

Foreign Fictions of Iceland

Daisy Neijmann

University College London (United Kingdom)

Abstract – This article will examine ways in which Iceland has been fictionally recreated by the foreign imagination and assess to what extent stereotypical images of Iceland are perpetuated, challenged, and/or reconstructed in contemporary foreign fiction. The role of Iceland in fiction from different countries will be discussed and compared, as well as the way Iceland is “contained” in the language of the novel/story. Perspective, form, and national literary context will be also be explored, as well as the “Iceland novel’s” relationship to other writing on Iceland.

Keywords – Literature, fiction, cultural representation, cultural difference, image, the Other

Introduction

Medieval Iceland has spoken to the European literary imagination for centuries. Not only were the Icelandic sagas translated into many languages, they inspired foreign writers to create their own tales about Iceland’s medieval past.¹ Contemporary Iceland has never really been able to compete with the romantic allure of its history. During the last few decades, however, there has been a noticeable change from an almost exclusive interest in the Iceland of the past to the “cool” and trend-setting Iceland of the present, which has raised the profile of modern-day Iceland in European culture and even, to a modest extent, in literature. This article will examine a selection of foreign fictions of Iceland that have appeared in the wake of this shift in focus in order to analyze the image of post-medieval Iceland that emerges in these works and its relation to the general discourse, images, and stereotypes of Iceland as part of the North.

¹ See for instance Wawn 2000; Helgason 1999.

Representations of Iceland and the Iceland Novel

As Sumarliði Ísleifsson points out in his article “Islands on the Edge” in this volume, foreign descriptions of Iceland go back as far as the 11th century, and there is a sizeable corpus of European writing on Iceland. From the Enlightenment onwards, Iceland became an increasingly popular subject of travel accounts and scientific literature, and scholars have turned their attention to the ways in which Iceland has been represented in these works.² Foreign fiction inspired by post-medieval Iceland, on the other hand, is still quite rare and, with some notable exceptions, quite recent. This raises the question whether there are any significant differences in the way Iceland is portrayed in these two genres. Do the requirements of fictional conventions produce a different textual representation? There is no doubt that travel literature and fiction are closely related, and often the lines between the two genres are blurred.³ But to what extent and to what purpose do fiction writers rely on this existing corpus of travelogues for their representations of Iceland? And, given the fact that *belles lettres* are inevitably part of, and in dialogue with, a larger literary context, do national literary traditions influence the image of Iceland in fiction—are there, in other words, noticeable differences between countries?

For the purpose of this article, I have selected five works of fiction, each from a different country, in order to analyze and compare the image of Iceland that emerges and the role Iceland is made to play in each work. In addition, I will discuss the relationship of these Iceland novels to travel literature on Iceland. The works to be discussed are the following: the novel *Skimmer* (*Shimmer*, 1996) by the Swedish author Göran Tunström; the Dutch novel *De Knoop van Ijsland* (*Iceland's Knot*, 1996) by Gerrit Jan Zwier; “Kaltblau” (“Cold Blue,” 2003), a German short story by Judith Hermann; *Smukke biler efter krigen* (*Smart Cars after the War*, 2004), a Danish novel by Lars Frost; and *The Killer's Guide to Iceland* (2005), a novel by the Northern Irish writer Zane Radcliffe. The fact that I wanted to do a cross-national comparison, and examine the representation of Iceland in the language in which it was originally cast, determined the countries I looked to for my selection of texts. Within these countries it soon

² Notably Ísleifsson 1996; also Aho 1993.

³ Adams 1983.

FOREIGN FICTIONS OF ICELAND

appeared there were not many works to choose from, sometimes only a single instance.⁴ Where there was a choice, I selected the most recent work, in order to limit the comparison to a specific time period, 1996 until the present.

The corpus of the Iceland novel is thus, it seems, an exceptionally modest one. In France, Iceland has been little explored in fiction since the heyday of Jules Verne and Pierre Loti during the 19th century, while Norwegian literature appears to focus exclusively on medieval Iceland. While more extensive research may yet uncover more, it certainly looks as if Iceland novels are the exception rather than the rule, and they appear to be primarily the result of a particular interest on the part of an individual writer. This might explain why most Iceland novels were published recently: Iceland's increased prominence as a tourist destination and cultural hot spot means that it has come to the attention of a much wider foreign public, which, in turn, would also mean that there is an increased readership for Iceland novels.

A significant part of my analysis will be informed by close reading and existing studies on the image of Iceland and the North, but I also rely on approaches used in the study of travel literature and the representation of the Other, particularly the ideas of Joep Leerssen and Ernst van Alphen, and on post-colonial theory, principally in respect to the representation of peripheral regions by cultural centres and the asymmetrical power relations involved in those descriptions, not least the marginalization and exoticization of colonized and (apparently) peripheral peoples, as demonstrated by Edward Said in his *Orientalism*.⁵ The stereotypes and ideas generated by such discourses of power tend to dictate the way in which particular places and cultures are perceived. In his discussion of the glacier Snæfellsjökull, famously recreated in what is probably the oldest and most well-known novel featuring post-medieval Iceland, Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864), Ástráður Eysteinnsson coins the term "Thuleism" to indicate a specifically Icelandic variant of orientalism, where travel-writers recreate an Iceland they have been

⁴ My research has so far yielded only single examples in Sweden, the Netherlands, and Italy, and three to four instances in Denmark, Germany, and the UK.

⁵ Said 1978.

“programmed” to see, or its antithesis.⁶ What informs the re-creation of Iceland in foreign fiction?

Nature, North, and Wilderness

Something that is shared by all the works under discussion is the prominent role of the Icelandic landscape, particularly the interior wilderness and its volcanic nature. The first thing Lasse, the main protagonist in *Smukke biler efter krigen*, wants to do when he arrives is visit the Blue Lagoon, and then see some “real Icelandic nature.”⁷ Reykjavík has nice cafés, but it is too small, and holds little attraction for him. The Icelandic landscape, on the other hand, is frequently described as “imposing” (*imponerende*)⁸ and is clearly what one is expected to see when visiting Iceland.

It is not long before the reader realizes, however, that the Iceland Lasse sees is coloured by his memories of an earlier visit with a girlfriend who has broken up with him since and the loss of whom he still mourns. The narrative provides a telling image of this at the very start, when Lasse first glimpses Iceland from the air: the weather is bright, but he remembers it looking grey and covered in mist when he arrived with Sigrid, and he concludes that “it should be misty when one arrives at Keflavík airport.”⁹ Lasse’s view of Iceland is clearly pre-conditioned, shrouded in the mist of his own memories and the desire for a lost love. Indeed, in the course of the novel it becomes difficult to tell Lasse’s experiences in the present apart from his memories of his previous visit.

During his excursion into the Icelandic countryside with a group of other foreigners, Lasse, aside from reminiscing, continually compares what he sees with sightseeing experiences in other countries, comparing for instance the waterfall Gullfoss with his experience of the Grand Canyon. The landscape does not remain a passive receptacle for Lasse’s clouded vision of it, however, as the

⁶ Eysteinnsson 2006: 66.

⁷ “rigtigt islandsk natur.” Frost 2004: 24 (my translation).

⁸ Frost 2004: 125-126 (my translation).

⁹ “[d]et bør være tåget, når man lander i Keflavik lufthavn.” Frost 2004: 12 (my translation).

FOREIGN FICTIONS OF ICELAND

Geysir pool seems to stare back at him from its hidden depths, a gigantic eye returning his gaze

like an iris, and it's possible to glimpse something, a darkness, a hole down into the earth's interior, inside the centre of the eye, like a pupil. It's not at all difficult to imagine the geyser's pool like an eye that stares up into the sky and out into space. [...] but what does this eye see? That's an entirely different matter. That's hard to know, and one should be careful [...]¹⁰

When the group decides it is time for some adventure, the landscape has its revenge. They play around crossing a glacial river in their hired jeep, filming each other and “enhancing the dramatic effects.”¹¹ Being unfamiliar with the landscape, however, and unable to interpret its language, they soon get into trouble. Not realizing that the river is quickly filling up with water after a warm, sunny day, they cross it at exactly the wrong point on their way back, and they get stuck. Suddenly, the Icelandic wilderness has turned into a real and immediate danger: “There are no people, there is nothing to see, and no reason to hope for any help.”¹²

In *Skimmer*, the other Nordic novel, there is a very strong and direct connection between the physical and the human world, which is inhabited by a myriad of eccentric characters. The narrator, Pétur, has retreated to his summerhouse in order to deal with the death of his father, and to write a memorial to him, which eventually becomes the novel we are reading. He introduces the landscape around him to the reader as a place away from “the contemporary” (*samtiden*),¹³ where he can escape from “civilised bad habits.”¹⁴ It is consistently capitalized in the text as *Obygden* (“the Wilderness”) and is described as a place of creative inspiration, still and remote, where emptiness

¹⁰ “som en iris, og man kan skimte noget, et mørke, et hul ned til jordens indre, inde midt i øjet, som en pupil. Det er slet ikke svært at forestille sig geyser-søen som et øje, der stirrer op i himmelen og ud i verdensrummet. Det giver sig selv med de farver og formen, den runde form, men hvad ser det øje? Det er en helt anden sag. Det er ikke til ad vide, og man skal passe på [...]” Frost 2004: 126 (my translation).

¹¹ “optimere dramaet.” Frost 2004: 139 (my translation).

¹² “Der er ingen mennesker, ingenting at se og ingen grund til at håbe på nogen hjælp.” Frost 2004: 143 (my translation).

¹³ Tunström 1996: 9, 111.

¹⁴ “civilisatoriska ovanor.” Tunström 1996: 65 (my translation).

reigns, nothing happens, and the limits of realism don't apply. The Icelandic wilderness is thus established as being not only a place beyond the urban and the everyday, beyond reality, but also as a place of origins for the narrator, as well as, on a metalevel, for the text and its characters.

If it is a place of origins, however, it is also a place of destruction and death. Pétur's mother Lára, a geologist who lived on a glacier on the slopes of a volcano called Fretla, measuring the movements of the earth, disappears shortly after giving birth to Pétur, when Fretla erupts. She is never found. Lára is an elusive character who has a mystical, almost symbiotic relationship with the landscape. Halldór, Pétur's father, calls her "the Seeress on Fretla":

she was the seeress, our connection to the earth: all the netherworld's quakes went through her. "Fretla breathes calmly. Fretla is restless. Fretla is asleep. Soon Fretla will blossom." As if she were talking about a child.¹⁵

Lára's mysterious, elusive nature can be explained at least in part by the fact that she exists only as an idealized memory in the book, an object of longing, but at the same time she also appears at times as the incarnation of the volcano she inhabits and, by extension, the Icelandic wilderness. Post-colonial studies have revealed how the inhabitants of colonies and peripheral regions tend to be represented in literature as childlike, innocent, and "natural" (i.e., living in an instinctive co-existence with nature), vis-à-vis the rational, cultured, and civilized European,¹⁶ and several scholars have pointed to the tendency in foreign discourses on Iceland to view Icelanders as personifications of their country and its wild nature.¹⁷ The novel's playful, ironic re-creation of common stereotypes about Iceland, however, suggests an intention to expose this tendency rather than uncritically perpetuate it.

¹⁵ "Hon var sierskan, den jordade kontakten till oss: alla skälvingar underifrån gick genom henne. 'Fretla andas lugnt. Fretla är orolig. Fretla vilar. Fretla kommer snart at blomma.' Som talade hon om ett barn." Tunström 1996: 178 (my translation).

¹⁶ On this, see for instance the essays in *Beyond Pug's Tour* 1997, and Thisted 2002: 319–323.

¹⁷ Jóhannsson 2001: 53–54, 59; Ísleifsson 1996: 213; Jóhannsdóttir 2006: 117.

FOREIGN FICTIONS OF ICELAND

Unlike what we see in *Smukke biler*, where Reykjavík is very much overshadowed by the Icelandic landscape, the Iceland constructed in *Skimmer* encompasses both a contemporary, colourful city full of life and culture connected to the modern world, and a timeless wilderness where life and art originate. The two are intimately connected: as the modern, global world threatens the wilderness, it also lives precariously in its shadow. In Peter Davidson's words: "the thin crust of rock over volcano, the thin layer of human settlement over the wilderness."¹⁸ This perceived fragility of an otherwise overpowering landscape becomes symbolic not only in *Skimmer*, where it is threatened by civilization and exploitation, the latter personified, interestingly, by a foreign Icelandophile,¹⁹ but also in *Smukke biler*, where Lasse extends it to Icelanders and Icelandic culture generally:

[He] talks about how fragile Iceland is: even though its nature looks so brutal, there are fragile landscapes, new, soft, changing mountains, living lava, and rivers that continually find new ways of running into the ocean. And the language is fragile, Lasse says.²⁰

In *The Killer's Guide to Iceland*, Sigríður, the clairvoyant mother of the protagonist's Icelandic partner, defends the Icelandic countryside and its "sacred places" from exploitation. Both here and in *Skimmer*, ordinary Icelanders are the defenders of Iceland's unspoilt nature, while the Icelandic authorities are portrayed as condoning foreign exploitation for economic gain.

¹⁸ Davidson 2005: 121.

¹⁹ That it should be an Icelandophile, of all people, who personifies threat and exploitation could, on the surface, be explained by the fact that the privileged perspective in this novel is a post-colonial Icelandic one which regards the onslaught of foreign Icelandophiles escaping "civilization" in search of "wilderness" and trying to "capture" a part of it as a threat; however, it is the Icelandic authorities who consciously turn a blind eye to the exploitation in return for economic profit. The intimation may thus be that even Iceland and its wilderness are now an integral part of a larger world, where the nationalist dichotomy of innocent children of nature overrun and exploited by corrupt foreigners no longer holds—if it ever did.

²⁰ "Lasse taler om, hvor skrøbelig Island er, selvom naturen ser så brutal ud, så er det skrøbelige landskaber, nye, bløde, foranderlige bjerge, levende lava, og floder der hele tiden finder nye veje at løbe ud i havet. Og sproget er skrøbeligt, siger Lasse." Frost 2004: 98 (my translation).

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

In both *The Killer's Guide to Iceland* and *De Knoop van IJsland*, the Icelandic interior plays a central role as the dramatic and symbolic stage for the main protagonists' inner journeys and emotional reckoning. The emphasis in both novels is on those characteristics of the Icelandic landscape that are viewed as alien: its overwhelming silence and isolation, the lack of life and growth, the formations of the rocks and mountains that speak to the imagination. To Cal, the main character in *The Killer's Guide to Iceland*, it looks both prehistoric and futuristic, like an alien planet,²¹ while to Hans, in *De Knoop van IJsland*, its "spooky" (*spookachtige*) qualities suggest an other, older reality, preceding civilization.²² As they look at the Icelandic landscape, however, they are actually looking at themselves, a part of themselves from which they have become estranged. As Ernst van Alphen has argued with reference to Freud's essay "The Uncanny," the Other is always the Other within: something which is known and familiar becomes repressed, and thereby strange and unsettling, and is then displaced onto an alien Other.²³ The physical landscape becomes an emotional landscape, a mirror of an alien self, reflecting the desolation the characters feel. As the reference to Iceland's interior as "the dark heart of Iceland" in *The Killer's Guide*²⁴ seems to indicate, the Icelandic wilderness becomes a symbolic "heart of darkness," located in both novels near the crater of the volcano Askja conveniently called Víti ("hell"), and the Askja lake, which Ina in *De Knoop van IJsland* calls "the lake of death." It is here that the protagonists have to confront their past and repressed emotions, undergoing a symbolic death and rebirth—a stage to confront their inner demons and vanquish them. The Icelandic world of nature here becomes what Birna Bjarnadóttir has called "a nature of feelings."²⁵ The nature and location of this landscape are crucial to its symbolic role: the lifeless heart of the country, both burnt out and frozen over, where the guts of the earth spill out.

Víti also plays a small part in *Skimmer*, where the main protagonists are all Icelanders. Halldór takes his son Pétur along on a trip to Víti, where they watch the Americans practising for their moon

²¹ Radcliffe 2005: 358.

²² Zwier 1996: 9–10.

²³ van Alphen 1991: 11.

²⁴ Radcliffe 2005: 325.

²⁵ Bjarnadóttir 1999: 937.

FOREIGN FICTIONS OF ICELAND

landing. From wondering about the nature of Iceland's independence, the conversation turns to Iceland itself:

—[...] Iceland is the most moonlike place on the entire earth.

—It is so horrible. It is like outer space.

—We *are* in outer space, Pétur. Far, far out. But there are many places that look like this. This is your country and you must learn to love it.

—That won't be easy.

—To love that which is beautiful is a cheap art. To demand a single drop of milk from a stone is much harder.

—I think in any case that we should move to another country, why do we have to live here? *Why?*

—Because the grey moss glows and the moss campion smiles, amid all the grey. So that once a year one can go into the Wilderness and be reminded that we are particles in a cosmic dream.²⁶

Here, it is Icelanders themselves who see the landscape as alien, but not as a symbol of their estranged selves. Rather, it becomes symbolic of man's place in the universe. Iceland emerges here in all its northern austerity, its difficult beauty, its ultimate strangeness, a place for humbled meditation, removed from the ordinary world.²⁷ What seems particularly interesting is that, in this novel, it is not a place one grows to love as a matter of course, not even, or perhaps especially not, for Icelanders. Or perhaps it simply exposes a foreign perspective wondering how Icelanders come to terms with living in this country.

These foreign novels, it would seem, endow the Icelandic wilderness with a heart of sorts: whether it is a symbolic "dark" heart that reflects the inner selves of the protagonists, or the heart whose

²⁶ "—[...] Island är den mest månlika platsen på hela jorden.—Det är så hemskt. det är som ute i rymden.—Vi är ute i rymden, Pétur. Långt långt ute. Men så här ser det ut på många ställen. det är ditt land och du måste lära dig att älska det.—Det blir inte lätt.—Att älska det redan sköna är en billig konst. Att avkräva stenen en enda droppe mjölk är betydligt svårere.—Jag tycker i alla fall att vi borde flytta till ett annat land, varför skall vi bo här? Varför?—Därför att backtimjan glöder och lambagräset ler, mitt i det grå. För att man en gång om året skall bege sig ut i Obygden och komma ihåg att vi är partiklar i en kosmisk dröm." Tunström 1996: 29 (my translation).

²⁷ Davidson 2005: 8, 46, 159, 165.

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

beatings the geologist Lára in *Skimmer* measures. In *Smukke biler*, *De Knoop van IJsland*, *The Killer's Guide*, and *Skimmer*, the Icelandic wilderness also has an eye, with an uncanny stare. In *Smukke biler* it is located in Geysir's pool, as we saw earlier. In *The Killer's Guide* and *De Knoop van IJsland*, Askja lake is described as a gigantic green eye, a metaphor that could be interpreted as a reflection of the self, the "I," as well as the eye, or gaze, of the land, returning that of the outsider and redirecting it to the self. And whereas most works depict the wilderness as silent, in *De Knoop van IJsland*, the Icelandic interior also has a voice, as Hans, the protagonist, listens to it howling, bubbling, sputtering, hissing, whistling, and screaming. The landscape thus becomes a living being in these works, albeit an alien one, Other to the novels' narrative selves.

In the German short story "Kaltblau," the Icelandic landscape dominates, too, but not so much in the form of the wilderness as in the form of a winterscape, which is, however, also used to symbolize and reflect the emotional landscape of the main characters. Like *Skimmer*, "Kaltblau" features an Icelandic perspective. Jonina²⁸ likes the whiteness, the quiet, the winter light, which allow her to empty her mind and think of nothing, something she experiences as purifying: "it calms her nerves and her entire body, and also her heart."²⁹ When a German couple comes to visit her and her partner Magnus, she realizes that, like many tourists, they endow the Icelandic world of nature with healing powers and a therapeutic effect. Gradually, it becomes clear that both couples struggle with relationship problems. The frozen landscape mirrors the estrangement that has crept into their relationships, which have, like the landscape, become frozen and suspended in time. Jonina, who is a tourist guide, has never liked tourist conversations about her country, but she starts listening to her guests in a way she never does to other tourists when she becomes aware of the fact that "they experience Iceland as a kind of miracle that mends their broken hearts": "For the first time she herself has the feeling that she lives in a country where the smoking volcanoes and hissing water lead to the answer to all

²⁸ All names as spelled in the original text.

²⁹ "[...] es beruhigt ihre Nerven und ihren ganzen Körper und auch ihr Herz." Hermann 2003: 70 (my translation).

questions.”³⁰ This theme of cold estrangement is nicely captured in the story’s title, “cold blue,” and the whites and blues that dominate the descriptions of the landscape. The cold, the white snow and ice of the winterscape are everywhere in the story, watched and traversed by the four characters. It is contrasted with the bright blue of the sky, as light replaces the darkness of the long winter nights.

The Icelandic landscape as portrayed in all five works is very much a northern nature, in accordance with traditional ideas and narrative functions of the North: the gateway to hell and the land of the dead, the strangeness, the contrast of fragility and awe-inspiring power, the cold and difficult beauty.³¹ All re-create, in one way or another, the pattern of what Davidson calls “archetypic northern journeys” in Western thinking about the North:

the journey from civilisation to wild and untamed nature [...],
and the journey into one’s interiority, the self-understanding,
clarification and focusing of the spirit that may be looked for
as a result of a journey into the far north³²

coupled with “the idea that in the process of an arduous journey some kind of understanding of oneself in the world can be achieved.”³³

The idea of *Ultima Thule* has long been connected to Iceland, along with its associations of the periphery, on the edge of, or even removed from, the ordinary, knowable world. This idea finds its way into foreign fiction in direct and indirect ways. In “Kaltblau,” Irene, the German guest, makes specific reference to *Ultima Thule* as she tries to express her impressions of Iceland:

“far away from everything, as remote as possible.” “And therefore as close as possible,” Jonas shouts. The expression is

³⁰ “Sie hat zum ersten Mal selber das Gefühl, in einem Land zu leben, in dem qualmende Vulkane und fauchendes Wasser alle Fragen zu einer Antwort führen.” Hermann 2003: 102 (my translation).

³¹ Davidson 2005: 26, 45, 121, 165, 184.

³² Davidson 2005: 65.

³³ Davidson 2005: 174.

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

completely new to Jonina, and she doesn't quite know what to do with it all.³⁴

Ultima Thule is thus presented as belonging to an outsider's perspective: Jonina has no idea what is meant by it. It causes her to think, though, about the location of such a place, and in particular the location of the horizon: "By which standard should one measure the end of the world? And how far away is the horizon, and is it always and everywhere equally far away?"³⁵ Jonina starts to consider the classical description of Iceland in a larger context, in response to Irene's comment. Towards the end of the story, she is looking out over the same landscape, this time without the snow, and is still contemplating whether the horizon is everywhere equally far away, echoing Davidson's discussion of the North as the most distant place on earth, and at the same time a place where distance is hard, even impossible, to measure.³⁶

Even without direct reference to *Ultima Thule*, the Icelandic wilderness is frequently described as a place representing another reality, where time is condensed or frozen. In his discussion of the mystic Celtic Fringe as a similar place of stasis at the very edge of the real world, E. W. Lynam suggests that, as in the Bakhtinian notion of a "chronotope," "a particular representational sphere is created where time is seen to pass at a different rate than elsewhere."³⁷ This description seems to fit perfectly the image of the Icelandic landscape in the foreign fiction discussed here: a place where the limits of realism don't apply and nothing happens (*Skimmer*), where the winterscape challenges the normal definitions of place and time ("Kaltblau"), a place "beyond this world" where an other, older reality challenges science and modernity (*De Knoop van IJsland*). In the two works which feature an Icelandic perspective, even Icelanders themselves come to view their landscape as above and beyond reality.

³⁴ "[...] entfernt von allem, am entferntesten? Und also am nächsten', schreit Jonas. Jonina ist dieser Ausdruck völlig neu, und sie weiß nicht, wie sie mit alledem umgehen soll." Hermann 2003: 102 (my translation).

³⁵ "Nach welchem Maß soll man das messen, das Ende der Welt? Und wie weit ist der Horizont entfernt, und ist das immer und überall gleich weit?" Hermann 2003: 105 (my translation).

³⁶ Davidson 2005: 22.

³⁷ Lynam 1990: 287.

Intertextual Landscapes

In his *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel*, Percy Adams demonstrates the close relationship between these two genres: just like the travelogue is never simply a photograph of reality, the novel is never “just” fiction, but traditionally sets out to evoke a recognizable reality. Writers of fiction who wish to re-create a foreign country for their readers almost inevitably rely on the available literature, even if, in these days of global travel, their writings may be expected also to build on their own experiences and observations. The extent to which travel literature informs the Iceland novel, however, both intertextually and as a motif, is striking.

Maps, tourist guides, and Iceland travelogues abound in Iceland novels. Most obviously, they constitute convenient narrative tools to provide the reader with the information necessary to conjure up the country, as well as being obvious props for the protagonist, who is in many instances a visitor. However, in several instances they also serve to emphasize the constructed nature of the Iceland we find in these works, as well as the fact that the protagonists, and, by extension, the reader, view the country, its landscape, culture, and inhabitants primarily through the prism of other texts.

Lasse in *Smukeke biler* has been invited to a wedding in Iceland and decides to add a few extra days to see something more of the country. It quickly becomes clear that tourist literature dictates what he will see while there. He decides to visit the Blue Lagoon before going on to Reykjavík, because “it is a place one should not miss.”³⁸ The entire route into the Icelandic countryside is determined on the basis of map and guidebook alone: “We *must* see this waterfall...”³⁹ Clearly, the landscape is not viewed and interpreted directly and on its own terms, but through a textual construction. While Lasse ridicules tourist guidebooks on Iceland at several points in the novel, he himself also chooses to experience the landscape indirectly, through the music of Sigur Rós: “In a banal but good way, it all fits together, the long

³⁸ “Det er et sted, man ikke må gå glip af.” Frost 2004: 13 (my translation).

³⁹ “Det vandfald skal man se.” Frost 2004: 76 (my translation).

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

grating guitar chords, the plaintive falsetto, the rough mountain slopes and the soaked, pale green meadows.”⁴⁰

He and his fellow travellers all want to see the Iceland they have come to expect from other texts. The image of Iceland in *Smukke biler* is thus very much that of a country perceived through the lens of commercial tourism, as well as through personal history and emotions. Iceland is either a misty isle, surrounded by the clouds of troubled memories and sorrow, or a tourist destination that sometimes fails and sometimes succeeds in living up to its marketed image by providing the expected diversion and adventure.

The Killer's Guide to Iceland also emphasizes its reliance on, and contribution to, a discursive tradition on Iceland created in a foreign language. Cal owns a company in Glasgow called Strawdonkey, which publishes online travel accounts, and which he sells when he moves to Iceland. Here, he sets up his own business finding locations for foreign film companies. Both businesses provide a metafictional comment by the novel on itself as a text which constructs an image of another country and foregrounds its own foreignness to its subject matter. With his firm, called Fire and Ice Locations, Callum tries to market Iceland through its “exotic” appeal, but the opposition he encounters from local people shows the potentially damaging consequences this can have environmentally. The constructed nature of the stereotyped images underlying this appeal of “exotic” Iceland is shown very effectively when Cal has to have three artificial geysers made to erupt on command for a shoot; they create an explosion which puts one man in the hospital. “The Killer’s Guide to Iceland”, a document sent to Cal anonymously by email, provides a rather eerie example of a tourist guide to Iceland, the kind Strawdonkey used to publish, but written to describe a murder. Here, in the words of Cal’s former partner Neil, “travel book meets thriller,”⁴¹ an apt description of the novel itself.

If intertextuality is a feature of *Smukke biler* and *The Killer's Guide*, it is at the very heart of *De Knoop van IJsland*, which bases itself on an

⁴⁰ “På en banal, men god måde, passer det hele sammen, de lange skurende guitarakkorder, den klagende falset, de skurvede bjergsider og de gennemblødte, matgrønne enge.” Frost 2004: 110 (my translation).

⁴¹ Radcliffe 2005: 197.

FOREIGN FICTIONS OF ICELAND

actual travelogue. The novel imagines the journey of Ina von Grumbkow, who published a travel book on Iceland in 1909 entitled *Isafold. Reisebilder aus Island*. The main narrative point of view is, however, not that of Ina, but of Hans Otten, an aspiring geologist. Hans and Ina's trip from Reykjavik to Askja is as much a journey through a physical as through a textual landscape, as they try to make sense of and come to grips with their impressions and experiences of Iceland by reading about it. They consequently see the landscape as much through other people's eyes as through their own, reading it as written by others, just as the reader sees the Iceland of the novel through their eyes. This Iceland is thus very much presented as a textual construction based on, and in turn contributing to, a narrative tradition of foreign discourses on Iceland.

For Hans, Iceland is primarily a topic of research, a geological paradise, and he uses geological terms to describe and comprehend the landscape around him. Ina on the other hand reads Icelandic literature and mythology, which suits her need to find comfort in a cultural presence on the one hand, and her interest in the supernatural on the other. These Iceland discourses help give shape to their impressions and provide the illusion of order in the chaos of the natural wilderness surrounding them.

A notable example of the textual self-consciousness that characterizes this novel is the conversation Hans has with an Icelandic guide called Sigurdur. Here, the novel becomes a metatext, admitting to its own nature as travel fiction, an Iceland narrative, and as such, unreliable. Hans suggests that Sigurdur's last customer, who Sigurdur said did nothing but write down what he said, must have been writing a travel book: "That genre is very popular again. Those books are usually made up of nothing but twaddle and humbug."⁴² Sigurdur admits that he sometimes allows himself a joke at the expense of the gullible foreigner, and told this customer, who wanted to know all about Iceland's poverty, that in times of famine, Icelanders drink horse blood. Hans recognizes this as a tale about the Huns, and Sigurdur confesses to having read it somewhere. Hans teases him about the sort of book that will now be published: "An Adventurous Journey With An Icelandic Guide Through A Hell Of

⁴² "Dat genre is momenteel weer heel populair. Die boeken hangen meestal van beuzelarijen en kletspraatjes aan elkaar." Zwier 1996: 43 (my translation).

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

Fire And Ice, in which it will say how he saw you drink litres of horseblood.’”⁴³ Apart from emphasizing the intertextual nature of the novel and affirming its place in a literary tradition of narratives about “other” peoples, this passage also undermines any claim to the novel as an authentic account about Iceland.

The native guide is a classic character in literature about foreign countries, and four out of the five works of fiction discussed here feature variations on it. *De Knoop van IJsland* provides the most traditional examples, which is perhaps only to be expected, considering its subject matter. Apart from Sigurdur, who plays only a very minor role, there is Bjarni Magnússon, who is the one actually travelling with Hans and Ina. Unlike Sigurdur, Bjarni generally conforms to the conventions of the native guide as possessing a knowledge of the area that is beyond that of the foreigner, but who is otherwise poor, dirty, culturally deprived, and superstitious: a child of nature who forms an antithesis to the educated representative of civilization.

In *Smukke biler* and *The Killer's Guide*, both of which are of course set in contemporary Iceland, the role of the native guide is played by an Icelandic woman with whom the male protagonist has a sexual relationship. Lasse meets Sigrún in the Blue Lagoon at the start of his visit and asks her out. She then regularly re-appears, providing Lasse with information and explanations, as well as providing sexual interest. Birna in *The Killer's Guide*, on the other hand, constitutes an intriguing subversion of this stock character. Her knowledge of her native country, although based in an intimate relationship with the landscape, is not instinctual but scientific: she is a volcanologist. She is also the one in charge for most of the novel, and her voice drowns out most of the other voices in the text, including that of the male protagonist, Cal. Interestingly, the native guide's instinctual, mystical knowledge of his environment has not disappeared altogether: it resides in the character of Birna's mother, Sigríður. It is also noteworthy that Birna and Sigríður, who could be viewed as two sides of the same coin, aren't the only native guides, even if they are the main ones. The presence of a group of different Icelandic characters

⁴³ “‘Avontuurlijke Reis Met Een IJslandse Gids Door Een Hel Van Vuur En Ijs, en daarin staat dan hoe hij gezien heeft hoe jij liters paardenbloed hebt opgedronken.’” Zwier 1996: 43–44 (my translation).

FOREIGN FICTIONS OF ICELAND

surrounding Cal, who hold conflicting opinions about their country, allows the novel to emphasize the fact that there is no one authentic Iceland that can be represented by one native guide. The native voice in this novel is a polyphonic one.

“Kaltblau” also shows an interesting reversal of the classic pattern. Here, the native guide is the story’s main character. Jonina is a tourist guide who is tired of hearing foreigners talk about her country and prefers to keep her distance when they seek her opinion. She cannot see the island the way the tourists do. This changes, however, with Irene and Jonas’s visit, when a shared but unspoken sorrow over lost love induces her to start listening and view her country with new eyes. Thus, the foreign author adopts a native perspective that is changed by a foreign perspective, a ploy that serves to remind the reader continually of the tourist view of Iceland, its limitations and advantages, and the tension between insider and outsider views.

Ultimately, all travel literature is about cultural encounter, more specifically, about the encounter between the Self and a perceived Other. Ernst van Alphen is one among several scholars who have pointed to the fact that encounters with an Other primarily serve the purpose of shedding light not on the Other, but on the Self.⁴⁴ The dynamic between outsider and insider, which shapes travelogues, also importantly informs the Iceland novel. Three of the works under discussion feature an outsider’s perspective, while the other two have Icelanders as protagonists. In *Smukke biler*, as we saw earlier, Iceland is mostly the object of the tourist gaze. The reader sees Iceland almost exclusively through Lasse’s eyes. It quickly becomes clear, however, that Lasse is by no means a reliable narrator. Having lost the woman he loves, and living a rootless and aimless life that provides no fulfilment, he lacks self-esteem, and is clearly in search of a more desirable identity. His superficial and facile opinions about Iceland serve primarily as a platform to reflect on himself and his home country.

In *De Knoop van IJsland* we again have an outsider’s perspective, but this time, it is a very self-conscious one. Just as the text shows a keen awareness of itself as part of a narrative tradition, the novel’s main perspective also demonstrates a clear sensitivity to its position as

⁴⁴ van Alphen 1991: 3.

outsider to its subject matter. Hans hails from one of the small East Frisian islands off the German coast. He is also of very modest background. This makes him a very marginal German character: he finds it difficult to speak standard High German, and his mental landscape of sea, dunes, and mudflats is as far removed from that of continental Germany as his home is far removed from Berlin and the German heartland. His modest, provincial background also creates a distance between him and his fellow geologists and Iceland-travellers, who are all from the upper classes.

Hans's background is important for the novel because it gives him a very different perspective from that of the other characters. He finds it much easier to understand and sympathize with the Icelanders, who are, after all, also islanders, far removed from any of the main European cultural centres and prey to the caprices of powerful and omnipresent natural forces. As he puts it: "The islands are situated on the edge of Germany, Iceland is situated on the edge of Europe. They are outlying areas, inhabited by barbarians."⁴⁵

When Hans meets Horstmann, another German geologist, who personally renamed Askja lake, he thinks to himself: "Horstmann. Who thinks he can just change the names on maps of other countries into German names. As if Iceland were a German colony."⁴⁶ And he wonders, not for the first time:

What is it about the Germans and Iceland? [...] Denmark would indeed do her powerful southern neighbour a great favour if she would hand over her burned bride. New Germany.⁴⁷

When he catches Horstmann rowing on the lake where his colleagues drowned, he seems to Hans the very epitome of Germany's attitude to other countries, "a real German" (*een echte Duitser*): "Horstmann

⁴⁵ "De eilanden liggen aan de rand van Duitsland, IJsland ligt aan de rand van Europa. Het zijn buitengewesten, bevolkt door barbaren." Zwier 1996: 132 (my translation).

⁴⁶ "Horstmann. Die meent dat hij de namen op de kaarten van andere landen zomaar door Duitse namen kan vervangen. Alsof IJsland een Duitse kolonie zou zijn." Zwier 1996: 83 (my translation).

⁴⁷ "Wat hebben de Duitsers toch met IJsland? [...] Denemarken zou haar machtige zuiderbuur inderdaad een grote dienst bewijzen als zij haar verbrande bruid zou willen afstaan. Nieuw Duitsland." Zwier 1996: 150–51 (my translation).

FOREIGN FICTIONS OF ICELAND

seems to him a worthy representative of the modern imperial Germany, acting just as tactlessly and arrogantly on the world stage.”⁴⁸ This passage tells the reader two things: that Hans apparently does not regard himself as “a real German,” and that his marginal perspective provides him with the distance to criticize contemporary imperialist and colonialist attitudes. He is thus not fully at home in either the category of insider or of outsider. Instead, like a trickster, he crosses the boundaries of each: he can identify with, yet keep a critical distance from, his own country as well as the country where he is a visitor.

Like Hans Otten, Cal in *The Killer's Guide* comes with an understanding of what it is like to be from a small country often viewed as both exotic and barbaric, acting as Other to a powerful neighbouring centre. Much is made of the fact that Cal is *not* English but Scottish, and his “northernness” is emphasized, for instance by making it easier for him to deal with Icelandic weather. Furthermore, Cal, too, is neither insider nor quite an outsider: when he arrives in Iceland at the beginning of the book, it is not as an average tourist or traveller, but to start a new life there with Birna, the Icelandic woman he loves. He does not speak the language, however, and he feels he is not accepted by Birna’s mother or her eleven-year-old daughter. On one level, the novel can be read as Cal’s personal journey to become an accepted part of their family, and while it remains unclear whether he really succeeds, the fact that Birna carries his child at the end of the book means he does manage to weave his way into the family’s, and Iceland’s, genetic fabric. Here, the movement of the text is clearly towards “going native.”

In “Kaltblau,” as we saw earlier, the narrative point of view is Icelandic, but the text nevertheless builds on an insider–outsider dynamic. The central event in the story occurs when the main Icelandic character starts seeing the Icelandic landscape with the eyes of her foreign visitors and begins to consider its magical and healing qualities. In this way, the story recognizes the difference between a native and a foreign perspective, between home and the physical reality of living there on the one hand, and the romance and

⁴⁸ “Horstmann lijkt hem een waardig vertegenwoordiger van het moderne keizerlijke Duitsland, dat even tactloos en arrogant op het wereldtoneel acteert.” Zwier 1996: 168 (my translation).

emotional influence of the wild elemental forces on the other, creating a tension between the two, but then resolves it by having the latter change the former. Ernst van Alphen has argued that the only way to know the Other is by letting the Other speak about the Self, by giving the Other the position of “I,” which is exactly what happens in this story.⁴⁹ However, in the end, the Other is not allowed to change the Self: it is still the foreign perspective that dominates, as it changes the assumed Icelandic one.

Skimmer also offers an Icelandic narrative point of view. It differs from all previous texts, however, in that it neither features travel as its main motif, nor does it revolve around cultural encounter in the same way that the other works do. The foreign perspective becomes clear primarily in the fact that the Iceland constructed here is a very international place, where foreigners feature prominently, and in the playful irony underlying the text’s re-creation of many common Icelandic stereotypes. Halldór, for instance, is introduced as a “child of the republic,” conceived at the suggestion of the prime minister of Iceland to be born on the day of Iceland’s independence, 17 June 1944, to form part of a new, independent nation of Icelanders. Halldór is also nationally famous as the Icelandic state radio’s fishing news reporter. Lára, the geologist, becomes a part of the landscape she is studying, while their son, Pétur, becomes a businessman who gives the Icelandic economy a new lease on life by creating a new export market for Iceland’s fishing industry. Thus, instead of uncritically perpetuating stereotypical images of Iceland, this text exposes and ridicules them.

Language

Any text about a foreign country inevitably raises the issue of language: how to capture, in this instance, Iceland, in a foreign language; how to introduce Icelandic into the text and to the foreign reader; and how to make foreign and Icelandic characters communicate in a convincing way. This article does not provide sufficient scope to address all these questions, but language does play a prominent part in several of the works discussed here, often taking on a symbolic role as well.

⁴⁹ van Alphen 1991: 15.

FOREIGN FICTIONS OF ICELAND

One thing that the foreign fiction on Iceland under discussion makes clear is that Iceland is as difficult to traverse linguistically as it is physically. Most foreign characters struggle with the Icelandic language and its pronunciation. Lasse in *Smukke biler* cannot remember the names of most of the Icelanders he meets. As he says dismissively: “one cannot possibly remember names like that.”⁵⁰ This statement in turn indicates Lasse’s lack of interest in getting to know Icelanders in any depth.

In “Kaltblau,” the cold/blue, or white/blue, symbolism that dominates the story is derived from an Icelandic expression: a “cold blue” (ice cold or hard) fact.⁵¹ Although the actual Icelandic is not quoted, the acknowledged role of Icelandic here demonstrates the text’s self-awareness regarding the role of language in the representation of a foreign country generally. Jonina and Magnus both speak German, and this is how they communicate with Jonas and Irene about Iceland. As a tour guide, Jonina is used to speaking about Iceland in a foreign language. Nevertheless, language has an estranging effect. Jonina remarks on the struggle for words that tourists experience in trying to speak about their Icelandic impressions.⁵² When Magnus and Jonina speak German, they become like strangers to each other (“It is strange to be speaking German, and Magnus’s German is almost uncanny”).⁵³ When Irene calls Jonina by her name, it sounds strange to her. Thus, the role of language in this story both reminds the reader of the fact that the language of the text is not always analogous to the language of its characters and topic, and it underscores its main theme: estrangement.

One way in which Hans Otten is able to get closer to Iceland than most of his compatriots in *De Knoop van IJsland* is through language. Hans’s East Frisian dialect allows him to understand Icelanders speaking Danish much more easily than Ina or Walther, who only speak standard German. Here, too, his marginal background proves to be an advantage. It is only a limited advantage, however, for Hans does not speak any Icelandic. In fact, the only foreigner who appears

⁵⁰ “det er ikke til at huske den slags navne.” Frost 2004: 87 (my translation).

⁵¹ Hermann 2003: 86.

⁵² Hermann 2003: 89.

⁵³ “Es ist merkwürdig, Deutsch zu sprechen, und Magnus’ Deutsch ist geradezu unheimlich.” Hermann 2003: 77 (my translation); also 65.

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

to understand and speak the language is Horstmann. Significantly, the solution to the geological riddle, or knot, Hans seeks to solve, whether there really are two craters in one big crater at Askja, is eventually found in an Icelandic poem and account. In this respect, the text pronounces its own judgement on visitors who attempt to appropriate another country, in this case through scientific discovery, without any consideration for local culture and knowledge.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the aspiring geologist in Hans, after reaching the top of Mt. Herðubreið, cannot resist the temptation to appropriate the mountain:

Hans Ottenfells, he thinks.

Hansfjall.

Hansubreid.

He tastes the words on his dry lips. Na! He looks around him in triumph. What a shame he did not bring a German flag!⁵⁵

Both Hans and Ina struggle to capture the Icelandic landscape in words. Hans initially relies on geological terms, but soon finds that the scientific language is inadequate to express the emotional effect of the landscape, which induces awe, fear, sorrow, and rapture, and an older, pre-Christian, mythological language begins to take over and occasionally clashes with the former, changing the hopeful scientist into a less rational being. Terms like “ghostly landscape” (*spooklandschap*) and “witches’ sabbath” (*beksensabbat*) indicate the sense of mystery and fear induced by the wilderness and its sounds, while the story of the mythological Hella, who guards the gate to the realm of the netherworld of the dead, reverberates throughout the novel.

At the same time, or perhaps rather as a result, the two main characters try to impose a vocabulary on the landscape that is more familiar and less threatening, thus reducing the uncanny effect of an

⁵⁴ Thisted 2002: 315. She has discussed how a country may be dominated and possessed by another through language and bureaucratic paperwork, as well as through the acts of mapping, measuring, and investigation, in relation to Denmark and Greenland.

⁵⁵ “Hans Ottenfells, denkt hij./Hansfjall./Hansubreid./Hij proeft de woorden op zijn droge lippen. Na! Hij kijkt triomfantelijk om zich heen. Wat jammer dat hij geen Duits vlaggetje heeft meegenomen!” Zwier 1996: 84 (my translation).

alien land by assuming power over it. Domestic and bodily metaphors are used repeatedly in natural descriptions: the landscape is referred to for instance as “leprous” (*melaats*) and as an “arsehole” of the earth (*een aarsgat van de aarde*), as well as “a failure from a potter’s oven” (*een wanproduct uit de oven van een pottenbakker*) and “a burned-out kettle” (*een uitgebrande ketel*) while Geysir is likened to a “green-white bowl [...] which lies entrenched [...] like the open-air display window of a china factory.”⁵⁶

The Icelandic language itself plays a minimal role in the novel, although it is not entirely suppressed. *Varda* is the one Icelandic word (“varða”) that is fully adopted by the Dutch text, referring to the monuments Hans and Ina raise to their dead loved ones, and, considering the fact that the cover of the novel has a *varda* on it, we could also regard the novel itself as a literary *varda*, or monument, to previous Iceland writers and travellers on whose narratives this text is based.

Cal in *The Killer’s Guide* also resorts to describing the Icelandic environment in domestic terms, reminiscent of home, thereby familiarizing it as “broken biscuits with rocks the colour of oatmeal” and “chewed up chocolate limes,” while Esja between sea and sky is a “liquorice allsort.”⁵⁷ This novel never allows its readers to forget that it takes place in a different language environment, going further than any of the works discussed so far. The English prose is generously peppered with Icelandic names, words, and phrases, some italicized and some integrated as part of the English. *Já* and *nei* are for instance standard replies for Icelandic characters, instead of “yes” and “no,” and the author produces some very entertaining instances where Icelandic is integrated in a way that allows the foreign reader to guess its meaning, as in “a different kettle of *fiskur*.”⁵⁸ Elsewhere, Icelandic phrases remain untranslated so that the reader shares Cal’s situation, especially when he feels excluded. At the very beginning of the novel, the narrator describes the Icelandic way of speaking English, so that the reader immediately gets an idea of how the Icelandic characters in the novel sound:

⁵⁶ “groen-witte schaal [...] die als de openluchtetalage van een serviesfabriek [...] ligt ingegraven.” Zwier 1996: 64, 112, 93, 165, 163 (my translation).

⁵⁷ Radcliffe 2005: 26, 124, 45.

⁵⁸ Radcliffe 2005: 55.

“It iss a kortur after seffen,” she replied in that clipped singsong that the Icelanders have with the English language. It was this *delishoss* accent that had first attracted Callum to Birna Sveinsdóttir: her elongated esses, her curt kays, her softened vees.⁵⁹

Language thus becomes an effective way of emphasizing the textual construction of Iceland from a foreign perspective, as well as difference and otherness.

Genre, Form, and Context

The creation of fiction never occurs in a cultural vacuum. It inevitably responds and in turn contributes to an existing literary tradition, as well as directing itself to a particular readership. The Iceland novels discussed here are all part of a specific national literature and are the products of specific cultural and historical circumstances and relations with Iceland. The exceptionally small number of Iceland novels would seem to indicate that they are a rather singular phenomenon in themselves, but at the same time, they cannot be viewed in isolation.

A number of features have so far come to light that the foreign works of fiction under discussion share. Many texts are intertextual and metafictional in nature and enter into a self-conscious dialogue with existing foreign discourses and stereotypes about Iceland. Travel in its various forms constitutes a prominent motif, with a clear tendency to rely on travel literature in formal and structural ways as well: cultural encounter, and the dynamic between insider and outsider, Self and Other, informs many narratives. But how do these texts reflect the literary context which produced them, and what audience do they address?

The Killer's Guide to Iceland is a thriller, and as such, it is part of a British tradition of adventure and crime novels set in northern locations.⁶⁰ Iceland in literature as the site for heroic adventure is intimately connected with the image of North in Britain, as Davidson points out: “In an English-language fiction, the words ‘we leave for

⁵⁹ Radcliffe 2005: 22.

⁶⁰ Neijmann 2009; Wawn 2000; Davidson 2005.

FOREIGN FICTIONS OF ICELAND

the north tonight' would probably be spoken in a thriller, a fiction of action, of travel, of pursuit over wild country."⁶¹ The novel has in fact much in common with an earlier, popular British thriller set in Iceland, *Running Blind* (1970), by Desmond Bagley.⁶² At the same time, the stereotypes addressed in the novel make it clear that the text also responds to the contemporary image in the UK of Iceland as a popular tourist destination and Reykjavík as a "cool" party town.

Hans in *De Knoop van IJsland* also links Iceland with adventure literature for boys: although the stories he mentions have nothing to do with Iceland per se, travelling through Iceland makes him feel like a character in one.⁶³ It is intriguing, though, that this Dutch novel bases itself on a German tradition of Iceland travelogues, and that there should not be a single Dutch person among its cast of characters. This could be seen as an indication of the fact that no such tradition exists in Dutch. The novel is very much a unique instance, the individual product of an author with an interest in northern locations, whose travels through Iceland inspired him to write his own travel account previous to this novel.⁶⁴ Its use of the metaphor of Iceland as a whistling kettle is, however, almost certainly an allusion to what was for a long time the only modern book about Iceland available in Dutch.⁶⁵

The prominent post-colonial angle of this work is striking, considering the fact that there is no colonial history between Iceland and the Netherlands. However, its extreme self-consciousness regarding the colonialist attitudes of powerful nations towards marginal cultures and peoples, personified by a main protagonist who hails from a region that has more in common with the Netherlands than it has with central Germany, suggests that it addresses itself to an audience from another small country, itself on the fringe of the European mainland, with Germany as its large and powerful neighbour.

⁶¹ Davidson 2005: 9.

⁶² Turned into a BBC television series in 1979.

⁶³ Zwier 1996: 54.

⁶⁴ *Land van Grote Eenzaamheid: Reisinotities over IJsland*, 1987.

⁶⁵ *IJsland. De Fluitketel van Europa* by J. H. Kruizinga, 1975.

Colonial relations also make up an important aspect of *Smukke biler efter krigen*, but here of course for more obvious reasons. The narrative shows a self-conscious awareness of the post-colonial relationship between Iceland and Denmark and exposes Lasse's ignorance about Denmark as a colonial power. During the wedding dinner, the Icelandic guests seated with Lasse are given the opportunity to counter his crude statements and provide their own view of the colonial history between the two countries, for instance Lasse's claim that Denmark's attitude cannot possibly be compared with that of the UK or France towards their colonies: "Denmark deals with these matters in its own, *hyggeligt* way. That's what Denmark is like. Denmark has a mentality all its own"; to which his Icelandic conversation partner laconically replies: "No one takes the teaching of Danish seriously anymore."⁶⁶ At other points in the text, Lasse's rants are undermined by an ironic humour, as in the following instance, where he is getting money from a cash machine:

Just like earlier in Reykjavík standing by a similar machine he felt a warm, national pride flowing through him when the machine addressed itself to him, not just in Icelandic and English and French, but also in Danish, and with a finger which, just like the rest of his body, trembles with pride in his forefathers' powerful control over the island, he touches the button by the Danish sentence indicating he wishes to be served in Danish. And then the machine eats his card [...].⁶⁷

Lasse's comments on Reykjavík and its "small-town charm," meanwhile, reveal a patronizing attitude. He can't stand its pretensions of being larger than it is, or its perceived shameless commercial self-promotion: "*darling*, Reykjavík is nowhere near being New York or Copenhagen."⁶⁸ Lasse's dismissive attitude towards the

⁶⁶ "I Danmark håndterer man den slags på sin egen hyggelige måde. Sådan er Danmark. Danmark har en helt egen mentalitet. [...] Der er ingen, der tager danskundervisningen alvorligt mere, siger Dröfn." Frost 2004: 92 (my translation).

⁶⁷ "Ligesom tidligere i Reykjavík ved en lignende maskine fyldes han af en varm, national stolthed, da maskinen henvender sig til ham, ikke kun på islandsk og engelsk og fransk, men også dansk, og med en finger, der ligesom hele resten af hans krop dirrer af stolthed over hans forfædres magtfulde herredømme over øen, berører han knappen ud for den danske sentens og indikerer, at han ønsker at betjenes på dansk. Og så æder maskinen hans kort." Frost 2004: 105–106 (my translation).

⁶⁸ "men *darling*, Reykjavík er altså ikke tilnærmelsesvis New York eller bare tilnærmelsesvis København." Frost 2004: 28 (my translation).

modern Reykjavík, coupled with his fascination with the natural wilderness, and his tendency to ascribe the perceived character of Iceland's natural phenomena to its culture and inhabitants, as when he extends its natural fragility to Icelandic culture, all belong to a Danish discursive tradition on Iceland. Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson has studied the reception in Denmark of Icelandic works written in Danish in the early 20th century from a post-colonial angle, and he concludes that a colonialist discourse on Iceland determined the way in which Icelanders and Icelandic literature were viewed. This discourse understands Denmark as the representative of civilization, and Iceland as untamed Nature and the past. Modernity is, consequently, viewed as alien to Iceland, and therefore dismissed.⁶⁹ Interestingly, this view is much less prominent in the other works of fiction, with the possible exception of *De Knoop Van IJsland*, which, however, is set in 1909.

Smukke biler thus clearly writes itself into a tradition of Danish writing on Iceland and addresses itself to a Danish readership. While it claims to be a thriller (“knaldroman”), in fact it plays with the conventions of a variety of literary genres, most obviously those of the road novel and travel literature, where the motif of the journey is used to discover the traveller's own identity. At the same time, the author states in an interview that part of his intention was to address the criticism that contemporary Danish literature has been lacking in social engagement.⁷⁰

Like *Smukke biler*, “Kaltblau” appears in its country of origin to be one among only a very few works of fiction dealing with Iceland, but, as in Denmark, there is a tradition of Iceland literature in Germany, most notably travel writing, which, like its writing on Ireland, is characterized by a romantic nostalgia for a lost world, a pre-industrial, pre-urbanized, pre-civilized, more authentic past, and a desire for myths and origins.⁷¹ The story's theme of cold estrangement, frozen emotions, and lost love is reflected in the lyrical, contemplative prose and reinforced by the imagery derived from an evocative Icelandic winterscape, which acts as both a mirror and a potential cure. “Kaltblau” thus appears to continue a long-standing German

⁶⁹ Jóhannsson 2001.

⁷⁰ Halskov 2009.

⁷¹ Schaff 2003: 469. See also Ísleifsson 1996 and Julia Zernack in this volume.

narrative tradition that has viewed Europe's Celtic and northern fringe as romantic and sublime, aesthetic representations reflecting not on any Icelandic reality, but on German identity crises and losses.⁷² Interestingly, this same tendency is attributed to the German protagonists by the Dutch author of *De Knoop van IJsland*, where Iceland represents a dreamland, a place of desire.⁷³

Skimmer, like *De Knoop van IJsland*, appears to be the only Iceland novel in its country of origin. And there is no apparent reason why Iceland should constitute the novel's main setting and topic, other than a personal interest on the part of the author. The function of the Icelandic wilderness in the novel could easily have been fulfilled by a Swedish wilderness instead, except that the specific characteristics of Iceland's volcanic nature and barren highland appear to evoke more powerfully the emptiness and Otherness that turn it into a creative matrix, a place where characters still remain as suggestions, ideas, and possibilities.⁷⁴ Thus, it becomes a metaphorical and metafictional blank sheet, a *tabula rasa* onto which the text of the novel is inscribed. Its perceived Otherness, being both antithesis and antidote to "civilised bad habits," is at the same time alien and familiar, as the place of origins for all life and art. The eccentricity of the characters suggests that this view of the landscape is extended to its inhabitants. In this respect, *Skimmer*, like the other Nordic novel *Smukke biler*, appears to address a tendency to view Iceland as both strange and familiar, like a wilder, more mystical part of itself. Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson's analysis might provide an explanation for this when he suggests that, at least in a Danish context, Icelandic nationality has been understood both as a particular contrast to Danish nationality and as a supplement to it.⁷⁵ *Skimmer* could suggest that this understanding extends to the other mainland Scandinavian countries.

Conclusion

The foreign fiction about post-medieval Iceland discussed here shares a tendency to feature primarily a textual Iceland that bases itself on

⁷² Schaff 2003: 474.

⁷³ "Oorden van verlangen. Droomoorden [...]" Zwier 1996: 24 (my translation).

⁷⁴ Tunström 1996: 65.

⁷⁵ Jóhannsson 2001: 39.

foreign discourses about Iceland generally. Particularly striking is how little the image of Iceland that emerges appears to have changed from that found in these discourses, going back centuries. While this image of Iceland varies to some extent from one national tradition to another, in other respects, it is the same across countries, where it shares many common features with writing about islands and fringe cultures generally.⁷⁶ Iceland is viewed with pre-programmed eyes and serves the narrative purpose of what Barbara Schaff has called “an imaginary soulscape”⁷⁷: a mirror of an estranged Self, of losses and desires, an antidote to civilization. Ultimately, the aim is not to get to know Iceland, but to address questions about the Self: Iceland provides the dramatic stage for an inner journey on the part of the narrative Self, designed to strike a chord with a readership at home. The works of fiction discussed here do, however, all display to varying degrees a self-consciousness about their indebtedness to a textual tradition, as metanovels that foreground their own foreignness towards their subject matter. They do this by emphasizing their own nature as travel fiction, undermining any possible pretension to authenticity or narrative authority towards the subject, and by providing a marginal or Icelandic perspective that brings cultural awareness and sensitivity to the text.

Fiction, it seems, does not change the image of Iceland in foreign literature, but rather incorporates it. Iceland in foreign fiction continues to serve as a mystical, natural or Northern, peripheral, wild Other to an urban, cultured, central self, “the Other within,” thereby perpetuating, albeit self-consciously, literary conventions, discursive traditions, and images of Iceland at home—creating fictional Icelands.

References

- Adams, P. G. (1983). *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Aho, G. (1993). “‘Með Ísland á heilanum’: Íslandsbækur breskra ferðalanga 1772 til 1897” [‘Iceland on the Brain’: British Travel Literature about Iceland, 1772–1897], *Skírnir*, 167 (Spring): 205–258.

⁷⁶ Ísleifsson 1996 and in this volume.

⁷⁷ Schaff 2003: 471.

- Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge.
- Bjarnadóttir, B. (1999). “Náttúra tilfinninga í íslenskum kvikmyndum” [Nature of Feelings in Icelandic Film], in *Heimur kvikmyndanna* [World of Cinema], ed. G. Elísson, Reykjavík: Forlagið, pp. 937–949.
- Davidson, P. (2005). *The Idea of North*, London: Reaktion Books.
- Eysteinnsson, Á. (2006). “Snæfellsjökull in the Distance: Glacial/Cultural Reflections,” in *The Cultural Reconstruction of Places*, ed. Á. Eysteinnsson, Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, pp. 61–70.
- Frost, L. (2004). *Smukke biler efter krigen*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal.
- Haskov, M. (2004). “Ingen slipper for samfundet.” Retrieved from <<http://jp.dk/arkiv/?id=310070>>, accessed 23 Apr. 2009.
- Helgason, J. K. (1999). *The Rewriting of Njals Saga. Translation, Politics and Icelandic Sagas*, Clevedon & Buffalo: Multilingual Matters.
- Hermann, J. (2003). “Kaltblau,” in *Nichts als Gespenster*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.
- Ísleifsson, S. R. (1996). *Ísland. Framandi land* [Iceland. A Strange Country], Reykjavík: Mál og menning.
- Jóhannsdóttir, H. (2006). “Under the Tourist Gaze: Reykjavík as the City that Never Sleeps,” in *The Cultural Reconstruction of Places*, ed. Á. Eysteinnsson, Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, pp. 111–21.
- Jóhannsson, J. Y. (2001). “Jöklens Storm svaledde den kulturtrætte Danmarks Pande?: Um fyrstu viðtökur dansk-íslenskra bókmennta í Danmörku,” *Skírnir*, 175, pp. 33–66.
- Lynam, E. W. (1997). “Outward Bound: The Locale and Ontology of Cultural Stereotypes in the Case of Celtic Exoticism,” in *Beyond Pug’s Tour. National and Ethnic Stereotyping in Theory and Literary Practice*, ed. C. C. Barfoot, Amsterdam: Rodopi, pp. 212–16.
- Neijmann, D. (2009). “The Image of Iceland in UK Fiction,” *Scandinavica*, 48(2), pp. 26–58.
- Radcliffe, Z. (2005). *The Killer’s Guide to Iceland*, London: Black Swan.
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Schaff, B. (2003). “A Lost World: Ireland in Contemporary German Travel Writing,” *Cross-Cultural Travel: Papers from the Royal Irish Academy Symposium on Literature and Travel, National University of Ireland. Galway, November 2002*, ed. J. Conroy, New York: Peter Lang, pp. 469–75.

FOREIGN FICTIONS OF ICELAND

- Stadius, P. (2001). *Southern Perspectives on the North. Legends, Stereotypes, Images and Models*, Gdansk: Nordeuropa-Institut der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (BaltSeaNet: <http://www2.hu-berlin.de/ostseekolleg/virtual/online_pdf/paper3.pdf>).
- Thisted, K. (2002). "The Power to Represent: Intertextuality and Discourse in *Smilla's Sense of Snow*," in *Narrating the Arctic. A Cultural History of Nordic Scientific Practices*, eds. M. Bravo & S. Sörlin, Canton, Mass.: Science History Publications/USA, pp. 311–342.
- Tunström, G. (1996). *Skimmer*, Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag.
- van Alphen, E. (1991). "The Other Within," in *Alterity, Identity, Image. Selves and Others in Society and Scholarship*, eds. R. Corbey & J. Leerssen, Amsterdam: Rodopi, pp. 1–16.
- Wawn, A. (2000). *The Vikings and the Victorians. Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- Zwier, G. J. (1996). *De Knoop van IJsland*, Baarn: De Prom.