

Simplification/Complexity of the Arctic: The work of Norwegian artist Patrick Huse

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If the notions of the North, the Arctic, and the polar realm primarily refer to geographical and climatic considerations, one quickly realizes that their representations are the product of overlaid images, texts, colours and characters, which result in the idea of North (Grace, 2002). This idea can lead to an image of a North that is generally problem-free, a place where the Western imagination can set and project its ideals. The main objective is to look at how, in his work, Norwegian artist Patrick Huse tries to oppose this simplification of circumpolar territories and cultures, and to capture some of the complexity of the North by likening it to a social cultural ecology, by letting the divergent discourses and images of the North appear side by side in the same project or work, by allowing diversity and contradiction, and ultimately by representing the North as a complex pluricultural layering of divergent discourses. The notion of ecology, as applied to the representation and interpretation of the North, particularly in artistic works of the imagination, requires questioning the relationship between the real and the imaginary, the concept of cultural diversity, and the simplification of certain regions or realms, such as the desert, the sea, and the Arctic, by Western culture.

The "North" as an Object of Study.

When we attempt to consider the "North" historically as a discursive system created by Western culture, we see that the "North" – or the Western idea of the "North" – has the unusual quality of being a shared pluricultural space. Its representations are like layers of discourse set down by different cultures, in some cases at the same time, such as Latin and Greek, Viking and Scandinavian, European, American, and Aboriginal, then picked up on and reworked by different movements, such as the Romantic Movement (in the 19th century), popular culture and media-based discourse (in the early 20th century), and post-colonialism (in the late 20th century).

In Canadian literary criticism, the theme of identity has been so prevalent that essays quickly zeroed in on representations of the North. The works of Allison Mitcham on the Nordic imaginary (1983) were followed by a number of others – including those of Margaret Atwood (1995), John Moss (1997), Renée Hulan (2002), and Sherill E. Grace – on the representation (1996) and idea of the North (2002). These essays have made it possible to define a paradigm of identity specificity and to consider the "North" as a realm with complex issues, as a formal problem, a myth, and a literary influence. In Québec, the pivotal works of Louis-Edmond Hamelin in the early 1970s made it possible to consider the geographic and cultural implications of the "Nordic state." In his early essays (published in 1968, 1971 and 1975), Hamelin developed the principle of "Nordicity," which he had introduced in 1965 and defined from a pluridisciplinary standpoint in relation to the entire circumpolar region. His notion of "Nordicity," as it applies to language, tourism, the economy, culture and literature, is a fertile one as it incorporates thinking put forward as early as the 19th century on the unity of Northern cultures and societies, and yet encompasses the diversity of the North in a theoretical and methodological manner, with indices on the "degree of Northernness" used in geography and other

fields. In Europe, studies on the Northern imaginary initially focused on perceptions of the Scandinavian world in the arts and literature, where it has been portrayed as a utopia (Fournier, 1989; Fjågesund and Symes, 2003), a romantic image (Andersson, 2004), an artistic "soul" (Kent, 2000; Toudoire-Surlapierre, 2005; among others), an exotic space (Schmid, 1985). A number of new works have attempted to define the formal specificity of the circumpolar realm, particularly through comparative literature (Dubar and Moura, 2000), dream study (Lopez, 1986), representation (King and Lidchi, 1998 and Deshoulières, 1998), and aestheticism (Onfray, 2002). Other, more specific studies have endeavoured to understand how particular symbolic elements of Nordic discourse operate, reflecting for example on the artistic use of snow (Ryd, 2001) and light (Levalois, 1985). Thus portrayed, the North can be considered conceptually as a discursive system, applied through convention to a given territory whose forms, figures and history can be defined, a system shared by a number of artistic and literary traditions and cultures, but within which each can lay claim to its own specificity.

For an Ecology of the Imaginary

The notion of "ecology of the imaginary" can be seen as an extension of the general concept of "ecology," in that it encompasses the characteristics of diversity, balance, ecosystem, and complex interrelations between human beings and their environment. In biology, the ecological triangle is made up of the individual, the group, and the environment. When applied to culture and works of the imagination, the ecological triangle includes individual works, collective imaginaries and the entire "discursive system," in relation to the actual physical environment. For the purposes of our analysis, we consider that a system, be it cultural or imaginary, is necessarily part of a larger whole, with which it maintains a dialectic relationship. This view, based on the observation of nature, allows for consideration of all interrelations among the elements of a whole, thus providing for the inclusion of differences and even contradictions.

In an ecology of culture and works of the imagination, which includes human creations and, more specifically, artistic productions, we must give due consideration to numerous "pluridisciplinary" factors and take diversity (of points of view, representations, and discourses) into account. We must therefore seek to observe a whole made up of diverse cultural and artistic elements that interact with one another in a dynamic organization, rather than strive to find a coherent or synthetic explanation that would diminish variety for the sake of "successive syntheses," as discussed by Wolfgang Iser.²⁾

The Artistic Project of Patrick Huse

The project of Patrick Huse, born in Oslo in 1948, is part of an artistic movement concerned about the effects of globalization and interested in considering local peculiarities, which convey knowledge endangered by the universality of languages, perceptions and discourses. His approach is part of the land art movement, which is aimed at integrating works harmoniously into nature and allowing nature to continue the artist's work through the elements (ice, rain and snow), the play of light, and the effects of time. His work offers a comparative study of circumpolar regions, from Nunavut to Finland, through Greenland, Iceland and Norway. *Intimate Absence*,³⁾ completed in 2005, is the second work in his Northern Imaginary trilogy. The first work, *Encounter*⁴⁾, was finished in 2003, and the third, *Predicting Hostilities*, will be completed in 2007. According to the artist, this project strives to "interpret the landscape, describe nature and is conceptually based on nature as social praxis." (Huse, 2003c) In the case of *Encounter*, Huse writes that the work, which relies on the collaboration "of historians, anthropologists and the local population who works in a similar field or wants to contribute through conversation and written participation" (Huse, 2003c), is a study of "the role and presence of nature in society, and the influence it has in practice, in the realm of culture." "Although motivated by a geographically-determined objective – different actual polysemy cannot be achieved in its entirety; that is why the processes of formation of meaning in texts always lose possibilities of actualization in the reading." (free translation)

Aspects of the circumpolar world, examined artistically from a comparative viewpoint – the trilogy is, first

and foremost, part of a conceptual movement that seeks to reinterpret the historical distance created by Western discourse between landscape, nature and culture. To achieve this, Huse has developed an approach that can be described as "ecological," in which the plurality of sources and the multiplicity of forms provide a guarantee of capturing diversity and avoiding the temptation to synthesize.

Intimate Absence - Rediscovering the Complexity of the North

Patrick Huse thus encourages a renewal of the relationship between nature and culture, which has been broken. For him, the natural landscape cannot be severed from culture, since the view that shaped the landscape – and, consequently, the very idea of "nature" – is, first and foremost, cultural. In the representation of the North by Western discourse as an ecumenical frontier, such separation has repercussions for the very conception of the territory and the culture of those who live in it. Patrick Huse makes two statements in this respect, expressed in his exhibitions and his works. This first is that landscape should not be considered as a separate phenomenon.

As he says: "There is no need to represent landscape as a separate idea or concept. (Huse (2005:19) The second is that "the concept of culture has been neutralized to a great extent through its disassociation from the actual processes of life."⁵⁾ (Huse (2005: 184). Huse's artistic project is part of a pluridisciplinary approach that is embodied in both the exhibitions and the book. The exhibitions are intended to be a dialectic extension of the cultural fragments collected, as they are presented in the sites that sparked the thinking that led to the works. The book considered "an essential part of the project" (Huse, 2005: 16), includes various and sometimes contradictory texts on the photographs and paintings exhibited. The book, which can be read on its own, discusses the aesthetic and theoretical underpinnings of the works and reveals discrepancies: "This book," writes Huse (2005: 16) in the introduction to *Intimate Absence*, "represents cooperation among several professional fields, and it also points out possible conflicts." The willingness not to achieve a synthesis—and consequently to maintain a problematic tension in the representation of the Arctic—is crucial to the approach, which refuses to seek solutions or answers to the oppositions found: "The search," writes Gavin Jantjes (in Huse, 2005:15) in the introduction to the work, "begins for open questions, junctures and insights, not for answers." The data for the creative work is collected through various, independent means, so that Huse can consider plural modes of representation and interpretation of the territory. Fragments are then selected, arranged and compared in the form of photographic negatives, paintings executed as a complement to the photographs, testimonials, analytical texts, quotations, and references to geological and cartographic elements; all of the material is organized in an ecological process that reveals the disparities of the environment and the many forms the discourses and representations can take. Gavin Jantjes (in Huse, 2005:15, my emphasis) describes this approach as organic, quote:

-Every one of Huse's projects begins with the collection of data from the landscape and environment he intends to work with. These facts and narratives point him to the mental, physical and geological sites for his work. His excavations take place simultaneously, above and below the surface, in the history of art and anthropology, the realms of geology, ecology and cartography. To reflect this organic interrelation of truths his projects are always complex in their media and documentation.

In the case of *Intimate Absence*, this work, which is similar to that of a geologist and an anthropologist except that it is aimed at creating an aesthetic object, led to the presentation of an exhibition and the publication of a book. This book complements and supplements the first one: in it, critics, academics, curators, reindeer breeders, writers, artists and anthropologists all come together in a curious assembly of often disparate discourses by specialists on the North and inhabitants of the Arctic region. The articles counterbalance and accompany the visual material and comparisons made by Huse. One of the most powerful works of the group, titled "Greenland Walls", juxtaposes two photographs, one representing the dreariness of a high rise, the other the minerality of a cliff rising up from the sea. During the exhibition, these photographs were projected on a wall several meters high, dominating the viewer. Without any other comment, the work portrays the strangeness of a building erected without any relation to the landscape, and its volumet-

ric likeness to the cliff: similar and foreign, contradictory and complementary, ungainly and harmonious, temporary and eternal. inhabited and silent—this photographic diptych, placed in the book among the analytical texts, clearly reflects the starting point of the project. For Huse, it is about showing the cultural aspect of nature and the natural aspect of culture, the aesthetic and social complexity of the North, and the impossibility of diminishing it, of simplifying it to the way in which Western culture has represented it so far. Figure 1: Patrick Huse, *Greenland Walls* (projected photographs, 2005).⁶⁾ *Intimate Absence* thus amply reflects the will to understand the North from the perspective of an “ecology of the imaginary”: rather than putting forward a synthetic view or solutions to the contradictions inherent in the landscape,⁷⁾ Huse seeks to juxtapose them so that the variety of the region can emerge with all its underlying complexity.

A Social Aestheticism

One of the authors of the articles appearing in *Intimate Absence*, Uuli Joorut, suggests that diversity is necessary to historicity; he bases himself on the representation of Greenland, long defined by Western culture as being “on the edge of the world.” According to Joorut, any attempt to understand Greenland without visiting it is risky, especially since those who live in the region have a relationship with the land in which “nature” and “culture” are never separate. As he says (in Huse, 2005: 62): “For people interested in the country, but who have not been there, it is difficult to understand. The multiplicity of links with the land necessarily gives rise to a multiplicity of viewpoints, representations and understandings: indeed, “it is difficult to portray Greenland in general terms. interpret the North with solely an aesthetic and artistic goal in mind, anyone (artist, writer, scientist) who actually visits or lives in the circumpolar world is quickly required to take social, political and environmental factors into account.

A Definition of “North”

In *Intimate Absence*, Patrick Huse seeks to define the North as a cultural whole that must be understood and interpreted according to one’s experience with the land and the diverse cultural interactions that arise from it. He defines his approach (2005: 15) as follows: The *Intimate Absence* project is based on environments between 60° and 80° N, environments in zones described as arctic, and sub-arctic. I would prefer to call them northern environments. For many years I have lived and travelled in these areas, from the Canadian Arctic through Greenland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. I have chosen to base my work on information received in these environments, as that is where my basic knowledge is: where I live and where I have travelled and stayed, in close contact with the different local populations. In these northern areas there are many similarities, due to climate and natural resources, but there is also wide cultural diversity, from Inuit to Western culture. His approach necessarily defies any form of synthesis. Let’s take a closer look at the “cultural space of the North” that he describes: It is geographically defined (“between 60° and 80° N”), but expressed as a more general concept that can be understood in social and cultural terms, with ecological overtones: “I would prefer to call them northern environments.” (Huse, 2005: 15) It is in line with the overarching circumpolar vision found in the work of European travellers and reflected in the notion of “Nordicity” introduced by geographer Louis-Edmond Hamelin. (see Hamelin, 1996) (b) The subject must have first-hand experience with the land (“for many years I have lived and travelled in these areas (Huse, 2005: 15). This experience with the land is not enough on its own: interaction and cultural practices are also important. Finally, although the climate and the nature of the terrain are similar in the circumpolar area, the area cannot be reduced to such specifics: “there is also wide cultural diversity” (Huse, 2005: 15). The ambiguity between the specificity and the universality of the North can be seen throughout the work of Huse and that of other artists and writers who have represented Northern landscapes. Their work – alongside that produced by the physical and environmental sciences, anthropology and archaeology – shows the need to maintain multiple and even contradictory representations. Patrick Huse (2005: 114) underlines the relevance of the artist’s viewpoint and role in the Arctic, when he says: “Geologists, archaeologists, anthropologists, botanists, economists and others are sent out to do research on different issues in an area, why not an artist?” This role is all the more important since an understanding of the plurality and complexity of the “North” depends on its pluridisciplinary representation, which is

conveyed through art and clearly illustrated in the composite work *Intimate Absence*, bringing together as it does political, scientific, environmental, geographic, artistic and photographic discourse. The relevance of art as a driving force for pluridisciplinary research is clear: as Huse says, "Art in itself is a vehicle for interdisciplinary communication." (HUSE, 2005: 114)

"Nature" between Vulnerability and Simplicity

Through his approach centred on social cultural ecology, Patrick Huse manages to bring together in a single place (an exhibition, a book), photographs, paintings, and texts (written by him and various other authors) that are not intended to explain the North or to offer solutions to the problems that exist in the region, but rather to show a paradoxical aspect of it—the variety and complexity of viewpoints, and the simplicity of the elements comprising it. The texts making up Huse's work are like opinions which the reader must interpret in relation to the overall project, as there is no guiding statement linking them. They all, however, testify to a need: the need to avoid the temptation of "globalizing" and to allow for the parts, the elements, the diversity. In his introduction (2005: 15), Huse supports a representation of the world as the sum of parts that are related, but fragmented and incapable of being conveyed as a whole: "Reality can only be communicated in partial perspectives," he says; "there is a whole series of ideological and intentional points of view." These "partial," "ideological" and "intentional" points of view correspond to the plurality of cultures and to the presence – masked in Western discourse on Nordic regions – of conflicts, tensions and differences. When the "North" is represented in its extreme simplicity: as being empty, devoid of landmarks; white, remote, cold, inaccessible, beyond culture and reason, the very idea of conflict and difference is excluded, and thus the idea – necessary to its inhabitants – of historicity and of plurality.⁸⁾

NOTES

1) In particular in the writings of French scholar Xavier Marmier (1808–1892) who, in his copious body of works consisting of essays, travelogues, translations and novels, expressed interest in the "North" which, for him, included Scandinavia, Finland, Canada, Québec and Russia.

2) In his work on the principle of text reading, Iser (1985: 11) discusses the reduction of polysemy for the sake of synthesis: "The polysemy of a text, determined by the factual nature of the text, is reduced during elaboration to a univocity that results from selection. This reduction of meaning is based on the formation of a consistent configuration, which emerges during reading. Indeed, it is only when the segments of a text take on a consistent form that the text opens itself up to comprehension. However, this means that the actual polysemy cannot be achieved in its entirety; that is why the processes of formation of meaning in texts always lose possibilities of actualisation in the reading. (free translation)

3) This work, presented at the Henie Onstad Museum of Contemporary Art (Oslo, Norway) in 2005, the Hafnarborg Institute of Culture and Fine Arts (Iceland) in 2006, and the Rovaniemi Museum of Art (Finland) in 2007, was accompanied by a book (Huse, 2005).

4) This work, presented at the Lillehammer Museum of Art (Norway) and the Rogaland Museum of Art (Norway) in 2003, the Akureyri Museum of Art (Iceland), and the Katuaq Greenland Cultural Centre in 2004, and the Nunatta Sunakkutaangit Museum (Nunavut, Canada) in 2005, was also accompanied by a book (Huse, 2003b).

5) This statements is repeated in Inuktitut, English, Greenlandic, Icelandic, Sami and Norwegian. In English, it is also part of the Encounter "Wall text, 2003". (Huse, 2003b: 166-175).

6) Photograph reproduced with the artist's permission.

7) In an interview, Patrick Huse said that he was not seeking to offer a solution through his work. (Unpublished interview with Patrick Huse, Lillehammer Museum of Art, August 15, 2005.) However, his approach is based on an ethic of the relationship between the artist and public space, and on the realization that cultural appropriation of the North has social and political repercussions.

8) See Daniel Chartier (2005) on the right Inuit and Amerindians to historicity and modernity.