



# A Carnival of Sailing Homes and Shipwrecks

## *Ocean and Society in Hallgrímur Helgason's Historical Fiction*

Auður Aðalsteinsdóttir

Postdoctoral researcher at Queen Margrethe's and Vigdís Finnbogadóttir's Interdisciplinary Research Centre on Ocean, Climate, and Society at the University of Iceland, funded by the Carlsberg Foundation and the Icelandic Centre for Research, Rannís (grant number CF20-0449/ROCS20-0449).

Author of the book *Þvilíkar ófreskjur. Vald og virkni ritdóma á íslensku bókmenntasviði* (2021), based on her PhD on Icelandic book reviews, and the chapter "Icelandic Literature and Ecofeminism" in *The Routledge Handbook of Ecofeminism and Literature* (2023).

[audurada@hi.is](mailto:audurada@hi.is)

### Abstract

In his historical novels *Sixty Kilos of Sunshine* (2018) and *Sixty Kilos of Knockouts* (2021), Hallgrímur Helgason describes the role of the "herring adventure" in Icelanders' swift move to modernity whilst gradually moving towards independence from centuries of foreign rule. The author uses grotesque humor and the philosophy of the carnival to offer us his own interpretation of this transitive state. This article discusses some of the story's carnivalesque characteristics, with references to the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and an emphasis on postcolonial and gendered aspects.

### Keywords

carnival, historical novels, Icelandic literature, postcolonialism, female grotesque

Iceland's abrupt shift towards modernity and urban life was such a dominant theme in twentieth-century Icelandic literature that official literary history, the one published in books and taught in the school system, has described "the classic theme of migration from countryside to town", with associated nostalgia for the ancient farming society, as one of its main characteristics (Eysteinnsson and Dagsdóttir 2006, 443; cf. Kristjánsdóttir 2010, 72, 87; Kristjánsdóttir 2006, 419, 436–437). The novel *Independent People* by Halldór Laxness, published in 1933–1935, is one of the earliest ironic answers to this nostalgic exaltation of rural society, but the theme lived on and twenty-first century writers continue to revisit the swift steps made towards modernity at the turn of the twentieth century. Jón Kalman Stefánsson's trilogy, *Heaven and Hell* (2007), *The Sorrow of Angels* (2009) and *The Heart of Man* (2011), focuses on the constant hardship and threats earlier generations had to face, but with sentimental rather than ironic undertones. In his historical novels *Sixty Kilos of Sunshine* (2018) and *Sixty Kilos of Knockouts* (2021), here referred to collectively as the *Kilos*, Hallgrímur Helgason also describes how Icelanders, whilst gradually moving towards independence from centuries of foreign rule, managed a swift move from turf huts with fish oil lamps, and cod and shark hunts, in open boats to wooden houses with electric lights and an advanced fishing industry, but turns our attention to the fact that the unexpected path that

led Icelanders to modernity was paved by a creature they scorned: herring. The titles of the books refer to barrels of herring and other goods measured in kilos. In the first volume, people who glimpse Norwegian barrels of herring from afar for the first time see sunshine reflected on the herring and are reminded of the comic Icelandic legend of the foolish brothers of Bakki who tried to use their caps to carry sunshine into their house. The knock-outs in the title of the second volume refer to all the wild parties and drunken brawls that accompanied these barrels.

Although harvesting the sea has always been necessary for survival in Iceland, it was only in the twentieth century that fishing replaced agriculture as the country's most profitable industry. This evolution was met with suspicion in the first half of the twentieth century, and life at fishing stations was often depicted as one of poverty, immorality and low culture (Pálsson 1987, 7–8). Nostalgia for the farming society likely contributed to the trend noted by Rúnar Helgi Vignisson (1995, 489) of the lost rural life being given far more importance in modern Icelandic literature than fishing villages and the sea. But in the *Kilos*, the ocean plays a vital and complex role. It is always in view so that when the main character looks out of the window of his home he feels that he and the rest of the household are on a ship “on their way to uncertain seas and even another land” (Helgason 2021, 11).<sup>1</sup> And the ocean is always a source of both life and death, offering a chance of wealth, freedom and a rapid course towards modernity, as well as threatening poverty, exploitation or sinking into the history of ancient traumas. Such a state of transition and movement, of ambivalence and contradictions, are a mark of the ancient culture of grotesque folk humor that Mikhail Bakhtin has described as taking on the form of the carnival in the Renaissance, both in life and the arts. According to Bakhtin (1984b, 34), such a “combination of a variety of different elements” liberates us “from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths”. The carnival spirit reveals “the relative nature of all that exists” and offers us “a new outlook on the world” with “the peculiar logic of the “inside out” [...], of the “turnabout,” of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings” (Bakhtin 1984b, 11).

Although in diluted form, according to Bakhtin, the carnivalesque form and its grotesque images live on in literature, as can be seen in the *Kilos*' style, which is rambling, tongue-in-cheek, polemical, uncrowning, debasing “all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract [...] to the sphere of earth and body” (Bakhtin 1984b, 19). Alda Björk Valdimarsdóttir (2008, 17–18, 37–51, 88–90) has discussed Hallgrímur Helgason's use of the carnival in his former novels and visual art, and in general, he is an author who revels in unrefined humor and the grotesque; his texts are not terse or concise but rather an enthusiastic and excessive flow of words, full of puns and double meaning. This article demonstrates that in the *Kilos* he uses grotesque humor and the philosophy of the carnival as described by Mikhail Bakhtin to offer his own interpretation of what is called the Icelandic “herring adventure”.

## The “Second World” of the Herring Adventure

At the turn of the twentieth century, the herring, which Icelanders had for the most part<sup>2</sup> not even considered edible, suddenly turned into the silver of the sea. As the narrator speculates, it is of course likely that this protected environment, i.e. “this great rejection

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1. All quotes from the *Kilos* are translated to English by the author of this article. The same applies to other direct quotes from Icelandic sources, unless otherwise stated in the bibliography.
  2. Hreinn Ragnarsson (2007, 25–26) mentions exceptions from that “rule”.

from Icelanders was the very reason why the herring had now washed up on shore, had almost come all the way to the door and knocked, begging people to use it for bait, brine it, eat it, love it” (Helgason 2018, 192). But it was only after Norwegians started fishing for it from Iceland in the late nineteenth century that the processing of herring started to draw in hundreds of Icelanders who wanted a piece of the profits. This newfound goldmine turned the quiet fishing village of Siglufjörður into a busy town – “the herring capital of Iceland” (Jóhannesson 2012, 280) – with a constant flow of workers of various nationalities, leading to the speedy industrialization of fisheries.<sup>3</sup> In Hallgrímur Helgason’s book series, this transitive state engenders a true carnival. Bakhtin (1984b, 9–10) states that the culture of folk laughter as expressed in the “pure” feasts of antiquity was “turned over to the popular sphere of the marketplace” in the Middle Ages so that the carnivalesque in life and literature still bears the mark of the “frank and free” (i.e. vulgar and obscene) speech, acts, and humor of the marketplace. As Rúnar Helgi Vignisson (1995, 496; 500) has pointed out, Icelandic seafarer novels indicate that this freedom also applies on board ships where men are temporarily “living in another dimension, outside civilization” and vulgar and pornographic language becomes the norm. In the *Kilos*, Siglufjörður becomes the carnivalesque industrial marketplace of Segulfjörður, Magnet Fjord, drawing in both local and foreign opportunists, mostly unruly seamen who bring ashore their own rules of conduct, temporarily disturbing the social order by offering what Bakhtin (1984b, 9) calls the “second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance”. Such a “second life” is constructed by means of Hallgrímur Helgason’s carnivalesque historical fiction; both as a fictional reality and a historical reality, since Helgason’s fiction offers us a carnivalesque interpretation of historical events. And like the carnival Bakhtin (1984b, 8) describes, the herring adventure here described is “organized on the basis of laughter”.

## The Fear of Death is Defeated with Joyous Laughter

As can be expected from an author who celebrates grotesque humor, the *Kilos* are a monstrous rollercoaster of a tale. The books could be described as a multiple narrative as we are presented with interconnected stories of numerous characters who, as in many historical novels, become representatives of different but intertwined destinies in the grand story of the birth and evolution of the herring village, the history and characteristics of the Icelandic nation and, on an even larger scale, of modernity – told by the dominating voice of an omnipresent narrator who likes to offer grandiose interpretations that first and foremost add to the entertainment value of the story.<sup>4</sup> We start off by following a character named Eilífur, meaning Eternal. He is on his way home from a hard journey after trying, without much success, to secure food for his starving family by negotiating with greedy merchants

3. The story of Siglufjörður has been used as a case study of complex interactions between physical, biological, and social systems (Hamilton et al. 2004, 325–326). For a historical overview of the herring adventure see for example Sigurðsson et al. (2007).

4. The dominating narrator’s voice raises the question of whether this can be seen as a polyphonic novel in the sense of Bakhtin (1984a). Alda Björk Valdimarsdóttir has noted a difference regarding the “immovable center” that typically steers the narrative in Hallgrímur Helgason’s books. In the novel *Betta er allt að koma* (1994), a narrating voice “from above [...] describes a carnival but does not participate in it”, and in *Höfundur Íslands* (2001), the author is “the beginning and the end in his text”. In *Rokland* (2005), however, she claims the novel’s mockery is polyphonic and *101 Reykjavík* (1996) she describes as characterized by postmodern play (Valdimarsdóttir 2008, 206–207). In the *Kilos*, the narrator certainly assumes a central position, but the social critique he and some of the characters offer is often based on far-fetched or even ridiculous interpretations which the reader quickly learns to take with a grain of salt, sensing the author’s humorous ambivalence. This makes it possible to view the *Kilos* as a polyphonic rather than a monologic novel.

of a corrupt trading system, interpreted by the narrator as leftovers from the oppressive Danish trade monopoly in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. On his return, Eilífur finds his home, called Stundarkot (Moment Cottage), buried under an avalanche and his whole family dead except his youngest son, Gestur, meaning Guest, who later becomes the main protagonist of the story, although we also continue to follow the destinies of many other characters. All sorts of puns around the names of Eternal, his lost Moment and his Guest multiply in the text, as if spontaneously, and these are just the beginning of an endless stream of jokes. Tongue in cheek, Hallgrímur Helgason uses witticisms and grotesque imagery – as well as irony, sarcasm, sincerity and even melodrama – to describe injustice, misery, death, and sorrow, following the carnivalesque philosophy of the “festive laughter” Bakhtin (1984b, 11–12) describes. This laughter is “universal in scope”, i.e. “directed at all and everyone”, also “at those who laugh”, turning terror “into something gay and comic” and communicating “fearlessness” (Bakhtin 1984b, 39). Using the technique of black comedy, the narrator of the *Kilos* invites us to laugh at the absurdity of the horrible Icelandic living conditions in the recent past – constant threats from deadly nature topped with merciless social injustice – but the narrative also illustrates that although the characters living out this reality are aware of its absurdity, they cannot always laugh along. When a drunken priest turns the funeral of Eilífur’s wife and young daughter into a farce, all Eilífur can feel is pain from their memory being “forever stained by that outrage” (Helgason 2018, 61). If the characters do find the heart to laugh, the temporary relief and freedom of that laughter can have its repercussions, highlighting that although the “carnival can be seen, above all, as a site of insurgency”, as Mary Russo (1994, 62; 58) describes it, “temporary loss of boundaries tends to redefine social frames, and such topsy-turvy or time out is inevitably set back on course”. Natalie Zemon Davis (2006, 401) also points out how temporary carnivalesque reversals of power structures “are ultimately sources of order and stability in a hierarchical society. They can clarify the structure by the process of reversing it”. Russo (1994, 58) argues, however, that the “extreme difficulty of producing lasting social change does not diminish the usefulness of these symbolic models of transgression”.

## Grotesque Birthing Scene

Bakhtin (1984b, 19–20) calls the imagery and aesthetic concept of the folk culture of humor “grotesque realism” whose essential principle “is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity”. An example of such degradation in the *Kilos* is the discovery of the first pages of a medieval manuscript of *Laxdæla*, described as “the most beautiful of the Icelandic Sagas”, which has been lying under the behind of an old woman, Grandvör, for decades and used even longer as a “þrekkbretti”, i.e. some kind of a bedpan for old or sick people, mostly used for bouts of diarrhea, Grandvör discloses (Helgason 2021, 400–401).

This scene has an obvious reference to the historical novel *Iceland’s Bell* by Halldór Laxness,<sup>5</sup> published in three volumes in 1943–1946, which takes place in eighteenth-century Iceland and Denmark. One of the characters, Arnas Arnaeus, is based on the scholar Árni Magnússon, who collected medieval Icelandic manuscripts and transferred them to Den-

5. Alda Björk Valdimarsdóttir has discussed how Hallgrímur Helgason has not only, as a “socially active author”, sought a role model in Halldór Laxness, but even, with the novel *Höfundur Íslands* (2001), where he obviously uses Halldór Laxness’s “fictive works, personality and life” as material, seeks to “mold himself in the image of Halldór Laxness” (2008, 23–24, 61).

mark. In *Iceland's Bell*, one scene depicts how Arnas, with the aid of a bishop and a priest, discovers a valuable piece of manuscript when going through “all kinds of garbage” in the bed of an old woman whose name is never mentioned, the mother of the protagonist Jón Hreggviðsson. Helga Kress (2009a, 260) calls this a “birthing scene” and says the manuscript is born to the society of learned men who pull this treasure out of “the old and moldy hay” in the old woman’s bed and identify it as *Skálda*, which contains “the most beautiful poems in the northern hemisphere” (Laxness 2007, 23). She also describes how *Iceland's Bell's* author, Halldór Laxness, emphasized the importance of old women’s storytelling for Icelandic literature, while actively exploiting stories he had heard from old women for use in his fiction. The “birthing scene” can be seen to mirror both high culture’s appropriation of folk culture elements and male authors’ overtaking of women’s creativity, thereby silencing them, as is emphasized when the old woman is said to have “sobbed quietly” while the men rummaged in her bed (Laxness 2007, 23). The scene also has obvious postcolonial undertones, as the manuscript will now be transported to Denmark, which as the ruler of Iceland not only seizes all material valuables but, with the help of modernized Icelanders, exploits cultural treasures as well. As the postcolonial aspect is also an important undercurrent in the *Kilos*, a brief consideration of this factor will provide us a foothold for further examining the complex, gendered dimension of this “borrowed” scene and the *Kilos’* carnival in general.

### Carnavalesque Postcolonial Reality

In the *Kilos*, Hallgrímur Helgason seizes upon the grotesque elements of Laxness’s scene, taking the degradation of highly revered medieval manuscripts under an old hag’s bottom to another level. As Bakhtin (1984b, 21) says: “To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth”; it means “coming down to earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time”. The *Kilos* are indeed full of graves that swallow people. At one funeral, which should be a sober and formal affair, a drunken priest is literally pushed into a grave. His successor regularly rolls drunk in the mud, to the horror of his upper-class wife. These scenes represent a typical carnivalesque uncrowning of “the established power and official truth” (Bakhtin 1984b, 99).

But in the *Kilos*, the sea also swallows up and gives birth. As discussed above, it represents the carnivalesque ambiguity of opposite poles: it is a source of nourishment and wealth that regularly draws the seamen harvesting it into a wet grave; it is via the ocean that merchants appear and supply goods while swindling people out of their fortunes; and the sea is the road to new opportunities while it also brings in foreign oppression.

Hallgrímur Helgason’s uncrowning of priestly<sup>6</sup> and mercenary power at the turn of the twentieth century fits the self-image Icelanders were establishing at the time the story in the *Kilos* takes place. This image was built on a myth of a noble culture that had been temporarily suppressed by Danish rule but went through an awakening in the nineteenth century and guided Icelanders back to freedom again in the twentieth century. Degrading those who got their power through Danish ties, were educated as priests in Copenhagen or were middlemen in the handling of Danish merchandise, still raises no eyebrows. But Helgason

6. Grotesque priests have featured in numerous Icelandic novels right from the start: Iceland’s first novelist, Jón Thoroddsen, gives the villainous pastor Sigvaldi Árnason a central role in his novel *Maður og kona* (Man and Woman) from 1876. Another example is pastor Guðmundur in *Independent People* by Halldór Laxness.

does not stop there, taking the degradation of the Sagas lying at the base of Icelanders' cultural self-image one step further than Laxness by turning the found manuscript into a diarrhea-soiled bedpan and even uttering the disputed word "colony": "Danes had now for centuries been the masters of this country and the relationship had been trying for both nations because Iceland was the one colony of the world which was hardest to exploit" (Helgason 2018, 13).

In the nineteenth century, Icelanders based their demands for independence on stating that their culture and heritage placed them in a category with the most powerful modern European states (Loftsdóttir 2019, 46–47) and not the one of colonies, dismissing centuries of foreign rule as a temporary lapse in an otherwise great history. Icelanders were considered members of the Danish state and therefore had a different status than inhabitants of the Danish colonies in the Caribbean and Indian subcontinent, but Guðmundur Hálfðanarson (2014a, 54, 72) thinks that denying that Iceland ever was a colony, and later a post-colony, "only tells half the story" as Icelanders were often regarded as a colonial nation by Europeans and were both subjected to and participated in a colonial discourse.<sup>7</sup> Sumarliði Ísleifsson (2015, 29; 32) also argues that Iceland's international position was "in many ways similar to the relationship between a colony and a colonial power" to the extent that theories on colonialism can be of use when discussing Iceland's national image, and Ann-Sofie Nielsen Gremaud (2014) thinks Michael Herzfeld's (2003) term "crypto-colony" is fitting. This still ongoing debate on appropriate terms to describe Iceland's former status reflects a need to confront Iceland's specific involvement in colonial relations and discourse (cf. Jóhannsson 2003; Þorláksson 2021). Helgason is one of the novelists who have taken a step in that direction in historical fiction.<sup>8</sup>

Achilles Mbembe (2001, 102–103) has studied the carnivalesque aspect of the postcolonial. He states that like the carnival, the postcolony is characterized "by a tendency to excess and lack of proportion" and "is a particularly revealing, and rather dramatic, stage on which are played out the wider problems of subjection and its corollary, discipline". The *Kilos* are driven on by a carnivalesque story-telling force, which turns out to be a perfect fit for a tale of a postcolonial modernity where the characters must adapt to a fast-changing reality. The herring adventure created prime circumstances for swindles, crime, violence, and death, but also for new hope and unprecedented freedom. In the *Kilos*, Hallgrímur Helgason offers an explanation of why the Icelanders were ready to embrace this state, describing them as people who are still marked by centuries of oppression – by natural forces and by an unjust social system – which has, first and foremost, made opportunists out of them.

Ambiguity and temporary disturbances of the social balance were not new to this nation, which anthropologist Kristín Loftsdóttir (2019, 28) describes as playing the role of the "trickster", i.e. seeking opportunities in "not fully belonging with the modernizing nations but yet not belonging with other colonized countries either". Gestur might be seen as such a trickster, grabbing unexpected chances and often bluffing his way through a slippery existence in the wild-west frenzy of this fishing village. But, according to the *Kilos*' narrator, all Icelanders are in fact reluctant to unambiguously settle anything once and for all: "few things tortured them more than fixed sizes, well prepared decisions, sealed contracts and detailed plans" (Helgason 2018, 93). As Mbembe (2001, 104) explains, "the postcolony is made up not of one 'public space' but of several, each having its own logic yet liable to be entangled with other logics when operating in certain contexts; hence, the postcolonial sub-

7. See also Hálfðanarson 2014b. For information on Danish colonies and slavery, see Pálsson (2016).

8. Other authors addressing the issue are Bergsveinn Birgisson in *Lifandilífslækur* (2018) and Arnaldur Indriðason in *Sigurverkið* (2021). See Aðalsteinsdóttir (2022) for an ecocritical-postcolonial reading of *Lifandilífslækur*.

ject has to learn to bargain in this conceptual marketplace”. These are people navigating a reality where, for example, the horrors of shipwrecks can suddenly turn into a salvaging feast where “everything [is] turned upside down; ships, mountains and men” (Helgason 2021, 259). With those words the narrator in the *Kilos* describes the carnival that breaks out when a Norwegian supply ship runs aground close to shore and every man drops what he is doing and runs to the feast.

## A Good Shipwreck

“Icelanders were the only nation in the world who in their language had the term ‘a good shipwreck’”, the *Kilos*’ narrator claims (Helgason 2021, 255). Although this might not be exactly the case, rather than anything else the narrator asserts, that term and the word “strandgóss”, stranded fortune, do describe the blessing a shipwreck often was for Icelanders suffering from Danish restrictions on commerce and trading. You could find all kinds of food, drink and wares in stranded ships and even build whole houses out of their wood.

The story of the shipwreck takes up twenty pages and five chapters in the middle of *Sixty Kilos of Knockouts*, and in many ways captures the essence of the books by weaving together postcolonial issues and the carnival. At first, the shipwreck is not as macabre as it might have been since everyone on board survives. Nevertheless, the pride of the drunken ship captain is hurt as he remains alone on his wreck and must watch the goods from his ship being “salvaged”, with a special emphasis on bringing ashore all the wine, which is then greatly enjoyed by the rescuers.

We are reminded of the postcolonial context in a discussion between the rescuers while they wait for the low tide to ease the operation. The stranded ship bears the name of Magnus VI, the thirteenth-century Norwegian king who reigned in 1264 when Icelandic chieftains signed the Old Covenant and succumbed to the Norwegian Crown, which in 1380 led to Iceland’s union with Denmark via the Kalmar Union. The ship’s name sparks a discussion on whether Norwegian rule had been better than Danish rule and how the Danes never did anything in Iceland but serve their own interests. When the rescuers find the drenched luxury goods of the ship, however, they enter “a fairy tale” (Helgason 2021, 256) – the second life of the carnival. Soon laughter, singing and yells are heard: “The beach was one great feast, men sung and fought and banged glasses, grimaced, threw up and pissed” (Helgason 2021, 258).

Here, everyone was friends, all of them, the crews of all boats, men from the south and west, north and east, shark hunters and herring catchers, poor boys and wealthy, Norwegian and Icelandic, everything had fused into one bundle of men, joyfully singing and genuinely crying [...] (Helgason 2021, 259).

According to Bakhtin (1984b, 7; 10), the carnival has “a universal spirit” where everyone takes part in a “temporary liberation” which “mark[s] the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions”. Accordingly, in the *Kilos*’ carnival, “[s]elf-crowned kings s[i]t in excellent thrones” and throw stones at the ship’s captain, enjoying “a moment outside of time and the world and reality, here there were no masters, no police, no women, no duties!” (Helgason 2021, 259; 262). With these words, though, the narrator reminds us that this carnival’s “universal spirit” only applies to the men.

The women are obviously excluded and reduced to their traditional function as guardians of societal order. They are considered representatives of a restrictive ideology – assigned

the role of mundane “jail-keepers” of spirited men.<sup>9</sup> The irony is, however, that this carnival originates from the sea, which is a female element, as has been explained to Gestur earlier by the atheist poet Lási. An element that has been forgotten in the Christian obsession with the male trinity of the father (heaven), son (earth) and the holy ghost (the air between heaven and earth).

The sea is namely the mother, woman: The Deep itself ... where life comes from. [...] In all other religions, Heathenry, Hindu, Buddhism, Tao, Athens, Rome ... women are both gods and goddesses, worshipped and existing, but this God of ours is a bachelor through and through. He does not mount a female except once in every three thousand years or so [...] (Helgason 2018, 131–132).

Helga Kress (2009b, 31) has discussed flow and water as “a feminine element and sign” in Icelandic medieval literature, characterized by lack of boundaries: “The flow is the opposite of hardness, the male system of solid laws and rules.” Men are portrayed as constantly building ships and sailing them but also wrecking them, so they have to perform acts of heroism: “water is dangerous for men [...] and that is why they try to conquer it” (Kress 2009b, 31). The struggle with this element confirms their manliness and power over the feminine. The same applies in modern fiction, according to Rúnar Helgi Vignisson (1995), who has pointed out the sexualized imagery of feminized ships and ocean in Icelandic novels from the 1990s which serve in different variations of one basic story where a young man at sea goes through a archetypical rite of passage: “Man meets naked nature, the monster that the hero must conquer to earn the princess [waiting ashore]” (Vignisson 1995, 490, my translation).

Ships are also the sphere of men in the *Kilos*; with these civilized constructs they tame and exploit the brute natural forces. But at the shipwreck feast in the *Kilos*, everything is drenched in alcohol and seawater, which flows like tears from a salvaged piano and competes with the tears streaming from the eyes of singing men. At this carnival, the men temporarily abandon themselves to the flowing element of water and get a release from their sense of bereavement for this feminine power that their Christian tradition seeks to repress by assigning to women the non-spiritual and non-creative role of guardians of societal propriety.<sup>10</sup>

This male carnival does not, however, alter the social structure or what Mbembe (2001, 109) calls “the stylistics of power”. This becomes obvious when the murdered body of a naked, pregnant girl, Selmína, an uncivilized and promiscuous farmhand, washes ashore outstretched like a grotesque “starfish” in the wake of the carnivalesque male celebration (Helgason 2021, 269).<sup>11</sup>

9. A good example of this role being assigned to women in fiction is in August Strindberg’s novel *Inferno*, where the protagonist describes his wife as his “beautiful jail-keeper, who watched my soul day and night, guessed my secret thoughts, marked the course of my ideas, and was jealous of my investigations into the unknown” (Strindberg 1913, 5).

10. It is worth mentioning that Søren Frank (2022, 133–139) thinks that traditional “distinctions between the male, associated with the risky and adventurous life of the sea and the ship, and the female, associated with the safe and bourgeois life of the land and the home” are challenged in Nordic maritime fiction. Frank analyses the positive merging of the domains of the female/domestic/landbound and of the male/dynamic/maritime in three maritime novels by the Norwegian author Jonas Lie. The last of these novels, *Gå på* from 1882, describes a Norwegian hering adventure and is the only one where Frank sees a failure in the “union between sailor and home”, as the main character gets caught up in the modern and “unstoppable” forward movement towards growth and progress. A comparison of Helgason’s novels with Frank’s reading of Lie’s works is, however, beyond the scope of this article.

11. This is yet another reference to a scene from a novel by Halldór Laxness; the drowning of Sigurlína in *Salka Valka* (1931–1932).



## Crying and Dead Women Enact and Embody Power Relations

It is time to return to the scene from *Iceland's Bell* that Hallgrímur Helgason recontextualizes. In the *Kilos*, the finding of the soiled first page of *Laxdæla* – a Saga which Helga Kress (1980, 108–109) has speculated might have been written by a woman because of its unusual focus on women's perspective – also has obvious references to a birth, as it emerges from an “oblong rift in the bedsheet” of the old woman Grandvör (Helgason 2021, 398). As such, these scenes are in line with the example Bakhtin (1984b, 24) uses to describe how the grotesque reflects “both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis”. Bakhtin interprets ancient Greek terracotta figurines as being “pregnant hags” when explaining that the grotesque is ambivalent: “It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. [...] Life is shown in its twofold contradictory process”. The word “grotesque” stems from the Italian word “grotto” and refers to archaeological discoveries of fantastical subterranean Roman murals. Mary Russo (1994, 1) has described how the grotesque cave as “a bodily metaphor [...] tends to look like (and in the most gross metaphorical sense be identified with) the cavernous anatomical female body”. She points out that for Bakhtin the carnival “can be seen, above all, as a site of insurgency” and as carrying the “possibilities of human freedom and cultural production”. However, “for the feminist reader, this image of the pregnant hag is more than ambivalent. It is loaded with all of the connotations of fear and loathing around the biological processes of reproduction and of aging” (Russo 1994, 61–63). Connotations that have served as fundamental tools for repressing women through the ages. Thus, although “associations of the female with the earthly, material, and the archaic grotesque” can be seen to suggest “a positive and powerful figuration of culture and womanhood”, it “is an easy and perilous slide from these archaic tropes to [...] misogyny” (Russo 1994, 1–2).

In the two manuscript scenes being analyzed here, the misogyny is evident. The old women giving birth to manuscripts do not do this willingly or joyfully. The one in *Iceland's Bell* sobs quietly, while in the *Kilos* Grandvör (the name means Righteous and points to the aforementioned womanly role of being guardians of societal propriety) would rather like to keep on using it as a bedpan but is given no say in the matter. The grotesque imagery functions to reveal violent, oppressive power structures in a fashion Mbembe (2001, 109) ascribes to the postcolony, where “the search for majesty and prestige contains within it elements of crudeness and the bizarre that the official order tries hard to hide, but that ordinary people bring to its attention, often unwittingly”. Like the dead Selmína, the old women in *Iceland's Bell* and the *Kilos* embody the subjugation of their sex, age, and class as the power relations that rulers and the people partake in are grotesquely enacted.

## Unruly Women Represent a Postcolonial Modernity

By engaging in a flow of seawater and tears traditionally ascribed to women, the men in the *Kilos*' shipwreck carnival experience a temporary and emotionally healing reversal of gender roles, whereas women's crying only confirms their submissive role in society. Laughter, which is generally connected with insurgency, also has gendered implications where men's laughter is often perceived as heroic and can offer constructive social critique, while women's laughter is perceived as monstrous and damaging for the patriarchal social order. In *Iceland's Bell* the ever-defiant protagonist Jón Hreggviðsson laughingly throws vulgarities, curses, and blasphemies at those in power, even the king whom he admires and envies for keeping mistresses. This open and fearless display is connected to Jón's manhood and virility (he cites pornographic poetry and dreams of sexual encounters with fat ladies) but

is also deemed grave enough to warrant a public flogging; a spectacle in the spirit of the carnival where the public joins in Jón's laughter at the representative of colonial power who is beating him. Throughout Jón's grotesque resistance and suffering, however, the "unconditional subordination of women to the principle of male pleasure remains one pillar upholding the reproduction of the phallocratic system" (Mbambe 2001, 110). As the head of the family Jón himself beats other family members, and when he is sentenced to death for murdering an executioner, he is prepared to sell his daughter – the apple of his eye – to his guard in return for tobacco. Just like the tearful carnival in the *Kilos*, the temporary disturbance of his manly laughter does not go as far as to challenge the foundations of patriarchy.

But what about the laughter of women? Helga Kress (1993, 122) has discussed laughter as carnivalesque body language used to degrade power and pointed out that in Icelandic medieval literature, laughter often ensues when women humiliate men. Their laughter entails a temporary liberation from women's oppressed position in the social hierarchy, showing the aforementioned "fearlessness" that Bakhtin sees in the images of folk culture, but the usual brutal revenge – in Old Norse literature laughing women often end up mutilated, raped and/or killed – shows that this is perceived by those in power as an attack on the social hierarchy itself. We arrive at the fact that the universal nature of carnivalesque laughter is utopian. What we know is the "conflictual laughter" from different directions that Russo (1994, 73) attributes to "social subjects in a classist, racist, ageist, sexist society" while "carnival laughter remain[s] on the horizon".

As Davis (2006, 406; 399–400) writes, sexual symbolism has "a close connection with questions of order and subordination, with the lower female sex conceived as the disorderly lustful one", and women's position "was used to symbolize not only hierarchical subordination but also violence and chaos". As we have seen, tearful and quiet old ladies signal subordination while the laughter of women signals an affront to the social order. In the *Kilos*, old women do not seem to have much to laugh about, just as in *Iceland's Bell*, but we do get at least one truly grotesque female laughter. A woman called Steinka is described as the most unsightly old hag in the area, with half-bald head, frostbitten cheeks, soot-black wrinkles, oozing abscess, cracked lips, missing front teeth, clothes that have not been changed since the nineteenth century and a smell like "she was followed by eighteen upright corpses" (Helgason 2018, 298–299). Steinka represents the consequences of the social injustices and utter poverty of dark old times, and as a child, Gestur, witnesses her bite a piece out of her husband's side as he lays drunk in his bed and then walk around their cottage "laughing with human flesh in her mouth while the blood dripped down her chin, while the man lay writhing in his bed screaming himself to death" (Helgason 2021, 300–301). Admitting that he has no right to morally condemn an act that results from years of abuse and misery, Gestur continues to be haunted by this scene as a token of the dark and horrid past from which he – and Icelanders in general – desperately want to escape.

In the high-speed modernization of Segulfjörður, women see opportunities for other kinds of laughter: in the strange new work of processing herring which seems like a break from oppressive and age-long routines; at late night dances after an arduous work shift; in the arms of men they choose themselves. But the (very recent) past continues to walk among them in the guise of grotesque old women and it is not that easy to shake off, even if the power hierarchies seem momentarily to be turned upside down. Young women who worked on farms and were near the bottom of the farming society's hierarchy, never owning anything and often subject to sexual abuse, are now suddenly paid in cash, which makes them not only independent but also, temporarily, gives them more to spend than the farmers for whom they used to work.

Davis (2006, 400–401) has researched “the *topos* of the woman-on-top” in early modern Europe, noting that displays of sexual inversion were “ultimately sources of order and stability in a hierarchical society”, clarifying “the structure by the process of reversing it” but not changing it. The women in the *Kilos* are faced with this dilemma. When Anna, Gestur’s beautiful, smart and modern girlfriend, is revealed to be Steinka’s daughter, he has to conquer his disgust at the thought of her mother’s “witch laughter” (Helgason 2021, 301). Although Anna has done her best to reverse the tables and be a free, modern woman, laughing, flirting and collecting boyfriends at herring dances, she cannot escape this heritage and is punished with rumors about her promiscuity and with Gestur turning his back on her for a period of time.

Women’s newly earned freedom not only comes at the cost of sexual danger and exploitation, it is also met with a moral backlash. Just like the unruliness of the past – symbolized by a wife who eats her husband – modern freedom can be dangerous to the societal order and must be moderated. Again, women’s bodies are the perfect symbol. As Davis (2006, 398) writes: “The female sex was thought the disorderly one par excellence in early modern Europe”. Nonetheless she claims that even if the *topos* of the woman-on-top in the end “renewed old systems”, it “also helped change them into something different” and “the image of the disorderly woman did not always function to keep women in their place” but was “also part of the conflict over efforts to change the basic distribution of power within society” (Davis 2006, 407; 401).

The *Kilos* are a story that recounts “how modernity sailed to port in North Iceland”, as it says on the blurb on *Sixty Kilos of Sunshine*’s back cover, and describes the transitive state of early modernity in a colony (which yet is not exactly a colony) on the verge of becoming a postcolony (or maybe not exactly a postcolony). All this ambivalence, uncertainty and instability is reflected in the surrounding nature. As the narrator says, the word *úrkomulaust* (e. without precipitation) is “probably the most Icelandic of all” as it describes an “eternal temporary state [...] It basically means that ten minutes ago it was raining or snowing, and now it has stopped, but in a few minutes, rain, snow, or sleet will fall, if not all at the same time” (Helgason 2018, 110). And as “few adjectives seem to capture so precisely the past, present and future”, it also brings our attention to the special temporality accompanying this instability. Most of Europe already “entered a new era in the second half of the eighteenth century, both in terms of the political revolutions in the Atlantic World and the dramatic economic and social changes created by the early stages of modern capitalism” (Taylor and Collins 2006, 1). In the *Kilos* (as in Icelandic history), these dramatic changes arrive more than a century later. Such “lateness” is often associated with the peripheral placement of (post)colonies in relation to the colonizing countries which, as cultural centers, are seen to gradually radiate novelties and modern thought out to the margins of civilization. Postcolonial studies often focus on how “the postcolonial has been taken to represent an ‘other’ time whose logic and historical expression are incommensurable with the normative temporality of clock and calendar associated with Western modernity” (Ganguly 2004, 162). This is the case in the *Kilos*, where Icelanders seem to head straight to the “future”, while still having one foot in a dark antiquity: “In spring at three o’clock in the afternoon, the future appeared heavily loaded from behind Segulnes and dropped anchor on Pollurinn a while later. [...] Here had arrived the largest sailing ship the fjord had seen” (Helgason 2018, 309).

Segulfjörður’s strange temporality is noticed and theorized upon by one of its inhabitants, an old man who takes on the classical role of the madman, which Bakhtin (1984b, 39) describes as “inherent to all grotesque forms, because madness makes men look at the

world with different eyes, not dimmed by ‘normal’”. The carnivalesque town of Segulfjörður has its own version of madmen: three senile old men, Sakarías, Jónas and Jeremías, whom the old priest refers to as his “prophets”. They stagger around like “zombies” in urine-soaked underwear like a “supervisory committee on behalf of the Almighty” (Helgason 2018, 42; 128). One of them, Sakarías, is said to be “quite sage-like” (Helgason 2018, 128) after he begins going around wrapped in a bedsheet and is constantly complaining about an error he claims to have discovered in the fjord’s calendar registrations:

Imagine the misfortune, that we just leaped over Leap Day itself, they just entirely forgot about it. Wednesday 29 February 1532 never arrived in this fjord! We are therefore doomed to be one day behind all other men, but still be ... yes, yes, because we must live with this damnation, that our life here in Segulfjörður is one endless tomorrow. [...] So, we never live today but are forever stuck in some haze of tomorrow (Helgason 2018, 75).

When the future-seeking Eilífur wonders if it is not a good thing, to arrive ahead of others into the future, the prophet professes to quote scripture (perhaps his own): “He who takes a shortcut to Paradise has a short stay” (Helgason 2018, 75). Sakarías’s sudden moralization brings to mind Russo’s (1994, 61–62) reminder that “Bakhtin’s focus on carnival in early modern Europe contains a critique of modernity”; it is “in some ways, nostalgic for a socially diffuse oppositional context which has been lost, but which is perhaps more importantly suggestive of a future social horizon”, a possibility for another kind of society. This utopian trait of the carnival might explain why the characters in the *Kilos* have such an affinity for the future.

## Conclusion

This article has outlined how the carnival marks the form, style, and historical perspective of the *Kilos*. The first two volumes of the series cover 800 pages, so limited space only allows for a listing of some of the novels’ carnivalesque elements while others remain to be analyzed. Reading the *Kilos* as a postcolonial novel, I have emphasized how grotesque style and imagery reflect the complexities of postcolonial power structures and insurgence in early modernity, where rapid social changes brought consequent instability. In Bakhtin’s theories, the grotesque debasement of the carnival is closely connected with the earth, but in the fishing village of Segulfjörður, the sea is the key element of the carnival being played out. Its ambivalent symbolism (food source/graveyard; danger/opportunities) and associations with an unruly feminine force – flow, unclear boundaries, the deep, the uncontrollable, and the ever changing – provides the carnivalesque driving force of the story.

According to the story’s carnivalesque logic, the experience of having been ruled by a foreign force, in addition to being surrounded by cruel and unpredictable nature, equipped Icelanders with exactly the right opportunistic tools to exploit the herring adventure, an unexpected gift from the capricious sea, this truly carnivalesque element, to pave the road to independence by way of modern capitalism. The self-directed laughter of the carnival, however, prevents this from becoming a national-romantic tale. Instead of heroes we have tricksters, opportunists, and debased officials – and the narrator of the *Kilos* makes countless jokes out of Icelanders’ insistence on living in the moment and waiting for windfalls.

In carnivalesque texts like the *Kilos*, historical accuracy is, of course, not a priority. A long report on Icelanders’ dislike of people with voluminous hair – which is traced back to their escape from the rule of the Norwegian king Harald Fairhair – sounds like some of

François Rabelais's fabulous tales of Gargantua and Pantagruel that Bakhtin explores with his theory of the carnival: It is absurd nonsense dressed as scholarly historical knowledge, poking fun at big tales of bravery and pride being inherited by Icelanders from ancestors who broke free from kingly oppressors and sought freedom elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> Such tales were actually told to explain the economic conquest of Icelandic “business Vikings” in the years leading up to the economic crash in 2008. When the narrator speaks of the Icelandic “arbitrary economic system”, where “even the economic system’s fundamentals, the prize of wheat, meat and alcohol, were made up, relative – based on inspiration” (Helgason 2018, 93–94), most Icelandic readers will also see a connection to the economic collapse. It reminds us that the *Kilos*, like all other historical novels, is partly a commentary and critique on contemporary society and our myths about the past. But the narrator’s following comment, that “[m]aybe this could all be blamed on literature, this strange phenomenon other nations tolerated but Icelanders worshipped” (Helgason 2018, 94), also reminds us of the blurred boundaries of reality and fiction that we are faced with in all historical novels. The *Kilos*’ narrator seems to suggest that Icelanders – i.e. the specific version of Icelanders he presents us with in his historical interpretation – are more willing to embrace this relativity because of their familiarity with a carnivalesque reality, (perhaps unwittingly) acknowledging that “the basic carnival nucleus [...] belongs to the borderline between art and life” (Bakhtin 1984a, 7). But when these speculations are applied to the *Kilos* as a whole, they also prompt the question of whether, at the bottom of all historical fiction, with its staging of a second reality, “a second life”, there lies the carnival.

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12. On such myths, see Sigurðsson (2017).

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