

Trolls, Monster Masts, and National Neurosis: André Øvrelid's *The Troll Hunter*

Ellen Rees

University of Oslo

Abstract

This article offers an analysis of the cultural references and social critique embodied in the trolls in *Trolljegeren* (2010, *The Troll Hunter*), a documentary directed by André Øvrelid. The author demonstrates how this film combines late modernity with folklore and tradition. While offering a complex critique of the welfare state, the director uses creatively elements drawn from Asbjørnsen and Moe's folk tales and from the illustrations of Theodor Kittelsen.

Key words

Trolljegeren, André Øvrelid, film studies, trolls, folk tales, society.

André Øvrelid's tongue in cheek monster documentary, *Trolljegeren* (*The Troll Hunter*¹), produced a great deal of popular and media attention when it was released in the fall of 2010. As the title suggests, the movie features trolls as its creatures of horror. Øvrelid's trolls, however, are a peculiarly domesticated type of monster, rehearsing as they do the folk tales of Asbjørnsen and Moe and in particular the drawings of the late nineteenth-century artist and illustrator Theodor Kittelsen. In this commentary I aim to give an account of the cultural references and social critique that make *The Troll Hunter* something more than merely mindless entertainment.

Self-proclaimed scholar of 'monsterology' Steven T. Asma has written extensively on the imaginative work that monsters do in contemporary popular culture. Put simply, according to Asma 'monsters can stand as symbols of human vulnerability and crisis, and as such they play imaginative foils for thinking about our own responses to menace' (Asma 2009b). In *The Troll Hunter*, the imaginative foil of raging trolls and their containment through the efforts of a covert government agency raises questions about not only the welfare state as a viable social model in late modernity, but also about what one might call Norway's national neurosis of collective narcissism.

The premise of *The Troll Hunter* is simple: a team of journalism students track the movements of a mysterious and evasive man named Hans, who is played brilliantly by the controversial comedian Otto Jespersen. They follow him into the forest thinking he is a poacher. When confronted, he claims instead to be a troll hunter working for a secret government agency called the TST (Troll sikkerhetstjeneste; Troll Security Service), an obvious play on the Norwegian secret service known as the PST (Politiets sikkerhetstjeneste; Police Security Service). The students then follow the stoic troll hunter as he attempts to contain an outbreak of trolls that appear to be escaping from one of the many secret troll reservations hidden in wilderness areas. The troll hunter's job is to track down and kill escaped trolls before the public discovers them. If the troll happens to inflict damage or kill livestock, the TST plants a recently shot bear at the site and blames the destruction on it instead.

The film makes direct references to both the folk tales of Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe and the drawings and paintings

of Theodor Kittelsen. Early in the film as Hans instructs the student journalists on how to behave in a confrontation with a troll, the students base their responses on what they have learned from the folk tales of their childhood. One of them asks what they should do if a troll engages them in an eating contest. Hans's terse response is: 'Kappspise? Asbjørnsen og Moe stemmer ikke helt med virkeligheten' (An eating competition? Asbjørnsen and Moe don't exactly correspond to reality).² Later in the film he tells them they can 'bare glemme eventyrene. De er for unger' (Just forget about the folk tales. They're for kids). In another scene, the film creates a visual tableau of the iconic folk tale 'De tre bukkene bruse' (The Three Billy Goats Gruff) when the troll hunter sets up a trap for one of the trolls on a bridge using three goats to lure the monster. Aside from the trolls themselves, which bear a striking resemblance to Kittelsen's drawings, the film also contains a brief scene in which one of the student journalists creates a roadside tableau that explicitly parodies Kittelsen's famous folk tale illustration from 1900, 'Soria Moria'. The student is from eastern Norway, and it appears that his response to the wild landscapes of western Norway and the central mountain ranges is mediated through childhood images and narratives. But *The Troll Hunter* is not all cozy references to the folk tradition. The film makers make a real effort to maximize suspense and special effects, although it has to be said that the fundamental goofiness of the trolls make them far less uncanny and horrifying than most movie monsters. With their slime, their overpowering flatulence, and their sheer destructive power they are repellent, but oddly un-terrifying.

While Norway has yet to make an international name for itself as a cinema nation, over the past decade a growing corpus of horror films has, perhaps surprisingly, achieved more international recognition than many attempts in the more serious genres. Films like *Villmark* (*Wilderness*, Øie 2003), the three *Fritt vilt* films (*Cold Prey*, Uthaug 2006, Stenberg 2008, Sandemose 2010), *Rovdyr* (*Predator*, Syversen 2008) *Død snø* (*Dead Snow*, Wirkola 2009), and *Skjult* (*Hidden*, Øie 2009) have helped establish a reputation for mastery of special effects and a good grasp of the elements of suspense.³ Many of these films make active use of the specifics of the Norwegian environment, placing

their action in remote wilderness settings, and *Død snø* activates Norwegian history in making Nazi zombies into the film's monstrous antagonists. *The Troll Hunter* distinguishes itself from among these films by the director's far more overt aim of creating a specifically Norwegian super hero confronted by equally specifically Norwegian adversaries. We can also contextualize *The Troll Hunter* in relation to two other Nordic films that activate traditional belief in supernatural creatures, namely Swedish director Ted Kjellson's short film about malevolent brownies, *Tompta Gudh* (2002), and Finnish director Jalmari Helander's feature film *Rare Exports: A Christmas Tale* (2010), in which human carelessness provokes a supernatural race of Father Christmases to violence.⁴

The troll hunter himself, Hans, fulfills all the stereotypes of Norwegian masculinity: he is a loner at home in nature, he is misunderstood, he suffers in silence, working tirelessly but without recognition for the safety and betterment of the larger society. He lives in a squalid camper, haunted by the prey that he stalks and unable to sleep in the dark for fear of being attacked by trolls. Hans is especially troubled by the recollection of an episode in the 1970s in which he was forced by his superiors to kill off a large enclave of trolls including pregnant females and infants so that the state could build tunnels. The way he describes this mass killing creates an associative link to war traumas such as the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. The feelings of guilt that Hans experiences become associatively equated in the viewer's mind with any number of Vietnam war movies in which the line between good and evil is blurred, and in which Western ethics are questioned and government-sanctioned exploitation exposed.

There is a delightful imbalance in the troll hunter's deep knowledge of the ways of the world and his adversaries the trolls, which are portrayed in the film as profoundly stupid. Legends about supernatural creatures known as trolls has a long history in the Nordic countries, dating back at least to the middle ages. In the modern era the troll has been defined as a:

[...] overnaturlig, menneskelignende, gjerne stygt og skremmende vesen, ofte større eller mindre enn et menneske

[...] eller på annen måte et vrengebilde av det [...], som holder til særlig i berg, skog eller hav [...] og i regelen er farlig for menneskene, men dumt [...]' (Knudsen 1983: 2962)

[...] supernatural, humanoid, frequently ugly and frightening creature, often larger or smaller than a human [...] or in some other way a distortion [...], that inhabits in particular mountains, forests and the sea [...] and as a rule is dangerous for humans but stupid.

Øvrelid's trolls follow this description⁵, but in the world he creates the trolls have become almost entirely contained within huge troll reservations in the mountains of Norway, where they pose little danger to humans. We are made to understand that this relocation took place decades ago, and that it is by and large highly effective, due in part to the stupidity of the trolls themselves. The occasional troll escapees necessitate the existence of the top secret Troll Security Service and its sole troll hunter, Hans, but the general population has become so ignorant of the natural environment that they fail to see the copious evidence of the troll presence scattered throughout the landscape. When the film team finally sees their first troll at about the fifteen-minute mark of the film, they become euphoric and begin to view Hans as a national hero whose story they want to broadcast. Hans in turn spends a great deal of screen time teaching the student journalists how to recognize and interpret the signs of troll activity.

One of the most important aspects of the trolls is their ability to recognize the scent of the blood of Christians. Before allowing the film team to accompany him, Hans requires confirmation that none of them believe in God or Jesus. All deny it, though the fact that the cameraman speaks with an accent from the south (the Bible belt of Norway) tips the viewer off that he may in fact be a believer. Needless to say, it is indeed this cameraman who gets eaten when the team is trapped in a troll den. Just before his demise he confesses 'Eg er kristen! Eg kommer til å daue!' (I am Christian! I'm going to die!). Øvrelid uses this tradition to interesting effect in order to comment on contemporary Norwegian society: the team calls in a replacement from Oslo, requesting that the person not be Christian. A young Muslim camerawoman arrives, causing

momentary perplexity. One of the students asks Hans: 'Muslim, det er greit?' (Muslim, is that okay?), to which Hans replies pragmatically 'Det veit jeg ikke. Vi får se hva som skjer' (I don't know. We'll have to see what happens). In other words, the trolls clearly haven't kept up with demographic developments in Norway. These references to religion reflect widespread debate and concern over the integration of non-Christians into Norwegian society and the spread of secularism in a humorous way that diffuses religious tension.

About thirty-five minutes into the film it starts to become clear that in fact the trolls are not the real enemy. Hans works for a man named Finn Haugan who runs the cover up operation for the TST. Haugan carries equipment to make fake bear tracks in the trunk of his car, and he pays Eastern Europeans cash to deliver bear carcasses obtained through dubious methods. Surprisingly Hans has apparently little or no problem with the ethics of the state-sanctioned cover up. In stereotypically Norwegian fashion, his real complaint has to do with his own working conditions. In a rant about the benefits that he does not receive, Hans explains:

Det er en jævla møkkajobb. [...] Arbeidstilsynet har ikke noe de skulle ha sagt i det hele tatt. Jeg får ikke natt-tillegg, ikke noe overtid, ikke noe smusstillegg, ingenting. Det er kanskje på tide at det skjer noen endringer i trollforvaltninga. Og det gjør det vel kanskje hvis dere greier å få dette her med på tv

It's a damned shitty job. [...] The Labor Inspection Agency has no influence at all. I don't get extra pay for working at night, no overtime, no extra pay for dirty work, nothing. Maybe it's time that there are some changes made in troll management. And that may just happen if you manage to get this on tv.

As its name suggests, the Norwegian Labour Inspection Agency regulates occupational safety and health. The fact that Hans wants the story to come out so that he can take advantage of Norway's phenomenally generous occupational laws and not, so it would seem, to enlighten the public about a government cover-up of massive

proportions, makes him into a dubious hero. As Hans himself tells the film crew, 'Det er ikke noe heltedelig over det jeg driver med. Det er skittent grovarbeid' (There's nothing heroic about what I do. It's dirty manual labor) and the low status of the work is emphasized by the extensive paperwork he is required to fill out for each troll that he kills.

The primary mechanism for containing the trolls on the various reservations is an elaborate network of high voltage power lines, and the second half of the film presents numerous images and discussion of such lines. A visit to a power station to investigate whether there have been any breaches in the network reveals that the energy company itself has no idea what the true purpose of the power lines is. When asked directly why he thinks a particular line makes a huge loop into uninhabited wilderness, the power station manager has no idea.⁶ Hans and the team of student journalists drive through a stunning mountain landscape that is criss-crossed by power lines. During a stop Hans makes reference to prevailing public opinion about the power lines, which is by and large that they destroy the natural beauty of the landscape. Hans complains 'Det er et jævla styr hver gang man skal sette opp nye master, da. Protester og bønder som hyler og skriker, og turistnæringen slår seg vrang' (There's a huge fuss every time they are going to install new power lines. Protests, and farmers yelling and screaming, and the tourist industry all worked up). Ever in opposition to the people he protects, Hans declares 'Jeg synes de er fine, jeg' (Me, I think they're nice), a statement that perplexes the student journalists.

This sequence is a commentary on a proposal that has dominated Norwegian politics for the past two years, namely the Statnett scheme to build a new high voltage power line through the idyllic Hardangerfjord region in order to meet the increasing demand for energy in the city of Bergen and its environs. Local inhabitants have held widely publicized protests over the proposed destruction of a pristine cultural landscape, and launched a comprehensive media campaign to demonize the project.⁷ Although critics point out that the power lines will look no different than any of the thousands of kilometers of similar lines that cover Norway, the Hardanger power masts have been quite explicitly demonized as 'monstermaster' (monster power masts), suggesting that they are some how exceptionally invasive and malignant.

In an article from August 2010, journalist Halvor Hegtun presents an overview of the historical shift in attitudes toward high voltage lines over the past fifty years. Hegtun reminds his readers of Danish-Norwegian novelist Aksel Sandemose's famous 1966 statement in favour of power lines:

La nu pent lysmastene i fred. Og se hvor vakre de er i seg selv, der de står med sine praktfulle armer som bærer lys, kraft og varme til fattige og rik – monumenter over vårt århundre (quoted in Hegtun 2010: 6)

Kindly leave the power masts in peace. And look how beautiful they are in and of themselves, as they stand with their impressive arms that carry light, energy and heat to rich and poor – monuments to our century.

Hegtun also points out that power masts decorated the mid-century propaganda of the Labor Party as 'Selve symbolene på gjenreisning og velstand' (ibid.) (the very symbols of reconstruction and prosperity). Hans thus aligns himself with an earlier rhetoric of Norwegian pragmatism and progress and against the contemporary aestheticization of the landscape. This aestheticization and fetishization of the pristine landscape is paradoxical, coming as it does at a time in which Norwegian consumerism and wastefulness has reached an all-time high. Neither everyday over-consumption nor the recent explosion of second homes in the mountains that are being upgraded with electricity and running water are seen as part of the problem, apparently.

The Troll Hunter has in effect two endings. Within the film's diegesis, Hans is forced to kill an enormous *jotne* [giant] that has contracted rabies and created chaos among the troll population. After completing this nearly impossible task, Hans leaves the film crew behind, stoically setting out into the wilderness of Jotunheimen (a mountain range that translates as Home of the Giants. The name is a nineteenth-century invention) alone. As the film team attempts to get back to civilization, Finn Haugan and his henchmen appear and try to retrieve the video recordings. The footage stops just as one of the students flags down

a semi trailer, and a series of intertitles informs viewers that the team has disappeared without a trace, leaving only their unedited tapes behind. A final extradiegetic filmed sequence comprises the film's second ending. In it, Øvreliid manipulates real life footage from Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg's state-of-the nation speech from June 2010, inserting the Finn Haugan character at his side. In the real speech, the prime minister comments on the controversy over the high voltage line in Hardanger, saying: 'Vi ønsker minst mulig inngrep i norsk natur. Jeg synes ikke kraftlinjer er pene. [...] I Norge er vi for strøm, men mot kraftlinjer. Det går ikke i lengden' (Strand 2010: 11) (We want the least possible destruction of Norwegian nature. I don't think power lines are attractive. [...] In Norway we are in favor of power, but opposed to power lines. That is untenable). Stoltenberg's speech in the film is identical up to this point, but as the camera pans to Haugan, instead of saying 'Vi skal bygge ut 11-12-13 TWh [terawatt] som et resultat av grønne sertifikater' (We are going to increase eleven, twelve, or thirteen terawatts as a result of green certificates), Stoltenberg nervously reveals this shocking information: 'Norge har troll, sånn at det kommer til å være behov for flere strømledninger i Norge. Og sånn er det' (Norway has trolls, so we're going to need more powerlines in Norway. And that's just the way it is).

The image of Jens Stoltenberg explaining Norway's pressing need for more energy despite calls for protection of the unspoiled wilderness that makes Norway unique among European nations brings us back to Stephen T. Asma's conceptualization of monsters as imaginative foils in collective responses to menace. Building on Freud's discussion of the uncanny, Asma explains that in popular culture monsters often symbolize forces in the world that we cannot control. When the monster cannot be defeated, Asma argues, 'it demonstrates our limits, it curbs and checks our narcissism. But when the monster is conquered [...], it symbolically returns our narcissism and reaffirms, albeit temporarily, our infantile power' (Asma 2009a: 191). Thus, *The Troll Hunter* can best be understood as a critique of Norwegian greed and narcissism. In Øvreliid's film, the trolls are on the order of natural threats. They occasionally cause destruction, but by and large leave the majority of the population unharmed and unaware of them as a threat. The

explicit reason for the increase in troll activity depicted in the film is an equally natural outbreak of rabies, which causes them to alter their behaviour. The only character in the film to be killed by a troll is the Christian cameraman, an act that the film seeks to naturalize within the context of a newly secularized Norway. The trolls only represent a specifically existential threat to the non-secular members of society, and even then it is unclear whether this includes all people of faith, or only Christians.

The viewer is prompted at the end of the film to consider the reason for the disappearance of the rest of the characters, apparently at the hands of the state agency that ostensibly protects its citizens from the troll threat. Just as Japanese Godzilla movies are always really about the dangers of technology and a government that overestimates its ability to control the natural environment, rather than about the monsters themselves, *The Troll Hunter* is a cautionary tale about government bureaucracy that loses sight of its mission and gets caught up in a self aggrandizing and exploitative conspiracy that serves the state rather than the citizens. The film suggests that Norwegian society as a whole suffers from collective narcissism. Notably, this is a narcissism mitigated by the Norwegian practice of 'selvironi' (self-irony).⁸ Just as the documentary genre that Øvrelid employs in *The Troll Hunter* embodies a kind of 'look at me' cleverness, so too does contemporary Norway in its self-deprecating self-absorption.

Endnotes

¹ All translations are my own.

² This is a reference to 'Askeladden som kappåt med trollet' (The Ash Lad who had an eating contest with the troll).

³ Øvrelid himself singles out Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) and Matt Reeves' *Cloverfield* (2008) as primary sources of inspiration for *The Troll Hunter* (Fagerholt 2010: 44).

⁴ Dutch director Dick Maas' *Sint*, which was also released in 2010, features a murderous Saint Nicholas, suggesting a minor international trend.

⁵ Øvrelid states that he deliberately chose not to do very much research into troll lore:

Jeg ville ikke lese eventyrene om igjen fordi jeg ville basere meg kun på det jeg allerede visste om eventyrene. Hvis ikke min kunnskap var sterk nok til å ta en referanse, så ville den nok ikke gått gjennom til det

generelle publikumet heller. Hvis jeg hadde begynt å nilese eventyr så hadde jeg funnet masse detaljer som de fleste i publikum ikke ville hatt et forhold til. Jeg prøvde å holde meg bare til de tingene som alle vet om (Fagerholt 2010: 45)

I didn't want to re-read the folk tales because I wanted to build only on what I already knew about the folk tales. If my knowledge wasn't deep enough to get a reference, then it probably wouldn't resonate with the general public either. If I had started studying the folk tales closely I would have found a bunch of details that most of the public wouldn't have had a relationship to. I tried to limit myself to just those things that everyone knows about.

⁶ The manager is played by Knut Nærum, an enormously popular comedian and writer.

⁷ See <http://bevarhardanger.no> (preserve Hardanger).

⁸ For a discussion of contemporary Norwegian irony see Tjønneland 2001: 85-94.

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