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## Ugly Cities of Jaan Oks and Knut Hamsun

Oks and Hamsun can be considered to belong among the earliest modernists in Norwegian and Estonian literature. The (early) works of Hamsun and Oks are characterised by their extreme fragmentariness and subjectivity. Both authors were among the first to use techniques such as stream of consciousness and interior monologue, although internationally these are mostly connected with Joyce or Woolf.

In my presentation, I will focus on two texts: Hamsun's *Hunger* and Oks' *Females*. Both texts can be considered as examples of Nordic Decadence. Decadence is usually connected with the notion of the metropolis and cityscapes; the city has even been dubbed as the central topic of modernist and decadent literature, with immediate associations with Huysmans and Baudelaire. However, here we have a kind of rural decadence, especially in the case of Jaan Oks, while Hamsun's Kristiania was no metropolis either at the time (1890).

I argue that the city as an *imagined environment* and *a way of seeing* (James Donald) is also present in Hamsun's and Oks' rural prose – for example, in the fragmentary and subjective nature of their writing, the rapidly changing moods and personas of the protagonists, and in the development of the Simmelian “metropolitan type” in both texts.

If the city is present in these texts, we may pose the question what it is like. In these texts, the city is seen only through a distorted filter, via the protagonists' perceptions. The texts can be characterized by a certain aesthetics of ugliness, in which desirable objects (i.e food, or the opposite sex) are rendered undesirable. The authors do so by applying various techniques, such as defamiliarisation, depersonalisation, and using metonymies.

As concerns the topic of the conference, boundaries and borders, we have a kind of boundary situation in which the city appears as a threat to the protagonist's self. Both stories depict a struggle to gain one's own space amongst a myriad of distractions. In this struggle, the protagonists have two “weapons”: starving and ugliness.

Lastly, I argue that in rural decadence the wilderness is never far away, transforming the *imagined* city, e.g. via the image of the swamp.