

## THE NORWEGIAN CABIN IN CHRISTIAN VALEUR'S *STEFFEN TAR SIN DEL AV ANSVARET*

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**ABSTRACT.** *The Norwegian Cabin in Christian Valeur's Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret.* The purpose of this article is to provide an analysis of the representation of the *hytte* or the Norwegian cabin in Christian Valeur's 2009 novel *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret* ("Steffen Takes His Share of the Responsibility"). Discussing the topos of the *hytte*, I seek to show how the novel offers a commentary on the Norwegian cabin tradition in the context of the climate crisis in particular and, more generally, on the paradoxical ideas of closeness to nature through consumerism. Drawing on Ellen Rees's study about cabins in Norwegian literature (2014) and understanding this locus as a heterotopia (Foucault 1986), I discuss how the cabin ironically loses its value of being an "environmentally friendly" form of dwelling, and therefore cannot accomplish its potential role as a heterotopia of compensation. On the other hand, the cabin becomes a place of refuge and self-reflection for the narrator and therefore functions as a heterotopia of crisis. Finally, I suggest we can read the novel in relation to the *hyttebok* ("cabin book") conventions, underlining the satirical and subversive nature of the novel towards ecological attitudes in Norwegian society. In this way, I aim to propose a new interpretation of the novel as a work of climate fiction.

**Keywords:** *Norwegian cabin, heterotopia, Christian Valeur, hyttebok, climate fiction.*

**REZUMAT.** *Cabana norvegiană în Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret de Christian Valeur.* Scopul acestui articol este de a oferi o analiză a reprezentării cabanei norvegiene (*hytte*) în romanul lui Christian Valeur, *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret* („Steffen își asumă responsabilitatea”, 2009). Discutând toposul cabanei, îmi propun să arăt cum romanul aduce un comentariu asupra tradiției cabanei

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norvegiene în contextul crizei climatice în particular și, în mod general, asupra ideii paradoxale de apropiere față de natură prin consumerism. Având la bază studiul lui Ellen Rees (2014) despre cabanele din literatura norvegiană și înțelegând acest spațiu ca o heterotopie (Foucault 1986), îmi propun să discut cum, în mod ironic, cabana reprezentată în roman își pierde calitatea de formă de locuire „prietenoasă cu mediul” și astfel nu își poate îndeplini rolul potențial de heterotopie de compensație. Pe de altă parte, cabana devine un loc de refugiu și reflexie asupra sinelui pentru personajul-narator, în acest fel funcționând ca heterotopie de criză. În cele din urmă, sugerez că putem citi romanul în raport cu convențiile jurnalului de cabană (*hyttbok*), punând în evidență caracterul satiric și subversiv al romanului la adresa atitudinilor ecologice din societatea norvegiană. În felul acesta, îmi propun să ofer o nouă interpretare a romanului citit ca ficțiune climatică.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *cabana norvegiană, heterotopie, Christian Valeur, hyttbok, ficțiune climatică.*

In cultural, literary, artistic, or mass-media representations, the Norwegian cabin culture has been taking many forms. Reminding of the old homes of the peasants, cabins remain symbols of pastoral life and tradition, while at the same time they have now become staples of Norwegian luxury and comfort. Interestingly, they have also become the site for contesting traditional values and disclosing its underlying paradoxes. Coming from pop culture, one such example is the music video “The Cabin” released in 2014, where the Ylvis brothers parody masculine ideals traditionally associated with the Norwegian cabin, a case which has been analysed by Ellen Rees (2020). Often employing the same humoristic strategies, literature also becomes a fruitful ground for interrogating common beliefs and ideas that might otherwise be left unquestioned. In this article, I shed light on how cabin culture and environmentalist issues are addressed in Christian Valuer’s debut novel *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret* (“Steffen takes his share of the responsibility”) published in 2009.

Narrated in the first-person perspective, the novel presents 21-year-old Steffen Schiøtz, a law student who goes to live at his family cabin a few days before Christmas, after deciding he wants to stop polluting and start a radically different, more environmentally friendly life. The novel can be read as climate fiction and it has been presented as an example of a climate change narrative set in a recognisable storyworld, unlike other Norwegian cli-fi novels that prefer dystopian narrative modes (Norheim 2017, 33). Reinhard Hennig (2021) suggests that *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret* responds to the challenge of representing the Anthropocene through its formal complexity given by the use of irony,

intertextuality, and insertion of other types of texts, such as hand-written lists and notes, photos of messages received on the mobile phone or drawn images. Sissel Furuseth (2021) pays attention to the novel's representation of snow as a disappearing resource that can elicit emotions such as grief and guilt, but also more positive feelings such as humour or gratitude.

In this article, I aim to contribute to this discussion and analyse the topos of the *hytte* and its role in representing climate change in Valeur's novel. I take as a point of departure Ellen Rees's groundbreaking work *Cabins in Modern Norwegian Literature: Negotiating Place and Identity* (2014), which studies the multifaceted depictions of cabins in literary texts published between 1814 and 2005. I thus wish to cast light upon yet another literary rendering of the cabin and show how it functions as a locus that allows the narrator in *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret* to portray a satirical illustration of Norway's environmental attitudes.

### The Norwegian *Hytte* and the Literary Tradition

In his 1859 epic poem "Paa Vidderne" ("On the Heights") Henrik Ibsen writes about a young boy's journey to the mountains where he finds great joy and freedom in the midst of nature, despite being away from home and family. In the lines of this poem, Ibsen introduces for the first time the word *friluftsliv* ("outdoor life"),<sup>2</sup> a term that, in its brief form, expresses nearness to nature as a value of Norwegian national identity. Still, it is perhaps curious that the protagonist is not outside, in the unbound nature he cherishes, when this expression occurs in the text. When autumn approaches, announcing the boy it is time to return back to his mother and his lover, feelings of sadness and regret seize him, since he no longer thinks of his house in the village as his real home. Instead, it is rather the *sæterstue*, his old mountain cottage that offers "*friluftsliv* for my thoughts" (Ibsen 1999, 395).<sup>3</sup> As the poem suggests, the simplicity of cottage life is an essential part of the protagonist's experience of *friluftsliv*. The *seter* – cottage or shieling as the word can be translated into English – also carries resonance in the construction of national identity. As precursors of the *hytte*, the Norwegian cabin, these mountain homes occupy a central role in the life and cultural imaginary of the nation, as places where nature and civilisation essentially merge together.

Rees throws light on literature's role in the process of making cabins "a primary locus for the performance of Norwegian identity", arguing that "they

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<sup>2</sup> Simply put, *friluftsliv*, which could be translated as "outdoor life" or "free air life", involves spending time in nature and typical examples of *friluftsliv* include hiking, skiing or picking berries and mushrooms.

<sup>3</sup> "friluftsliv for mine tanker" (Ibsen 1999, 395, my translation).

have become the place where Norwegians retreat from the pressures of everyday life, where they are at their most private and most relaxed, but also most in line with a nationally inflected mythos” (2014, 5). Analysing a broad period in Norwegian literature, Rees distinguishes five phases in which the *hytte* activates as a symbolically charged locus. First of all, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the *seter* (shieling) appears to be a harbinger of the modern *hytte*. Inspired by the resonances of the *seter* as a “home for the national romance”, Romantic authors then continue to make use of the trope of the *hytte* as a “symbolic home for the new nation” (50). With the growth of industrialism, the *hytte* further starts to function as a place of refuge from modernisation, that allows retreat into nature understood as the opposite of the morally corrupted urban space. In the period after the First World War and through the 1960s, cabins are rather associated with individual experiences of soul-searching and self-cultivation, appearing as places of therapy. While they become popular tropes in crime fiction especially in the interwar period, they will be less common in canonical texts (183). After the 1990s, writers reintroduce the motif of the *hytte* to the literary realm in significantly different ways, often depicting it as a place of trauma and emotional distress. In other cases, literary cabins gradually transition into “signifiers emptied of meaning” (175). Prescribed by late modernity into a sort of fetish objects, these “post-cabins” often appear in contemporary literature that ironically or parodically comments on the cabin culture, calling into question the values traditionally attached to it, such as masculinity, love for nature and ideals of simplicity.

In her extensive study, Rees analyses the space of the cabin in terms of what Michel Foucault conceptualised as “heterotopia”, understood as “a particular type of social space that functions on numerous registers simultaneously, and that has far more affective and social significance than it would appear to warrant on the surface” (Rees 2014, 2). Depending on what social meaning is ascribed to these particular spaces, Foucault distinguishes between six types of heterotopias in his essay “Of Other Spaces” (originally published in French in 1984 and translated into English in 1986). One such locus is the heterotopia of crisis, characteristic for primitive societies that would isolate individuals in a state of crisis, like adolescents or pregnant women. Nowadays, Foucault notes that these have been replaced by heterotopias of deviation, as exemplified by prisons or psychiatric hospitals. Places constituted as archives, for instance museums or libraries, are considered as heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time. On the other hand, there are temporal heterotopias, such as the fairgrounds or the vacation villages, which are only briefly inhabited. Further, there are heterotopias, like the brothel, whose scope is “to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory” (Foucault 1986, 27). In opposition to these heterotopias of illusion, Foucault finally conceptualises,

based on the example of the colony, what he calls heterotopias of compensation, or spaces in which human life and activity is regulated and perfectly organised. Drawing on this categorisation, Rees illustrates how literary renderings of the *hytte* reflect the multiple types of heterotopias identified by Foucault. For instance, the shieling largely works as a heterotopia of crisis in Maurits Hansen's short story "Luren" ("The Lur", 1819), where it becomes a place of "transgression of class identity" (Rees 2014, 55), while in Henrik Wergeland's drama *Fjeldstuen* ("The Mountain Cabin", 1848) which presents a rather utopian vision of what the new formed nation might become, the cabin can be conceptualised as a heterotopia of compensation. And the mountain *hytte* in Peter Christen Asbjørnsen's "Reensdyrjagt ved Ronderne" ("Reindeer hunt at Rondane", 1848), transitorily occupied by different characters that exchange stories and cultural experiences, evokes a temporal heterotopia.

In the wake of the postmodern tradition, Valeur's 2009 novel presents a post-cabin configured around significantly different values than those of the nineteenth century literature, while at the same time carrying echoes of previous cabin discourses (Rees 2014, 154). Based on the idea that the cabin culture potentially reflects attitudes and worldviews that characterise Norwegian society, I wish to discuss how the novel challenges ideas of Norwegian environmentalism through its depiction of cabin life. The importance of environmentalist politics and sustainable development in this country is often explained by the belief that respect for nature has traditionally been an essential value of the Norwegian people. For instance, Nina Witoszek suggests that codifications of certain ethical and political views within cultural tropes of the "nature tradition" epitomise the idea of Norwegianness. Thus, from her viewpoint, the "regime of goodness" that defines Norwegian identity stems from culturally transmitted values of moderation, cooperation, or equality, shaped and legitimised by the close relationship to nature. As she notes: "Today a tradition informed by the experience and imagery of nature continues to nurture the ethical and political predispositions of Norwegian culture" (2011, 22). It is nonetheless important to keep a critical stance towards such assertions and I believe texts like *Christian tar sin del av ansvaret*, through their literary strategies, offer the premises for questioning and relativising such standpoints.

The question I will try to answer in my article is: "how does the topos of the *hytte* allow for a commentary on the Norwegian cabin tradition in the context of the climate crisis in particular and, more generally, on the underlying paradoxes of contemporary Norwegian ideas of closeness to nature?" Drawing insight from Rees's study on literary representations of the *hytte*, I also seek to show how Steffen's cabin incorporates different types of heterotopias. Thus, I first discuss how the cabin seen as an ideal place is depicted in the novel as losing its status of

an “environmentally friendly” form of dwelling and therefore cannot accomplish its potential as a heterotopia of compensation. Then, I show how the cabin equally functions as a refuge for the protagonist and thus becomes a heterotopia of crisis. I will end my analysis with a discussion about the significance of the *hyttbok* (“cabin book”) in the novel, underlining the satirical and subversive undertones towards ecological attitudes in Norwegian society. Throughout my analysis, I give special attention to the use of literary strategies, such as intertextual references or irony, building on Hennig’s discussion about the aesthetics of fictional texts addressing climate change and the Anthropocene (2021).

### “My Environmentally Friendly Burrow”

Meaningful symbols of national identity, *friluftsliv* and the *hytte* tradition often appear as central motifs in Norwegian fiction about climate change (Furuseth et al 2020). One such instance is Brit Bildøen’s *Sju dager i august* (*Seven days in August*, 2014), where a heavy rainstorm damages the cabin of the main character. In this context, climate change materialised as extreme weather can be seen as a “threat to symbols of national identity” (Furuseth et al 2020, 11). In Valeur’s *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret*, the cabin is not menaced by such extreme phenomena as it happens in Bildøen’s novel. Instead, the cabin appears, at first sight, as an alternative to the consumerist values of the capitalist society, at least in the eyes of the protagonist. Calling the family’s *hytte* “my environmentally friendly burrow” (Valeur 2009, 14),<sup>4</sup> Steffen is confident that he could recreate the traditional pastoral lifestyle that his great-grandparents once had and adopt a sustainable way of living: “My great-grandparents lived their CO<sub>2</sub>-free life by this lake” (127).<sup>5</sup> In this way, he seeks to attend the ideal of simplicity that the old traditional cabins inspire, as an alternative to city life.

Besides, the cabin is also associated with protection and safety. It is seen as a possible refuge not only by Steffen, but also by his father, who has been securing the cabin with food “in case of a catastrophe” (33).<sup>6</sup> While his father fears scenarios in which health emergencies may occur or his family would get snowed in, Steffen has in mind cataclysms as the ones evoked by apocalyptic cinema. References to movies like *Deep Impact* (1998) or *Independence Day* (1996) suggest that the cabin is understood by the protagonist as a protective space that can provide shelter in the face of potential large-scale disasters. That he also later in the novel mentions the 2004 disaster film *The Day After Tomorrow* (95), insinuates that this could include devastating effects of climate change. To avoid such scenarios

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<sup>4</sup> “mitt miljøvennlige hi” (Valeur 2009, 14, my translation).

<sup>5</sup> “Ved denne innsjøen levde oldeforeldrene mine sine CO<sub>2</sub>-frie liv” (Valeur 2009, 127, my translation).

<sup>6</sup> “i tilfelle en katastrofe” (Valeur 2009, 33, my translation).

and mitigate the effects of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions is precisely the reason that brings Steffen to the cabin, in his attempt to make a personal contribution to reverse the consequences of climatic instability. From this perspective, the cabin has the potential to fulfil the role of a heterotopia of compensation, whose function is “to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (Foucault 1986, 27). In other words, such a heterotopia is “constructed as a perfect space that compensates for the general chaos and disorder of human life” (Rees 2014, 3). Gunnor Vittersø notes that “cabin life is strongly influenced by the philosophy to live a simple life outdoors” (2007, 278) and Thomas Berker and Helen Jøsok Gansmo observe that the cabin tradition is associated with the idea of escape and “a search for alterity from modern everyday life” (2010, 174). Given these common views about the role of the *hytte* in Norwegian society, it is rather reasonable that Steffen expects to find here a place to live in communion with nature and thus a solution to his pursuit of a CO<sub>2</sub>-free life.

However, quite early in the novel, it becomes obvious that Steffen’s family cabin is nowhere near the pastoral image of the traditional Norwegian *hytte*. In fact, the cabin is a modern, two-level building, equipped with all necessary commodities, such as electricity and running water. It is moreover equipped with a jacuzzi, and it has an additional cottage, with other four rooms, ironically directly associated with “peasant romanticism” (Valeur 2009, 18)<sup>7</sup>. Besides, it seems to be just one of the family’s two cabins (68). The *hytte* depicted in the novel reflects a general trend that, according to Vittersø, shows that time spent at cabins is more and more based on consumption, a development which “stands in contrast to the traditional Norwegian ideals about outdoor recreation and cabin life” (2007, 269). The paradoxical use of consumption for outdoor recreation at the cabin shows that Norwegians tend to “think of cabin life as ‘environmental friendly’ (sic) per se, and to a very little degree present any kind of reflection on how to reduce environmental impacts relating to cabin ownership or cabin use – other than to sort waste” (Aall et al 2011, 462). In the opening scene of the book, arriving at the cabin, Steffen thinks: “From now on it is just me and nature” (Valeur 2009, 7).<sup>8</sup> It will gradually turn out that he could not be more wrong, and the rest of the novel shows how his plans of living a simple life close to nature are thwarted by the kind of lifestyle imposed by his family’s modern and luxurious cabin.

Aware that he cannot make use of electricity if he wants to adopt an environmental lifestyle, the protagonist makes up a plan which involves finding

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<sup>7</sup> “bonderomantikk” (Valeur 2009, 18, my translation).

<sup>8</sup> “Fra nå av er det bare meg og naturen” (Valeur 2009, 7, my translation).

ecological alternatives. His priorities are heating the cabin, finding candles to light the place, and getting something to eat. Written in a naivistic and humorous style, the novel depicts, through a series of comic scenes, Steffen's dismal failure to accomplish his environmental goals. When he goes to search for fire logs, he cannot find any because, as it turns out, his parents seldom use the fireplace and prefer using electricity instead, to reduce the risks of causing a fire. For the same reason, Steffen cannot find any candles either. The next day, he goes to look for logs and branches in the woods, but as expected, he does not succeed in lighting up a fire with wet logs. Optimistic when it comes to food, because of the can reserves his father has taken care of, Steffen faces yet another problem when he has to open the cans with a knife, to avoid using the electric can opener. His attempt to fish in the frozen lake near the cabin is also doomed to failure. Realising how unprepared he is, but also how impractical it is to live environmentally at the cabin, Steffen gradually gives in and starts using electricity and other commodities he has at hand, despite feeling guilty about it.

The solutions found by Steffen's parents to create comfort at the cabin and avoid too much hassle reiterate the paradox embodied by modern cabins. In their sociological study about leisure and sustainable development, Aall et al. explain how the idea of a simple life associated with the cabin "has developed to imply two contradictory meanings" (2011, 462). They explain that:

For some people simplicity still means primitive, understood as simple technical and material standards, whereas for others a more modern meaning of the concept has developed, meaning easy or convenient; the latter involving high technical standards and easy accessibility by car. Furthermore, simple life is a term related to relaxed social conventions as well as to qualities such as tranquillity, silence, slow time and relaxation. Simplicity thus becomes the contrast to the noise and hurried 'multitasking' that often characterises modern everyday life (2011, 462).

For Steffen's family, and for other Norwegians, the cabin is essentially a place of leisure, where they can enjoy peace and relaxation far from their primary dwelling space. But it appears that higher levels of energy consumption required are often at odds with back-to-nature ideals. This reality is mirrored in Valeur's novel, which ironically deconstructs the image of the cabin as an environmentally friendly locus, and as a place that allows authentic interaction with nature.

Moreover, *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret* opens a dialogue with other literary texts in which cabins are illustrated as the central topos. When he talks to his friend Markus about his plans of going to the cabin, Markus points out that

Steffen “travels to a palace” (Valeur 2009, 64)<sup>9</sup> and suggests that he reads Erlend Loe’s novel *Doppler*. Steffen simply ignores him, probably imagining that Markus is only showing off with what he has been reading: “always some book he has read” (64).<sup>10</sup> But Loe’s *Doppler* (2004) is, similarly to Valeur’s novel, another critique of the cabin tradition and consumer’s society in Norway. In her discussion about Loe’s novel, Rees notes that “[a]t the beginning of the twenty-first century, it appears that cabins, rather than representing a viable escape from urban life, have become an extension of it” (2014, 176). In the study conducted by Aall et al, it is also suggested that “today the concept ‘cabin’ should perhaps be replaced by the international concept ‘second home’, implying that Norwegian cabins are becoming more like residential homes” (2011, 462). This entails that technical requirements also increase, as people choose to create the same comfort and convenience as in their residential homes (Aall et al. 2011, 462). In the same vein, the modern cabin presented in Valeur’s novel paradoxically becomes an extension of the society Steffen tries to leave behind. Literary texts like Loe’s *Doppler* and Valeur’s *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret* exemplify in this way how literature has the potential to inquire or play with these contradictions in humoristic ways.

It is also possible to read certain parts of the novel in light of a literary tradition that made the cabin as a crime scene a common motif in Norwegian crime fiction. This trope became popular especially with Bernhard Borge’s *De dødes tjern* (*The Lake of the Dead*, 1942).<sup>11</sup> Rees explains that, after the Second World War, as they became more accessible to the lower classes, cabins were also less present in “higher” fiction and turned instead into a common trope in crime fiction: “cabins became far less exclusively the domain of the social elite, and they thus lost some of their appeal as a special locus” (2014, 142). In this context, crime fiction activates “the potential for terror and for the uncanny that the remoteness of the typical cabin rather naturally suggests” (141). In *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret*, the cabin does not become a crime scene in the traditional sense, meaning that no actual murder takes place, but the novel evokes instead a crime towards nature for which the whole society is responsible.

This “crime” is illustrated in the humorous style that characterises the whole text, with auto-ironic undertones. On his third day at the cabin, Steffen wakes up feeling warm, and realising that the electric heating has been mysteriously turned on during the night. Since he is alone at the cabin, unable to remember

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<sup>9</sup> “reiser til et palass” (Valeur 2009, 64, my translation).

<sup>10</sup> “alltid en eller annen bok han har lest” (Valeur 2009, 64, my translation).

<sup>11</sup> Bernhard Borge was the pseudonym used by André Bjerke as a crime fiction author. Importantly, the tradition opened by his novel is still alive in contemporary Norwegian literature. An example of such a novel in which the cabin becomes the setting of a crime scene is Jan Kjørstad’s novel *Berge* (2017).

how and whether he was in fact the one who turned the heating on, Steffen imagines he must defend himself in court and starts putting a speech together:

It seems obvious that the accused has turned on the lamps and the stoves, since he was alone at the crime scene at that time. [...] Finally, I would dare to claim that, if the accused now considers keeping the electricity on, it cannot be said to be anything other than a crime against the whole global society, not to say against himself (Valeur 2009, 85).<sup>12</sup>

In this fragment, the cabin is referred to as “the crime scene”, and use of electricity is considered to be a criminal offence. The victim here is not another person, but “the whole global society”, which must suffer the consequences of a damaged environment. In this way, the novel alludes to the high level of energy consumption as one of the largest environmental problems in Norway, leisure activities playing an important part of this. Moreover, after holiday journeys, traditional outdoor recreation and staying at cabins seem to be the largest area of energy consumption in the country (Aall et al 2011, 457). After ending his pleading, inspired by the “mystery with the cabin electricity,”<sup>13</sup> Steffen intends to start writing crime fiction (Valeur 2009, 86). Hinting towards the literary tradition that evolved in the second half of the twentieth century, this scene adds a new layer of meaning to the cabin as a locus of crime, namely as a place where crimes against the environment take place.

In the end, it turns out that it was Steffen’s father who “committed the crime”, with the help of a remote control with which he could set the temperature from his home in the city. Ironically, however, Steffen does not complain because he blames the crime on his father: “If dad wants to have it like this, it can stay like this. *I* haven’t turned on the electricity. That is what is most important” (86).<sup>14</sup> After all, as Steffen himself admits, it is “easier to be environmentally friendly” if he stays warm (84).<sup>15</sup> This also ironically illuminates the paradoxical use of cabins to get in touch with nature while at the same time enjoying as much comfort and commodity as possible.<sup>16</sup> In Norwegian culture, time spent at the cabin is usually

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<sup>12</sup> “Det synes åpenbart at det er den tiltalte selv som har skrudd på lamper og ovner, da han på det aktuelle tidspunkt var alene på åstedet. [...] Avslutningsvis vil jeg våge å påstå at om den tiltalte nå vurderer å holde strømmen påslått, kan ikke det sies å være annet enn en forbrytelse mot hele det globale samfunn, for ikke å snakke om mot seg selv” (Valeur 2009, 85, my translation).

<sup>13</sup> “mysteriet med hyttestrømmen” (Valeur 2009, 86, my translation).

<sup>14</sup> “Hvis pappa vil ha det sånn, kan det være sånn. *Jeg* har ikke skrudd på strømmen. Det er det viktigste” (Valeur 2009, 86, my translation).

<sup>15</sup> “lettere å være miljøvennlig” (Valeur 2009, 84, my translation).

<sup>16</sup> It is important to bear in mind, as Arne Lie Christensen remarks, that such paradoxes in the cabin life tradition are not new and that the opposition between ideals of a simple, primitive lifestyle and modern comfort date back to the Enlightenment period (2015, 19).

seen as a way of relieving stress. The novel shows how this is possible due to the comfort of the cabin because once Steffen forbids the use of electricity, which entails use of almost all appliances, he can no longer enjoy his stay. Living environmentally does not seem to align with simplicity ideals but becomes a continuous, painstaking struggle for the character.

### **The *Hytte* as a Space of Self-Reflection**

In his *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard presents the hut as a space of solitude and refuge, in which one “would like to hide away” (1994, 30). Likewise, in Valeur’s novel, the cabin is also a place where the protagonist can withdraw to reflect upon his own life, besides its role to provide a counterbalance to the consumerist lifestyle. As the story unfolds, it gradually becomes clear that living environmentally is not his only motivation for choosing to retreat to the cabin, and that Steffen cannot be trusted as a reliable narrator, as Hennig also observes (2021, 125). In fact, Steffen’s social isolation is equally a response to the overwhelming confusion in his personal and academic life, that stirs up difficult emotions. As such, the cabin is not only a place where he can find a counterbalance to modern lifestyles, but also a place of introspection. In this way, the novel recalls eco-philosopher Arne Næss’s relationship to his cabin Tvergastein, which remained a symbol of deep ecology practice. Rees indicates that largely due to Næss’s influence, the cabin became in the mid-twentieth century “the locus for experiments and individualism [...] a place of therapy, of soul-searching, of writing, and of self-cultivation” (2014, 120). Steffen himself tries to find new ways of dwelling in the world with more responsibility towards the environment, while at same time dealing with his personal turmoil. It is therefore interesting to see how the cabin can function as a heterotopia of crisis, which is conceptualised by Foucault as a “privileged or sacred or forbidden [place], reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc” (1986, 24).

Steffen’s personal crisis is caused by a series of events and difficult situations in his private life. First of all, he is confused about his feelings for his girlfriend Isabell, because he is attracted to his colleague Kjersti, who introduced him to environmentalism in the first place. A member of the environmental organisation *Natur og Ungdom* (Nature and Youth), Kjersti shows Steffen a Youtube video that convinces him it is everyone’s responsibility to take care of the environment and emboldens him to take personal action. Because of his growing feelings for Kjersti, it is not clear to what extent Steffen’s concern for nature comes from a genuine interest in this issue and how much it is only a way to impress her.

After all, the idea of withdrawing at the cabin comes up in one of their conversations (Valeur 2009, 55–56). Only towards the end of the novel does the reader find out that what really provoked Steffen's sudden withdrawal at the cabin was that he had seen Markus and Kjersti kiss at a party. Even more, the closing scene of the novel reveals that Steffen and Kjersti have also kissed after she showed him the Youtube video that inspired the protagonist to take responsibility over his actions, which also explains why jealousy could be the main reason for his decision to isolate himself. Furusetth thus comments that "it is hard to distinguish his heartsickness from his climate grief" (2021, 169). Another catalyst for his departure is the exam he had just taken, knowing he would most certainly fail it. Leaving to the cabin before Christmas can therefore also be seen as a way to avoid having to admit to his parents that he did not do so well on his exam, which would lead to a more serious discussion about the fact that he wishes to quit his law studies.

Above all, Steffen is confused about the most suitable measures to take in order to live ecologically. The novel is in this way more than just an ironic comment on the modern cabin and becomes a critique of the whole Norwegian society. Thanks to the structure of the novel which intertwines the present of the story with flashbacks that generally depict conversations between Steffen and his family, colleagues and friends, readers get access to multiple voices and perspectives on environmental issues. For instance, Steffen often discusses with his friends about what products are less harmful to the environment. Inspired by Kjersti, he wants to adopt a new lifestyle by changing his shopping habits and reducing consumption. Because he and Isabell live together, most of these choices must first be approved by her and they often debate about what they should and should not buy. Steffen wants for instance to replace all light bulbs in their apartment with more economic ones, and he also tries to convince Isabell that they should install a new shower head to save water: "Did you know that if everyone in Norway installed energy-saving showers we would save the environment 750 000 tonnes CO<sub>2</sub>?" (41).<sup>17</sup> Isabell is rather sceptical about such statistics: "Do you believe in all the numbers researchers come up with?" (42)<sup>18</sup> When Steffen insists that scientists have a reason for coming up with such statistics, her reply is: "Yes, so that people like us would buy the energy-saving showers they sell alongside their research" (42)<sup>19</sup> and she further adds: "They're saying that if the economic development in the USA continues, then there will

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<sup>17</sup> "Visste du at hvis alle i Norge installerte sparedusj, ville vi spart miljøet for 750 000 tonn CO<sub>2</sub>?" (Valeur 2009, 41, my translation).

<sup>18</sup> "Tror du på alle tallene forskere kommer med" (Valeur 2009, 42, my translation).

<sup>19</sup> "Ja, for at sånne som oss skal kjøpe sparedusjene de selger ved siden av forskningen sin" (Valeur 2009, 42, my translation).

be a real crisis, and then nobody will afford energy-saving showers. It costs money to be environmentally friendly” (43).<sup>20</sup> She thus alludes to the capitalist motivation behind sustainable development politics. Therefore, although she is generally sceptical to Steffen’s environmental attitudes, it could be said that Isabell is more down-to-earth than him, because she realises that not just personal choices have a say in the matter and acknowledges the Western capitalist logic of consumption as the underlying cause of the climate crisis. Losing sight of the larger economic structures that undermine individual initiatives, Steffen only becomes more confused about what choices he should take.

One of the subjects he often brings into discussion is the use of hand dryers versus paper towels and he almost seems to grow an obsession on this issue. At one point, his friend Atle says that he could make a calculus to find out which one is more environmentally unfriendly. However, after a few days, he tells Steffen that he cannot come to a conclusion, because he cannot find any public statistics and there are also many other aspects to take into account:

Paper produces waste.  
 But it can be recycled.  
 I don’t think there are so many clubs that recycle [...] trash from the toilets.  
 And then transportation. [...]  
 Hand dryers must only be transported once. [...]  
 Paper must be transported a couple of times during the week.  
 And then the garbage must be carried away. [...]  
 But then I don’t know what such hand dryers are usually made of, but it certainly isn’t as environmentally friendly as trees.  
 But what happens in the rainforests is not good either.  
 Paper in the club toilets hardly comes from rainforests.  
 No, but do you understand what I mean?  
 Not really. (95–96)<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> “De sier at hvis den økonomiske utviklingen i USA fortsetter, så blir det skikkelig krise, og da kommer ingen til å ha råd til sparedusjer. Det koster penger å være miljøvennlig” (Valeur 2009, 43, my translation).

<sup>21</sup> Det blir avfall av papiret.

Men det kan man resirkulere.  
 Jeg tror ikke det er så mange utesteder som resirkuler [...] søppelet på doene. [...]  
 Og så har du frakt. [...]  
 Håndtørkere må bare fraktes en gang,  
 Papir må fraktes flere ganger i uken. [...]  
 Og så må avfallet fraktes bort. [...]  
 Men så vet jeg ikke hva sånne håndtørkere er laget av som oftest, men det er sikkert ikke så miljøvennlige som trær.

Atle then makes the assumption that hand dryers are more environmentally friendly when compared to the use of paper towels, but when Steffen asks: “So if everyone in Norway would get hand dryers, how much CO<sub>2</sub> would we save?”, he does not understand what his friend would need this kind of information for, making clear that “People use towels at home” (96),<sup>22</sup> a point which Steffen seemingly had ignored. Strongly wanting to do the right thing, he needs concrete answers to his questions and doubts, and he is often guided by numbers and statistics, which do not always mirror reality. Most of the times, it is almost impossible to know for sure what products or services are most ecofriendly and he gets trapped in a loophole where he seems to lose common sense, as his conversation with Atle suggests. In another chat with his friend Markus, Steffen concludes that he “must die to stop polluting” (124).<sup>23</sup> Fortunately, the protagonist does not seriously consider this option, but his remark hints towards the impossibility of living a CO<sub>2</sub>-free life, at least when one’s life is guided by Western capitalism.

If Steffen seems unable to make a connection between all the obstacles he faces in the process of becoming more environmental and Western capitalism which Norwegian economic system is a part of, the reader, nonetheless, has the chance to grasp the ironies and the subtleties surfacing in the dialogues between Steffen and his friends. Although he does not directly indicate that he reflects over these things while at the cabin, the structure of the novel, leaping from the present of the story to past episodes, indicates that conversations with the other characters are rendered retrospectively. This suggests that Steffen does ponder upon the dialogues with his friends, perhaps trying to reevaluate his judgements. Therefore, the cabin can be seen as a heterotopia of crisis, where the character undergoes a ritual of isolation in order to reflect upon his life decisions and feelings.

We do not have access to Steffen’s final thoughts about his experience at the cabin, but the novel’s conclusions are roughly wrapped up by another character. When his family gathers at the cabin, Steffen’s sister Nanna faces him with the conclusions that maybe the protagonist himself has drawn from his experiences: “What I mean is that – it is not us, or you, or, yes – it is not individuals who are not environmentally friendly. It is everyone around individuals that is. Those who make demands and expect lots of things. [...] That one should make expensive *russ* sweaters, and become rich, and buy fine presents, and buy this and

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Men det som skjer i regnskogen, er jo slett ikke bra.

Papiret på utesteddoer er neppe fra regnskogen.

Nei, men du skjønner hva jeg mener?

Egentlig ikke. (Valeur 2009, 95–96, my translation).

<sup>22</sup> “Så hvis alle i Norge fikk seg håndtørkere, hvor mye CO<sub>2</sub> vil vi spare da?”, “Folk bruker håndkle hjemme” (Valeur 2009, 96, my translation).

<sup>23</sup> “jeg må dø for å slutte å forurense” (Valeur 2009, 124, my translation).

that I-pod and everything else" (253).<sup>24</sup> The message she gives hints to consumerism as the culprit for environmental damage, and in a subdued manner, to the way the cabin tradition has evolved in light of Norway's economic development. The cabin culture is certainly strongly influenced by its representations in mass-media, which has gradually shifted the focus from ideas of simplicity and tradition to luxury and technology (Hungnes 2015), thus shaping people's preferences for the way they conceive their cabins.

Despite its satirical criticism of cabin culture as part of leisure consumerism, I would nonetheless argue that, as a heterotopia of crisis, the *hytte*, as it is represented in the novel, still functions as a place of self-reflection. The fact that Steffen, coming here, has the occasion and the time to ponder upon his life and upon all the problems and paradoxes related to his own as well as his family's and friends' environmental attitudes, finally suggests that cabins have the potential to be restored as places of introspection and self-examination in literary discourses.

### **What Is Appropriate to Write in a *Hyttebok*?**

In this final section, I would like to return to Hennig's observation that the novel's formal complexity is, among others, a result of the insertion of other types of texts in the narrative (2021). It is important to note that the novel borrows the form of the journal, and the first-person narration allows us to read it as Steffen's diary, covering the few days he spends at the cabin. Arguably, the fragments which depict scenes from the recent past or dialogues with his friends, can also be read as part of the journal.

Moreover, besides the hand-written notes and lists, pictures of phone messages, advertisements, reproductions of social media conversations and so on, it is especially interesting to pay attention to a particular type of diaristic writing that the novel makes reference to, namely the *hyttebok*. The *hyttebok*, which would translate as a "cabin book", can take many forms, but it is essentially a kind of journal or chronicle where the owners and visitors write a few words about their experience at the cabin. The *hyttebok* is perceived as an important part of the Norwegian cabin tradition and it has been analysed as a culturally inflected type of text, that could be thought of as a particular genre (Bjordal 2011; Arntsen 2019). In what follows, I would like to present how the *hyttebok* plays an essential role in *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret*.

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<sup>24</sup> "Det jeg mener, er at – det er ikke vi, eller du, eller – ja – det er liksom ikke enkeltmennesker som ikke er miljøvennlige. Det er alle rundt enkeltmenneskene som er det. De som stiller krav og forventer masse greier. [...] At man skal lage fete russegensere, og bli rik, og kjøpe fine gaver, og ha den og den I-poden og alt det der" (Valeur 2009, 253, my translation).

I would argue that we can trace a connection between the overall structure and subject of the novel and the typical form and content of a *hyttebok*. On his second day at the cabin, after flipping through all the magazines he finds on the bookshelves, Steffen finds the family's *hyttebok* and opens it to read the last account, dating back to his last visit with Isabell at the cabin from the year before. The handwritten excerpts are rendered in the section titled "18<sup>th</sup> DECEMBER. HYTTEBOK" (Valeur 2009, 71)<sup>25</sup>. First of all, one can notice a visual resemblance to Steffen's own writings. The *hyttebok* excerpts are introduced by a date, for instance "3<sup>rd</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> August 2007" (73)<sup>26</sup>, followed by a brief account of the time spent at the cabin during that period. Similarly, the different parts of the novel are marked by the date and a word or a few words that briefly summarise what that fragment is about, for instance: "17<sup>th</sup> DECEMBER. ARRIVAL" (7), "18<sup>th</sup> DECEMBER. FOOD" (32), "18<sup>th</sup> DECEMBER. SNOWMAN" (48), "19<sup>th</sup> DECEMBER. FISHING" (126)<sup>27</sup>. Certainly, the paragraphs in the *hyttebok* are written retrospectively, while the parts covering Steffen's stay at the cabin are written in the present tense and provide a much more detailed account of his actions and thoughts. However, the general form and content of both texts strongly resemble each other. The novel is organised in relatively short parts (variably covering half a page or a few pages) which contain information about the same kind of content that is also usually mentioned in the *hyttebok*. As Håvard Vestnes Arntsen (2019) explains, "cabin books" usually contain information about outdoor activities (*friluftsliv*), weather, food, cabin work, and visitors. This is also primarily what the novel deals with, although with a strong emphasis on Steffen's inner life and his struggles with performing these activities. Furthermore, when it comes to the style of the *hyttebok*, one of its characteristics seems to be multimodality (Arntsen 2019, 29). In this way, another connection can be made with the novel, as *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret* also includes photos and drawings made by Steffen.

This literary engagement with the *hyttebok* conventions only emphasises the ironic undertones of the novel with regards to the cabin tradition. Funnily enough, after reading a few fragments from the family's *hyttebok*, Steffen starts writing an erotic short story in it, which, at the end of the novel, will be read by Steffen's sister, parents, and his girlfriend altogether, making him feel embarrassed. This generates a discussion about what is adequate to write in a *hyttebok*. Isabell comments on Steffen's story saying that: "I think it is meant to be satirical" and his father adds: "Of course it is meant to be satirical. This is exactly what makes it

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<sup>25</sup> 18. DESEMBER. HYTTEBOK (Valeur 2009, 71, my translation).

<sup>26</sup> 3. – 9. august 2007 (Valeur 2009, 73, my translation).

<sup>27</sup> "17. DESEMBER. ANKOMST" (Valeur 2009, 7, my translation), "18. DESEMBER. MAT" (32, my translation), "18. DESEMBER. SNØMANN" (48, my translation), "19. DESEMBER. FISKING" (Valeur 2009, 126, my translation).

so good" (Valeur 2009, 257).<sup>28</sup> As the novel, to a certain extent, reflects some typical *hyttebok* conventions, the dialogue between the characters reinforces the idea that we should read the whole text as a satire.

Moreover, Isabell's observation – "But whether it belongs in a *hyttebok*, that is the question here" (257)<sup>29</sup> – suggests that Steffen has transgressed the unwritten rules of what is appropriate to write in a *hyttebok* and has in a way contravened the cabin tradition. It seems that Norwegians avoid writing about negative experiences in their "cabin books": "The existence of unpleasant texts is not compatible with the writing practice, the *hyttebok* should only be a source of positive experiences" (Arntsen 2019, 31)<sup>30</sup>. We can find an allusion to this in the novel as well, when Steffen comments on his sister's account of their ski trip during their last holiday at the cabin: "Nanna's description of the ski trip when it blew up into a storm. *A really exciting ski trip*. It says nothing about the crying, the despair" (Valeur 2009, 74, emphasis in the original).<sup>31</sup> If negative experiences are banished from 'cabin books', Steffen's rather awkward erotic story can be seen as a transgression, not least because it would make readers feel uncomfortable. The discussion about the "ethics of the cabin book" (258)<sup>32</sup> can be extended to the whole novel, if we consider the way it engages with the cabin tradition. Steffen's struggle to live ecologically at the cabin reveals that, if one has the impression of getting closer to nature by spending time at the cabin, far from the city, one is in fact harming the environment more, a reality which is perhaps overlooked or difficult to admit. Essentially, this hints towards the potential of such a satire to undermine the cabin tradition as a core symbol of national identity.

The space of the cabin thus becomes conceptually translated within the space of the *hyttebok* and the act of writing it has the potential to undermine the idealised image of the *hytte* in the Norwegian collective imaginary. Mirroring a typical *hyttebok*, it can therefore be said that the novel itself becomes a heterotopia of crisis and the process of its creation reflects the narrator's process of introspection upon both his life crisis, the environmental crisis, and the cabin culture.

## Conclusion

Drawing on Rees's understanding of the *hytte* in terms of heterotopias, I have discussed in this article how *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret* builds on the

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<sup>28</sup> "Jeg tror på at den er ment satirisk"; "Selvfølgelig er den ment satirisk. Det er jo det som gjør den så bra" (Valeur 2009, 257, my translation).

<sup>29</sup> "Men om det passer i en hyttebok, det er spørsmålet her" (Valeur 2009, 257, my translation).

<sup>30</sup> "Eksistensen av ubehagelige tekster er ikke forenlig med skriftpraksisen, hytteboken skal kun være en kilde til positive opplevelser" (Arntsen 2019, 31, my translation).

<sup>31</sup> "Nannas beskrivelse av skituren da det blåste opp til storm. *En skikkelig spennende skitur*. Det står ingenting om gråtingen, fortvilelsen" (Valeur 2009, 74, my translation).

<sup>32</sup> "hytteboketikkk" (Valeur 2009, 258, my translation).

rich literary tradition that charged the Norwegian cabin with cultural meanings and values of national identity. However, as a postmodern novel, it no longer presents an idealised image of the *hytte*, but rather mocks and challenges traditional views on the cabin culture.

Although it seems that the cabin has the potential to function as a heterotopia of compensation that could offer the protagonist an alternative to the consumerist and polluting lifestyle he normally has in the city, it turns out that the cabin cannot function as such a space. Instead, it has become a product of modernity inasmuch as it thwarts Steffen's environmental goals. The novel deconstructs the idealised image of the *hytte* employing strategies such as irony and intertextuality. On a different level, the *hytte* works as a heterotopia of crisis, since it allows the protagonist to reflect upon his own life and ponder upon his own and his friends' and family's often contradicting ideas about environmentalism. Furthermore, I attempted to show how, playing with the *hyttebok* conventions, the novel is built as a satirical comment on the cabin tradition and in this way challenges culturally and socially constructed worldviews. I would finally conclude by suggesting that, in a subdued manner, climate change becomes a "threat to symbols of national identity" (Furuset al 2020, 11) in this novel, due to the way it makes the protagonist question the idea that the cabin allows closeness to nature as a value of Norwegian identity.

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