The Thrill of the Nordic Kill: The Manhunt Movie in the Nordic Thriller

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“This world’s divided into two kinds of people: The hunter and the hunted,” big-game hunter Rainsford says in The Most Dangerous Game (1932) and self-assured continues, “Luckily, I’m a hunter. Nothing can ever change that.” Well, he will discover that in the manhunt movie even the hunter can become prey. The manhunt movie is a subgenre of the Hollywood thriller which joins two elements: big-game sport hunting and hunting humans. Sport hunting stirs up themes of nature and culture, morals and ethics, masculinity, and, finally, civilization. Here, we will ask what happens when the subgenre is used in the Nordic thriller.

The chapter has three aims: First, it establishes the central generic traits of the manhunt movie. Second, it sets up a theoretical framework of sociobiological and ecological theories with hunting as a reference point. And, third, it examines the Nordic version of the manhunt movie focusing on the themes of hunting, nature, social standing, and civilization. I look at the Danish drama The Hunt (2012, Thomas Vinterberg), the Norwegian thriller-heist-comedy Headhunters (2011, Morten Tyldum), and the Swedish thrillers The Hunters (Jägarna, 1996) and False Trail (Jägarna 2, 2011) by Kjell Sundvall.¹

The Manhunt Movie
Since I cannot claim extensive knowledge of manhunt movies I will approach the subgenre with modesty. Some may claim that sport hunting of human game is not a genre but just a theme or a trope. I leave this discussion for others and will regard it a subgenre of the thriller and call it the manhunt movie.

The idea of combining sport hunting with hunting humans originates from Richard Connell’s short story “The Hounds of Zaroff” (1924) which was adapted as The Most Dangerous Game in 1932. Connell was inspired by big-game hunting in Africa, Asia, and South America, which was popular among rich Americans in the twenties.² In Connell’s story the big-game hunter Rainsford falls off a yacht in the Caribbean and swims to an isolated island owned by a Russian aristocrat, general Zaroff. Zaroff is a big-game hunter who has bought an island where he hunts shipwrecked sailors. At first Zaroff thinks he can share his unique “game” with this fellow hunter, but Rainsford declines. Zaroff then gives Rainsford the options to be
killed or be prey. Rainsford gets a three-hour start and is free if he survives three days. During the hunt Rainsford sets three traps for Zaroff: a Malay man catcher, a Burmese tiger pit, and a Ugandan knife trap. When Rainsford jumps into the ocean, Zaroff thinks he has won and returns to his chateau. But Rainsford is hiding in the general’s bedroom and the story ends with Rainsford sleeping in Zaroff’s bed.

In *The Most Dangerous Game* by Irving Pichel and Ernest B. Schoedsack, Count Zaroff (Leslie Banks) already has shipwrecked visitors – Martin and his sister Eve – when Rainsford (Joel McCrea) arrives. After hunting and killing Martin, Zaroff offers Eve (Fay Wray) and Rainsford the game. Again, Rainsford sets three traps, jumps into the ocean, and returns to the chateau where he injures Zaroff and escapes with Eve. Zaroff falls from a window into the ocean. In the opening, one of the men on the yacht speculates: “I was thinking of the inconsistency of civilization. The beast of the jungle killing just for his existence is called savage. The man, killing just for sport, is called civilized.” Rainsford answers about the tiger he killed on his last hunt: “What makes you think it isn’t just as much sport for the animal as it is for the man?” Rainsford regards his hunting as a competition between equal predators, but when he is himself hunted says, “Those animals I cornered – now I know how they felt.” The film added a heroine and also a bow and a rifle to Zaroff’s automatic pistol in Connell’s story, and it showed human heads mounted as trophies in a trophy room.

Connell’s story and its adaptation becomes founding material for the manhunt movie and the story was adapted again in 1945 and in 1956 with Zaroff as a Nazi. In 1987, the theme of big-game manhunting spread to action and science fiction, first with John McTiernan’s *Predator*, where aliens use Earth as hunting territory and humans as big game. The film was followed by *Predator 2* (Stephen Hopkins, 1990) and *Predators* (Nimród Antal, 2010) and had an Alien-franchise, *AVP: Alien Versus Predator* (Paul W.S. Anderson, 2004) and *Alien Vs. Predators: Requiem* (Colin and Greg Strause, 2010), where Predators hunt Aliens on Earth. John Woo’s thriller *Hard Target* (1993) took manhunt to New Orleans where rich people hunt homeless veterans as big game. *Surviving the Game* (Ernest R. Dickerson, 1994) repeated the homeless-as-big-game formula. In 2000 the manhunt movie enters the Nordic cinema with Aage Rais-Nordentoft’s Danish drama *Foreign Fields* where a former mercenary soldier organizes manhunts in Bosnia. Also in 2000, manhunt was used in the Japanese science fiction film *Battle Royale* (Kinji Fukasaku) where the government forces school children to hunt and kill each other on an island. Finally, in Suzanne
Collins’ bestselling book trilogy *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010), children hunt each other as live television entertainment, adapted as *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012) and *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (Francis Lawrence, 2013).

From 1924 to 2014 the manhunt movie develops from big-game hunting to live television entertainment. Among central characters are a good and an evil big-game hunter; location is typically a remote island or some wild nature far from civilization; semiotic elements include hunting dogs, automatic pistol, bow, and rifle, a chateau, a trophy room, and the evil big-game hunter’s taste in world cuisine and piano playing; and, as we will explore shortly, themes are sport hunting, culture versus nature, masculinity, and civilization.

**Going “Deep”: Instincts and Universal Values**

The appeal of the subgenre lies in hunting or, more precisely, sport hunting, since both good and evil hunters hunt professionally or for entertainment, but not for sustenance. Hunting is thus both a natural and a cultural phenomenon and a dramatic plot element. In the last two decades film studies have seen the development of a sociobiological approach which combines theories from the natural sciences with theories from the humanities. Some criticize this approach for ignoring the aesthetic and formal qualities of cinema, however, my aim here is to illuminate the appeal of the manhunt movie which I take to be primarily emotional. Since the thematic core of the genre is hunting, which is a highly sensory and emotional element, I will use neuropsychology and ecological philosophy to understand hunting as an innate behavior we share with other species as well as a cultural choice of leisure time that is uniquely human.

Emotionally speaking, hunting is a complex phenomenon. Where predators like lions and tigers have no natural enemies (except for humans), species like chimpanzees and humans have several enemies and are equipped with instincts to be both predator and prey. The innate fight-or-flight instinct (more precisely a fight-flight-freeze-or-fawn instinct) tells us how to react. Dependent on if we are prey or predator, we either flee or hunt. But whether we belong to one or the other depends on our ability to master a situation and on our assessment of our own abilities.

Hunting also requires aggression. South African neuropsychologist Victor Nell (2006) argues that human cruelty has evolved from aggression and innate hunting instincts. He discusses three kinds of aggression: predatory aggression
(hunting), territorial and sexual aggression, and defensive aggression which is the
instinctive response to danger. The three are neuroanatomically distinct but easily
invoke one another, and they connect to instinctive behaviors such as the seeking,
rage, and fear systems. The seeking system, says Nell, is “a foraging, exploration,
curiosity, and expectancy system” (Nell 2006: 214) used to stalk prey. The rage
system is loud and spontaneously aggressive, and defensive aggression mixes rage
with fear, the latter connected to our fight-or-flight response. A predator stalking its
prey is in seeking mode, not rage or fear mode, whereas a prey is in fear mode.
Unless, of course, the prey turns the tables on a hunter and becomes a hunter itself.
Animals hunt instinctively. Humans, however, do sport hunting by choice. Sport
hunting thus involves both instincts and conscious choice.

Let me briefly return to cruelty. Nell explains that hunting is hard work.
Statistics show that most animal hunts end without a catch (217) and to compensate
for empty stomachs, predation has to feel pleasant and rewarding to the animal.
Therefore, to hunt feels extremely good even without a kill. “[P]redation is
dopaminergic, affectively positive, and distinct from rage,” says Nell, “[it] is a
powerfully rewarding experience even before satiation occurs” (212, 215). Hunting
generates “auditory, visual, olfactory, tactile, gustatory, and visceral stimuli” (213)
that are extremely exciting and lead to behavior we find cruel. Thus, the more a prey
struggles, cries, and bleeds, the more exciting for the predator. Where animals are
predators by instincts and of necessity, humans can choose to hunt and only humans
have the cognitive capacity to plan and intentionally inflict pain. Animals hunt when
hungry; humans hunt for many reasons.

Hunting and sport hunting are related but have different motives. Philosopher
Roger King defines sport hunting as “the desire to kill a wild animal for sport under
conditions in which such killing is not necessary for survival” (1990: 85). We still
find subsistence hunting today, however, in developed countries sport hunting is
recreational, that is, for “fun.” And sport hunting uses an instrumental terminology far
from instincts: prey is called “game” and game animals are “stocks” that are
“managed” and “harvested” (King 2005: 392). Big game is hunted for trophies that
can be displayed in a trophy room, where they signal man’s mastery over nature.

Let us finish the framework with an eco-philosophical base. The expressions
“deep ecology” and ecosophy were coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss.
“By an ecosophy,” writes Næss, “I mean a philosophy of ecological harmony or
equilibrium. A philosophy as a kind of sofia wisdom, is openly normative, it contains both norms, rules, postulates, value priority announcements and hypotheses concerning the state of affairs in our universe” (1973: 99, emphasis in original). To Naess, ecosophy is respect for the environment, nature, and Earth. It places ecological balance before human desire or need. The difference in “deep” and “shallow” ecology is that the first seeks sustainable answers without prioritizing humans over other species, and the latter settles for short-term solutions to environmental problems. Shallow ecology is instrumental and sees nature as a ressource to be harvested.

Naess argues for plurality, sustainability, and respect. Human cognitive capacities have made it possible for us to exterminate other species and destroy the planet. Therefore, those same cognitive capacities bring a responsibility to care. To care means to have values, and this requires norms for living. An ecosophia demands a philosophy of values and of civilization. As we shall see, those are at the heart of the manhunt movie.

The Nordic Manhunt Movie
American manhunt movies call up hunt and sport hunting by titles: “game” in The Most Dangerous Game and Hunger Games (playing on multiple meanings), “target” in Hard Target, “predator” in the Predator film series. So, too, does the Nordic manhunt movie with the Danish The Hunt, the Norwegian Headhunters, and the Swedish The Hunters and False Trail. We are warned that the stories involve hunting. However, where American manhunt movies explicitly place humans as big game at the center of the plot, the Nordic manhunt movie uses this as part of its drama, as thematic subtext, and fuses these semiotic elements with other genres. Thus, The Hunt is a drama, Headhunters is a heist-comedy-thriller, and The Hunters and False Trail are thriller-crime-films. But in all four, variations of sport hunting and manhunts constitute the core emotional appeal.

Hunting
Thomas Vinterberg’s The Hunt opens with a group of men laughing and betting who will jump first into a November-cold lake. This is after a hunt and their joyful camaraderie springs from the shared experience of killing game. The film has three hunts: an initial hunt we do not see, a mid-way hunt where protagonist Lucas (Mads Mikkelsen) takes down a deer with a single shot, and the film ends with a hunt. The
plot is about forty-two-years old Lucas who recently divorced and lost his job as a teacher. He now works in a kindergarten and has a teenage son, Marcus (Lasse Fogelstrøm). When five-year-old Klara (Annika Wedderkopp) is upset because Lucas returns her pearl heart and says she ought to give it to her mother, she tells the head of the kindergarten, Grete (Susse Wold), that Lucas has “a cock rigid like a stick,” an expression she has heard her older brother use. Lucas is now (wrongly) accused with molesting Klara and he shifts status from “one of the guys” to an outcast, his house is attacked, his son rejected in the community, his dog Fanny shot, and he is beaten up and kicked out of church on Christmas Eve. Klara is the daughter of Lucas’ best friend, Theo.

The two hunts – sport hunting and vigilante hunting – are paralleled. But what does it mean to hunt? We recall hunting is stimulating for a predator and so, too, is sport hunting, which expresses man’s domination of nature, his ability to kill, and his possession of skills necessary to “out-animaling the animal,” as British ethnographer Garry Marvin puts it (Marvin 2005: 22). In “genuine” sport hunting, game is given fair warning and the hunter’s weapons restricted to what is appropriate, that is, not machine guns or bombs. Only when sport hunting is a challenge does it generate the thrill of the hunt, which is the sensory and affective predator excitement.

“Concentration, alertness and awareness are fundamental to the hunter’s mode of being,” says Marvin (22) and points to hunting as “a contest and a competition between two sets of senses and sensing – the human and the animal” (18). A hunter is immersed in nature and fully absorbed in sensing his prey. Lucas is mild-mannered, wears glasses, and works with children, but he is also the best hunter, silent, accurate, and sensitive to game. In what Marvin calls “justified” hunting, the hunter treats game with respect and eats its meat. When Klara asks Lucas what his favorite dish is, he replies deer back. Klara’s favorite are fish fingers and at her house they eat pie and lasagna. Thus, Lucas is the one most immersed in hunting and best at sensing nature.

Sport hunting is also a social experience, that is much more than recreational. Like in Michael Cimino’s The Deer Hunter (1978), sport hunting is the emotional glue that binds civilized men together, it is swimming in cold water and sharing life’s experiences such as divorce and loss. We are in North Zealand, an upper-middle class area north of the capital Copenhagen. The forest belongs to Bruun (Lars Ranthe) who has a chateau and hosts the post-hunt dinners. If the forest once echoed with aristocratic hunting, today’s hunters are both commoners such as the teacher Lucas
and forest worker Theo (Thomas Bo Larsen) and the rich Bruun. Hunting is where hunters enjoy “exercise, fresh air companionship/camaraderie, intimate personal contact with nature, and procurement of meat for the larder” (Causey 1989: 335). It is a male world of intimate emotions – Theo jokes “there are no gays, only guns” in his home (a pun on “bøsse,” Danish slang for both “gay” and “rifle”), and Theo kisses Lucas on the mouth, later referring to him as “dad’s very, very, very best friend.”

And then, of course, hunting is a world with ethics. The film title refers both to Lucas as deer hunter and to the community’s hunt when people think he is a sexual predator. What are the rules in sport hunting? A hunter invades the animal’s “home,” nature, and makes it his “game.” The game cannot negotiate with the hunter; it is the hunter who makes the rules and his ethics determine the nature of the hunt (its “fairness”). In similar fashion, Lucas becomes “game” when his intimate world is invaded by Grete, who phones his ex-wife and Marcus’ school about the sexual assault, and when someone throws a stone through his window, kills Fanny and throws the body on his lawn, and when he is out shopping and is beaten by the employees. “I have the right to shop here,” he objects and, when the butcher and the shop owner hit him, “you cannot hit me, is this normal, to hit customers?” But in sport hunting, the game has no rights. The hunter decides the rules. In the community, people believe Klara, even when Klara recants her lie. “I believe the children, I always do, they don’t lie,” Grete tells Lucas and Theo says “I know my little daughter, she doesn’t lie, she never did. So why would she lie now?”

So, in both natural hunting, sport hunting, and the community’s vigilante hunt of Lucas, we are asked to consider hunting ethics. What are they? Who decides if someone is game? Can we tell lie from truth? Can we trust our instincts?

I shall return to values and ethics in the last section.

Nature

Nature is a central theme in the manhunt movie where it is both the external environment and dramatic setting (the remote island, the jungle, the mountains, the forest) and a question of innate nature, namely that of prey and predator (in manhunt movies the two are usually human). The two natures, external and internal, interact.

Rumle Hammerich’s Headhunters is a comedy-thriller-heist film about the successful headhunter Roger (Aksel Hennie) who is also a successful art thief. He uses his information from interviews to steal art and support the extravagant lifestyle
he thinks his trophy wife Diana desires. In voice-over Roger offers his reason for stealing: “My name is Roger Brown. I am 1.68. And you don’t need a psychologist to tell that that needs compensation for . . . For someone like me to get what I want, there is only one way: Money. Lost of money.” He wants to be loved by Diana who he sees as “one of those tall, smart, beautiful people. Accustomed to be loved. Taking it for granted. There are plenty of men willing to give her love. And taller than 1.68.” Roger concludes, “the only thing I have inherited are bad genes.” To compensate for deficient genes he has learnt to read people and to steal.

When Clas Greve (Nicolai Coster-Waldau) applies for the position as head of Pathfinder, a Norwegian technology company, Roger discovers Clas has the priceless Rubens painting “The Caledonian Boar Hunt” in his apartment. Clas is former head of the GPS-tracking company Hote and also a former elite soldier specialized in tracking and winner of the European Military Pentathlon. In terms of hunting, Clas is pretty proficient, and he is cast in the role of former Count Zaroff (his name Greve literally means “count” in Norwegian). The Caledonian Boar Hunt is a classical myth recorded in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* about prince Meleager who kills a boar and presents its head as trophy to his beloved. Roger steals the painting and soon finds himself in position of the boar with Clas hunting him with a muscle dog, weapons, and advanced nano-technology. When Roger accidently shoots and kills his partner in crime, he flees from the capital Oslo into the mountains.

“Hunting” now shifts from art to people and ground from civilization to nature. Hiding from Clas and the dog, Roger ends fully immersed in a feces container to cover his scent. He manages to escape and kill the dog, however, Clas tracks him down and runs a car with Roger and two police officers off a cliff, sending it several hundred feet into a creek. Strapped in the passenger seat Roger stares Clas in the eye without blinking, convincing Clas that he (that is, Roger) is dead. The scene is a point of no return where Roger faces his fears. He earlier got rid of his fancy city clothes and he now shaves off his long hair (realizing the tracking device was smeared into his hair), bathes in the creek water, and puts on one of the policemen’s clothes. Roger emerges a new man and returns to Oslo.

In the manhunt movie, the question is never if nature is good or bad, but how we use it. Ecological psychologist James J. Gibson has coined the term “affordances” about an animal’s use of nature. “The affordances of the environment are what it offers animals, what it provides or furnishes, for good or ill” (1977: 68). Affordances
are what the animal perceives and does with its environment. Thus, a fish can swim in water but a human can only swim if he or she has learnt so. Affordances are what we do with the environment using both our innate abilities and acquired learning. Gibson does not divide the environment into nature and culture. He thinks there is only one world and one environment, which holds various sets of affordances depending on who and where we are. The rules are the same: we can only work with what is here and what we can perceive. Roger cannot beat Clas in an environment where Clas has expert knowledge, but he can switch perspective from prey to predator and return to a hunting ground where Roger has expert knowledge, namely the city and the heist. Roger may be shorter, but height is unimportant when it comes to tricking Clas into drawing a gun with blanks. Roger then shoots and kills Clas.

Gibson invented the term “affordances” to avoid the use of “values” which is loaded with the philosophy of meaning. In Gibson’s view, nature is neither good nor evil, whether we talk about the environment or our innate nature. The Norwegian mountains do not care if Roger lives or dies, nature is amoral and supports the good as well as the evil hunter. And, really, it is not important what the environment is but what it affords, be this mountains or cities. The same with innate nature; Roger may be shorter but he can out-heist Clas, and thus out-predator the predator. And he then finds that Diana doesn’t care about money, she loves him and wants to have his child.

In civilization, nature is a thing with fuzzy borders. We cultivate and adapt to nature, and this goes for the environment as well as our innate nature. What matters is not what nature is – city or wilderness, brains or muscles – but what it affords.

**Social Standing**

When we compare the American and the Nordic manhunt movie we find they have different hunters who hunt for different reasons. In the American manhunt movie, the good big-game hunter is, mythologically speaking, a descendent of the frontier-hero Natty Bumppo we know from James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Deerslayer* (1841).³ This hunter is a self-contained and romantic hero who has no home or family because he belongs in the (moving) frontier. Nature is his home and he is essentially a defender of modern civilization with one leg in wilderness and one in civilization. Hunting is his only way of living. The good hunter in the Nordic manhunt movie is a different character. He is a man planted in a community soil where he has social standing, and he has family and friends. He belongs.
If we return to Connell’s story, Zaroff explains how he became a hunter: “God makes some men poets. Some He makes kings, some beggars. Me He made a hunter.” Zaroff’s whole life “has been one prolonged hunt” (2004: np). Rainsford is also presented as a natural-born hunter, as are also antagonists and heroes in *Predator* and *Hard Target*. They are all examples of what philosopher Ann Causey calls the “genuine” sport hunter who has an “emotional commitment to the sport” (332). Causey differentiates between *sport hunters* and *shooters*. For the sport hunter, hunting is primary and the kill secondary. He treats game with respect and wants “to be a link in the chain of nature, connected as predator to prey, and thus to participate directly in natural processes” (332). We see here a continuum between nature’s predators and culture’s sport hunter. The shooter, on the other hand, “is not a hunter in the genuine sense,” because his focus is not the hunt (333). “It may be meat for the freezer, companionship with other hunters, male camaraderie, or exercise and fresh air . . .” (332). Shooters are “the meat harvesters, the poachers, the ‘slob hunters,’ and the hunting jocks who are participating in a competition using game animals as foils for macho displays of strength and courage. . .” (333). A film like *Hard Target* triangulates its good/evil hunter dualism by adding the shooter, a “slob hunter” customer who pays to go manhunting without possessing the proper skills.

What, then, characterizes the Nordic hunter? In Kjell Sundvall’s *The Hunters*, protagonist and police detective Erik (Rolf Lassgård) returns to his birthplace in Northern Sweden after a divorce and out of frustration with life in the capital Stockholm. He has a brother, Leif (Lennart Jähkel), and a heritage (he returns for the father’s funeral). When he was young, Erik escaped the abusive father and left his younger brother with a beautiful singing voice behind. Erik “got away” to Stockholm and now returns to Norrland to retrieve his roots. Leif is all there’s left of those roots, and if Leif still sings beautifully in church, he now also heads poaching, abuses women, and is border-psychoic. His perverted reasoning is mirrored in his treatment of his dog Zorro which he shoots when it doesn’t obey. Leif buys a puppy that dies with him when he commits suicide after being exposed.

In the relationship between the brothers Erik and Leif we do not find the same doubling as in the relationship of the good and evil hunter, since Erik is not a hunter. Erik goes fishing with Leif in *The Hunters* and with his nephew Peter in *False Trail*, and he can take down game (Erik goes hunting with Torsten (Peter Stormare), the big-game hunter and murderer in *False Trail*, and takes down an elk with a single shot).
Rather, Erik is a hunter in the symbolic sense, a hunter of those who violate the rules of society. He is a truth-seeker, a detective-hero committed to upholding society’s values. “You will learn how we do things here,” the police chief tells him in *The Hunters*, but society can not operate with two sets of values. The “evil” big-game hunters in the two films – the five poachers headed by Leif in *The Hunters* and the unfaithful husband, policeman, and big-game hunter Torsten in *False Trail* – are less evil than they are greedy and misguided. The poachers share organized poaching, four-wheel cars, homebrewed liquor, and, eventually, killing people and raping women, but their motive is money for a consumer lifestyle. “A reindeer is 3,000 Kronor, an elk is worth 10,000,” says a journalist at a town meeting about the now public and therefore embarrassing poaching. “I need 40.000 Kronor for payment on my new car,” one poacher protests when Leif suggests they lie low for a week. In this desire for a consumer lifestyle, they are no different from the rest of the men in the area, where everyone is a hunter and no one likes Erik with his high-headed ideas about ethics and policing. Erik finds that the local police ignores the poaching and the state willingly offers economic compensation to the Sami for their loss of stock without asking for a police investigation.

In the Nordic film, thus, instead of a good/evil dualism we find a critique of consumerism and of a community’s vigilante hunting. Hunting may be the only respectable masculine lifestyle, however, at the funeral Erik and Leif’s father is remembered as “a real asshole” by his friends in his livingroom, which is also a trophy room. The “good” big-game hunter is a paradox and an impossible figure in the Nordic manhunt movie where “good” means upholding social values which in a welfare state do not include killing which is considered murder. Roger gets away with murder because *Headhunters* is a black comedy, but Lucas renounces his rifle and Erik – threatened point-blank three times in the two films – doesn’t fire his gun at people. The good hunter in the Nordic manhunt movie renounces the thrill of the kill.

*Civilization*

After discussing hunting, nature, and the hunter’s social standing, we will now take a broader look at the Nordic manhunt movie and ask what its values are. What values does the good hunter defend and what kind of civilization does he represent? What is the ideology of the Nordic manhunt movie?
Asking for the meaning of hunting we hit what philosopher Næss and biologist Ivar Mysterud call “the rock bottom of philosophy and political ideology” (1987: 22). In an article on the Norwegian wolf, Næss and Mysterud discuss the rights of 5–10 wolves to live in a country with 3.2 million sheep and 4.1 million people, where inhabitants want to kill the wolves because they eat sheep. From an ecosophical perspective, Næss and Mysterud argue that no one has the right to decide this. Wolves are afraid of people and only kill sheep, and they suggest we conceive of a “mixed community” including animals (sheep and wolves) as well as people, instead of a community existing solely of people who use animals as “crops.” An ecosophia rejects speciism and anthropocentric thinking. In other words, just because we have the means to make other species game or extinct, this does not give us the rights to do so. All species have rights and are of value in themselves as part of Earth’s ecological variation.

What does this have to do with sport hunting and the manhunt movie?

Comparing the American and the Nordic manhunt movie, they have different hunting cultures. The American hunter is a hero by out-predatoring his predator. He proves himself equal at killing and better at hunting. To paraphrase Dirty Harry, there’s nothing wrong with shooting as long as the right people get shot. The difference between the good and evil hunter is not the hunt, but game and motive. There is nothing wrong with hunting as long as the right game is killed. The evil hunter kills for egoistic reasons, the good hunter because it is his nature and he upholds social values. Hunting is a matter of instincts and beyond moral judgment. Thus Causey argues that, “[i]t is not morally wrong to take pleasure in killing game; nor is it morally right. It is simply not a moral issue at all, because the urge itself is an instinct, and instincts do not qualify for moral valuation, positive or negative. Thus, the urge to kill for sport is amoral, lying as it does outside the jurisdiction of morality” (338).

Hunting is differently presented in the Nordic manhunt movie. “Hunting and the forest are his life. What happens if you take that away?” it is said about Tomme in The Hunters when Erik confiscates the poacher’s rifles. “What happens if I don’t?” is Erik’s reply. And in False Trail the community is furious when they must hand over their rifles to the police for caliber testing. The one complaining loudest is the murdered girl’s father. A man’s rifle is his being, his essence, we understand. But this is a delusion. In the Nordic version, sport hunting is not about instincts but is a culture
with customs, rituals, and an aggressive masculine lifestyle. In *The Hunt* this culture is seen in the eating and drinking and the organized dinners at each other’s homes. Here we see a community’s values acted-out, values that are invisible as long as they are unchallenged. Thus, when Marcus comes to Theo’s house to ask why Klara is lying, the families, who are there for a cozy dinner, kick him out and slab him. And when Lucas is in the grocery store he is kicked out, and when he is in church – where the evangelisms by Lucas and Marcus are read – and tells Theo to stop harassing him, Lucas is again thrown out.

The Nordic manhunt movie replaces the ethics of individual hunters (good or evil) with the ethics of a community. What are the rules for inclusion or exclusion? What rights does a person – prey or predator – have? In an ecosophical perspective, values are balance, plurality, respect, and sustainability, while shallow ecology values are consumer culture and capitalism. *The Hunters* portrays poaching as a repulsive slaughter executed with silencer and telescopic sight, yet accepted by local police and local people. *Headhunters* portray Roger in the beginning as a scared and shallow person, more worried about appearances than about honest emotions. *The Hunt*, finally, reshuffles generic elements and plays them against expectations. Here, the rich chateau-owner and big-game hunter Bruun defends Lucas and believes he is innocent until proven guilty, while the kind head of kindergarten, Grete, leads the hunt. And when we think Lucas is a helpless prey, he walks back in the grocery store, headbangs the butcher and demands his groceries which he pays for at the counter in orderly fashion.

In the Nordic manhunt movie, sport hunting is portrayed as a male culture that lets aggression and greed take over reason. In nature, hunt is a matter of instincts. In society, however, sport hunting is a culture. What role we play is a choice, not an instinct. We can act like the butcher or like Bruun. In modern society it is hard to tell truth from lie. Civilization is so complex that instincts only point us in the right direction if people are honest. We feel what is right and wrong, but “instincts are no match for reason,” as Zaroff says in Connell’s story.

**Conclusion: Deeper Than Instincts**

The good big-game hunter is a contradictory character in the Nordic thriller and the American frontier ideology is unacceptable in a Scandinavian welfare society. The Nordic subgenre goes beyond the dualism of good and evil. The problem is not with
individuals, but with the conditions generating an aggressive hunting lifestyle. Civilization builds on reason. Thus, although we share hunting instincts and aggression with other predator species, being human means to exist in a civilization from which there is no return to a “natural” order. Nature is amoral, but we are in the moral domain.

In The Hunt, Klara is afraid of straight lines. At the end of the film at a party at Bruun’s chateau, Lucas lifts Klara up and carries her across the terrifying lines on a wall-to-wall carpet. The lines will not disappear. But one day Klara might learn to cross them. Until then she needs guidance. Similarly, the hunting culture is unchanged. In the very last scene, Lucas is shot at and is unable to see the shooter’s face. He is unarmed because he has given his rifle to Marcus, who is old enough to join the hunt. But Lucas is armed with determination to remain standing. Although no longer a hunter, he cannot leave the hunting ground because there is only one world and we all live in it. Civilization is the constant challenge to master instincts and uphold values that run deeper than instincts.

Hunting is exciting and intoxicating but in the Nordic manhunt movie the landscape is no mythic wilderness and the protagonist no frontier hero. The subgenre’s values are the opposite of the Dirty Harry motto about shooting the right people. Instead, the Nordic manhunt movie expresses the ancient universal Golden Rule: Treat others as you want them to treat you.

Bibliography


Notes

1 In the Danish cinema, the dramas Foreign Fields (Aage Rais-Nordentoft, På fremmed mark, 2000) and Headhunter (Rumle Hammerich, 2009) are also relevant to this discussion, however, due to space I leave these out of this chapter.

2 Connell’s short story was also adapted as A Game of Death (Robert Wise, 1945) and Run for the Sun (Roy Boulting, 1956) with the big-game hunter as a ex-Nazi officer.