

## THE WEATHER ISSUE : a moving object of aesthetics in North European art

According to the Nordic Culture Fund, the term 'Nordic' can be used when at least three Nordic countries (such as Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) or self-governing areas (Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland Islands) are involved in a project. This self-definition, to be understood from a European centred perspective, underlines a will from the North European countries to organise themselves as a particular regional entity. Nevertheless, this does not mean that each part of this entity does not own a proper culture and history. Through an aesthetic point of view, I would like here to introduce the reader to a specific area, where geography, history, language and art are closely intertwined, a situation which leads the observer to perpetually move from the local to the global. In these circumstances, we will see that the issue of the weather can go beyond the phatic function, and can actually contribute efficiently to survey the perception evolution of a part of the occidental world towards its environment.

From the XIXth century to the turn of the XXth century : National Romanticism and Modernism

"But outside is waiting the land, covered of snow. [...] Ah, snow – the snow ! Could not the snow and snowy landscapes be represented in an image, imposing and startling how they are after all, wonders our imagination."<sup>1</sup> It was in these terms that Richard Bergh, a Swedish artist and art critic, urged his fellows to consider their own environment, their motherland as a potential creative resource. In 1899, most of the North European artists had studied and travelled in France, Germany and Italy. What Bergh proposed was to come back to their usual landscape and take it as an inspiring and rich experimental matter. Snow, like Italian day light, could be used as a medium to explore the expressive qualities of painting. But the experience went a step further, when this movement back to the original elements of nature became the tool of national emancipations. Landscape, and more accurately the landscape affected by various weather phenomena, could be viewed as a mark revealing certain values about the geographical ground they were coming from and the populations experiencing them.

Although Bergh's words, snow remained rather rare in Swedish paintings of the late XIXth century. Gustaf Fjaestad (1868-1948, Sweden) was one of the few, who worked to numerous winter landscapes. In his works, the snow was presented as a heavy covering matter, which imposed meditation and an oppressive silence. Because of its mass, it almost led to some abstract turns when snow occupied the four fifths of the canvas, and the attention the artist gave to it started to reveal winter time and its natural signs as a proper subject of interest. But it was in Akseli Gallen-Kallela's paintings (1865-1931, Finland) that snow was suddenly empowered of an extra meaning. *Joukahainen's Vengeance* (1897) and *The Autumn* (1902) offer good illustrations of how an artistic and political stream used environmental facts to point out specific national issues. By showing the first snow, the icy wind agitating small bushes, the sea starting to freeze and the grey

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Bergh, *Svenskt Konstnärskynne*, in *Om konst och annat*, Albert Bonniers Förlag, Stockholm, 1919, p.152

heavy sky coupled to some mythical *Kalevala*<sup>2</sup> characters, the painter was clearly designating and idealising the harshness life of Nordic folks. The specific climate of this area was used as a symbol to evoke the ancestral link which has always been existing between people's lives and their land, notwithstanding the centuries of colonisation by Sweden and Russia. Ancient myths and the reality of the earth, as hard as it could be, embodied the idea of what a Finnish nation and Finnishness could be.

In the meanwhile, at the opposite of strong nationalist statements, an other attitude was to provide Central European spectators with a more seductive view of Nordic nature, thanks to the theme of the summer night. Most of the Nordic artists of this era have painted at least one picture of this type. Richard Bergh, Kitty L. Kielland (1843-1914, Norway), Peder Severin Krøyer (1851-1909, Denmark), Eilef Peterssen (1852-1928, Norway) or Harald Sohlberg (1869-1935, Norway), to name a few, depicted this nearly magical atmosphere of clear long nights. A broad transparent sky, a cold light, silence, quietness, and momentary deserted spaces were the ingredients usually gathered to witness of the peaceful feeling experienced during this part of the year.

As raw is the winter weather, as sweet is the summer time. This accentuation through painting of the weather dichotomy appears as a characteristic of the National Romanticism of that time. During the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth century occurred a complete reorganisation of the instances of power and borders in the Fenno-Scandinavian peninsula. Norway obtained independence first from Denmark in 1814, and then from Sweden in 1905. After five centuries of Swedish colonisation and one century of Russian one, Finland was set free in 1917.<sup>3</sup> Artistic creation was conceived in those days as a tool to create unification between the people of a freshly self-designated nation. Painting could work at building a representation for others of how each country identified itself. This was how seasons alternation, visible through weather phenomena, took part in these high latitudes to give shape not only to the geographical and land reality of these countries, but to witness also metaphorically of humankind affects about this trouble era. 'Building the self' and looking for one's identity was also a goal to reach by these pictures. As Knut Berg wrote it : "The sun goes down on Nordic landscapes, it is the reign of the summer night and of the dusk blue hour, with its particular atmosphere and its mysterious magic. The strict description of reality vanishes, the artist, romantic and dreamy, wants to sound the depths of the soul."<sup>4</sup>

Finally, it seems important to me to point out a last aspect of the art production of this movement : the importance of the sky. In this landscape painting, the sky used to appear very widely. Bright blue in P. S. Krøyer's *Young Boys bathing on Skagen's Beach*, orange in T. B. Thorláksson's *Sunset on the Tjörn* (1867-1924, Iceland), totally white in V. Hammershøi's *Farm in Refsnæs* (1864-1916, Denmark), filled with different types of clouds in Prince Eugen's *The Cloud* or *Still Waters* (1865-1947, Sweden), the sky occurred as a relevant reality of the place, telling about atmospheric conditions as well as supporting inner mood. The sociologist Martin de la Soudière has worked for a long time

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<sup>2</sup> The *Kalevala* is a national epic poem, which was written down by Elias Lönnrot and published for the first time in 1835. This poem, long of some 5000 lines, is a compilation Lönnrot organised from thousands of folk poems he collected in the far Finnish countryside, especially in Eastern Karelia. Through this work, his aim was to create the equivalent of the Greeks' *Odyssey* or the Ancient Scandinavians' *Edda*.

<sup>3</sup> Iceland had to wait until 1944 and the weakening of Denmark at the end of the II<sup>nd</sup> World War to get freed from this domination.

<sup>4</sup> Knut Berg, *L'art nordique vers 1900*, in *Lumières du Nord, La peinture scandinave 1885-1905*, Musée du Petit Palais, 21 février-17 Mai 1987, Association Française d'Action Artistique, Paris, 1987, p.36

about the weather and its perception in our occidental societies. In one of his studies, he recalls some words of Jean-Jacques Rousseau : "About the exaltation of sensitiveness and the 'feeling of nature' emphasized by the pre-romantic stream, he [Jean-Jacques Rousseau] seemed to be the first writer to imagine that the weather could be described according to its relation with the psyche. « Climates, seasons, colours, darkness, light, elements, [...] everything has an effect on our machine, and on our soul.», he wrote."<sup>5</sup> In these Nordic paintings, the depiction of aerial phenomena has to do as much with the recognition of a specific territory than with the era's spirit.

A few years later, in the late 1910s, the landscape had changed of shape. Once the claims for independence and national identity were not so sharply critical, the artists moved on towards a close observation of the evolution of their daily life and environment. Still influenced by various central European artistic movements, they nevertheless manage to give a picture of their own about this new moment. Urbanity and industrial installations offered them unprecedented visual supports, which were experienced sometimes with enthusiasm, but many times also with an uncertain and doubtful feeling. Looking at pictures from the 'November Group'<sup>6</sup>, in Finland, the factoryscape is a recurrent theme. This new order of life, coupled to social class tensions, resulted into the use of darker colours. The sky was not anymore presented as the bright and wide place of meditation it used to be. Still very present, it became in Eero Nelimarkka's images (1891-1977) a grey flat area overhanging town views constituted of buildings and electric poles. Ragnar Ekelund (1892-1960) gave pictures of suburban places, streets, the Cholera Hospital, all merged in a grey-blue atmosphere, with cloudy closed skies. The '*Factory Workers going Home*' (1917), by Marcus Collin (1882-1966), is probably the most symptomatic image of this era, where one can see a long line of workers bent by a strong winter wind, a heap of snow at the foreground and a dark brow cloudy sky at the background. Chimneys and smoke, sombre cloud formations, cityscapes made of buildings and roofs concretions, means of transportation, were associated to give a testimony of what revealed itself to be the modern environment. Nature was much less shown under the shape of land elements than occupied and marked by human city planning. Remained the weather, still uncontrolled by humans. But for how long this situation would last ?

### The weather in today's Nordic art : a matter of reflection

The use of new technologies and the evolution of artistic practices have lead to consider the environment, in a comprehensive acceptation, under new perspectives. If the weather remains an object of interest in the Nordic area, the imaginary territory it convenes has developed. The assignment of giving an image to national identities has been replaced by a phenomenological conscience of the relationship between humankind and the physical world. Nature phenomena are understood as poles, fluctuating along with the constant renewing of the human inventions and needs.

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<sup>5</sup> Martin de la Soudière, *Au bonheur des saisons, Voyage au pays de la météo*, Grasset, Paris, 1999, p.101

<sup>6</sup> The November Group, formed in 1916, had its first official exhibition at the Ateneum Museum of Helsinki in December 1918. The members' works were recognised as appropriate to witness of Finnishness, with a limited colour scale, rush structuralism and showing rugged life conditions. Playing the role of an avant-garde, it was perceived as an opposition to the Septem Group, more interested into colours and composition. Among most famous artists were Alvar Cawén, Marcus Collin, Ragnar Ekelund, Eero Nelimarkka, Tyko Sallinen.

Jari Silomäki's (1975 born, Finland) *My Weather Diary* is a going-on taking picture process started some years ago, and comprising hundreds of photos. Using the concept of meteorological readings, the artist takes a landscape photograph of the place where he is and add then a written comment on it, at the bottom. But the landscape is regularly a cityscape one, and the comments tell about personal daily mood, stories the artist heard at the moment of the snapshot, or international and political events. No scientific measurements involved in this project, but a sort of open book harvesting local facts as well as global ruptures. Between micro-events concerning the intimate photographer's sphere ('*A wedding parade drifting by reminded me my grandfathers funeral. [...] Past his own fields, the local shop and the road bend where he fell in love for the first time.*') and large effect events ('*A candle demonstration in front of the Russian embassy in Helsinki. Anna Politovskaja was murdered yesterday.*'), the sky unfolds a common thread. Like an independent eye, it witnesses of these various facts, memories and feelings by its constant phenomenal presence. If the pictures give views of an infinite range of weather conditions from different countries, according to where and when is the author, they also share this incompressible fact that keeps on linking them to the physical world. Weather is thus to be understood less as an object of rigorous study than an image intermediary to create mental paths between the different levels of perception and comprehension of our daily environment, going from the 'here' to the 'there', from the anecdotal to the worldwide outcome, from the continuum to the breaks. From the inner space to a lasting unfolding exterior.

A scale undertaking as well is Olafur Eliasson's (1967 born, Denmark/Iceland). Always based on very precise physical facts, O. Eliasson's works all take the shape of half-scientific half-magical projects. Among these, photography is a mechanical way of capturing material phenomena, that he frequently investigates. *The horizon series* (2002), *The morning small cloud series* (2006), *The Domadalur daylight series - North and South* (2006) rest upon a systematic recording of the visible. And still, the method can be objective and putting distance by the technical means, the recorded phenomena continue to hook our empathy. The aperture of the sky, the occurrence of a diaphanous little cloud, the variation of the light intensity meet affect translations into us. But through the systematisation, the artist pursue also an other goal. The Vatnajökull Glacier holes pictures, and earlier *The glacierhouse effect versus the greenhouse effect* (2005) transform, under the form of an artistic expression, the static observation of the weather into the trailing of a set off movement. Weather is now considered by the artist for its ability to modify the matter; global climate warming becomes tangible when tracked through time in ice material. Coming from a place where weather has effect on everyday life, O. Eliasson's understanding of the climate is set apart of his peers' one. Rather than making a metaphor to evoke abstracts social structures, his recordings or experiences point out the interdependences between specific places and physics, enlarging them to create an Earth consciousness.

Roni Horn (1955 born, USA) is not Icelandic, but it is not by any chance that her experience entitled '*Weather Reports You*' (2005-2006) took place there in the North. "Iceland more than most places is a country that has forcibly been made to recognize the weather as the dominant, essentially unpredictable presence that influences the outcome of all things on the island."<sup>7</sup> By interviewing the residents of a defined area on the West coast, the idea was to create a sort of double portrait : to gather the history of the human

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<sup>7</sup> Roni Horn, *Introduction* to the book *Weather Reports You*, a project of Vatnasafn/Library of Water, Artangel/Steidl, London and Göttingen, 2007, p.10

community of this place, and the weather evolution according to people's memories. On one hand, the project resulted in a sort of sociologic inquiry, in which the weather revealed its propensity to mould some of people's psychological features : what make them joyful or afraid, how do they remember important moments of their lives according to the weather there was on that particular day... And on an other hand, it builds up through several generations an archive of the climate changes.

“The climate, especially over the past ten years, has been quite different and at odds with what I used to know. [...] I've watched the weather fairly closely, especially the sea temperature - I took regular measurements during the years when I lived on Flatey.”<sup>8</sup> Gudmundur Páll Ólafsson forms probably a part of the ones Martin de la Soudière calls 'météographes' (people writing down daily weather conditions). With the help of photography, writing, physics knowledge or publishing, these contemporary artistic productions witness of an aesthetics which uses recording processes as to give shape to a moving object, which more and more does not only concern a few Northern societies, but the humankind as a whole. By making tangible such slight transformations, art creation participates to raise the weather issue as a relevant subject of attention. From the individual experience to the ecological preoccupation, the weather has not finished to haunt artists imaginary as well as our everyday relation to the world.

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a few links :

- *Lumières du Nord, La peinture scandinave 1885-1905*, catalogue, Musée du Petit Palais 21 février-17 mai 1987, Association Française d'Action Artistique, Paris, 1987
- *Surface and Depth, Early Modernism in Finland 1890-1920*, catalogue, Ateneum Art Museum, 08.03-30.09.2001, Helsinki, 2001
- [www.jarisilomaki.com](http://www.jarisilomaki.com)
- [www.olafureliasson.net](http://www.olafureliasson.net)
- [www.libraryofwater.is](http://www.libraryofwater.is)

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<sup>8</sup> Gudmundur Páll Ólafsson, born 1942, Húsavík, natural scientist, writer, interview p.85 in the book *Weather Reports You*



Akseli Gallen-Kallela

*Joukahainen's Vengeance*, 1897,  
tempera on canvas, 125x130 cm,  
Turku Art Museum



Richard Bergh

*Nordic summer night*,  
1899-1900, oil on  
canvas, 170x223 cm,  
Göteborg Art Museum





Prince Eugen  
*Still Waters*, 1901,  
142x178 cm,  
oil on canvas,  
Stockholm National  
Museum



Marcus Collin  
*Factory Workers going Home*, 1917, 88x106 cm,  
oil on canvas,  
Ateneum Museum



*Cloudy day in Zekawa. At the same time hurricane Katrina destroyed New Orleans.*

Jari Silomäki

*My weather diary,*  
2001-2008  
photograph



Olafur Eliasson

*The morning small cloud,*  
2006,  
photographs series





Olafur Eliasson

*The glacierhouse effect versus the greenhouse effect*, 2005, sculpture installation, collection of Jeanne and Michael Klein



Roni Horn

*Weather Reports You*, 2005-2007, website archives and book publication

**Guðmundur Páll Ólafsson**

Born 1942, Húsavík

Natural scientist, writer

The weather's always been in the main role, especially when I've been at sea. There have been plenty of close calls, especially when I've been fiddling around on a boat by myself. It would have been a case of "little is known of a lone man's fate". Often I shouldn't have been at sea on my little dinghy when wild storms have got up. But there's something enchanting about those times, as if providence was in charge.