

Complex Narratives Against Compelling Stories: Kaspar Colling Nielsen's *Det europæiske forår*, and the Limits of the Ethics

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Award-winning Danish author Kaspar Colling Nielsen depicts such gloomy phenomena as racism and sexism, albeit in a humorous and carnivalesque light—in the good old Boothian sense of unreliability. No wonder Colling Nielsen has been called “a Scandinavian Houellebecq” in *Le Parisien Week-end*. In the meantime, he is a lecturer at the Copenhagen Business School, an active figure in the Danish public debate, and a former government speechwriter.

This paper examines how Colling Nielsen's novel *Det europæiske forår* (2017, *The European Spring*) works against the story economy. I will distinguish what are the narrative devices and rhetorical resources that produce the disparity between the ethics of the telling (the ethical dimensions of author-narrator-audience relations) and the ethics of the told (the ethical dimensions of characters and events) in James Phelan's (2017) terms.

Especially on the level of the ethics of the told, Colling Nielsen often presents characters that provoke ethical considerations. I will focus on Christian, the main character of one of the parallel storylines (others deal with a refugee crisis in Europe, a utopian society in Lolland, etc.). Christian is a sex-addicted painter who falls in love with a girl named Mia.

The reader soon notices that there is something strange about her speech and actions. Christian, from whose point of view this storyline is told, rather continues to live in his sexual fantasy, dismissing all the signs until he eventually realizes that Mia is mentally disabled. At first, he fights for guardianship of Mia, but thereupon can but see Mia as disabled.

In terms of the three interests that the narrative can provoke in the reader (Clark&Phelan 2020), in this novel the recognizable places and the political situation call for the mimetic interest. The tabooed relationship, then, evokes the thematic (and especially ethical) interest. For instance, Christian's comparison of their sex to porn films, and the general discussion of the artistic work call attention the synthetic aspect. The same applies to paratextuality as a rhetorical resource. For example, the intertitles are ambiguous, as they allude to the ethical concerns (“*Købet af Mia*,” *Purchase of Mia*) but can be questionable due to the pejorative language (“*Christian som retarderet*,” *Christian as retarded*). This blurs the two ethics of the told and the telling.

Colling Nielsen's production stands for what Pieter Vermeulen (2023) calls “nonautofictional metafiction,” and thus challenges the social media affordances, such as shareability, scalability, and replicability (boyd 2011; Papacharissi&Gibson 2011). These affordances favor moral unambiguity, and encourage sharing one's authentic story in a compelling form (Mäkelä&Björninen 2022). Some literary genres, like autofiction, benefit from the turn to compelling stories. I further argue that the social media affordances privilege reading for the

thematic interest. Such a social media-informed reading of *Det europæisk forår* might ask why Mia is not voiced, or point out that Christian's sex fantasies are problematic. However, I argue that the complex narratives, like Colling Nielsen's, invite the reader to combine the ethical consideration with the unfolding of the mimetic and the thematic.