating direct correspondences, rather, by invoking this particular historical marker certain important if abstract points are made about (in)humanity, and the events that will unfold are preemptively enfolded in a mood of miserable crepuscule that never really lifts. Having most likely killed the old lady in the chimney for monetary gain, Mrs. Ólfer's humanity is ambiguous from the beginning; the fact that she essentially prostitutes her daughter to well-to-do businessmen in exchange for merchandize endows her with a further dimension of brutality. Much as their home is anti-domestic, she is a parent who is in fact not only un-motherly but something of an anti-mother.

#### *11.4 The Past, the Present, Purling and Pressing*

The setting of *Prjónastofan Sólin*, the play that Laxness wrote right on the heels of *Strompleikurinn* but was not staged until four years later, is a debilitated but once stately French villa on “the outskirts of town”, close to the coastline.<sup>1329</sup> The house, while nominally a part of the unnamed municipality, is marginal, isolated and linked to nature and the countryside. The French villa stands midway between the town and the surrounding environment — the ocean, the coastline and the interior — and thus complicates the demarcation between unruly nature and civilized society. This is furthermore underlined by the variety of animals that seem to be attacking the building from the outside (in the form of aggressive birds, referred to at one point as “scavengers”) and undermining it from the

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<sup>1329</sup> Halldór Laxness. *Prjónastofan Sólin*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1962, p. 9. In the original: “Prjónastofan Sólin niðurkomin í “frönsku villunni” í útjaðri bæjarins”.

inside (in the form of rodents), the sounds of which punctuate the goings on in a regular fashion.<sup>1330</sup>

The animal presence, off-stage but clear, is also expressive of the “corrosive” effect of a harsh environment on a building that, despite its current shaky state and alignment with nature, represents as a former consulate an aspect of modernity: internationalism, formalized diplomatic bonds between nation states, metropolitan centers and so forth. The ambiguous “placement” of the house is furthermore reflected in the tension between its cosmopolitan origins— built by a French consul — and essential peripherality, not only is it on the edge of town, the town itself is in a country on the “outskirts” of Europe. This is reminiscent of the hunting lodge in Laxness’ first play, *Straumrof*, where a remote cabin and the myths surrounding it function as a reminder of traditionally structured communities and their precarious relationship with the forces of nature.

Of the central characters, we first meet Sólborg, the titleholder of the house and the proprietress of Sun Knitting. Sólborg came into ownership of the building, she later explains, during the “war years” when the municipality essentially gave her what was at that point described as a “deserted cabin” in order to get what may have seemed a significant war time production effort off the ground.<sup>1331</sup> A secondary intent, one imagines, was to put a stop to the vandalism that in conjunction with the passing of time and neglect had proven

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<sup>1330</sup> Halldór Laxness, *Prjónastofan Sólin*, p. 39. In the original: “Hræfuglarnir eru byrjaðir að garga.”

<sup>1331</sup> Laxness, *Prjónastofan Sólin*, pp. 29–30. In the original: “Mér áskotnaðist húsið í stríðinu. Bærinn átti það. Franskur konsúll bygði það. Hann er laungu dáinn. Húsið stóð í eyði í tíu ár og það var búið að brjóta í því gluggana og stela úr því ofnunum [...] Þegar bærinn fékk mig til að standa fyrir prjónastofu þá afhentu þeir mér þennan *eyðikofa* með einskonar skjali fyrir samasem ekkert.”



the building's main enemy.<sup>1332</sup> In this way, as well, a point of similarity between *Prjónastofan Sólin* and *Strompleikurinn* comes to the fore as the domestic residences in both plays are shown to be in a way war legacies or “debris” left by the world-wide destruction that is the immediate past of everybody in the play.

In comparison with the historically loaded domiciles of the first two plays, the modest cellar setting of *Dúfnaveislan* seems quite everyday and ordinary. Pressarinn (the Presser) and his wife, Pressarakonan (The Presserwoman), use the front of the cellar as a workplace and the back as a residence. Their operation is modest seeming although the truth about the “family business” turns out to be quite surprising. The couple and particularly the husband represent what by this point in Laxness' career had become a stock-type, the spiritualist who has largely abandoned modernity and the “normal” concerns of the harried modern subject, and lives in relative seclusion and finds peace and spiritual fulfillment in doing some menial task; ironing here while Jón Prímus in Laxness' next novel, *Kristnihald undir Jökli*, fixes primus stoves rather than take care of his congregation as would be expected, being the parish priest. In the critical literature these characters are frequently associated with Tao, in part due to Laxness' oft voiced liking for Laozi's *Tao Te Ching*, but Laxness also at times hands them a phrase or two from the ancient Chinese book.

Pressarinn irons trousers preferably without pay or, if he is not so lucky, he likes at least to work for someone who cannot pay full price. Yet, despite his modesty and dislike of financial remuneration, he does his work well, so well as a

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<sup>1332</sup> The working of the government and those in power represents a thematic strand that runs through the late plays. Among Laxness' recurring topics are the regulatory framework for farming and agriculture, how the treasury of the state is “robbed” with impunity by special interests in the form of subsidies and grants. In *Prjónastofan Sólin* he also parodies the governmental discourse of gender equality.

matter of fact that he is widely considered the best ironer in the city. In that sense, the figure of Pressarinn may seem to invite consideration of where true value lies in capitalistic modernity; he is a craftsman whose expertise is widely sought and it is noted that he is an expert when it comes to “reading” textiles. While his profession, in the form we see it — individual shop owners — is in dire danger of being rendered extinct by mechanization and more efficient methods, suitable for a mass market, he still represents the sort of individualized connoisseurship that modernity does value, in spite of everything.

It is however interesting that he does work in a business that has it as its goal to make people look good, somewhat akin to the fashion industry, although a less fashionable character than the Presser is hard to imagine. Nevertheless, the world values people according to their external appearance. As much is indicated by a customer who, happy beyond belief with his newly pressed trousers, holds them aloft and says, “Old rags turned into new trousers. Now I can finally go and ask a girl to marry me. Master! What do I owe you?”<sup>1333</sup> That this may not be a stand-alone occurrence is indicated by the fact that despite his dislike of material goods, and a particular loathing of money — which he treats like pornography that requires hiding and therefore he stuffs the bills in strange places around the cellar flat where they cannot be seen— he has amassed quite a substantial horde of capital.

When what undoubtedly is the strangest character of the play, which is saying something, Gvendó, who is a labor leader, charity worker, transvestite and an apparent financial genius, offers to take the money off Pressarinn’s hands,

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<sup>1333</sup> Halldór Laxness. *Dúfnaveislan*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1966, p. 7. In the original: “gamlar dulur verða að nýum buxum. Nú get ég loksins farið að biðja mér stúlku. Meistari! Hvað á ég að borga?”

the latter simply cannot get rid of it quick enough. What has all the trappings of a swindle proves however to be a genuine contract between the two men, at least in Gvendó's mind — Pressarinn never thinks of the money again — and using the substantial amount he got in that stripped down cellar as seed money, Gvendó proceeds to turn the old, modest Presser, without his knowledge, into an international business behemoth with holdings all over the world, including ships and hotels. And this is the biggest irony — Pressarinn continues to live in his cellar, skimping on everything and buying only the cheapest food, while he is in fact rich beyond belief.

To sum up, the three places that serve as homes in the plays are an abandoned military barrack with an enormous smokestack in the middle of the living space, inside which the body of an old woman who was almost certainly murdered is hidden. The barracks are thus the “scene of a crime” but once the constellation of the criminal act and guilt has been invoked, the site takes on an increasingly nightmarish quality. In addition to the murder, and its remainder and reminder, there is the fact that although “just” a building, the ramshackle corrugated iron heteromorphic construction was a part of the war effort, the war machine, and thus tainted, and third, the smokestack itself points not to a crime but an atrocity.

The villa in *Prjónastofan Sólin* references European cosmopolitanism and a life of luxury but by the time the play starts, the building is near collapse. It is however the nationality of the previous owners that is most significant in this instance; it is a *French* villa and in view of the rebellion that breaks out at the end, a symbolic register that invokes the French Revolution is brought forth.

There is, therefore, enormous historical resonance to be found in these two residences. First of all, the reference to the French Revolution invokes one of the inaugurating moments of modernity, the signal event that through tremendous repercussions brought down not only the French monarchy, but marked the beginning of the end for the European aristocracy.

The publication of *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* (The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, 1789) signaled the ascension of democracy, the freedom of the individual and equality before the law — all fundamental ideals and markers of modernity and modern societies. The Holocaust marks the end of any straightforward acceptance of these values and ideals and thus the two buildings bookend a certain period of Enlightened modernity. Embedded in the military barracks is also the passing of the torch of Empire — henceforth the United States would not resist becoming the world power that Britain had been until the First World War.

At first the cellar service shop of Pressarinn and his wife stands out as simply lacking symbolism, iconicity, a connotative range, not to mention a reference system and constellation building capacity. But first appearances can be misleading. Although invisible global capital will not go utterly off the rails in an orgiastic attack mode until Ronald Reagan comes along in 1980 and deregulation becomes the order of the day, multinationals had of course existed since the first decades of the century and secret bank accounts in Switzerland and elsewhere were of course well known. Switzerland, by the way, is the country from where Gvendó runs his operation. The cellar is in this context the abode of a global financial titan whose heroics on international markets would

make Ayn Rand swoon, except of course he is utterly ignorant of everything and believes himself unable to buy shoes for his daughter or allow himself anything but fish remainders for dinner. It's a perfect image of ideology where what one can see of capitalism, now embodied and busy with a steaming iron, is not only harmless but so cute one wants to take it home. What happens behind the scenes on the other hand is for no one to see. And although it might seem to push the reading too far, its anachronistic tenor already discernable, it is an interesting and amusing coincidence that in a recent article, Paul Krugman notes that wealth concentration has become so extreme that it's almost impossible to wrap one's head around just how much a person or a family can own, resulting in a situation where "people imagine that [the near-limitless holdings] belong to surreal or mysterious entities."<sup>1334</sup> If there ever was a surreal entity to be a party to a late capitalistic monetary scheme, then it is Pressarinn. In the end, all the money joins the Nazi gold and disappears into a black hole in the Swiss banking system, never to be seen again.

Furthermore, and like the other "homes," the cellar ironing shop lacks the privacy usually associated with the domestic sphere. That this applies to all the residences in the plays is suggestive of a larger point concerning dwelling in post-war modernity; the safety and tranquil enjoyments described by Benjamin above applied to a pre-war world, a world before the traumas of the twentieth-century made themselves felt. Although Iceland had emerged relatively unscathed from the war, Laxness was one of those who still felt the caesura. Reflecting on the shift in the individual subject's relationship to the world, others and to itself in the wake of the war and the Holocaust, and employing the notion

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<sup>1334</sup> Paul Krugman. "Why We're in a New Gilded Age." *The New York Review of Books*, 8 May, 2014.

of the home as a semi-metaphorical context within which to reflect on these issues, Adorno writes: “The predicament of private life today is shown by its arena. Dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible. [...] ‘It is even part of my good fortune not to be a house-owner,’ Nietzsche already wrote in the *Gay Science*. Today we should have to add: it is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home.”<sup>1335</sup> Adorno then proceeds to articulate a thought that is in many ways similar to Frederic Jameson and Perry Anderson’s reflection in the Introduction on the waning of the revolutionary spirit after the Second World War, except that in his inimitable style, everything is packed into a single sentence: “The possibility of residence is annihilated by that of socialist society, which, once missed, saps the foundations of bourgeois life.”<sup>1336</sup> This seems appropriate to the domiciles of the plays; the lives led in them seem rootless, transitory and unhappy. Pressarinn, admittedly, is happy enough and thus an exception, but the daughter he and his wife adopt in the course of the play, Anda, is less satisfied.

### *11.5 The Moon is Ours, and Dolphins Will Inherit the Earth*

Thematically *Dúfnaveislan* is grounded by the conception of war and weapons of mass destruction, while *Prjónastofan Sólin* has as its central theme the concept of a beauty pageant, which then turns into a revolution. *Strompleikurinn* has as its overriding theme moral vacuity. The latter two plays end with apocalyptic events while *Dúfnaveislan* concludes with a failed substitutionary atonement and

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<sup>1335</sup> Theodor Adorno. *Minima Moralia. Reflections From a Damaged Life*. London: Verso, 2000, pp. 38–39.

<sup>1336</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 39.

ascension. In all cases, the world we leave as the plays come to a close seems utterly empty and void of meaning and purpose, post-apocalyptic spiritual ruins. The historical forces that brought about the devastation are at least partially personified in two of the three plays — *Strompleikurinn* is the exception, there we just find morally vacuous humans, no need for symbolization. It should be noted however that in this, the earliest of the three plays, the historical forces and historical events that deform the lives of modern subjects are represented by the sets and props; primarily of course the military barracks and the smokestack.

In *Dúfnaveislan* the historical forces in question are the ones driving technological modernity to ever-greater feats of scientific glory, but in the service of a terminally short-sighted economic system. These are manifested in Rögnvaldur Reykill. Pressarinn on the other hand represents middle class political and social *ennui*; and the damage that is done to civic institutions and the public sphere by *petite bourgeois* who cannot be bothered to look around, try to comprehend their social environment and then act. And both are presented without a shred of redeeming qualities. Reykill is something of a huckster and swindler while Pressarinn fails drastically as a father and by the end a reader might well wonder if he is on the spectrum.

The first time Pressarinn hears of Rögnvaldur is when his daughter is waiting for her date to come and pick her up for the movies. Who is the boy? her parents ask. Turns out that he is not so much a boy as an adult millionaire, scientific giant and multi-national business entrepreneur. The next question comes quick, when did you meet him? Last time she was at the movies, it turns

out. He drove up in his car and offered a ride. “He took me outside the city,” she says. “I hope nothing happened,” her mother says. “No, not to speak of. He just raped me.”<sup>1337</sup> Did she scream? No. Why should I have? To call the police, her mother replies. We were out in the middle of nowhere; Anda replies, what are you going to do? I am going to marry him. Her mother, furious, is going to go immediately to the police. Pressarinn takes part in the conversation at this point:

The girl hasn’t committed any crime herself — as far as I understand. Or what? I mean, you didn’t harm anyone, dear Anda?

Dad, I hope not.

Then I am going to go off and finish these trousers that I had started. (Pressing) You decide for yourself where you go, woman, because you are a hero. But for my part, the police are mighty men and it always turns out badly for anyone who interferes with them on their own volition.<sup>1338</sup>

And so nobody goes to the police. “Love is in a car,” Rögnvaldur says to Anda the next time they meet.<sup>1339</sup> Anda’s traumatized rage is not expressed however until the end, when she and Reykill have their reckoning.

Rögnvaldur has one main goal, it turns out, and that is to get to the moon, and as soon as possible, before “mankind goes extinct” — which is certain to happen — at which point he believes dolphins will inherit the earth. As a weapons manufacturer, indeed, as the inventor of a new steam-powered poison that makes bodies disappear while leaving the material surroundings undamaged, the ultimate capitalist weapon, he is not doing much to resist the progress towards destruction. But as nobody behaves “rationally” in the play, it

<sup>1337</sup> Laxness, *Dúfnaveislan*, pp. 63–64. In the original: “Hann ók mér út úr bænum [...] Ég vona að það hafi ekki komið neitt fyrir. Nei, ekki teljandi. Hann bara nauðgaði mér.”

<sup>1338</sup> Laxness, *Dúfnaveislan*, p. 66. In the original: “Telpan hefur ekki drýgt neinn glæp sjálf — skilst mér. Eða hvað? Ég á við, þú geðrir aungvum ilt, Anda mín? Pap-a ég vona ekki. Þá fer ég og klára þessar buxur sem ég var byrjaður á. (Pressar) Þú ert sjálfráð um þínar farir kona, því þú ert hetja. En ég segi fyrir mig, pólitíin eru miklir menn og sá hefur verst sem fer að skifta sér af þeim að fyrrabragði.”

<sup>1339</sup> Laxness, *Dúfnaveislan*, p. 70. In the original: “Ástin er í bíl.”



is difficult to envision a behavioral paradigm that is in keeping with the internal rules of the diegetic world. Reykill keeps insisting however that he is a humanist and idealist, which is an attempt to affiliate himself with the progressive ideals of the Enlightenment. However, the more one learns about him, the more absurd the entire idea of technological progress becomes. His latest business enterprise (with marketing centers already set up world-wide, he says) is mouse-fodder, so that people can feed the tiny creatures, meanwhile keeping their cheeses safe.

The nurturing of “vermin” connects *Dúfnaveislan* to *Prjónastofan Sólin* as one of the lead characters, Ibsen Ljósdal, has surreptitiously been feeding rats in the Villa. Ljósdal is Sólborg’s closest companion as well as a messianic figure whose spiritual operation is run out of the “French villa.” He has an office space reserved for himself in the antechamber (constituting a desk and a chair that are arranged in front of an old Christmas tree), as well as storage room for materials relating to his organization, which he calls “The table of opulence” or “Allsnægtarborðið”. The richness evoked by the central concept of Ljósdal’s philosophy — “*allsnægtir*” or opulence — contrasts starkly with the interior of the villa where everything is damp and sodden, marred, beat up and imbued with the veneer of poverty. Sólborg is a disciple of “Allsnægtarborðið,” the only one as a matter of fact, and seeing how she funds the printing of the organization’s newsletter, it is unlikely that Ljósdal need concern himself much with rent. This is not insignificant as Sólborg’s financial worries prove to be an important impetus for the plot of the play.

Much like Pressarinn whose philosophy is to leave the world in peace, Ibsen Ljósdal’s philosophy is unlikely to disturb the equilibrium even of a rural

post office, let alone make bigger waves. Indeed, it seems designed to allow him to keep to himself and not bother with the world: “It is my opinion that the world is correct in itself and for that reason everything that happens in it is beautiful.”<sup>1340</sup> In *Strompleikurinn* there is a figure similar to Pressarinn and Ibsen, Kúntner Hansen, a peg-legged old man who likes to carve out pictures and such on his wooden leg. He believes himself to be an artist, and having given up on being appreciated in his homeland, is often heard muttering to himself, that he will be acknowledged from abroad, eventually. While taken seriously by some critics as a representative of true art in the play, it seems clear that the text does its utmost to render his practice surreal and a grotesque parody of art.

The French villa turns out to be a more complicated structure than the above description indicates. While Sólborg has been entrusted with the title to the house by the municipality, the basement is a separate entity and belongs to a builder of coffins. Presented at the start as an antagonist of the spiritual and charitable work that is being accomplished on the ground floor, the coffin maker is preparing to file a complaint with the township authorities against Sólborg and her management of the estate; a complaint grounded in matters of hygiene and the despoilment of valuables. The issue of contention is the rodents mentioned above, primarily the damage done by rats, who are wrecking havoc on the coffin maker’s wood supply.

The coffin maker, while a marginal figure in the play in terms of time spent on stage, is endowed with an unmistakable symbolic significance. Being essentially unthinkable, death is “repressed” in the cellar, a traditional symbol

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<sup>1340</sup> Laxness, *Prjónastofan Sólin*, p. 37. In the original: “Það er mín skoðun að heimurinn sé réttur í sjálfu sér og þessvegna sé alt sem í honum gerist fagurt.”

for the unconscious. The coffin maker also provides a thematic counterpoint to Ljósdal's lofty rhetoric, which portrays existence as a feast and celebrates all forms of life equally, making the feeding of the rodents an entirely rational gesture from his point of view, as he quite literally sees no reason why they should be barred from the "table of plenty". In comparison, the inhabitant of the cellar is a stark reminder of the fact that the feast promulgated by Ljósdal is destined to come to an end — should it ever see the light of day. His comic interjections represent a sardonic attitude towards life, not exactly morbid but infused with skepticism towards the anthropomorphic meanings projected by Ljósdal onto the world.

### *11.6 Beauty Pageants and a Bouquet of Flowers*

Sólborg has just returned from a round of visitations to subscribers of the "Allsherjarborðið" newsletter in the hopes of collecting fees. Not a single one however is willing to pay (placing their status as free and willing subscribers somewhat in question). Sólborg then has to face up to the dire fact that the knitting store has lost the majority of its business, most of which took the form of government contracts, or contracts with the municipality, and that revenues are drying up quickly.

Sólborg's business troubles seem closely related to a rather limited range of customers, but the real set-back comes when the Air Defense cancels a major undertaking intended to be protective in the case of atomic war:

The knitting store faces the problem of deciding what to do as old customers such as the Red Cross and the Rescue Team have come to an agreement to purchase all their knitting from abroad. And the Air Defense has decided not

to dig out Arnarhóll from the inside, but the plan was to then stuff it with knitting for those that happen to be saved naked.<sup>1341</sup>

Arnarhóll is a hillside in the center of Reykjavík and Sólborg is referring to a plan to construct a giant atomic bunker inside the hillside. This is one of the instances when atomic war is referenced in the play and all three do as a matter of fact share atomic metaphors, the chimney in *Strompleikurinn* at one point close to the end being associated with the bomb. However, to make a bunker out of Arnarhóll is absolutely bonkers, but one would have to have been in Reykjavík to catch the joke. What we learn of the “emergency plan” does not instill confidence either; woolen goods are probably not the first thing that comes to mind when atomic war starts but the reference to being “saved naked” comes close to positing the nuclear apocalypse as a rebirth.

When Sólborg voices her concerns to Ljósdal, she meets his characteristic indifference to worldly affairs (and her, it might be added), expressed in his similarly characteristic idiom of opaque aphorisms, “The direction of the birds is all that matters.”<sup>1342</sup> This is what prompts her to advertise for lodgers, an idea that troubles Ibsen Ljósdal, but the tensions invoked by the very mention of having boarders comes to a head when the only respondent to the housing ad arrives and proves to be the very antithesis of Ljósdal and his spiritual work, a brash and loud capitalist whose business dealings are as “material” as possible, dealing as he does in “beauty pageants”. Here we have yet another confrontation

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<sup>1341</sup> Laxness, *Prjónastofan Sólin*, p. 14. In the original: “Vandinn hjá prjónastofunni er sá hvað gera skuli, fyrst þessir gömlu viðskiptafélagar eins og Rauði Krossinn og Slysavarnarfélagið hafa samþykkt að fara að kaupa allt prjónles frá útlöndum. Og Loftvarnarnefndin er hætt við að hola innan Arnarhól sem átti að fylla af prjónlesi handa þeim sem kynnu að bjargast naktir.”

<sup>1342</sup> Laxness, *Prjónastofan Sólin*, p. 14. In the original: “Stefna fuglanna er það sem skiftir máli.”

between matter and spirit, man of successful action in the world and someone who has essentially retired from the world.

Ibsen Ljósdal's name is ambiguous in that embedded in it is a radical division or rift, a tension between opposites that recalls the earlier constellation of contested binaries — civilization and nature, center and periphery, and so forth. First, he is the namesake of the famous Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen. Second, his surname, Ljósdal, is semantically very close to “valley of light” or “bright valley” in Icelandic. The picture thus brought forth (a sunny dale, sunrise, contentment and well being) quite appropriately describes the delusional connotative range of the “table of plenty”. What is clear however is that the vacuous, Panglossian philosophy espoused by Ljósdal has very little relevance to what may have been the most socially engaged playwright of the nineteenth-century.

In a recent book arguing for Ibsen's centrality in the birth of modernism, Toril Moi notes that his philosophical and aesthetic stance is best described as a radical form of anti-idealism; idealism here defined as the refusal to accede or accept the notion that the world's imperfections are indeed imperfections in the sense that they should (and can be) judged and evaluated in comparison to the grand and lofty ideals created in the mind's eye.<sup>1343</sup> The ugliness and cruelties of the world are what constitutes being, Ibsen suggests, or are at least integral parts of it, and thinking otherwise is a dangerous illusion. Ibsen Ljósdal's name thus invokes idealism and, according to Moi, the figure who did more than anyone

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<sup>1343</sup> Toril Moi. *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism. Art, Theater, Philosophy*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

else to bring idealism into disrepute in the nineteenth-century and, indeed, turn it into a marginal aesthetic in the span of a few short decades.

Furthermore, Ibsen's *Et dukkehjem* (A Doll's House, 1879) was hugely important for the women's rights movement at the end of the nineteenth century, being widely considered the most radical play of the era. In later notes Ibsen wrote for the play, he observed: "A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society, it is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men, and with counsel and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view."<sup>1344</sup> While this sounds a lot like Gæa in *Straumrof*, we can rest assured that our Ibsen sees no reason to even question, let alone critique, the beauty pageant that is being organized in Sólborg's home.

As the comment above about the birds suggests, Ibsen Ljósdal's "philosophy" is a parody of the sort of discourse articulated by the organist in *Atómstöðin*, to name an example. Indeed, Ibsen Ljósdal expresses at one moment sentiments that are very similar to the life-force philosophy that the organist expressed in the context of the flowers, "Life came into existence against all material odds. Life ends victorious even though everybody is against it. It is supernatural."<sup>1345</sup> It is the addition of "supernatural" that indicates that the textual consciousness is not taking Ljósdal entirely seriously, that, indeed, he is a figure of "fun".

Although we last saw the organist's bouquet in Reykjavík in 1948, it is possible to trace its "fate" through the late plays in the sense that in all three we

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<sup>1344</sup> Quoted in Gail Finney. "Ibsen and Feminism." *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*. Ed. by James McFarlane. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 90.

<sup>1345</sup> Laxness, *Prjónastofan Sólin*, p. 50. In the original: "Lífið varð til þvert ofan í öll skilyrði í efninu. Lífið sigrar þó allir séu á móti því. Það er yfirnáttúrulegt."

find either flowers or something comparable and in all cases the object is endowed with a symbolic function, making the intertextual connection plausible. However, in *Atómstöðin* the flowers symbolized hope, the future, idealism, life and art, but it is unlikely that the connotative range will be equally positive here, especially seeing how it is Rögnvaldur Reykill in *Dúfnaveislan* who first comes to our attention. Reykill mentions flowers briefly but in a highly suggestive fashion: “What is the flower in spring? An atomic explosion in the plant.”<sup>1346</sup> Flowers and an atom bomb; the nod to *Atómstöðin* is clear. The metaphors are perverse, however, as what Rögnvaldur is aiming for is a visualization of something explosively coming to life. In a discussion of the nuclear age and the presence of nuclear energy in popular culture, Dick van Lente is quite justified in pointing out that the splitting of the atom is not a black and white issue and that much like an apocalyptic imagination was brought into being with the attacks on Japan, nuclear fission had its utopian adherents who expected its contribution to medicine, agriculture, engineering, and power provision to lead to a better future.<sup>1347</sup> Somehow, still, the idea of more potatoes lacks the oomph-factor that comes so easily to the idea of planetary extinction.<sup>1348</sup> More to the point, this is the second image we encounter where atomic explosions are accompanied by imagery of rebirth.

At the end of the play, when Anda has been arrested for the murder of Reykill (she is innocent, he is alive), Pressarinn is determined to offer himself up

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<sup>1346</sup> Laxness, *Dúfnaveislan*, p. 144. In the original: “Hvað er blómið á vorin? Atómspreiðing í jurtinni.”

<sup>1347</sup> Dick van Lente. “Introduction: A Transnational History of Popular Images and Narratives of Nuclear Technologies in the First Two Postwar Decades.” *The Nuclear Age in Popular Media. A Transnational History, 1945–1965*. Ed. by Dick van Lente. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 1.

<sup>1348</sup> Obviously I am not making light of hunger and food scarcity. However, in that area at least, the problem is localized. Westerners produce much more food than they need and throw away more than would keep the rest of the world satiated.

in her stead, not admit to the crime necessarily but simply exchange his body for hers in lock-up. Getting ready to go, he decides that a bouquet of flowers would be just the thing to take to prison. He is however stopped at the last minute and informed that such things simply are not legal, and should he actually admit to a crime he did not commit, he would be committing a whole new offense. "Is the redemption of mankind then illegal?" he asks, making concrete the Jesus-connotations that have been swirling around this character type in Laxness' fiction, but doing so in a parodic and outlandish fashion; Pressarinn had seemed uninterested in his surroundings but the question now arises whether he fully comprehends them. And the notion of taking flowers to prison seems somehow suspect; it is something one takes to people's homes where the flowers can be kept in water and so forth.

In *Prjónastofan Sólin* it is the Christmas tree that stands dead and out of season behind Ljósdal's desk that corresponds to the bouquet in an absurd way. At the right time and fully decorated, a Christmas tree, much like a flower, can be a beautiful thing. As is, the Christmas tree is a somewhat sad reminder that Ljósdal is man out of step with time and his environment. As in *Dúfnaveislan*, there is an actual flower bouquet featured in *Strompleikurinn*, but the flowers are fake, plastic ones. Nevertheless, Mrs. Ólfer has placed the bouquet in front of the chimney along with a stuffed dog, onto which she liberally pours perfume in order to disguise the smell emanating from the opening of the heating apparatus. Pointing to the bouquet, a guest in the home notes that these "are better than



real ones,” which is indicative of how artifice has come to dominate life in the barracks.<sup>1349</sup>

Coming home at dawn at the beginning of *Strompleikurinn*, Ljóna, talking aloud to what she thinks is the old lady that is now dead, notes that “the world may be fake but the blows are real,” which proves a fairly accurate description of the social dynamics of the play.<sup>1350</sup> Poor and desperate people struggle for what little there is to get. Ljóna dreams of becoming a singer on a European stage and then a movie star and has been taking lessons for years with a music professor who is paid for by one of her suitors. The music professor realizes immediately that Ljóna cannot sing but does not tell her that, nor the businessman who funds the lessons, because he needs the money. Everything is fake, and everybody is lying to everybody else.

The dream of becoming a star, without much chance of that happening, speaks of course to *Silfurtúnglið*, but the culture industry makes an appearance in all three late plays. So-called “show-girls” feature in both *Strompleikurinn* and *Dúfnaveislan*, and in both they represent the male mercantile power that has turned women’s bodies into commodities. The culture industry features most prominently in *Prjónastofan Sólin*, and as we left the discussion of that play, the person known only as Fegurðarstjórinn (The Beauty Chief) was getting to know Ibsen Ljósdal.

### 11.7 *The Beauty Chief, La Belle Dame and the Girls of Baffinsland*

<sup>1349</sup> Laxness, *Strompleikurinn*, p. 107. In the original: “þau eru betri en ekta.”

<sup>1350</sup> Laxness, *Strompleikurinn*, p. 11. In the original: “Því þó heimurinn sé blöff, þá eru kjaftshöggin ekta.”

When Fegurðarstjórinn arrives at the French villa, he is accompanied by a beauty pageant contestant who is introduced under two names in quick succession, Dísa and Þrídís (Three-dís, or Three-nymph); the latter moniker derives from the fact that she is about to enter a pageant for the third time, having enjoyed considerable success in her first two excursions. In an interesting discrepancy between the discourse of the characters in the play and how they are “positioned” by the formal elements of the text, including the layout on the page — that is, the way in which names of characters precede whatever utterance is to be ascribed to them; the traditional page layout for plays, in other words, name in one line, dialogue starts in the next — Dísa is never designated by her proper name in the line given over to proper names. The nickname allocated to her by Fegurðarstjórinn (Þrídís) is not even used; she is, without explanation, titled *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, or *La Belle Dame* for short.

The existence of a name that is “expressed” in this fashion would also have been difficult to communicate during a performance of the play, one imagines. That the layout makes *La Belle Dame* somewhat hard to identify is no accident however, her identity is fluid and she takes on two additional symbolic roles after shedding the skin of *La Belle Dame*. As the play starts drawing to a close she becomes *La Plastiqueuse*, a violent revolutionary. Then, in the post-apocalyptic world that concludes the narrative arc, she has become the best-known “fallen” woman in Western culture, *Mary Magdalene*, and in a scene that replicates and mocks one of the central narrative threads of the *New Testament*, she exists having found her Jesus, a man who is a spiritual ruin, and humbled herself before him.

The reference to Keats's poem has several implications for the text.<sup>1351</sup> First, the associations invoked by the romantic aesthetic, such as the free play of the faculties, the earnest expression of emotion, the accentuation on sensibility, spirituality and unmediated experience (even of other realities), stands in utter and complete opposition to the collapse of values and vacuity of meaning and human emotions that shape the world of Laxness' play, the drabness of its environs and the exhaustion and listless cruelty that emanates from so many of its inhabitants. Among all the earnest, emotional Romantics, poor young Keats however remains a figure apart, the tragic impact of his demise ensuring that his epitaph never came true — the play that thus invokes him can however be read as an epitaph of sorts for mankind as a whole.<sup>1352</sup>

The reference also invokes the sexual threat of women and the dangers of seductive femininity ("her eyes were wild [...] She looked at me as she did love, / And made sweet moan"), a theme that refers back to Gæa's "unfettered" sexuality in *Straumrof* while providing in *Prjónastofan Sólin* a powerful contrast to the way in which an oppressive beauty industry objectifies women and keeps them under constant observation and control.<sup>1353</sup> The disciplinary measures are made quite explicit in the play, which is in keeping with the dimension of the absurd and the

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<sup>1351</sup> The poem describes how a traumatized knight is found confused and wandering and when pressed tells the story of how he met and loved a woman who turned out to be a supernatural being, probably an elf, and he thus found himself in mortal danger as by this point he was in her home.

<sup>1352</sup> John Keats' epitaph reads: "This Grave / contains all that was Mortal / of a / Young English Poet / Who / on his Death Bed, in the Bitterness of his Heart / at the Malicious Power of his Enemies / Desired / these Words to be / engraven on his Tomb Stone: / Here lies One / Whose Name was writ in Water. 24 February 1821."

<sup>1353</sup> There are also vampiric connotations to be found in the poem ("saw their starved lips in the gloam, / With horrid warning gapèd wide,") and while the destructive capacity evidenced by Dísá later in the play far exceeds the scope of even the vampiric, the fact that she has designated one of the lost souls to play the role of Jesus to her Mary suggests that she herself will be asked to drink blood soon enough. John Keats. "La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad." *The Norton Anthology: English Literature*. Sixth Edition, Volume 2. Ed. by M.H. Abrams, et. al. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, p. 787.

strand of exaggeration that runs through all three plays. “Would you mind if bars were to be put in the windows?” the Beauty Chief asks his landlord, Sólborg, who responds by asking if he intends to erect a prison in the house.<sup>1354</sup> “Well, as you know, madam, beautiful girls are never free, and never are they less free than just before the first round of the pageant. It’s enough for them to just be seen on the street and then you have a crowd coming after them.”<sup>1355</sup> The play thematizes the systematic subjugation of women and thus invokes the threat(s) they pose to the masculine ego. In the absence of a threat, the violence of the patriarchy would presumably not be necessary.

Dísa seems at any rate to live up to her designation as cold-hearted, carrying herself in an imperial and despotic fashion and putting forth a number of “cruel” demands relating to the rodent population and Sólborg’s charity, which she wants to shut down as the sight of cripples offends her aesthetic sense: “and we simply cannot stand having men without arms in our sight”.<sup>1356</sup> The dominant in her characterization appears to be lack of sympathy, cruelty and an unflattering form of solipsistic attitude towards the world. That however might be too hostile a reading of behavior that is modulated in a certain way simply to be credible in a masculine world where the show of force, a degree of callousness and an egotistical bearing are all accepted as normal in men of ambition. As we noted above in relation to the three symbolic roles she takes on — and much as is the case with Gæa — Dísa’s threatening gender performance is endowed with a more complex dimension as the play progresses.

<sup>1354</sup> Laxness, *Prjónastofan Sólin*, p. 38. In the original: “hafið þér þá nokkuð á móti að settar séu grindur fyrir glugga?”

<sup>1355</sup> Laxness, *Prjónastofan Sólin*, p. 38. In the original: “Ja, eins og þér vitið frú, þá eru laglegar stúlkur ekki frjálsar; og allra síst meðan verið er að raga þær undir fyrstu sorteringu.”

<sup>1356</sup> Laxness, *Prjónastofan Sólin*, pp. 39–40. In the original: “Og við viljum láta drepa alla hræfugla og óargadýr”; and the second quote, “Og handalaus menn viljum við ekki hafa fyrir augunum”.

Although Fegurðarstjórinn will leave the diegesis rather suddenly in act two, not to reappear, he has big plans, both for himself and his “beauty queen”:

[Dísa] took the Sikkoríu-prize for the capital the year before last, a week in Copenhagen she got for that, as well as her picture in five hundred thousand coffee packages [kaffibætispökkum]. Last year she took the award offered by a shaving cream factory for the city — that netted the Pacific for a week plus a glossy color photo, fifteen times human size, in all decent barbershops and in cabinet size for all progressive public WC's in town [framsæknum utandyraþægindum í bænum]. The international committee is now however insisting that those who compete to go to Long Beach be the representatives of at least an entire country and, preferably, that the smaller countries join up; export coffee and shaving cream are no longer considered valid [...] This is why we are now having stars from Ólafsfirði and Bárðardal up north arrive in town, and I wouldn't mind frankly if we could herd something together from Greenland, Svalbarði and Baffínslandi.<sup>1357</sup>

The passage accentuates how exotic locations are intertwined with an economy of rewards in order to provide the pageant with a regular supply of new participants; Copenhagen being perhaps somewhat drab — although still at this point in time a center of culture for many Icelanders, the tradition of the best and brightest going off to the colonial capital to study was in place for centuries. In comparison, the “Pacific” is a definite step up. This time around, however, Fegurðarstjórinn and La Belle Dame are aiming for the city of Long Beach and the heart of the worldwide culture industry.

La Belle Dame, it turns out, needs no coaching from the Beauty Chief as she is thoroughly familiar with the industry. Her father is the one who really holds the reins of power, not Fegurðarstjórinn, but at the same time Dísa's father

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<sup>1357</sup> Laxness, *Prjónastofan Sólin*, pp. 27–28. In the original: “Hún tók Sikkoríuverðlaunin fyrir höfuðstaðinn í hitteðfyrri, vika í Kaupmannahöfn fyrir það, og mynd í fimm hundruð þúsund kaffibætispökkum. Í fyrra tók hún verðlaunin sem nýja Skeggsápugerðin bauð út fyrir höfuðstaðinn — það gefur Miðjarðarhafið í viku og auk þess glansandi litmynd, fimtánföld náttúrustærð, á öllum sómakærum rakarastofum og kabínettstærð í öllum framsæknum utandyraþægindum í bænum. Nú heimtar Alþjóðanefndin að þær sem keppa til Lángasands séu fulltrúar að minsta kosti fyrir heilt land og hlest að þessi smærri lönd slái saman; exportkaffi og skeggsápa er ekki leingur tekið gilt [...] Svo nú ætlum við að láta koma hingað stjórnur bæði úr Ólafsfirði og norðanúr Bárðardal, og mín vegna ef hægt væri að smala einhverju saman norðanaf Grænlandi, Svalbarða eða jafnvel Baffínslandi.”

is depicted as someone who has been physically distorted by power, “Has there ever been a more deformed person than your father”? she is asked at one point and, although a shadowy figure, we also find out that he has been confined to a wheelchair for twelve years.<sup>1358</sup> He “nevertheless controls all the beauty in this country,” as well as “the ideology and all the propaganda” that is used to construct models of femininity and maintain the gender status quo.<sup>1359</sup>

The references to ideology and propaganda are of course clear indications that the text is addressing the mode of cultural production we have associated with the concept of the “culture industry” in previous chapters but the focus is more specific in this instance than in that earlier essay, and even *Silfurtúnglið*. While *Silfurtúnglið* can by no means be classified as a realist work, its harvesting of melodramatic and symbolic devices is expressionistic and comedic, as well as tragic — the frequent shift between narrative registers being as a matter of fact one of its most striking characteristics — the present text has moved considerably further in the direction of absurd and disturbing representational and thematic strategies; one obvious example being the comparison of the beauty pageant to a cattle show in as direct a fashion as possible: a cow farmer comes to see the Beauty Chief to hand over his daughter and six cows.<sup>1360</sup> It is precisely this that La Belle Dame will rebel against in the last act, leading a feminist rebellion against the Villa, the men in a general sense and the beauty

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<sup>1358</sup> Laxness, *Prjónastofan Sólin*, p. 35. In the original: “Hefur nokkur tíma verið til vanskapaðri maður en hann faðir þinn?”

<sup>1359</sup> Laxness, *Prjónastofan Sólin*, pp. 26, 35. In the original: “sem stjórnar þó allri ídeológíu og öllu própaganda fyrir fegurðina í landinu.” Second quote: “en hann stjórnar nú samt allri fegurð hér á landi”.

<sup>1360</sup> Laxness seems to be keeping up with the times in the sense that he had already staged an armed uprising against the beauty industry, as well as employing the livestock comparison, when female protestors crowned a sheep “Miss America” in 1968 to protest how women were treated. “Pageant Protest.” *Gender Issues and Sexuality. Essential Primary Sources*. Ed. by K. Lee Lerner, Brenda Wilmoth Lerner, and Adrienne Wilmoth Lerner. Farmington Hill: Thomson Gale, 2006, p. 356.

industry in particular. The quick escalation of the rebellion to an apocalyptic level changes the meanings circulating around her figure once more.

In Laxness' essay "Myndir" (Pictures), published in *Alþýðubókin* (The Commoner's Book) in 1929, there is an interesting moment that points forward to the publicity part of the prize that Dísá won a year earlier (the enormous color poster expanded to fifteen times the normal human size). The essay ranges widely but its essential argument is that photographic technology, particularly the cinema, has rendered pictorial and figurative art obsolete. Laxness approaches the issue from various directions and at one point he brings up how the urban landscape is intertwined with a culture of advertisements. While thus focusing on a particular aspect of the culture industry, the rise of the advertisement image, Laxness' account also describes a moment when he himself is brought to consciousness about his environment. On a late night walk he passes an advertising poster "twice the height of a person" featuring a beautiful girl promoting "Palmolive soap" by looking dreamily out into the distance, possibly wishing for soap. Ordinary as the sight may have been to Laxness by this time — one suspects that the United States may well have been the only place in the world at this point where such a grandiose manifestation of the advertisement industry would have been considered "ordinary," but that such is the case is suggested by the young author — there is still something that causes him to slow down and reflect on the significance of the image:

I paused on the street and, enthralled, simply looked at the wonderful woman. The effect of the picture was resounding enough for it to invoke comparisons with the advertisements of the church of yore, which featured the mother of god. When I realized that the modern soap-image and the age-old picture of Mary communicate to their viewers the attitudes of two historical periods, separate but sharing certain affinities towards cleanliness, I became confident that neither girl would be shown any disrespect should I make a note to the effect that the central difference

between the two images was what can be described as the shift of pictorial superfluities.<sup>1361</sup>

Noting that any number of art connoisseurs might find the comparison objectionable, Laxness continues, unrelenting, and insists that whatever changes people may insist on noting between a medieval Mary–portrait and the Palmolive girl are superficial; a green box of washing powder has supplanted the angels for example. The medieval religious painting was a high–class ad of its time, just like this one is at the moment; and just like consumer desire is aroused, so too is the religious sense of wonder a manufactured effect, the work of ideology and grounded in the ignorance of those subjected to it.

In 1929 Laxness clearly thought the Catholic Church and religion were important enough to get into a bit of a scuffle over, and so he provokes and incenses, all the while making a very decent argument. There is however no object, idea, institution or character in *Prjónastofan Sólin* that is endowed or allocated anything resembling the degree of ideological import we have just seen expanded on the Palmolive girl. In the world of the play, the ads appear merely as one symptom among many of the culture industry and its workings. But something changes when all these elements are brought together, they become more than a collection of reminders of the commercial imperatives that now

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<sup>1361</sup> Halldór Laxness. *Alþýðubókin*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, Jafnaðarmannafélag Íslands, 1929, pp. 177–178. In the original: “Í gærkvöldi gekk ég af tilviljun fram hjá tveggja mannhæða auglýsingamynd af Palm–Olive–sápunni. Það er mynd af unaðsfagurri og göfugri stúlku sem horfir dreymandi augum út í bláin. Ég nam staðar á strætinu og horfði frá mér numinn á þessa undursamlegu konu. Og með slíkum styrkleik höfðaði myndin til vitundar minnar, að ég vissi ekki fyrr en ég var farinn að nota margra ára listþekkingu mína til þess að bera hana saman við auglýsingamyndir fornkirkjunnar af móður guðs. Eftir að hafa gert mér ljóst, að nútíma–sápumynd og fortíma–Maríumynd flytja sjáandanum hreinleik?stákn tveggja mannsaldra furðu líkra, þótt all–ólíkir séu að vísu, þá þóttist ég gera hvorugri stúlkunni of lágt undir höfði þótt ég skrifaði niður hjá mér, að höfuðmunur þessara mynda væri falið í því, sem á útlendu máli er kallað staffage – en kalla mætti myndarauka á voru máli.”



adorn culture. They reveal the outlines of the culture industry itself; the maleficent ideological machine that will eventually liquidate all genuine culture. But even that is not enough to garner a response; the text, although faintly disgusted by the ungainly and clumsy commerce in flesh, never builds into a genuinely scandalized discourse, as in *Silfurtúnglið*, for example, where Lóa loses her child and is herself lost, facts that show the stakes to be immense.

The reader may at this point realize that something is wrong, or more is wrong than was initially thought. Indeed, the struggle between opposing cultural forces is no longer going on, the major contestation throughout  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the play involves Ibsen Ljósdal feeding a rat and the coffin builder in the basement disliking the gesture and sending off a complaint to some organ of the municipality. Ibsen quietly leaving because he does not like to share his lodgings is hardly a principled act. The simple fact is that one side has emerged victorious, the culture industry, and there was no moment of redemption. Even the revolt at the end, which initially seems to represent the actuality of values, turns out to be motivated by jealousy and fed by insanity. It also takes place after Fegurðarstjórinn has abandoned the contest, he simply absconds with all the funding and the girl of his choice, Moby Dick, named after a cultural monument that predates the culture industry, as if bitter irony is required to render the victory complete. The leveling of what Adorno termed “the impotent utopia of beauty” has long since taken place.<sup>1362</sup>

It is at this point that the beauty pageant is revealed to be a slightly unorthodox operation, at least if compared to pageant norms, as the girls are

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<sup>1362</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 95.

simply “given” over as sexual playthings to powerful men in a remarkably frank and explicit scene. The “beauty” industry thus turns the bodies of young girls, their youth and vitality, into commodities. This is accomplished in part by associating them with product brand names but also by making a fortune off of the spectacle of the pageant itself and, finally, by the undisguised prostitution. That Fegurðarstjórinn focuses his attention on country girls (Ólafsfjörður, Bárðardalur) and has dreams of “harvesting” the young women of Greenland and other countries whose economic and social difficulties would seem to make them ripe for such an incursion is one of the striking example of the rapaciousness of capitalism in the play.

Fegurðarstjórinn invokes, almost in a Kinbotean fashion, “Baffinsland,” which, unlike Zembla, does exist although it is largely unpopulated. Baffinsland is the fifth largest island in the world, but the inhabitants number in the four digit range. Its invocation by Fegurðarstjórinn accomplishes two things; it points to the utter irrationality of the enterprise that he is orchestrating and it suggests that all of the more populated, reachable and “civilized” areas are already under the dominion of the culture industry; a totalizing image of despair.

### *11.8 Benign Indifference?*

The opposition between technologically advanced capitalistic modernity and humanism and humanitarian ideals as represented on the one hand by Rögnvaldur Reykill and Fegurðarstjórinn and, on the other, Pressarinn and Ibsen Ljósdal, is apparent throughout. Clear as well is that Laxness depicts what amounts to the most extreme forms of these two social (or life) tendencies;

wanton and insatiable exploitation on the one hand, benign humanism and a humble attitude towards life that slide into complete withdrawal and surrender to the whims of social forces, including brutal capitalistic exploitation, on the other. These characteristics are also apparent from the first, and not something slowly revealed by the unveiling of the plot. That however is by no means the rule; some of the characters do have hidden depths that are only revealed gradually or at the end. But such differences turn out to be superficial compared to what all the characters share, which is a unique aptitude for wrong choices, mistakes, hermeneutical imprudence, gnostic turpitude and the misapplication of reason.

In *Prjónastofan Sólin*, for example, Þrídís sheds her beauty queen personality and turns into a revolutionary, La Plastiqueuse, who recruits and organizes the poor contestants in the pageant, kept like virtual prisoners, and does so with great rhetorical flourishes that depict the beauty industry as a dangerous and damaging trap: “The monsters have put out a trap and in it captured humanity’s beauty. [...] What can make things right? Nothing — except the bomb.”<sup>1363</sup> Then she declares war and activates the bomb that is mysteriously in her possession. In the span of only a few pages a justified critique of the culture and fashion industry transmogrifies into apocalyptic rage and lunacy.

The last section of the play takes place after the explosion, in what may well be some sort of afterlife or purgatory. What is striking, however, is that the characters are offered choices one last time: with whom do you want to spend

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<sup>1363</sup> Laxness, *Prjónastofan Sólin*, p. 101. In the original: “Óargadýrin hafa sett út gildru og veitt í hana fegurð mannkynsins. [...] Hvað getur rétt hlut okkar? Ekkert — nema bomban.”

eternity? Sólborg needs to choose between Ibsen Ljósdal, who has always been emotionally unavailable to her and used her as unpaid help, and the love of her youth, who has returned. Sólborg chooses the former.

Mother and daughter in *Strompleikurinn* do not play their hand particularly well and even Rögnvaldur Reykill made a mistake marrying Anda, which he did for her money, not realizing that she has no access to it. We could go on. The point however is not whether or not these characters are failures, or just how well their lives are going, whether we agree with Sólborg that Ibsen Ljósdal was the only rational choice for a partner, etc. — all the events are surreal and absurd and can hardly bear the weight of being analyzed from a humanist perspective or one that takes the interiority of the characters seriously. At stake is, as always in these plays, a symbolic dimension.

In a number of cases, the interiority of the characters has been sutured seamlessly to their mode of social behavior and thus emptied out, effectively rendered a void. This applies not least to the binary of the material activist and the characters who have somehow found the solution to life's puzzles, Ljósdal and Pressarinn. Psychological verisimilitude is something that the plays politely refuse to take an interest in. And in due course, most of the characters are revealed as absurd; Reykill with his dolphins, Mrs. Ólfer with her stuffed dog and fake flowers, Pressarinn with his Christ-like fantasies, Þrídís as the fashion liberator, and so on. The characters resemble human harlequins in a *commedia dell'arte* where the comedy never quite gains the upper hand, leaving those on stage stuck in an untenable, irrational, and as noted, absurd situation.

During the staging of a play, the actors are expected to inhabit the same space as the audience, while this space is also designed with the facilitation of certain point of view structures in mind. In so far as the work being performed concerns itself with human affairs and human beings, the mode of representation might also be assumed to raise, involve or address issues of subjectivity. It is therefore interesting that in his *Poetics*, the foundational text of Western literary aesthetics, particularly in the context of the dramatic arts, Aristotle states categorically that “[t]ragedy is not an imitation of persons, but of actions and of life.”<sup>1364</sup> Characters have a clear function within the poetics, namely to perform the actions that motivate the plot and the plot also has a purpose, “effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions.”<sup>1365</sup>

While the theatrical tradition of the Middle Ages can to an extent be aligned with the Aristotelian view of character and subjectivity, the influence of Shakespeare on literary history and conceptions of the relationship between literature and inwardness, subjectivity and psychology, proved immense enough to sideline the earlier tradition, Elinor Fuchs argues.<sup>1366</sup> “Inner selves do not exactly abound in the works of the creators of Tamburlaine and of Sir Epicure Mammon,” Harold Bloom notes, before putting forward his aggressively phrased contention that Shakespeare “invented the human.”<sup>1367</sup> Despite differences of language, Bloom and Fuchs are expressing the same thought; the plays heralded a paradigm shift in representations of human interiority.

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<sup>1364</sup> Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. by Malcolm Heath. London and New York: Penguin Books, 1996, p. 11.

<sup>1365</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 24.

<sup>1366</sup> Elinor Fuchs. *The Death of Character. Perspectives on Theater after Modernism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. 25–26.

<sup>1367</sup> Harold Bloom. *Shakespeare. The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998, p. 1.

There are certain elements in Laxness' late plays that speak much more strongly to the pre-Shakespearean tradition of focusing on the material world, unstable as it proves, than the subjectivity of the characters. Indeed, his plays are not "imitation[s] of persons," but revolve rather around action, or as Aristotle notes, "well-being and ill-being reside in action, and the goal of life is an activity, not a quality."<sup>1368</sup> The action that Laxness' characters engage in is rather minimal, and results invariably in ill-being and unlike what Aristotle would have preferred, does not really drive a plot forward. Indeed, "the goal of life," as understood by the various characters, whether it is monetary gain, the marketing of mouse fodder or ironing pants with flourish, lacks by design all grandeur or impetus and the texts thus make sure that what in Aristotle functions in lieu of modern characterization, that is action, becomes as paralyzed and ineffectual on stage as modern conventions of psychology.

However, the reference to the Aristotelian conceptual scheme helps identify the way in which there is meaning precisely in the degradation of the concept of action. More so than in the defamiliarization of language or the infusion of crisis into the act of communication, it is through the actions described above that the existential void that lies at the core of the plays is revealed. Second, the harsh and strikingly pre-modern sentiment of Aristotle's, that ill-being is the result of actions undertaken in the past, speaks despite the ethical gulf in a highly significant fashion to the existential dimension of the play. To clarify this latter point, however, we need to take a closer look at the concept of the absurd.

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<sup>1368</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 11.

In his definition of the concept, Martin Esslin emphasized that the feeling of absurdity was produced by the fact that modern man was “cut off from religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots [and therefore] man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless”.<sup>1369</sup> Esslin was looking to Camus when he formulated his conception of the absurd and the notion that in the absence of a religious world picture meaning disappears from the universe, leaving humans floating about without purpose, ethics or reason to exist. We have seen how the philosophical discourse of modernity sought precisely to counter this sense of purposelessness by producing its normativity out of itself, without recourse to models of the past, but one may of course say that the attempt was a failure, that all we have, much as Meursault in *L'Étranger* (The Outsider, 1942) comes to find out, is the surety that, when looking up at the stars as we die, greeting us will be the “benign indifference of the world.”<sup>1370</sup>

The problem here however is that the absurd has been posited as a completely static category, unchanging in the face of experience and rendering human existential despair a natural, predictable response, like the foot kicking when the hammer hits the knee. The condition is also strangely haphazard (if not for secularization, etc. ). There is also something extremely dubious about the notion that the modern Parisian walking the streets in 1950 — let’s say it is a man who has come through the Second World War, and is preoccupied with his new refrigerator that simply is not working, no matter what he does, the fact that his son has been playing truant at school and that although things might be picking up at the Peugeot factory his marriage seems to be heading towards, or

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<sup>1369</sup> Esslin, *The Theater of the Absurd*, p. 22.

<sup>1370</sup> Albert Camus. *The Outsider*. Trans. by Joseph Laredo. London: Penguin Books, 1982, p. 117.

already is in a pretty bad place — suddenly halts and remembers that God no longer functions as the central bank of ideology, being the lender of last resort who thereby guarantees all the smaller banks. In other words, this hypothetical Parisian, who may well know of a village where every single inhabitant was killed by the Nazis as a punishment for a blown up train track, is knocked cold by the realization that he has no unalienable confirmation anymore that Earth is 6000 years old and that a large angel will at some point blow a huge trumpet to announce the end of the world. Or a young lady who exits the cinema in downtown Reykjavík in 1950, still smiling and smitten by that Cary Grant who just doesn't seem to age a bit, but then recalls that she is cut off from religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots and therefore lost; all her actions are senseless, absurd, useless. The face of Grant fades and she goes into a deep funk.

Point being that there must come a time when the recycling of the cliché of the “shock” of the secular world stops being a valid explanatory tool for existential confusion, despair or a sense of meaninglessness experienced by a modern subject. There are plenty of other reasons to explain the condition, from a chemical imbalance in the brain for which ailment the modern subject can now get Prozac, to the wide variety of atrocities that have characterized our age. That major authors of the twentieth-century such as Beckett could find no more pressing motivational device for the ennui and the crisis of late modernity than the several hundred year old news that there might not be a guy up in the sky looks like a lazy short cut. The meaningless and absurd void in Laxness' plays can at any rate neither be seen as the natural expression of the real and only possible state of the world nor as the result of secularization. In light of how often the latter is invoked it must count as remarkable that a persuasive argument can still



be wanting, but apparently there is nothing that can be pointed to in order to substantiate the claim other than well, you know, it's the death of god, man.

The universality of human dignity and natural rights, as symbolized in *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* and then objectified in various institutions, seems for example a fine enough belief system to sustain a person through life's travails, no worse at any rate than the idea that everything is up to the mood and whims of a genocidal deity who floods the planet when the day is not going well. Placing such trust in a primary Enlightenment document is however not an option, that much the aforementioned atrocities have shown.

Grounding the sometimes commonplace mistakes of the characters in Laxness' plays, as well as their at times spectacular lapses of judgment or revelations of cruelty, is this historical fact: calamity triumphed. That is why Laxness makes sure that the atomic weapons are referenced in all the plays, sometimes frequently; why he portrays the French Revolution as a failure in *Prjónastofan Sólin*; and why the chimney is the central symbol of *Strompleikurinn*. These are the actions that have gotten us to where we are. About fifteen years before the premier of *Strompleikurinn* around 600.000 people came together to work on the biggest scientific/technical project in the history of man, The Manhattan Project, and while Rögnvaldur Reykill's invention, the poison that vaporizes the victim, is truly puny in comparison, Laxness understands that the power of the symbolic register is infinite and thus the fact that Reykill's little gadget is endowed with the distinct echoes of gassing turns him into the marker of a historical atrocity. Indeed, his musings about the moon and the dolphins are considerably saner than the conversation that took place in

56–58 Am Großen Wannsee on 20 January 1942, when Heydrich held a meeting with administrators, departmental heads and government officials to ensure their co-operation when it came to the implementation of the final solution to the Jewish question.

In chapter two, we discussed Stephen Kern's contention that the trauma of the First World War, or a substantial part of it, was how it "ripped up the historical fabric and cut everyone off from the past suddenly and irretrievably."<sup>1371</sup> What the Holocaust did and the deployment of atomic weapons did was something similar yet entirely different; it ripped up the fabric of the future, the key category for the self-understanding of the Enlightenment and modernity, much as Kant points out in his essay on the nature of the Enlightenment, where no type of limit is allowed upon the future because that renders the concept of progress inoperative. Twentieth-century humanity not only set a limit, and what a limit the extinction of the species turns out to be, but the progress of the past few centuries was of course also rendered suspect.

However, there is little we can do now to fix Kant and the scientific establishment of the past is beyond the reach of a stern talking to. But Adorno and Horkheimer have just been handed the most disastrous and despondent of all belated "you-guys-nailed-it" awards; the fact that the totalitarianism of instrumental reason is a threat to the survival of the species need not be debated. Having had the choice of being anything, the destroyer of worlds came out on top for technological modernity. It is of no use to look up at the stars like Meursault and wonder at the indifference of the universe, benign or malign as the case may

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<sup>1371</sup> Stephen Kern. *The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1918*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 290.

be; what makes existence tolerable or intolerable doesn't come from above but within. The world expresses nothing but the meanings we ascribe to it and after the Second World War it seemed like it would be the iron cage for quite a while. Yet, slowly the despair grew slightly less all-consuming. The invention of the middle class was a strong move for the Enlightenment. But the two friends from Frankfurt were right and unfortunately everything remains as it was when they wrote their book of fragments, except that Germany, the rogue state of the period, has behaved impeccably, and the West has gone back to fighting wars against nations and cultures far removed from its own borders and that, and this is key, do not have the technology to fight back. And the fact that the structures of rationality that brought us Auschwitz have their most spectacular feat yet in store for us around the year 2100 worries only a few. This is the meaning of losing the future; if not nuclear war, if not global warming brought about by our rational minds and technological capacity, then it will be something else because the dialectic of the Enlightenment is not changing.

In his plays, Laxness captured a perfect image of the existence that can be conducted under such circumstances; we wander around in the ruins of the ideals of the French Revolution along with Ibsen Ljósdal, ignore the downright unbelievable number of unbelievably thin workers that have suddenly shown up in striped suits all over our cities, cordoned off and watched by armed guards, like Mrs. Ólfer would have no trouble doing. And like Pressarinn we also take our modest position in the magnificent edifice of organizational genius and technocratic excellence that came up with and handled the identity cards, infused hope in strategic doses into the ghettos, made the trains run on time and kept the ovens on.



Existence is a series of footnotes to a vast,  
obscure, unfinished masterpiece.

Vladimir Nabokov  
*Lolita*

## Arriving in the Good Cinema, or, Concluding Thoughts

### 1. *Invention(s) of the Modern*

In an essay written in 1947, “Endurminning um leiklist” (Remembrance of Theater Art), Laxness recalls the first time he went to the theater and saw a play. He was twelve and the play in question was *Fjalla-Eyvindur* (Mountain-Eyvindur) by Jóhann Sigurjónsson, and, although young, he experienced a genuine epiphany. It is because of this, he writes, that “I know what it is like to be completely in thrall to the art of the theater: the other reality disappears or becomes insignificant, vainglorious, I am tempted to say, untrue.”<sup>1372</sup> The theater has a unique power to transport and place the audience under a spell, or so it seemed to Laxness. And although the perspective in the passage below clearly belongs to an adult who is not overly concerned about the representation of youthful sensory experiences, Laxness’ genuine love of the theater is palpable:

The life that took place on the floorboards of the stage admittedly involved the life of people, yet it transcended human life much as the lives of gods do, it transpired on another stage than that of ordinary human existence; a rational stage, cleansed of the filth of coincidence and incidental details, axiom and intent was one, axiom and fate. Even if we only noted the speech in the theater, liberated from the imperfections of daily conversation, what would appear if the kernel of wisdom and truth from all the daily chatter was condensed into a single unit; this was enough to convince me that the theater was where the true

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<sup>1372</sup> Halldór Laxness. “Endurminning um leiklist.” *Reisubókarkorn*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1950, p. 112. In the original: “En fyrir bragðið veit ég líka hvað það er að vera gagntekinn af leiklist: annar veruleikir hverfur eða verður lítilsverður, hégómlegur, mér liggur við að segja ósannur.”

version of human life was enacted, and our pedestrian existence was the pretension.<sup>1373</sup>

It is more than just the theater however that the boy seems to be falling in love with. What must have been experienced as a grand adventure and less as cause for reflection has, in hindsight, become the moment when the idea that life, the actual practice of living life, could be the object of aesthetic attention and, more than that, transformed into art, struck Laxness and although he may not have decided right then and there, he would as a matter of fact make a career out of grappling with what he here calls “the true version of human life” — that is, the technical mediation of the infinitely complex and variable life of the mind in an aesthetic register.<sup>1374</sup>

### *1.1 Universal Vision and the Objective Eye*

There is another medium that comes to mind, which is even more thoroughly “liberated from the imperfections” of mundane happenstance and the wildly unexpected and inappropriate way the material world tends to behave, and that is the cinema. Walter Benjamin’s analysis of a visit to a film set is the

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<sup>1373</sup> Laxness, “Endurminning um leiklist,” p. 113. In the original: “Þetta líf sem gerðist uppá pallinum var að vísu mannlíf, og þó ofar mannlífinu einsog líf guðanna; það gerðist á öðru sviði en mannlífið, vitrænu sviði, hreinu af sora tilviljunar og aukaatriða, lögmál og tilgángur var eitt, lögmál og örlög. Þó ekki væri nema talið á leiksviðinu, frjálst af ófullkomleik daglegs tals, nokkurskonar vísuþrúninginn kjarni als baðstofuhjals á Íslandi, þá nægði það til að koma mér á þá skoðun að þarna væri hið rétta mannlíf, og okkar hversdagasmannlíf væri hégóminn.”

<sup>1374</sup> What is perhaps slightly misleading about the quote above however is the apparent aversion that underlies its celebration of orderly art towards the pedestrian and the “filth of coincidence and incidental details.” Although Laxness would indeed be accused of looking down at workers, farmers, housewives and mothers at various points in his career, nothing could be farther from the truth. What can perhaps be retained from the account and applied to Laxness’ daily practice and attitudes towards being in a world that rarely takes our wishes into account is the notion that it is possible to give one’s life style, in spite of everything; that one need not give the aesthetic project up entirely when not at a desk. This would prove an extremely fertile attitude and no doubt contributed to Laxness’ conception of fashion as the manifest guise of the deep currents of modernity.

paradigmatic example of the above mentioned “liberation”: “in the studio the mechanical equipment has penetrated so deeply into reality that its pure aspect freed from the foreign substance of equipment is the result of a special procedure [...] The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology.”<sup>1375</sup> Laxness shared Benjamin’s faith in the uniqueness of the new medium that is grounded in the stunning mimetic power of the photographic image (“the mechanical equipment has penetrated so deeply into reality”), and this we might say is Laxness’ version of Benjamin’s paean:

The perfection of color photography is expected from the chemical laboratories shortly, and thereby Western culture seems to have achieved its ultimate dream when it comes to pictorial reproduction. And what more could we ask of a pictorial representation aside from its ability to replicate the likeness of objects as they appear to the universal vision, the objective eye.<sup>1376</sup>

Laxness is saying, to echo a later formulation by French film theorist André Bazin, that, unlike all other art forms that are dependent upon the presence of man, photography derives an advantage from his absence. Furthermore, the “desire” of traditional aesthetics to transcend the “mundane” aspects of everyday practice is deemed a bourgeois ideology. Laxness’ belief in technology, from the power of the radio as expressed in an essay from 1923, to the rational, humanitarian social order promoted in *Alþýðubókin* (The Commoner’s Book,

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<sup>1375</sup> Walter Benjamin. “The Work in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Trans. by Harry Zohn. *Illuminations*. Ed. by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1968, p. 233.

<sup>1376</sup> Halldór Laxness. *Alþýðubókin*. Reykjavík: Jafnaðarmannafélag Íslands, 1929, p. 175. “Fullkomnun litaðrar ljósmyndar er í undirbúningi á efnarannsóknarstofum, en með henni virðist vestræn menning hafa framkvæmt sinn hinnta draum um framleiðslu myndar á einum fleti. Og hvað skyldum vér framfar geta á kosið og hvers krafist af mynd fram yfir eiginleikann til að herma útlit hlutanna, einsog þeir birtast fyrir hinni almennu sjón, hinu óeinstaklingsbundna auga.”

1929), is such that it becomes a virtual synonym with progress and humanity's hope for a better future.

The moment in Laxness' intellectual development that marks a shift in his thinking on these matters, deepens it and makes it more critical, is the time he spent in Hollywood and his first-hand experiences with the workings of the culture industry, which he observed with a sharply critical and analytical eye. The result was his essay on Hollywood; in many ways a unique document on the dream factory, but in terms of Laxness' own thinking it represents a new understanding of the politics that surround and inflect the various technologies of modernity; the fact that they are not always, and perhaps never, value neutral.

Up to this point, Laxness had not been much slowed down by the past, the idea of progress and change motivating him to experience and write about an enormously varied range of subjects that only had to have the one thing in common that they could be read as symptomatic of some aspect of modernity's potentiality. And much like he saw nothing but benefits follow the electrification of the provinces, the building of a sewage system, or the arrival from abroad of avant-garde cultural practices, the technology of the cinema seemed a virtual boon to him. Although the final version of his essay on Hollywood is extremely critical, earlier versions show Laxness to be enthralled by the movies and (almost) perfectly willing to give up literature — not just for himself but as an expressive medium in modernity.

Much like the camera was an improvement on a pencil and canvas, and the tractor on the spade, so it seemed to Laxness for a period, was the moving image an improvement on literature. The rarefied nature of one medium, and the



populist nature of the other was an important consideration. At this precise moment in time, elite culture did not match up with Laxness' political beliefs. A medium famous for attracting the working class, immigrants, the less well-off, and to be frowned upon by the respectable and expensively suited cultural commentators of the middle class: the combination was irresistible. Thus the shock of finding not a sprouting popular culture but the world's most powerful mechanism for ideological dissemination and the manufacture of consent. And it was already in the iron grip of corporations who knew exactly how to wield their new technology of power. It was here that Laxness realized that speaking as if the fact of technology entailed automatically a value was naïve. He now realized that no meaning could be ascribed to devices of wonder unless you knew who controlled them and for what purpose. This exact thing, the inherent opposition between fact and value in a democratic society — scientists provide the facts, politicians ascertain value and make decisions — would be pushed to and beyond the limits thought possible by atomic weapons, as Laxness would be quick to realize when the time came.<sup>1377</sup>

### *1.2 The Good Cinema*

As Laxness' above recollection of the theater and many other articles demonstrate, it was a medium the author virtually never ceased complimenting. As indicated above, however, cinema met pretty much the opposite fate. Rarely mentioned and when it was mentioned it was in a derogatory context, yet its pull had at one point been quite as strong as the magical attraction of the stage as

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<sup>1377</sup> Richard Mason. *Oppenheimer's Choice. Reflections from Moral Philosophy*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005, pp. 156–158.

experienced by the twelve year old Laxness. This we know because the young author undertook a journey half way across the world in order to become a part of the entertainment industry. Interestingly, in the novel *Guðsgjafaþula*, written when the young man above had accumulated close to half a century's additional experience, Laxness returns to the psychological enigma that grounds the movie-going experience, something he had attempted to conceptualize much earlier, while delving deeper than before into the relationship between images and the subconscious. Indeed, the single most curious locale in the text is a cinema, *Góða bíó* (The Good Cinema),

When you feel bored because there is no herring, and you simply do not know what to do, and perhaps you've gotten yourself absolutely smashed by noon, or you are a girl, — what do you do then? [...] On the top of the poster's frame these words remain imprinted with a golden hue: The Good Cinema. In here is where you should go. Whoever finds himself there will forget sorrows, his will be a contented stay, even if he's drunk or just a girl.<sup>1378</sup>

Although the tone is that of someone midway between a carnival barker and a kindly Santa Claus talking up Habermas' public sphere, those familiar with Laxness' essay on Hollywood will immediately assume that The Good Cinema must be an oxymoron — representing, perhaps, Laxness' final invocation of the desecration of a once promising art form; it could also be a rhetorical/mnemonic maneuver that aims to call forth in the memory of a reader previous summaries of the culture industry, one that employs obvious irony as a short-cut to bypass reiteration and repetition. A reader will entertain these possibilities and many more, no doubt, and thus the surprise is that *Góða Bíó* does not serve as a mere

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<sup>1378</sup> Laxness, *Guðsgjafaþula*, p. 148. In the original: “Þegar þér leiðist af því ekki er síld, og veist ekki hvað þú átt að taka til bragðs, og kanski ertu orðinn feiknarlega drukkin klukkan tólf á hádegi, ellegar þú ert stúlka, — hvað gerirðu þá? [...] Á umgerð plaggatsins standa þesi orð efst með gullnu lettri: Góða Bíó. Það er þarna sem þú skalt fara inn. Hver sem ratar þarna inn, hann mun gleyma sorgum, það mun fara vel fyrir honum þó hann sé drukkin eða bara stúlka.”

continuation of Laxness' critique of inauthentic art and celebrity worship, or as a comment on the balance of geopolitical power, let alone American cultural imperialism — multifaceted, urgent and aesthetically innovative as Laxness' rendition of these themes tended to be.

Rather, perhaps because freed from overarching political commitments, Laxness incorporates the above perspectives into *Guðsgjafabula* but chooses to examine the relationship between the medium of film and individual subjectivity in a way that transcends the propaganda function. *Góða Bíó* is where “the world’s cinema-goer will fall easily asleep [...] because the shoot-outs on the screen are silent; and with this silence the noble real-world shoot-outs, which man values above everything else, are mocked and derided.”<sup>1379</sup> The thought that the void of silence greets brutality as the perfect representation of the conceptual content it deserves is a powerful one, and harks in a certain sense back to the poet in *Atómstöðin* who also thought silence was the only responsible act when faced with the atrocity of the Holocaust. There is another kind of silence embedded in the text, or perhaps it would be better to say that the novel stands as a portent of the silence to come as with *Guðsgjafabula* Laxness left the scene of the novel. One might therefore say that unlike Adorno who, when he revisited the culture industry, reached the same conclusions as earlier, Laxness had found a way to come to peace with the medium, and that was to incorporate it into his work, the place where Hollywood had to behave according to his rules.

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<sup>1379</sup> Halldór Laxness. *Guðsgjafabula*. Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1972, p. 149. In the original, the quote reads, “Heimsins bíógestur mun sofna vært á þessum stað, vþí skambyssuskothríðin á léreftinu er þögn; og með þessari þögn er verið að hætta og forsmá göfuga skothríð heimsins, hið æðsta sem mennirnir þekkja.”

Nowhere else was that true however, historical reality least of all. Laxness' political ideology took the place of blind faith in technology, progress and modernization. Corporations and culture industries may rule the day in America but the Soviet Union was something else. Then the catastrophe of World War II occurs. The world picture that greeted those emerging from the cataclysm was radically changed. The First World War had shaken belief in progress and the project of civilization, the betterment of man. However, having started two world wars in the span of three decades, European nations had put paid to such talk for good. The US had invented a weapon whose destructive capacity took even its designers by surprise; cities could be destroyed at a stroke, waste laid to nations in minutes and the planet itself could most likely not withstand a serious onslaught. As soon as possible, as is only reasonable, scientists were hard at work at making more powerful versions of these devices.<sup>1380</sup> Once news and photos spread, confirming the reality of the Holocaust, another fact became unavoidable, one of the most prosperous, educated, cultured, technologically advanced nations in the world had just devalued all these adjectives; mythic monsters hid behind a Beethoven-listening exterior.

The dust had hardly settled when Laxness, along of course with so many others, registered two things as paradigm shifting: the attempt of the Germans to exterminate European Jewry and the invention of the atom bomb. As Richard Mason notes, "It was not apparent in the early 1940s that the wholesale destruction of all life on the planet was a possibility, but this did not take long to emerge. Atomic weapons turned out to be unprecedented in their potential for

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<sup>1380</sup> Campell Craig and Sergey Radchenko. *The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008, pp. 1-34.

harm, gigantically out of proportion to anything before.”<sup>1381</sup> The response to all this was varied of course; in the theater a movement came into being later given the name “Theater of the Absurd” that dealt directly with the repercussions of the above list of irrationality by positing the world and human existence as meaningless and senseless. Halldór Laxness registered these epistemological and existential convolutions in *Atómstöðin* and several subsequent works, the most important of which are three late plays.

Then comes 1956 and the image of Stalin is damaged beyond repair by official confirmation of the purges. The Soviet Union also invades Hungary; demonstrating criminal aggression that was the final straw for many Marxists and supporters of the Communist state. As the narrator of Nabokov’s *Priglaseniye na kazn* (Invitation to a Beheading, 1938) says at the end, when a totalitarian regime much like the USSR is tottering, losing its reality: “Everything was coming apart. Everything was falling,” which seems a not unlikely encapsulation of what it must have been like for Halldór Laxness to see the political and ideological edifice that he had supported and that in return had sustained him, lose its last shred of credibility.<sup>1382</sup>

Around this time Laxness starts to entertain the idea of getting rid of Álfgrímur and his buoyant, blessed good spirits — and not only Álfgrímur but all his colleagues and relatives, everything that pointed to a dominating textual consciousness had become an aesthetic blight, ideological encumbrance and an inelegant narrative device. Even behind the narrator and the act of narration

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<sup>1381</sup> Mason, *Oppenheimer’s Choice*, p. 106.

<sup>1382</sup> Vladimir Nabokov. *Invitation to a Beheading*. Trans. by Dmitri Nabokov and Vladimir Nabokov. New York: Vintage, p. 223.

someone was behind the scenes busily orchestrating events and choosing color schemes and modulating soundscapes and deciding whether there should be a pleasant linearity or gaps as the story unfolds.

### *1.3 Regulative Ideals*

In a sense, Laxness' solution was to move to a new genre and there employ a technique that, while universally accepted as the norm today was once highly contentious, and is indeed debated by the very earliest literary theorists of Western culture; condemned by one, celebrated by the other. In the present context we can say that wanting to remove "Plús-Ex" from the text signifies what Plato describes as desire on behalf of "the poet [to] conceal [...] his own person," and somewhat sneakily "resemble someone else," which, while planning his perfect *Republic*, he considered a very dangerous game.<sup>1383</sup> It was imitative, untruthful and a distortion of reality, as well as highly volatile emotional stimuli.

Aristotle on the other hand builds his poetics around the concept of imitation, placing it at the center of his definition of tragedy as well as seeing it as the motivating factor in genre distinctions. In addition, Aristotle points out that taking pleasure in things that imitate other things is a deeply ingrained human characteristic. Addressing the very issue raised by Plato above he notes, "It is possible to imitate the same objects in the same medium sometimes by narrating (either using a different persona, as in Homer's poetry, or as the same person without variation), or else with all the imitators as agents and engaged in

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<sup>1383</sup> Plato. *The Republic*. Trans. by Tom Griffith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 81 / 393c.

activity.”<sup>1384</sup> The third option, although presented neutrally, is the privileged one in terms of tragedy. The definition of the genre makes it clear that the tragic play is “performed by actors, not through narration”.<sup>1385</sup>

The fact that the stage is the place to go in order for a writer to rid himself of “Plús-Ex” can thus count as ancient wisdom. Somebody might even be tempted to inquire about the relevance of this excursion in history. Well, first it is clear that there is a long history of reflection and thinking on many of the aspects that Laxness found particularly exciting about the theater as a medium. We have already touched on some of the theories that explain the post-war theatrical scene in terms of postmodernism or “the death of character” or “alienation” — to an extent all this is underlying in Aristotle’s theory of action over interiority but in addition the Greek edifice came with an unmodern sentiment that well-being and ill-being resided in action and this, I felt, spoke to the strange vacuity that emerged when concepts such as justice, morality, and responsibility were examined and one tried applying them, in line with some cognitive/ethical frameworks, on events in the narratives and thus perhaps also inquire about where the text itself stood with regard to the many hot-button issues that are incorporated into the plot of the three plays (these might include Anda’s rape in *Dúfnaveislan*, mother and daughter ascending the chimney to their death in *Strompleikurinn*, the Beauty Chief getting away scot-free midway through *Prjónastofan Sólin*, and not only that, he has all the money and unlike Captain Ahab, he landed Moby Dick) and one almost invariably comes up against a wall. The texts absolutely refuse to fall in line behind any conventional value system

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<sup>1384</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 5.

<sup>1385</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 10.

and the reason, as has been suggested, is that the plays take place in a moral vacuum, a humanist black hole.

That last metaphor actually went a step too far. It's more like coming unto the ruins of a civilization and piecing together through archeological work certain indications about the reasons for the social collapse. In textual terms, these "indications" are the traces of the atrocities that in these texts put an end to ideals. Ideals in the modern world, much like the concept of progress, depend upon the symbolic abstraction of futurity because there we find embedded the regulative apparatus that moves ideals from the level of empty idealism and onto the plane of pragmatic behavior.

Regulative ideals can be compared to a precious and intricate machine that generates meaning and values, the construction of which commenced in the Enlightenment and during the French Revolution and had continued since — the wikivalues of the past three centuries if you will — but has been destroyed now by technological modernity. Having lost the regulative function from the conceptual domain of the culture, subjects do what the people in Laxness' plays do when faced with bare life: they iron trousers, work the sugar daddies, knit gloves for the handless and clothes for the naked survivors of atomic war, tend to their "table of plenty;" existence in other words, but devoid of the structures of thought that we take for granted; taking care of children is noble because they are the future; archives preserve knowledge for the future, I plan to train to be an Olympic diver. Such frameworks are no longer valid because the camps will come back, that now is the only certainty. The only question is what form they will take.



We should also keep in mind that Plato and Aristotle both emphasize the absence of “Plús–Ex” in the theatrical work, a point that, it seems to me, is not all that frequently taken up, that is, the status of narration on the stage. Instead of viewing “imitation” (as opposed to diegesis and narration) as somehow an organic part of the theatrical form, which, admittedly, is tempting, it can also be historicized and revealed to be a function that can be deployed just as it can be left alone. Burning with curiosity and enthusiasm for a new enterprise in pretty much a new medium, and knee–deep in the an argument years in the making with “Plús–Ex,” Laxness happened to be situated in such a way that for him, the “concealment” of his authorial avatars in a text was far from a given and its opening up as an option activated new forms of negative thinking.

The Ancient Greeks even invite a final thought. Plato’s distrust of imitation and the imagination made him sort of the spokesman for what we could term non–fiction, finding ways to express the truth of the world in order to improve it. There could certainly be worse historical parallels to Laxness’ project of social modernization in the 1920s. In Aristotle, imitation is the grounding of tragedies and literally everything about Laxness’ late plays, except their manifest content, is tragic, so again the conceptual separation between these originary philosophes speaks to Laxness’ work, and the division mirrors the schema of the dissertation, which can also, surely, be taken to suggest a spirited affinity with ancient wisdom.

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