

FILMING BEAR ISLAND

Arctic Island Narratives, Polar Exploration, and Poetic Geometry

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses the poetics of polar geography in three filmic accounts of expeditions to Arctic islands: Don Sharp's Cold War thriller *Bear Island* (1979), the surfer film *Bjørnøya/Bear Island* (2014), and the NRK television series *Bjørnøya* (2014), which documents six months at a meteorological station in the Arctic. Taking Bertrand Westphal's geocritical call to "place place at the center of debate" (2011: 112) as my starting point, I explore the filmic life of Bear Island in the Svalbard archipelago. As I will demonstrate, all three works create a poetic geometry of experience, mediating Arctic geography to think about the relationship between human agency and the agency of the physical world. They do so, however, in very different ways: *Bear Island* oscillates between representing snow and ice as forces overpowering humans and a fantasy of human control of the cold landscape that ties into Cold War environmental anxieties; *Bjørnøya* (the film) and *Bjørnøya* (the series) engage with surfing and meteorology as practices that embed humans in complex geographical and ecological networks. In doing so, all three works both follow and challenge the conventions of island narratives by giving them a distinct polar spin.

KEYWORDS: Cold-water islands, island narratives, island films, geocriticism, poetic geometry, mediation of geography, Arctic imaginaries, poetics of snow and ice

Introduction

At the beginning of Don Sharp's 1979 film *Bear Island*, an image of the ocean fades in. As the camera pans left, we see the terminus of a glacier on the border of land and sea. Exploring the giant blocks of ice, the mobile camera crosses the border and gradually moves inland; after several dissolves, the camera distances itself from the ice and tilts upwards, revealing the entire trajectory of the glacier and the peaks towering above it under a blue sky. A series of shots follows of what seems to be an icy coastline but could also be the snout of a glacier elsewhere. Low-angle perspectives underscore the enormity of the ice, and gusts of wind swirl up the snow on the ground. The next shot takes us inland again, and we see a mountainous landscape covered in snow and partly hidden by fog. The title of the film, "Alistair MacLean's BEAR ISLAND," is displayed in the centre of the image, establishing the island status of the landscape. As the remaining credits appear, we see various views of the mountains that feature snow, ice, clouds, and fog in different states; the snow whirling around the landscape creates the sense of a dynamic environment. One image is particularly striking: the plane of snow surrounding the mountains resembles an ocean. The ripples on the hard surface are reminiscent of waves, and the band of mist around the mountains creates the illusion of a coastline shrouded in fog. Before the narrative proper begins, then, the credit sequence offers a starting point for thinking about the poetics of polar islands. As Gillian Beer points out, "in its earliest forms" the word *isle*

“derived from a word for water and meant, ‘watery’ or ‘watered’. In Old English ‘land’ was added to it to make a compound: ‘is-land’: water-surrounded land” (1990: 271). Polar islands are frequently even more “watery” than warm-water islands: extensive covers of snow and ice can make large parts of the surface of polar islands watery even on land.

While the representation of tropical islands and the real or fictional travellers that visit them has been discussed extensively in literary studies, there is as yet no corresponding scholarly tradition dedicated to cold-water islands and the specific imaginaries connected to them. For Godfrey Baldacchino, polar islands have the potential to counter fantasies of tropical islands: “[g]iven their extreme and insular location, and shorn of the ‘paradise’ hype of sun, sand, sea (and sex?), islands on the top and bottom of the world can be seen as absolutely the most remote and foreboding destinations on the planet” (2006: 7). But Baldacchino’s argument also implies that polar islands actually suggest an extreme version of what many typical Western representations of tropical islands convey: the idea that islands are remote, bounded, isolated, inaccessible, and deserted. Yet I argue that Arctic island narratives can serve very different purposes and contest conventional island fantasies in more fundamental ways than those suggested by Baldacchino. As I have argued elsewhere, “while northern island texts typically draw on the imagery of snow and ice to paint suggestive landscapes, there is a set of texts that poeticise the specific geographical inventory of Arctic islandscapes to *challenge* rather than reinforce island clichés like ‘inaccessibility,’ ‘island isolation’ and ‘individuality’” as well as the territorial, cartographic models of space that accompany such stereotypes (2016: 146; emphasis in original).

In this article, I wish to present a geocritical exploration of filmic travels to one Arctic island, the island of Bjørnøya (Bear Island): *Bear Island* (1979), a Cold War film directed by Don Sharp; *Bjørnøya/Bear Island*, a documentary about three Norwegian brothers’ surfing trip to Bear Island (directed by Inge Wegge and Edda Grjotheim, Norway 2014); and a six-part television series by the NRK (Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation) that documents the lives of nine Norwegians running the meteorological station on Bjørnøya for six months, also entitled *Bjørnøya* (2014). Bjørnøya is the southernmost island of the Svalbard archipelago in the Barents Sea, situated at about 74° north, 19° east (Figure 1).¹ It served as a base for the hunting of marine mammals from the early 17th Century onwards when the English Muscovy Company dispatched a series of hunting expeditions to the island. In the late 19th Century, the German and Russian Empires tried to claim the island on account on its strategic value. After World War I, a Norwegian meteorological station and a radio station were established on Bjørnøya, and there was a mining village on the island from 1916 to 1925. The area was important for the Nazis during World War II, who established various meteorological stations in East Greenland, Svalbard, Hopen, and Franz Josef Land (Lüdecke, 2002: 39). The area was also of strategic importance in the Cold War, when it functioned as a buffer zone between Russian and American-controlled territories that both superpowers surveyed anxiously. Today, most of the island is a nature reserve, and it is only inhabited by the changing staff of the Norwegian meteorological station on the north coast.

Bertrand Westphal’s geocriticism advocates a “geocentered approach” to space and “places place at the center of debate” (2011: 112). He advocates multiple textual perspectives on a given spatial referent, coupled with a polysensory attention to space and its many layers (which, for him, always includes textual and medial layers). He thus places geography and not the subject or individual works in the centre of analysis to explore the interface between space and its representations. For Westphal, representations are as much part of

¹ See also Tynan (2020).

space as physical geography and built structures. A crucial ambition of Westphal's geocriticism is to contest spatial stereotypes via multiplicity: thus, "representation proliferates depending on points of view, on discourses. It continues to inspire stereotypes, but, as they cross each other and explode the focal nodes that would limit our perspectives, they will reveal themselves as such" (2011: 147). Looking at three filmic accounts of Bear Island does not only allow me to follow Westphal's call for a multifocal approach by comparing their different visions of the same spatial referent, but these portrayals of an Arctic island in themselves already contest stereotypes on the level of genre by both evoking and challenging other island narratives. In *Haunted Journeys* (1991), Dennis Porter argues that travel writing is frequently haunted by the voices of previous travellers: texts partly view the landscapes they describe through other texts, from which they simultaneously strive to liberate themselves. In line with Porter's claim, these films in many ways construct the Arctic island through the poetic and narrative devices of classic island stories – thus, one of the crew members mentions Robinson Crusoe as an inspiration at the very beginning of the NRK series, before drawing attention to the different climate zones – but they also complicate the latter's conventions and spatial ideologies.



Figure 1: Map of Bjørnøya in the surfer documentary *Bjørnøya/Bear Island* (2014)

Arctic islands

As an "environment characterised by an exceptional level of spatio-temporal dynamism and material complexity" (Steinberg and Kristoffersen, 2017: 627), the Arctic archipelago poses challenges to Western conceptions of space and territorialisation through the presence of snow and ice in various contexts – including glaciers, permafrost, and ice sheets – as well as through other material and experiential particularities including optical illusions, perceptual distortions and the distinctive patterns of light and darkness in the polar regions. As Barry Lopez writes in *Arctic Dreams*, these properties of the Arctic challenge conventional understandings of space and time and have the potential to expose them as cultural constructions (2014: 20).

Polar islands arguably embody the interaction between geospheres in a heightened and tangible way. In the Arctic, for instance, the importance of water that is so frequently emphasised in Island Studies is extended. Godfrey Baldacchino emphasises “the multiple ways in which the waters fold into island life; or the islands fold into ocean life” (2012: 26) and maintains that a “sea of relationships has made small islands what they are” (2014: online). For Laurie Brinklow, “islandness must always come back to water” (2011: online). Responding to the debate, Philip Hayward argues that even archipelagic conceptions of islands frequently underemphasise the importance of “the marine aspect of archipelagos” and should engage more thoroughly with “integrated terrestrial-marine spaces” (2012: 2). The credit sequence of *Bear Island* certainly presents its titular island as a “terrestrial-marine space.” More than that, it includes the atmosphere in its conception of island space. The island that emerges in the film’s first minutes is shaped by water in its three states of matter: fluid (the ocean), solid (snow and ice), and gaseous (the fog). We see a watery land indeed: the island’s solid, fluid, and airy spheres are all filled with varieties of H₂O. Furthermore, these different spheres also interact: the scattered lumps of ice on the edge of the ocean and the snow swirling through the air foreground the ongoing exchange of water between atmosphere, hydrosphere, and terrestrial space. Having initially arrived on the island from the ocean via the atmosphere in the form of precipitation, the island’s covers of snow and ice are shown to return to where they came from not only at the “osmotic membrane” of the “maritime boundary” (Rivera-Collazo, 2011: 23; emphasis original), but also on the border of land and air. If “island studies is very much about the implications of permeable borders (Baldacchino, 2007: 5; see also Hay, 2013: 220), this enquiry is usefully extended beyond the shore, especially (though by no means exclusively) in the context of polar islands.

Numerous scholars have reflected on the cultural and geopolitical implications of the material properties of polar geography (see Craciun, 2010; Steinberg and Peters, 2015; Steinberg and Kristoffersen, 2017) and any discussion of polar islands should take these material properties into account. Conversely, Island Studies offer conceptual tools that are valuable for polar research. This is, perhaps, particularly true for the Arctic. In the absence of an Arctic continent, the circumpolar north is productively thought of as an archipelago. The emphasis on the interaction between water and land in recent Island Studies takes on special significance in the Arctic archipelago where the presence of (sea) ice challenges neat divisions between land and sea, as Adriana Craciun argues:

Simultaneously fluid and solid, turbulent and rigid (but rarely tranquil), the Frozen Ocean posed unique problems for oppositional ‘ideologies of land and sea’ that, as Christopher Connery has shown, were fundamental to the ability of capitalist models of global power to eclipse ‘a host of other visions of maritime space.’ (2010: 694).

Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters make a similar argument when they discuss the potential of “wet ontologies” and “oceanic thinking” to unsettle static cartographies and geopolitical orders, notably in the Arctic (2015: 560).

Poetic geometries

Literary and filmic representations of the Arctic often play with these material and perceptual properties of polar geography and add their own medial layers to them. In the

next section, I will think about how the three filmic accounts of Bear Island mediate Arctic island geography to reflect on the relationship between the human travellers and the physical environment. They do so through what I would like to call a poetic and creative geometry of experience. The notion of poetic geometry I am advancing here relies on but also departs from John Gillies's notion of "poetic geography," which he adapts from the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico. For Gillies, "poetic geography' [can] be taken as paradigmatic for any geography which differentiates between an 'us' and a 'them'", like "the Renaissance dualism of the known world versus that class of geographic entity bearing the label 'terra incognita'" (1994: 6-7). Unlike Gillies, I am not primarily interested in binary poetic constructions of 'here' and 'there,' but I take from him the interest in how geography "mediates key ideological structures" (ibid: 5), and in how the phenomenological, the medial and the geographical come together in representing experiences of unfamiliar spaces.

Phenomenological accounts of space and geography tend to critique Euclidean geometry by emphasising that lived experience cannot be reduced to abstract geometrical forms (Merleau-Ponty, 2004: 49-56; de Certeau, 1984: 117; Ingold, 2007; Pultz Moslund, 2015: 1-14, 223). At the same time, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945) repeatedly engages with geometrical forms like cubes, circles, and lines to think about the vectors, directions, and dimensions of experience – more generally, the orientation of the body in geographical space. Jean-Paul Forster's historical phenomenology of space is attentive to this geometrical dimension of experience in literature, for instance when he discusses the emergence in the 18th Century of 90° angles of vision in island narratives, notably Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) (2013: 65-102); Edward Casey's discussion of dimensionality in visual art and cartography (2002) is another, more explicitly phenomenological, example. My understanding of poetic geometry is also shaped by geopoetic explorations of a two-way exchange between the physical world and poetic language, that is, by the textual production of space as well as the shaping of poetic form by geography (see White, 1994; Marszałek and Sasse, 2010; Italiano and Mastronunzio, 2011; Bouvet, 2015; Riquet, 2019). The following analyses rest on the assumption that medial productions of geographical space can both consolidate and challenge spatial ideologies. The three filmic constructions of Bear Island I will now turn to, though overlapping in interesting ways, produce very different poetic geometries in conveying different experiences of Arctic islands.

Verticality and Cold War geopolitics: *Bear Island* (1979)

The first of these poetic geometries is the experience of verticality. *Bear Island* is a British-Canadian Cold War thriller directed by Don Sharp, based on a 1971 novel of the same title by Alistair MacLean, though the film tells a very different story. In the film, an international team of scientists embarks on a scientific expedition to Bear Island under the banner of the UN to study climate change – or so we think at first. Soon we learn that some of them are really interested in something else: gold hidden on the island by the Nazis during World War II. As the film progresses, it becomes clear that various groups are after the gold, among them an underground Nazi organisation with a global reach. In its conflation of Cold War and World War II references, *Bear Island* transforms a classic of island fiction, *Treasure Island*, in various ways: a tropical island is replaced with an Arctic one, pirates with double identities are transformed into covert Nazis, and a treasure linked to colonial violence is replaced with gold amassed by fascism. In both narratives, a map

plays a central role in guiding the characters' movements on the island; finally, the experience of verticality is central to both narratives.²

The real and imaginative histories of Bear Island/Bjørnøya and the larger region within which it is located provide an evocative background for this Arctic island tale. As Cornelia Lüdecke points out, "civil life (meteorology) and military life" were "combined" in these operations as "meteorological information from the Arctic... was essential for wartime activities concerning England and Russia" (2002: 40, 39). Some of the stations were manned, others were automatic. In 1942 and 1943, the German Luftwaffe set up two automatic weather stations on Bear Island (Blyth, 1951: 208, 214); perhaps more importantly, in 1943 a manned weather station was established in Alexandra Land at the western end of Franz Josef Land under the name of Operation Schatzgräber ('Treasure Seeker') (ibid: 211-213). Like the fictional expedition of *Bear Island*, the operation ended in disaster: its members died from food poisoning after eating polar bear meat in 1944. The station was long surrounded by uncertainty, mystery, and speculation until Russian scientists found its remnants in 2016. With the discovery, old speculations about the station resurfaced, in more or less sensationalist form. Thus, an article in *The Independent* vaguely referred to "some specialists speculating that it might have been used for the pursuit of ancient relics" (Khan, 2016: online), while a report in *The Sun* wrote that the mission might have been "searching for a mythical treasure trove" (Michael, 2016: online). Such secret treasure hunts are probably as mythical as the treasures themselves, yet the name of the operation certainly resonates with the Northern mythology of Nazi pseudo-science (see Godwin, 1996). One of the breeding grounds for Nazi ideology was a secret society named the Thule-Gesellschaft ('Thule Society'), an occultist group that was founded after World War II and whose name refers to classical antiquity's legendary island at the northern limits of the known world, Ultima Thule. Its members believed in a lost Arctic continent and an original Arctic race from which the Aryan race had descended (Godwin, 1996: 47-61). These speculations, which tapped into centuries (even millennia) of Arctic mythology and ideas about a superior Hyperborean race living in a polar utopia,³ were reproduced by Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg in his influential book *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (1930), where he asserts that "one has to assume that there was a prehistoric northern center of culture" (in Godwin, 1996: 57).

The Arctic mythology of Nazi pseudo-science forms an important backdrop for *Bear Island* because speculations about underground Nazi survival, some of them rather wild, were still popular in the 1970s and 1980s, and they invested Arctic geography with new myths. Thus, Wilhelm Landig's 1971 *Götzen gegen Thule* (subtitled *Ein Roman voller Wirklichkeiten* - 'A Novel Full of Truths') and R. P. Martin's *Le Renversement* (1984), which presents itself as a factual account, offer visions of the survival of Nazism in secret hideouts in the Canadian Arctic, linking them to Northern mythologies like those of the Thule society (Godwin, 1996: 63-76). With its underground spaces on the shore of the island, which play an increasingly important role as the film progresses, *Bear Island* resonates with these popular and occult myths about Nazi survival.

² In *Treasure Island*, the prospect of vertical experience is already anticipated in Jim's daydreams about the island when he is pouring over the map, linked to pleasurable exploration and imaginative activity: "I climbed a thousand times to that tall hill they call the Spy-glass, and from the top enjoyed the most wonderful and changing prospects" (Stevenson, 1985: 36).

³ See, among others, Davidson (2005) and Richard (2003).

At the same time, references to the Cold War are present from the beginning of the film. When the team is still on the ship on the way to the island, a brief dispute erupts as the Polish scientist dismisses the expedition leader's appeal that "nothing must delay our final report" by saying: "this panic is ridiculous, the cycle of change will take decades." As a young female scientist replies "not if the Russians divert those rivers," ordered conversation momentarily breaks down, before the professor goes on to explain: "just before we embarked, Doctor Lansing, a report was handed me that the Russians are planning to divert several large rivers southwards, instead of emptying into the Arctic as they do now." There were indeed several large-scale projects by Soviet scientists in the 1950s and 1960s to change the Arctic climate by diverting rivers or damming the Arctic Ocean (although, in fact, Americans and Canadians also had river diversion projects with the goal of climate amelioration). At the forefront of the Soviet projects was a scientist named Piotr Mikhailovich Borisov, who wrote an article entitled 'Can we Control the Arctic Climate' (1969) and a book called *Can Man Change the Climate* (1973). For Borisov, man-made climate change was something to aspire to rather than fear. At the core of his projects was the building of a dam across the Bering Strait to heat up the Arctic and, eventually, ameliorate the global climate.⁴

At the beginning of *Bear Island*, Soviet climate engineering is perceived as a global threat when the young female scientist warns that the river diversion projects will "change the whole of the world's weather" and adds "they have got to be stopped now." This brief discussion speaks to the sublimation of Cold War anxieties in complex ways. Thus, in a conflict whose central metaphor relates to temperature (see Piette, 2009: 79; Westerståhl Stenport, 2015) and which generated an entire set of tropes linking politics to coldness, freezing, and thawing (think of the so-called Khrushchev "Thaw"), this dispute about Soviet-controlled changes in the global climate inevitable carries geopolitical associations. However, the film never returns to this initial threat; it functions as a red herring, a mere diversion before the Nazi threat emerges.

Bear Island thus not only retells Stevenson's *Treasure Island* by relocating the island of gold from the Caribbean to the Arctic, but also superimposes two conflicts, one substituting for the other: in the Cold War détente of the 1970s, the Soviet Union can no longer function as an active threat. It is sublimated into an older threat, but the Soviet threat has not entirely disappeared and structures the film as an underlying anxiety through the material and figurative links between Arctic landscapes and the Cold War. Thus, the initial climate anxiety that is the official reason for the expedition plays into larger anxieties about Arctic geography during the Cold War. As Matthew Farish argues, "the multiple geographies of the Cold War Arctic [were] created at the confluence of strategy and science" (2006: 180). For Farish, the Arctic functioned "as a dual geopolitical and scientific frontier in the early years of the Cold War, when fears of a Soviet assault led to an alternate invasion of Arctic landscapes by research teams, administrators and troops, all pushing northwards to occupy and materialize a geographic region" (ibid: 179). The Arctic thus became a site of extensive scientific enquiry and imaginative investment – with alternative visions representing it as either an "empty bulwark separating the superpowers," or, conversely, a "wilderness that could hide a growing enemy presence" (ibid: 184). Knowledge about the Arctic became strategic; scientific missions to understand and master Arctic geography served geopolitical strategy. Controlling the Arctic environment was associated with controlling the enemy. This convergence of scientific and military activities characterised both World War II and Cold War interest in the Arctic.

⁴ Today's climate engineering projects go in the opposite direction and aim to cool the Arctic.

Accordingly, though the Cold War anxiety in *Bear Island* is partly displaced onto the past and Nazi Germany, it remains present in the film's treatment of Arctic geography. Human and physical geographies mirror and substitute for each other: for instance, an iceberg visually parallels the ship approaching the island, and the underground spaces that extend the island into the sea are part caverns, part excavations. Throughout the film, there is an anxiety around the Northern environment: an uncertainty of whether the Arctic controls humans or the other way around. The glacier calving into the Arctic ocean at the beginning of the film evokes a dynamic, active, and powerful environment (Figure 2). But as the film progresses, again and again natural threats masquerade as human threats and vice-versa. In one of the film's several cartographic moments, the professor shows the team a map of risk areas on the island that are to be avoided because of natural hazards. As two team members ski into one of the danger zones, they promptly trigger an avalanche – or so it seems, as the hazards turn out to be man-made rather than environmental: the avalanche is engineered to cover up the geopolitical and golden secrets hidden in the area (Figure 2).



Figure 2: The verticality of the Arctic environment in *Bear Island* (1979)

As in the opening image of a glacier calving into the sea, the power of natural forces is associated with a downward movement, but this time the seemingly natural agency is actually triggered by humans. Thus, agency oscillates back and forth between the environment and humans in *Bear Island*, and although the Soviet threat is soon dismissed, the initial anxiety about controlling the Arctic environment remains present throughout – and the film obliquely points to Cold War tensions that remain unresolved. It does so by

superimposing environment and strategy, climate and politics. In this, the film's rhetoric resembles that of Borisov's 'Can We Control the Arctic Climate': though Borisov avoids any direct reference to politics, and indeed highlights the importance of global scientific collaboration, he nonetheless presents a vision of global climate amelioration under the leadership of Soviet engineers. More subtly, the text figuratively evokes several of the ideological pillars of Soviet communism: for instance, in its programmatic description of various stages of climate amelioration ultimately resulting in a "levelling of landscape zonalities" (Borisov, 1969: 48), and with notions like "liberat[ing]" the northeastern parts of Eurasia "from any remaining tundra" (ibid: 47), "destroy[ing]" layers of water to counteract "the deleterious influence of the stable stratification" of the ocean (ibid: 46), or "increased production" (ibid: 48). In doing so, it also conflates the 'natural' and the 'man-made' as Borisov interrupts the description of his projects with a long digression on warmer periods in the history of the Earth. This creates a link between natural and human histories of the planet, making the latter appear as the mere fulfilment of a pre-existing, ideal natural state.

Several key moments in *Bear Island* enact this oscillation between 'human' and 'natural' forces via a poetic deployment of the island's verticality. Already at the beginning of the film, the glacier's downward movement from (and of) the land into the ocean is immediately followed by a more human threat: at the end of the credits, we see what seems to be a rock in the landscape; as the camera tracks forward, the 'rock' morphs into a tent. In the following shots, a man skis towards and enters the tent, before we see a snowmobile speeding down the flank of the mountain and running over the tent with the man inside. In the second half of the film, a violent storm and human sabotage conspire in bringing down the tall radio mast. One of the villains' spectacular fall down crumbling cliffs of ice at the end of the film is another example of how the film stages the island's verticality. In this context, it is significant that the island in the film looks much more mountainous and vertical than the real Bear Island, which is rather flat. In fact, the outdoor scenes were filmed in British Columbia and Alaska by an entirely non-Norwegian crew. This conflation of geographies is not without its geopolitical correlative: like the Barents Sea, "the Canadian North was a site of keen military concern throughout the Cold War," and the same is true for Alaska (Lackenbauer and Farish, 2007: 921). But the topography of the 'real' Bear Island is certainly changed in the process, which creates an imagined verticality that suits the purposes of the narrative.

Islands in general invite reflections on dimensionality (see Riquet, 2019: 235-241). Any island has a minimal interplay between the horizontality of the ocean and a rise out of that horizontality by the land. In *Bear Island*, the vertical dimension is augmented as different geographies are superimposed in the production of a distinctly cinematic space. In the resulting topography, the gravitational pull of the vertical is linked to contemporaneous fantasies of human control of the environment that are common in many classic island narratives – but they sit uneasily with the mobile geography of snow and ice that has an agency of its own and easily displaces human control. If the vertical in *Bear Island* is linked to a struggle over controlling the environment, my second filmic example, the surfer film *Bjørnøya*, ultimately privileges the horizontal – and with it a different relationship between space and the humans moving within it.

Horizontality and surfing: *Bjørnøya* (2014)

The vertical is not absent in *Bjørnøya*, a film about three brothers who travel to Bear Island/Bjørnøya to surf and engage in various other outdoor activities for a few months and

document the experience filmically. While the spectacular verticality of Sharp's *Bear Island* is firmly grounded in the sublime tradition of Arctic exploration narratives that various Cold War fictions reinscribe, *Bjørnøya* interrogates and transforms the discourse of exploration through an interplay of the vertical and the horizontal. This interplay is signalled in the arrival scene when a top shot of the ship's vertical prow contrasts markedly with shots of the open horizon on the sea and the island's flat, wide coastline. In the early moments of the film, the three brothers are introduced as adventurers, and each of them is explicitly linked to the thrill of the vertical. The first is shown sitting on a steep cliff over the sea and jumping off ramps on a snowboard; the second is introduced in voice-over as somebody who "loves steep places"⁵ while we see him climbing an almost vertical rock face and downhill longboarding; the third (the filmmaker) is shown paragliding and, a few shots later, walking a tightrope between two rocks while we hear him saying in voice-over: "I like the feeling of living on the edge, while knowing that I'm safe." The first half of the film, in particular, is full of scenes showing the vertical thrills of the island as we see brothers snowboarding, climbing, abseiling, or paragliding. Many high-angle shots from elevated points (and sometimes low-angle shots from below) underscore the vertical excitement of their activities. In these scenes, the aesthetics of the film is close to that of adventure and sports documentaries like Curt Morgan's *The Art of Flight* (2011). The link between verticality and adventurous exploration is epitomised in the film's first monarch-of-all-I-survey scene, a classic narrative device of island narratives where the castaway (paradigmatically, Robinson Crusoe) climbs to the highest point of the island and visually appropriates it (see Pratt, 2008: 197-204; Weaver-Hightower, 2007: 1-42). In *Bjørnøya*, we see the brothers ascending to the highest mountain of the island and hear one of them exclaiming "the top of Bear Island." In the next shot, we see Inge (the oldest brother) stretching out his arms on the summit in a classic explorer pose; the wide-angle lens underscores the drop of the precipice to the sea, whose curved horizon we see in the background (Figure 3).

Yet the vertical masculinity of these scenes coexists with a contemplative horizontality conveyed in calm, slow shots and open horizons (in fact, even the mountains are referred to as "quiet" at one point in the film). Perhaps the best examples are the frequent shots taken from the ground of the island, with a camera placed there without anyone operating it. Many of them are in extreme wide-angle, extending the field of vision. These horizontal views are often near the shore and show a combination of land and sea, offering an aesthetic counterpoint to the brothers' fast-paced vertical adventures. Sometimes in time lapse, they provide an almost non-human perspective as though of the island itself, operating at a different timescale. At the same time, the film increasingly questions the masculinist adventure discourse it starts with – in one example, the brothers eat raw seal blubber as a "test of... manhood," yet the initial premise that "we're not proper polar explorers until we eat raw seal blubber" is soon rejected as two of them spit it out, opting for raisins, nuts, sausage, and cocoa instead. As Gunnar Iversen argues, the scene "playfully attack[s] the older myth of masculinity that is so important to the genre" and is thereby exemplary of how the film as a whole "questions the polar expedition genre" (2019: 181).

Even the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene is transformed as Inge goes to a high point on the island not for thrills but to pick up a better signal with the satellite phone so he can talk to his pregnant girlfriend at home. Like the debris that washes up on the island's beaches and that the brothers clear away (including countless plastic bottles), the satellite link with the Norwegian mainland is a horizontal connection. Indeed, verticality is all but absent from

⁵ All translations are taken from the subtitles of the film. <<https://vimeo.com/ondemand/bjornoya>>.

the scene; instead, we see the gentle slope of the back of the cliffs, and the views of the misty landscape are soft and meditative. The absorption of the vertical by the horizontal is expressed in a simile that encapsulates the film's island poetics: "being on this small island, with ocean as far as we could see, was like being on a boat and on the mountain all at once." Land and water, the verticality of a mountain and the horizontality of the ocean, are poetically connected. The simile, uttered by Inge in voice-over, is visually reinforced by a panoramic shot of the coast that shows the land, the ocean, and the sky, and creates links between these geospheres through visual parallels between the snow on land, the ice on the water, the mist that blurs the coastline, and the clouds in the sky – all, as in the opening shots of *Bear Island*, different varieties of H₂O.



Figure 3: The thrill of vertical exploration versus contemplative horizontality in *Bjørnøya/Bear Island* (2014)

Before the brothers begin their journey back to the north of the island, there is a final nod to the thrill of vertical adventures as we see them engaging in various sporting activities. However, verticality is here not associated with the struggle for survival that defines the rhetoric of heroic masculinity prevalent in polar exploration discourse. Instead, Inge tells us in voice-over that:

Bear Island was supposed to be hard core and give us storms, cold and struggles. We'd made it our playground. A playpen 68 square miles big, far north in the Arctic.

For Iversen, the film thereby “delineates a new Arctic masculinity” based on playfulness, childishness, and ease (2019: 183). While the image of the island as a giant adventure park certainly speaks to a form of mastery and domestication that treats Arctic geography as an almost virtual space and a resource for personal enjoyment, it also cancels out its function as a proving ground and a threatening environment to be conquered by valiant national heroes. It is therefore significant that the main challenges faced by the brothers are not connected to exploration and adventure, but rather to the return journey.

Indeed, in the last part of the film the horizontal takes over entirely as the brothers cross the island from the rather mountainous south back to the flat north. As the snow has largely melted, the few kilometres suddenly take a very long time as they can no longer pull their sledges. The absence of snow on land now slows them down; conversely, movement is also impeded in the water because of ice, which immobilises the boat one of the brothers uses. In this experience of slow, strenuous, horizontal movements, space experientially expands. This expansion is accompanied by many shots that show us flat and open surfaces of land and unbroken, endless-seeming horizons of land and water. Quiet compositions and gentle horizontal lines dominate this part of the film; the pace of the editing is slow and the camera moves quietly or is completely still as the brothers traverse the landscape. Several times, we see them as small figures walking on or near the horizon and almost disappearing into the landscape. In one shot, one of the brothers is walking on the ice near the shore; two horizontal lines, the shore and the horizon, structure the image and accompany his movements. In a scene near the end of the journey, land and sea aesthetically merge via the ice that links them. The image here becomes a horizontal expanse where different shades of white, blue, and grey blend into each other against an open horizon and a sky of similar colour (Figure 3). This section contrasts maximally with the aesthetics of vertical thrills in earlier parts of the film. At the same time, it connects with the contemplative horizontality that was already present at various moments throughout the film. Here, the island is presented neither as a space to conquer through heroic masculinity nor as an easy playground. Instead, it is portrayed as a space that demands careful attention and slow exploration. Rather than leading towards any ultimate high points and destinations (“the top of Bear Island”), the horizontal scenes of the film weave the human subjects into an expansive landscape, and the island itself is extended into the ocean and sometimes even the sky.

The interplay of the horizontal and the vertical, of course, is also a good way of describing surfing, the primary purpose of the brothers’ trip. And indeed, by the end of the film, surfing has changed from a thrill to an intimate experience of geography, of the currents water and wind. Like the island’s poetic extension into the sea and the brothers’ collection of debris on the shore, surfing makes it clear that water and its currents are part of the island. In fact, in various shots the white surf evokes snow or ice, bridging the brothers’ Arctic experiences of land and water, like the simile of the boat and the mountain.

Roundness and meteorology: *Bjørnøya* (NRK, 2014)

The NRK (state television) series shares both the title and a contemplative horizontality with the Wegge brothers' *Bjørnøya* – but it also supplements it with different forms of roundness. The six episodes of the series portray the life of nine Norwegians during the winter months on Bear Island, where they run the meteorological station. For Iversen, both the Wegge brothers' and the NRK's *Bjørnøya* "are examples of the new polar expedition film" (2019: 187). They "refus[e] to continue the traditions of heroic masculinity, polar imperialism, and conquest; at the same time, they are strengthening the old tradition of emphasizing the natural bond between nation and nature" (ibid: 188) by presenting protagonists that "search for inner psychic landscapes" (ibid: 187). Iversen's insightful analysis demonstrates the continued effects of a national nature imaginary in the two documentaries despite their transformation of the genre of polar exploration. For the present purposes, I am primarily interested in the poetic mediation of island geography that effects this transformation. Without disregarding the construction of a national imaginary implicit in the individual search for "inner... landscapes" and meditative experiences in the high Arctic, I will focus on the series' aesthetic strategies that explore the island as an island, specifically a polar island, and the ways in which they transform not only the genre of polar exploration but also that of island narratives.

Like the other *Bjørnøya*, the NRK series is full of flat, open horizons and quiet horizontal planes. The overall aesthetics is even calmer, and verticality is almost entirely absent from the episodes. Here, too, the camera is often on or near the ground, sometimes showing members of the team moving around the island – often from a distance – and sometimes showing the landscape without humans in it. Even more than in the Wegge brothers' film, this creates an effect of the island itself watching. At times, the island almost seems to be merging with the human body as the movements of the hand-held camera seem to respond to human movements. These camera movements are often no more than a gentle, sometimes barely perceptible tracking shot, pan, or even trembling; sometimes, they occur after somebody starts moving again after having rested. The regularity with which these 'island perspectives' occur underscores the temporariness of the human habitation of the island, decentring the visitors and presenting the land itself as the focal point (the repeated reference to the dogs as the only permanent inhabitants of the island serves a similar function). The island-camera thereby seems to explore the humans as much as they explore the island.

In this calm exploration, the medial and the material come together. In the first episodes, during the polar night, shots of the dark island where we see very little are interspersed with scenes of inside life and archival footage from the varied lives of the island, which has never been inhabited for any substantial length of time (at least in recorded history). The episodes give us snippets of these past lives in a variety of media including maps, photographs, and films. They range from early maps from the time of William Barents's explorations in search of a Northeast Passage in the 16th Century and early English whalers in the early 17th Century to photographs of a 19th Century house on the island. We also see visual documentation of the short-lived mining village of Tunheim (1916-1925), the meteorological station that was established on the island after World War I, the island during WWII, the accident of a post airplane on the island in 1954, and encounters with polar bears by people working at the meteorological station. The archival exploration of the island even includes its fictional past as the team organise a "Bjørnøya film festival" and screen Sharp's *Bear Island*. All of this becomes part of a multi-dimensional and multi-

medial exploration of the island that complements physical exploration. The series thereby adds different layers of time to the encounter with space.

In this multidimensional exploration, roundness plays an important role on both literal and metaphorical levels. During the first, dark months, it is present in many round shapes that are linked to the roundness of the island itself. This includes maps of the island in different forms, from a map on a cup to the island-shaped foot of the Christmas tree. These multiple maps emphasise that the island is, in these first episodes, primarily explored through its representations. In the credit sequence, the map of the island (which recurs throughout the series) is followed by the round sun, the round moon, a meteorological balloon (Figure 4), and the double Ø of the title – all of which repeat the (relatively) round shape of the island on the map in the first shot of the credits. The shape of Bjørnøya is not perfectly round – in fact, it is something between a circle and a triangle – but neither are any of the other shapes listed here: the sun dips into the ocean, the moon is not full, the balloon is slightly oval, and the letter O is traversed by a line. I am, however, less interested in a geometry of circles than in the film's gesturing towards various round, curved, and turning forms, movements, and experiences.

In the later episodes, roundness plays a role as the team members feel the need to finally go out and explore the island more fully on foot, on ski, and by boat rather than through medial representations. One of the them comments on this by saying that they can now “finally experience life round the island.” Here, roundness becomes a metaphor of for an expansive experience. Indeed, the episodes now often cross-cut between different expeditions, in which we see the island from all kinds of camera positions, many of them again on or near the ground (and some on water). There are also many round camera movements in the form of gentle pans that almost caress the frequently white landscape and turn in all directions. They culminate in a spinning camera movement that shows a panoramic view from the highest point of the island against the face of one of the female team members, who appears to be holding the camera and turning on the spot several times. This monarch-of-all-I-survey scene is not one of triumphant territorial conquest, but rather the quietly exuberant climax of many individual movements around the island. Unlike monarch-of-all-I-survey moments in classic island narratives, which typically result in the cartographic fixing of space and the establishment of the island as a clearly delineated territory, the triple 360° camera spin does not reveal the island's limits but presents us with a seemingly endless whiteness that visually extends the island into infinity. Here, too, the island reaches into the sky with its white clouds; the icy blue of the sea that flashes up a few times does not interrupt this expanse of whiteness but smoothly merges with it. Of course, the moment is nonetheless celebratory, but the celebration is intimate, and the shot connects with the series' investment in self-searching through a personal relationship with nature – in Iversen's words, the new “Arctic of the Mind” (2019, 186-188). The significance of the moment is underscored by its appearance in the credit sequence: its spinning movement links it to the series' round, personal exploration of the island in different registers.

Another scene that epitomises this intimate exploration of the island and brings together the material and medial dimensions of this engagement shows a team member talking about a meteorological phenomenon outside the station. As she explains different types of clouds, we see her arm pointing at the sky in front of her, as if touching it, supported by the camera's occasional upwards movements. This outdoor scene is followed by her examining an archival photo of the station in similar weather conditions. In a close-up shot, we see her finger gently touching the photograph and tracing round shapes on it while talking

about the clouds, paralleling the movements of her arm outside the station. Here and throughout the series, meteorology is fashioned as an intimate practice, a slow study of the physical environment. The medial representation of the island is treated as something material: she intimately touches the photograph like the camera touches the island, and like the island ‘touches’ the people when the island-camera seems to be in sync with their bodies.



Figure 4: Horizontal and round: meteorology and selfie aesthetics in the NRK documentary series *Bjørnøya* (2014)

In the second part of the series, we see the oldest team member carrying a large stone along the island's coast on his back, interrupted by meditative breaks in which the camera goes off on its own gentle explorations. In the end, before leaving, he transforms the stone into a garden seat, an act of land art that we can read as emblematic of the close relationship between humans, island, and camera. People here quite consciously leave traces and, by the end of the series, become part of the island's history and memory. In its multidimensional, round exploration of the island, the series engages in its own geocritical project. The island it presents is made up of various physical layers including snow and ice, traces of past activities (such as houses, mining operations, and airplane wrecks), and medial layers – including historical and fictional layers as well as the camera's own recordings. In the last episode, we see a compilation of many weather balloons released into the atmosphere by the team at different moments of their six-month stay. I would like to read this as an emblem of the series' release of multiple versions of the island.

Conclusion

The three filmic representations of Bear Island/Bjørnøya I have discussed in this article poeticise the Arctic landscape in ways that prompt reflection on the relationship between human agency and the agency of the physical world. They do so, however, in very different ways. *Bear Island* oscillates between a representation of snow and ice as forces overpowering humans and a fantasy of human control over the cold landscape. It thereby negotiates contemporaneous discourses about climate engineering and the Cold War anxieties connected to it, sublimating the latter into a story about Nazi survival. In contrast, *Bjørnøya* (the film) and *Bjørnøya* (the series) engage with surfing and meteorology, respectively, as practices that embed humans in complex geographical and ecological networks. Each of the three films mediates the specific materiality of polar island geography to articulate its own distinct vision of the Arctic, thereby renewing not only the genre of polar exploration but also that of the island narrative, whose conventions – such as the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene – they transform.

The three works create a poetic geometry of experience by mobilising the language of film to accentuate and shape the geography of the island in distinct ways. The verticality of *Bear Island* connects with the desire to master space that characterises much of classic island fiction, but the mobile polar geography also challenges this drive and speaks to a profound environmental and geopolitical uncertainty. Nonetheless, *Bear Island* largely remains within the aesthetic (and geopolitical) conventions of a sublime, threatening Arctic, which is enhanced by the film's conflation of North American and Northern European geographies. The Wegge brothers' *Bjørnøya* exists in a tension between an adventurous verticality and an increasingly important contemplative horizontality. While the former domesticates the Arctic and turns the island into a giant theme park of fast thrills, the latter slows down the pace of the film, opening up space and time and presenting the human movements on the island as part of a larger ecology. In the NRK's *Bjørnøya*, a similar meditative horizontality co-exists with a poetic investment in roundness, which is linked to the series' emphasis on intimate exploration through both physical movements and a multimedia archive. Both documentaries also make use of light and mobile cameras that can be operated flexibly or even left to operate on their own, creating two somewhat contradictory effects: on the one hand, this seems to make the island itself present as an observer; on the other, it is also connected to the digital aesthetics of amateur videos and selfie culture and thereby underscores the personal nature of the expeditioners' quests noted by Iversen.

For Iversen, this privileging of the personal in both versions of *Bjørnøya* goes hand in hand with a harmonious vision of the Arctic that disavows geopolitics. While this may be true for the surfer documentary, I would argue that the many references to military history and historical resource extraction in the NRK series obliquely point to the contemporary interest in Arctic resources, which becomes explicit in the last episode: the account of an oil spill caused by a Russian trawler in the nature reserve of Bear Island is followed directly by a comment on plans to drill for oil near the island and the visit of a Greenpeace team to the island. Here, Norway's problematic relationship with oil is foregrounded and placed in a larger context of resource extraction in the Arctic.

Despite their different geopolitical implications, then, the films all mobilise the material and experiential dimensions of polar geography – including snow and ice, open surfaces, light and darkness, colour, and weather – and thereby rethink both Arctic imaginaries and island imaginaries. Each in its own way, they present the island as a dynamic environment that interacts with and extends into the ocean. Recent developments in Island Studies have emphasised the dynamic and watery dimensions of islands. With their shifting geographies and the presence of H₂O in different states of matter, polar islands lend themselves to a radical questioning of the man-made geographies of tropical island narratives and complicate the territorial logic of Western modernity – even if they give rise to their own spatial ideologies in turn. It is one of the premises of geocriticism that the physical and medial layers of any given space fold into each other. This is perhaps particularly true for spaces that are sparsely inhabited and difficult to access for most people. As my geocritical exploration of different films about Bear Island shows, the medial lives of the island communicate not only with their spatial referent and with each other, but also with a larger set of texts and imaginaries pertaining to both the Arctic and to islands. When the crew of the meteorological station of Bjørnøya watch the 1979 film about Bear Island on Bear Island, though it was actually filmed somewhere else, their lived experience of the island intertwines with its fictional past – only to form a new medial layer that will yet again reshape the polar island for future viewers and visitors.

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