MOTHER NATURE'S EXHIBITION

On the Origins of the Aesthetics of Contemporary Northern Landscapes

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ABSTRACT

In this article Zoltán Somhegyi investigates the aesthetic qualities of Northern landscape representations, with a special focus on how contemporary examples are connected to classical ones. First he examines the history of the aesthetic appreciation of these sites, starting from their early modern reception and from the differentiation of "Northern" and "Mediterranean" landscapes: while the Mediterranean ones were highly valued already from the 15th–16th centuries on, the "wilder" Northern landscapes were admired mainly from Romanticism onwards. This has, among others, an aesthetic-historical reason, namely the birth of the category of the sublime; and in this case the harmonious Mediterranean landscapes and the irregular yet impressive Northern ones relate to each other as the category of beautiful does to the sublime. This is why from Romanticism on Northern landscapes became not only aesthetically valuable, but even more capable than the Southern ones to move the spectator. This is especially because, from a gnoseological point of view, the landscape might be a place – and the landscape representation a means – of self-interpretation. The historical overview is then used to better understand some of the most important characteristics of contemporary Northern landscape interpretations and representations from leading artists of the region, which are analysed in the second part of the article.

KEYWORDS

Northern art and aesthetics, Landscape representations, Romanticism, Contemporary Nordic art

"Lawrence Weiner's powerful and timely installation runs until the 8th of May. Mother Nature's exhibition end-date unknown." I received this witty information as a subscriber to the regular newsletters of i8 Gallery, one of the leading art spaces in Reykjavík, with the subject line of the email: "The Volcano Show continues...".* It is not very difficult to guess that the message arrived in those weeks of 2010 when the Eyjafjallajökull Volcano of Iceland,

whose name earlier seemed almost impossible both to pronounce and to remember for non-Icelanders, became a much-discussed breaking news, mostly due to blocking a large part of Europe's air traffic.

Even if one might say that it is just an attention grabbing headline in the newsletter or a scintillating and at the same time thought-provoking form of PR-communication, it tidily illustrates connected to Northern art and how these natural forces are interpreted from an aesthetic viewpoint. This will then lead us to some further considerations on the particularities of current Northern landscape-representations, with reference to their historical roots.

This curious geological episode and the funnily respectful newsletter that it had inspired may thus remind us of a couple of mesmerising questions: where does this connection of an impressive and at the same time extremely powerful natural phenomenon to the world of art, so particular to Northern art come from? How can we trace the origins of the strong aesthetic appreciation of harsh, challenging, and often even life-threatening natural phenomena? How does the special interpretation of Nature and its mighty phenomena characterise Northern landscape representations? How does this "Northern wilderness" continue to amaze the viewer even in contemporary art, turning the challenging sites into artful sights? Inspired by the newsletter, I could also ask: why does the eruption of a volcano become a "Volcano show" in such a discourse? What is more, this appreciation manifests itself not only in national or regional pride, but – and, in fact, this is even more interesting from the aesthetic point of view – also in a particular choice of subjects in both contemporary and older art. It also influences the special ways of the representation of the elemental experience, as far as composition, display and accent of elements, choice of colours etc. is concerned.

True, the natural phenomenon of the Eyjafjallajökull Volcano was really impressive, but what inspires me here is to investigate the origins of this emphasis on the power of Nature and the appreciation of severe and harsh natural elements, and their often-occurring primary role in classical and contemporary Northern art. This interest is frequently referred to as "respect of" and "nearness to" Nature, and the expression is regularly quoted when discussing key features of Northern – and also Nordic – art, architecture or even design. However, it may easily seem an automatically used commonplace, without precisely explaining what one would exactly mean by that. Hence it seems worth examining in more detail why in (contemporary) Northern art we find very inspirational

artists, whose examination of their relationship to Nature, and whose experience and attempts to represent the effects of elementary natural forces and phenomena can be so crucial to a better understanding their work. Thus in this paper I have a backwards movement in my questions and proposed answers. I am curious in a contemporary question that turns out to have its roots much earlier. Therefore, I am investigating the reasons and origins of the aesthetic appreciation of Northern landscapes and natural phenomena in order to open new readings of contemporary works. In this way the questions concerning the characteristics of classical and contemporary Northern landscape representations and their difference from for example the Mediterranean ones will lead to new layers of meaning of recent artistic productions. In my analyses I contend that this "nearness," as well as the astonished examination of Nature and its powers, are not a characteristics only of the last decades in Northern and Nordic art, but has its roots much earlier, at least from around the 18th century, and their survival is what still inspires many Northern artists today.

In order to understand this appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of Northern landscapes – both in contemporary and in classical representations –, first we have to examine the distinction itself, i.e. the differentiation of "Northern" and "Mediterranean" landscapes that began to be discussed already in the early modern age.

In the history of art, the Alps were traditionally considered as a border. A border that divides the Mediterranean lands – or, in a broader sense, the Mediterranean landscape, culture, way of life, art, gastronomy etc. – and the "Northern" ones. Of course the two cannot be separated, and it would be quite difficult to exactly define the precise "borders" of these two regions, especially because both regions turn out to be artificial cultural topoi, a sort of invented category. Fabio Benzi and Luigi Berliocchi describe this almost abstract vision of the Mediterranean region: "It is a topos especially in the modern conception that interprets it as a privileged, natural and spontaneously beautiful landscape: this is the inheritance of a Romantic and thus substantially Northern European viewpoint that admires this landscape as an element that is not its own but is still somehow close to it, a place of poetry, of dreams, of a melting pot of civilisations and before that even the place of a mythical golden age; an intact place just as the gods had given it to man, who, in the glorious development of civilisation, has in certain parts further cultivated it."[1] Nevertheless the separation of the two regions derive from these quasi-abstract topoi, there are certain factual differences or even oppositions that

nurture the separation and diversification, as well as the definition of these regions. It is enough to mention the presence and dominance of classical Antique heritage in the Mediterranean area and the primacy of Gothic art in the North – an aspect that in great deal influenced both the art production and the art theory especially through the birth of an anti-classical aesthetic approach. As Werner Busch has repeatedly pointed out, this preference can be traced since the late Renaissance onwards, for example through those artists who – despite their interest in classical Antique culture – have intentionally not visited Italy, including, among others Rembrandt or Caspar David Friedrich.[2]

Needless to say, the two regions are not homogeneous in themselves: Southern Italy's giant volcanoes compared to the fine Tuscan hills, or Denmark's mild slopes compared to Norway's overwhelming fjords certainly weaken the generalisation on the morphology of these landscapes. What we can observe however is that the Mediterranean features were valued earlier than the Nordic ones, already from the 15th-16th centuries. The natural forms first appeared merely as "background" for religious images, but soon also as a genre, i.e. as a topic that merited to be presented in itself for its aesthetic qualities. This interest and heightened appreciation of the classical landscapes later motivated the Northern travellers to undertake the several months or years long Grand Tour from the late 17th century on and especially throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries. On the other hand, as it is well known, the "wilder" Northern landscapes were admired mainly only from the mid-18th century and early Romanticism. How and why did this happen?

Curiously, this division between the two regions became stronger, and the appreciation of the Northern landscapes started exactly through the analyses of the very "border" (i.e. the Alps) itself. The interest in the formerly less (or not at all) valued Northern landscapes that were not considered as potential objects of aesthetic pleasure started around the 18th century in parallel with the domestication of the Alps. By "domestication" of the Alps I mean the changing attitude towards both the aspect and aesthetic potential of the natural beauty, and thus the early forms of appreciation of this chain of mountains. It seems right to call this as domestication, since before the 18th century the Alps, as well as other high mountainous areas, were considered frightening natural parts as well as useless elements, unusable for practical aims – like agriculture –, and regarded only as serious obstacles for transport and commerce. This interpretation had radically changed throughout the 18th century, when the Alps started to be

viewed as magnificent and impressive natural formations, whose observation can equally lead to a sort of aesthetic experience. What was needed however is that beside "beautiful", further categories could be used to classify and describe the aesthetic qualities of landscapes. From the categories that were recently introduced and diffused in the period's art theoretical discourse, *picturesque* and *sublime* were the most often used in connection to landscapes.[3] Picturesque, however, was more often applied to the description of (English) landscape gardens, whose appearance reminded the viewers of their favourite idealising painters of the previous century, including Nicolas Poussin, Claude Lorrain, Gaspar Dughet, or even Salvator Rosa. Of course this was because in great deal these gardens were designed with a strong influence of these painters on the landscape architects' ideals and visual repertoire. This characteristic was described already in the 18th century by the poet William Shenstone, who coined the term "landscape gardening," as we know it from Michael Charlesworth's exact observation: "Shenstone believes that the new garden design is and should be closely related to pictorial artistic practice and that gardens should be designed in a «picturesque» way so as to form pleasing three-dimensional pictures akin to contemporary landscape painting to be first apprehended as views and then, unlike paintings, entered and explored."[4] Picturesque is thus, in all its appearance, connected to the idea of the final result of art production, the picture itself. As William Gilpin defined it in his 1768 text titled *Essay on Prints*, picturesque is "…that particular kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture."[5]

Compared to the picturesque, that turned out to be a rather purely descriptive category, without any further or stronger emotional effects on the viewer, the category of sublime seemed more adequate to label the peculiar aesthetic and at the same time almost "spiritual" feeling that was arisen, not lastly through the experience of encountering the harsh and un-classical forms and features of high mountains and – soon after – the "irregular" Nordic landscapes. Exactly this emotional effect of the sublime becomes pivotal not only for the theoreticians of the phenomenon, but also for the artists trying to grasp and reproduce it on their works. As Malcolm Andrews argued: "The experience of the Sublime is, almost by definition, one that subverts order, coherence, a structured organization (...). It bypasses the rational mind and concentrates its force directly on the emotions."[6] This uncontrollable and indomitable character of the sublime that was surprising for the perceivers, a characteristic that was so different

than the better-known experience of the beautiful. Hence sublime was not considered as a simple sub-category or as a new and just special form of beautiful, and not even as a novel way of experiencing the beauty, rather a proper and new experience in itself. This explains then why it was applied to describing the aesthetic qualities of such phenomena that previously was lacking any sort of considerations of this kind. We will see on the following pages how this approach then influenced the categorisation and appreciation of the diverse forms of landscapes. What is important at this stage of our argument is that in the history of the aesthetic categories, the 18th-century diffusion of sublime in the art theoretical discourse is strongly connected to the newborn aesthetic evaluations of the Alps and high mountains in general. This is strongly supported by those textual sources that describe the first encounters with the mountains. Although Albrecht von Haller's 1729 poem *Die Alpen* is traditionally considered one of the earliest appreciation of the Alps, there are some other earlier examples too, where travellers report their ambiguous feelings when encountering or crossing these mountains. From these reports and descriptions we can remember Henry More's *An Antidote against Atheism* of 1652, where he writes of his "delight in disorder" when observing the mountains that provides him "with a pleasing Horror and Chillness," or John Dennis' letter from 1688 analysing his emotions when ascending the mountains: "a delightful Horror, a terrible Joy, and at the same time, that I was infinitely pleased, I trembled."[7] These examples will then lead to other well-known oxymoron, e.g. Joseph Addison's "agreeable kind of horror" or Lord Shaftesbury's writing on how the "wildness pleases" from 1703 and 1709 respectively, which further prepared the way for the theorisation of the sublime by Edmund Burke and Kant. Apart from these better-known examples, however, a significant series of other sources also influenced and formed the aesthetics of the Alpine landscapes, that were examined in detail in Cian Duffy's book titled *The Landscapes of the Sublime 1700-1830*, where we can find many 18–19th-century examples of what the author calls the "discourse of ascent," i.e.: "a discourse which consistently correlates the physical ascent of the Alps with a variety of ostensibly unrelated forms of elevation: moral, political, epistemological, aesthetics – as well as religious."[8] These texts of diverse form and purpose, including travel descriptions, geological studies, and literary pieces were based on real, physical explorations of the Alps, where the experience of these site trips (or sight trips) were then converted in the more precise explication of the sublime

phenomena and also influenced these landscapes' representations in artworks.

As with the high mountains in general, through the "domestication" of the Alps, so also the Northern landscapes – often identified with and celebrated through austere mountain scenery – started to become objects of aesthetic interest, especially after having found the relevant classification, the sublime, to describe the curious pleasure and "pleasing horror" they provided. Thus, as mentioned above, the examination of the division between the two regions (i.e. of the Alps themselves as border), and the increased appreciation of the Northern regions was a parallel tendency throughout the 18th century. Apart from this, however, we can also mention a rather "political," or cultural-political reason of the appreciation of the mountains and of the "wild" Northern landscapes. The increased value of the irregular, anti-classical, previously frightening, but later sublime Alps and Northern landscapes can also be interpreted as a sort of compensation for the lack of the classical, "harmonious" Mediterranean forms and sights, and, what is more, a sort of national pride, as it can be testified by several sources from the period. Just to mention a well-known quotation from the middle of the 19th century, from King Charles XV of Sweden, who himself liked to paint local landscapes, and who seriously claimed that the wild natural scenery is a significant and distinctive part of Northern identity: "We have a wonderful country, perhaps not radiant in sunshine but all the more in seriousness and vigour. Our history and traditions are rich and poetic, full of noble memories, which with good reason constitute our honour and our pride. And so the history and natural beauty of this, the land of our fathers, shall be the main subjects of our art – together they build a temple, and thus shall the work of our artists be also the worship of our Lord of Nature, the Almighty God. This is the path by which our art will achieve its goals, bestowing upon a beloved fatherland both honour and glory."[9]

The Swedish King was not alone with his observation of the Nordic lands, i.e. being a place "not radiant in sunshine" though more adequate for seriousness both in life and art. A similar connection between the challenging landscape and national or "Nordic" identity was established in other countries too. Sigrun Åsebø draws our attention to a similar tendency in the history of Norwegian art: "Spending time in the mountains is highly rated as a recreational activity and finding inner peace by overcoming the obstacles of nature and the body seems to be at the core of «Norwegianness»."[10] Just like in Iceland, where, as Auður Ólafsdóttir pointed out:

"Icelandic nature is not only a challenge for all the senses, it is also part of the national consciousness, and from it Icelanders derive part of their identity."[11] In fact this harshness of the lands is still an influential source for contemporary artists too. We can remember the Icelandic photographer Ragnar Axelsson's succinct conviction on artistic production, quoted in the article of Jörn Glasenapp: "The worse the weather, the better the result."[12] The Northern region was thus often set against the Mediterranean and this opposition was deeper analysed by numerous philosophers and art historians in the last three centuries, in order to describe and theorise the differences not only in the lifestyle, but also in the cultural production, the style of artworks and sometimes even in the moral values and standing points of these regions. The aesthetic and aesthetic-historical consequences of the differentiation and sometimes even opposition of the two geographical areas were comprehensively surveyed in a recent article of Konrad Lotter.[13] As he demonstrated, in the course of the 18th to the 20th centuries different viewpoints reinforced the contrast of the regions and the preference was alternatingly given for one or the other. Among the many examples Lotter invites us to remember how the 18th-century climate theory influenced Winckelmann too, who, in his *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* of 1764 considered the ideal climate as one of the reasons why classical art could develop and flourish in the Mediterranean lands and at the same time why the extremities of the Northern seasons as well as the fog and thick haze make it impossible that in the Northern countries such an art is created that could be considered as universally exemplary and thus "classical" or canonical. A bit more than a century later, in Nietzsche's 1886 *Beyond Good and Evil* the South will be the home of the Classical-Dionysian, and will be positioned against the Romantic-Christian North, the South being a "… great school of recovery for the most spiritual and the most sensuous ills."[14] While for Winckelmann and Nietzsche the South was the ideal home for arts and culture, in many Romantic texts we find the testimonies for the establishment of the aesthetics of the Northern scenery and countries. In her 1810 book on Germany, Mme de Staël is in a way both continuing the considerations of climate-theory and anticipating the national pride of later affirmations, including the aforementioned one by King Charles XV, when defining the challenging and unpleasant weather conditions as favourable for imagination and artistic production: "It was pretty generally understood that literature existed in the north of Germany alone, and the inhabitants of the south abandoned themselves to the enjoyments of sense, while those

of the north tasted more exclusively those of the soul. (…) from Weimar to Konigsberg, from Konigsberg to Copenhagen, fogs and frosts appear to be the natural element of men of a lofty and vigorous imagination."[15]

What we can understand from these sources is that even after the "emancipation" and rapidly growing appreciation of the Northern landscapes, the differentiation between them and the Mediterranean ones still survived; but in many cases they were esteemed on different basis. We can formulate it in such a way that the harmonious Mediterranean landscapes and the irregular yet impressive Northern ones relate to each other as the beautiful does to the sublime. Hence this "morphological" difference between the two regions then substantiate the aforementioned aesthetic categorisation, also because – as it is known especially from Kant's analyses –, the beautiful is often concerned with qualities connected to form while the sublime phenomenon can in many cases amaze the perceiver with its formlessness or by something definitely outgrowing the perceptible form. In this way the non-harmonious natural visions that were lacking those traditional features that would qualify them to be evaluated on the basis of the category of beautiful were still possible to be described with and through the experience of the sublime. What is more, this appreciation of the sublime seems to appear both at "direct" as well as at "indirect" experiences too – or, translated to our current case both when physically encountering the harsh, wild and non-harmonious landscapes, and when enjoying their representation as artworks. The aforementioned Joseph Addison is known to have specified the distinction between the effects of the primary and secondary pleasures of the imagination that can correspond with encountering Nature and its presentation in or through an artwork: "If we consider the Works of Nature and Art, as they are qualified to entertain the Imagination, we shall find the last very defective, in Comparison of the former, for though they may sometimes appear as Beautiful or Strange, they can have nothing in them of that Vastness and Immensity, which afford so great an Entertainment to the Mind of the Beholder."[16] Although from only this passage it would seem that Addison gives greater value to the direct experience or to the primary pleasures of the imagination, from other parts of his text we understand that he does not explicitly prioritise one or the other, he rather finds both as ways of incentivising the experience, like Karl Axelsson noted when analysing Addison's approach, "(...) the experience of the wild scenes of nature, as well as the poetry of Milton, needless

to say beget – apart from being an indisputable experience of the sublime for the creator himself – the experience of the sublime for the addressees, and that the strong imagination is positioned at the heart of the experience of nature as well as of the experience of art."[17] Addison's contribution to the interpretation of the sublime then lies not only in the fact that he started to distinguish it from beautiful, what Burke scrutinised soon after, but also in recognising the direct and indirect sources of experience and that their common effect is even stronger. As Emily Brady pointed out in her recent book on the history of sublime, in Addison's thought: "When greatness in both art and nature come together, where there is a 'double principle' of primary and secondary pleasures, there is even greater pleasure than can be found in nature or art alone."[18]

This also clarifies why artists were highly inspired to grasp the essence of these mighty natural scenes and at the same time to depict them in their works, while searching and searching for the novel experience. We can agree with Malcolm Andrews that the diffusion of sublime subjects can also be interpreted as a sort of reaction to the (slightly earlier) picturesque tendencies, looking for new forms of expressions either by rendering distant and exotic sceneries among their subjects or by presenting the already known from another perspective.[19] As a matter of fact, this other perspective can almost be taken literally, if we just observe the many new viewpoints and compositional solutions 18th–19th-century artists chose to show the overwhelming Nature, including the wide angles of the panoramas or, in other cases, the frightening cliffs almost stretch and break the frame of the image, that we can observe in the works of both better and lesser known artists, including for example Caspar David Friedrich, Caspar Wolf, Thomas Cole, W. H. Bartlett, Frederic Edwin Church, James Ward or Philipp Jacques de Loutherbourg.

As a result of this novel interest, we have completely new sorts of landscape representations compared to the ones from the previous centuries or even decades. We are tempted to say that they became spiritually and emotionally more "loaded" than their predecessors. As it is often analysed, in the earliest forms of this genre, including Renaissance pieces or the Baroque idealising and pastoral landscapes with religious or mythological themes, the natural elements had a secondary role compared to the "main" or "official" subject matter of the painting. Even the earliest "proper" or independent landscape images are in fact hard to define as really pure ones – as Werner Busch demonstrated in a

careful analysis, the road to independence was long, and in most cases there were still significant factors modifying and layers of meaning added to the works, including religious, philosophical or political references.[20] The novelty of the 18th century and Romantic representations is, however, that through the amazed impression gained through the experience of the sublime, the artwork itself could efficiently become a mediator of this very experience, that can be proved by numerous texts and descriptions of works of art, including the often-quoted examples of visitors' reactions to the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich.

Based on all this, we can say that from the early Romanticism onwards, Northern landscapes become not only aesthetically valuable, but even more capable than the Southern ones of moving the spectator, especially because, from a gnoseological point of view, the landscape might be a place for – and the landscape representation a means of – self-interpretation – as will be further examined below.

Therefore, although the growing national pride as well as the ideas concerning the culture-shaping character and power of Northern landscapes certainly have central importance, still they may not serve as sufficient explanation for this heightened admiration of the sublime regions. I think we get closer if we examine the question also from the perspective of longing and experience or even longing *for* experience. If we accept the aforementioned classification, i.e. that the reception and appreciation of the harmonious Mediterranean landscapes and the un-classical Northern ones relate to each other as the category of "beautiful" does to "sublime," then we are definitely tempted to add to this that the Southern scenery is more like a place to *visit and see*, while the Northern a place to *experience and feel*. Certainly, the distinction shall not be strict, as well as it must include the already noted exceptions in both regions, i.e. gentle and calming hills north from the Alps, as well as the frightening South-Italian rocks and especially volcanoes. Still, if we continue our examination through these topoi to describe the various sites, then exactly the Northern landscapes seem to have become the "ideal" places for experiencing the sublime forces of Nature.[21]

It is important to highlight, though, that it is not about a simple and delightful experience for its own sake, or a pleasurable exposure to Nature's impact. Instead of these, it is more connected to the ideas of the Romantic apprehension of Man's alienation from Nature that also leads to Nature's objectification and later exploitation. This process is an important aspect in the reception-history

of Nature, and is profoundly analysed by several thinkers, among others by the young Schelling in *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature, as Introduction to the Study of this Science* from 1797, where Schelling argues that the separation of subject and object will serve as the basis for reflection and thus can be interpreted as the first step towards philosophy. The consideration comes up later with Heidegger's 1939 text *On the Essence and Concept of Physis in Aristotle's Physics B,1*, where we can read the well-known passage: "(...) beings can be experienced as objects only where human beings have become subjects, those who experience their fundamental relation to beings as the objectification – understood as mastery – of what is encountered."[22] However, these reflections not only consider the philosophy of Nature, but have important consequences on the birth and development of landscape representations too, and hence we can agree with the affirmation of Heinrich Lützeler in his 1950 essay titled *On the essence of Landscape Painting* where he claims: "Landscape painting can develop only when man experiences not only other fellow-beings or gods, but even Nature as something against him, encountering him."[23] This makes it now understandable how the objectification of Nature – in fact, in the form of a landscape – becomes the criteria of being able to encounter it.

One of the key achievements of Northern Romantic philosophy and art is the comprehension that the experiences of the harsh, intensive and elemental forces of the powerful and sublime Nature result in strong direct emotional responses. Facing, encountering and being challenged by the sublime natural phenomena through demanding conditions will then lead to the desire of investigating both these factors and our responses to them, in order to position ourselves in – or against – the overwhelming Nature.[24] What is more, Nature was understood as "overwhelming," as well as sublime, not only due to its physical, but also because of its temporal infinity. Hence the endless forces of Nature, experienced in particular through the Northern landscapes, were manifesting the eternal essence and permanence compared to Man's limitedness in space and time. The Romantic understanding of the relationship between Man and Nature will thus interpret this in such a way that, nevertheless due to the objectification of and our alienation from Nature and nevertheless the fact that Nature's real essence remains out of our reach forever, the analyses of our emotional reaction to the sublimity of Nature's manifestations – e.g. while encountering its "wild" and "serious" aspects in the Northern landscapes – will still help guide us in our own process of self-interpretation.

When coming back to the initial considerations on the commonplace-like claim of Northern art as being characterised by a certain "closeness" to Nature I suggest that we should rather speak of a "close examination" of Nature and its powerful phenomena as being something typical in both classical and contemporary Northern art. If we only said "closeness to Nature," it would over-simplify and diminish the real essence of these artworks. Based on this I propose to interpret Northern landscape representations by defining them as signs or testimonies of the "close examination" of Nature's infinite power and its effect on the viewer through the emotional responses it generates in the perceiver – both the perceiver of the real, physical place (e.g. the landscape painter or photographer), as well as the perceiver or observer of the final artwork, the landscape representation.

Depicting the powerful sublimity and eternal qualities of the Natural phenomena is a recurrent topic exactly because it documents the very experience of the infinite forces of Nature as well as the artistic elaboration of this experience. This self-referential feature of the Northern landscape – i.e. that it aids the viewer in his attempts of self-positioning and self-understanding while encountering the particular aesthetics of the region – that has proved to be long-lasting, up until today. Needless to say, contemporary art, just like the concept and the interpretation of the very concept of the artwork itself, as well as its purpose and function(ing) is in numerous ways different than 18th–19th-century art pieces – in fact, the investigation of these questions would require not only another paper but a book in itself –, and I am not intending to assume that current art production dealing with representation of the Northern landscapes is a straight and linear continuation of the Romantic practices. What I am curious of, however, is how certain approaches of the (direct) examination of the Nature and ideas connected to the importance of experiencing and representing of the sublime phenomena survived. Hence my approach of investigation and interpretation might remind the reader of the seminal analyses of Robert Rosenblum when, in his 1975 book titled *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition. From Friedrich to Rothko*, he explored the earlier less emphasised links between the two periods. Just like Rosenblum, I am interested in the "analogy of sensibility and intentions"[25] between artists separated by two centuries, without overstressing or postulating direct connections, rather to show how certain 18th–19th-century aesthetic ideas are still influential in contemporary art, and how we can trace the signs, effects, and pictorial consequences even in very recent creations.

Danish photographer Per Bak Jensen has a clear vision, an extremely precise rendering, and in particular a sensitive capacity of representing the distance between the subject and the object, i.e. between the viewer (as experiencer and interpreter of the landscape) and the natural elements. He is often concerned with the sublime infinity, never-defeatable distance, uncontrollable power that cannot be dominated, and with how all this can still be somehow rendered through the medium of photography. As the artist explained it in an earlier statement: "From when I first picked up a camera, as a child, to now, photography has been the way that I make contact with and try to make sense of the external world. In a way, I'm searching for the intangible, the unattainable, something that lies just beyond the immediately visible, but something that I take to be reality. It's about my relationship to the world as I experience it."[26]

It is curious how the word "experience" appears in Per Bak Jensen's statement. In his artistic attempt then the pictures are created through the observation of the outside world, and even if his aim to capture the unattainable in Nature and to go beyond the "immediately visible" will always remain impossible – as we know from the Romantic philosophy of Nature onwards – still, at the end the attempt of the rendering of these sights helps the artist "to make sense of the external world." The observation and the representation of the landscape will be the artist's aid in positioning himself, exactly through the analyses of his relationship with "the external world" or "reality." Looking at his images, the first feature that strikes the viewer is the calm and serene display of the elements. The vision has a particularly distant, formal and descriptive character, we can almost say that it is not only Nature that does not allow the observer to get closer to its secrets, but the artist himself too wants to respect and keep this distance – and this results in an almost unnatural alienation in the representation. This we can observe particularly well in a 2010 image of Per Bak Jensen, titled *Snowfield*, where he clearly differentiates between the precisely shown close detail of a tree in the foreground, and the infinite horizon in the background. In a way, we can recall the well-known compositional solution of some Romantic painters, especially of Caspar David Friedrich, who often "skipped" the middle ground in order to emphasise the inaccessibility and indomitable infinity of Nature. In the case of the Romantic painter this infinity was shown through this missing middle ground, so that the eye cannot comfortably scan, discover and hence conquer and appropriate the vision.[27] Per Bak Jensen does not create his rendering so rigorously, i.e. we do have a small stripe of the

Per Bak Jensen: *Snowfield*, 2010
C-print + matdiasec. 125 cm + 165 cm. Ed. 6 + AP
Hp vivera pigment ink print + mat diasec. 159 cm + 202,6 cm. Ed. 3 + AP
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middle ground on his image that leads towards the ever-distant horizon, still Nature's infinity is clearly put in focus. As a matter of fact, in this aspect we can easily recall also Friedrich's famous work titled *Monk by the Sea* from two centuries before where the overwhelming and almost depressing infinity dwarfs the solitary human figure. Alternatively, the essentially reduced horizontal (horizon) and vertical (tree trunk and tilling) structures in Per Bak Jensen's photograph might also recall the stylisation process of the young Piet Mondrian, who coincidentally had also departed from the trees, to then arrive at the purest form of the artwork and to the essence of painting through the minimal and geometric compositions. With all these solutions, Per Bak Jensen – just like many of his Romantic predecessors – is interested in the capturing of both physical and temporal infinity, an aim that I analysed in an earlier catalogue text on the artist's work: "While viewing the astounding natural forms, we sense the calm progress of the endless time determining their existence even in their apparent immobility, especially when the artist even reinforces that sense by contrasting those forms with artificial ones doomed to perish much sooner."[28]

To show another example of the examination of impressive and irregular landscape, we can quote some of the works of the Finnish-born, USA-based Arno Rafael Minkkinen. In many of his photographs he attempts to create visual, formal, and compositional parallels between the fascinating landscape and the human figure, either by highlighting certain natural forms or by contrasting and complementing them. Some of the works at first sight might seem to be only made for the sake of a visual joke. However, observing them better, we can certainly feel that there are noteworthy considerations behind these photographs. The artist himself appears in many of his works, normally very close to the camera, in the extreme foreground, in order to have the amazing natural scenery in the background. However, this background is not a secondary element at all, but an essential component of the image: the works are actively investigating the relationship of the human figure and the landscape. Here the artist is in the act of measuring and comparing, but not only his own body with the natural form(ation)s, but also his whole existence to that of Nature, and hence his own limited temporality with the eternity of Nature. Landscape thus becomes not only a natural scenery or background for his photographs, but serves as a scale on which – or perhaps *against* which – to calibrate human existence in general. This is why in many cases Minkkinen's face does not appear on the images, only parts of his body, often only his hands or legs. By not

showing the face, the most characteristic and individual part of the human body, he generalises the figure, making his investigations authentic and universally valid. Here we can again find a reference – though perhaps only an indirect or implicit reference – to the Northern Romantic master: in Caspar David Friedrich's images the figures are almost exclusively shown from behind, the famous *Rückenfigur*, thus not allowing the viewers to identify them through the face, and at the same time making them become universal representatives of mankind. These are such representatives, who observe, contemplate, and analyse the infinite powers of Nature.

In fact, this very examination of the temporal and physical difference between Man and Nature can also become a topic in itself, in both classical and contemporary Northern landscape-representations. To illustrate this, we can quote a member of the so-called Helsinki School of Photography, Kalle Kataila, who made the act of observation the focus of his works. In the series titled *Contemplation*, a figure is shown in the foreground while facing – and contemplating – the infinite distances. We can note a curious turning point in the examination, as it is not only the infinity itself that is shown, but the very act of observing this infinity. Contemplation and meditation of the infinity are the real subject matters of the pictures, we can say that the *mediation* of this *meditation* will be at stake, and the work of art will become the final result, the aesthetic object of this existential analysis. What is shown through the image is thus not only the eternity of Nature experienced in and through the landscape, but also the essential human necessity of finding and defining ourselves while encountering the sublime and powerful Nature.

Apart from these couple of two-dimensional examples, installations can also become significant ways of mediating the experience of the sublime eternity of Nature, as well as of letting the perceiver of the work encounter – often almost even physically encounter – the aesthetic consequences of this encounter. As a well-known example we can remember a relatively recent exhibition of Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson: in 2014 he created a monumental site-specific installation titled *Riverbed* in the galleries of the Louisiana Museum in Humlebæk, Denmark. A practically monochrome, silent, rocky "landscape" filled up the classical, white museum space, with a gentle stream of water floating down in the middle of the art piece, adding a special and subtle auditory aspect of the work. Through the installation, Olafur Eliasson managed to examine a complex set of questions, connected, among others, to the power of Nature and at the same time the

Arno Rafael Minkkinen: *Maroon Bells Sunrise*, Aspen, Colorado, 2012
© Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York

Kalle Kataila: *Contemplation*, Helsinki, 2004
pigment print, framed, 70 x 95 cm, Ed. 5 + 2 AP,
© Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Taik Persons

ways of the representability of this very power too. We also should not forget that the artist created this site-specific installation right in a museum that became world-famous also due to its perfectly harmonious staging within the enchanting natural scenery around the buildings. Once in the museum space, the constructed fragment of Nature became artificial, more precisely: the boundary between "natural" and "artificial" started to blur. Originally the stones and rocks were definitely natural elements and components, but constrained in an artificial space, intentionally and carefully designed by the artist. This is exactly how Olafur Eliasson aimed to draw the visitors' attention to the representability of the infinite natural forces. Even if setting the "landscape" in the museum might seem at first sight as limiting Nature itself – as if we could dominate it by confining its segment (the artificial landscape) within the walls – I think it is more fruitful to interpret it from the opposite direction: as an attempt to challenge our belief in our faculty of grasping the essence of Nature's infinity through the means of art. And precisely this challenge will bring the viewer closer initiating the examination of and hopefully understanding himself. As Olafur Eliasson stated it in an interview about the show: "I think that one when walking into the museum should see it as a way of amplifying what you know about the world already. And it is only when not stepping into some kind of a representational safe-haven you are actually in a situation where you feel comfortable of questioning yourself."[29] This kind of "questioning yourself", or enquiry for our self-understanding is what will be at stake in many Northern landscape representations.

From these examples we can already see ways of how the origins of aesthetic appreciation of the Northern landscapes are still influencing and defining many contemporary artworks. This showing and displaying of the infinity experienced when encountering Nature and sublime natural phenomena will then open up to new perspectives, discovering certain aspects that would not be possible if one did not tempt to face this very infinity. It seems, however, that observing "Mother Nature's exhibition" is not only enjoying an impressive spectacle in itself when Nature opens up, that we have learned to evaluate aesthetically – and where, agreeing with Martin Seel, this learned aesthetic appreciation functions even in the case of existentially threatening natural phenomena. As he stated in a recent article: "(…) appearances of nature often continue to maintain their aesthetic fascination when their impact has become threatening or overwhelming. Our sensory grasp is unable to measure sufficiently the quality of external nature. It could

Olafur Eliasson: *Riverbed*, 2014
Installation view
Water, blue basalt, wood, steel, foil, hose, pumps, cooling unit,
20.8.2014 to 11.1.2015 at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark
Photo: Anders Sune Berg
Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York
© Olafur Eliasson

be that we perish in a spectacle of cruel beauty."[30] For, at the same time, this very observing of Mother Nature's exhibition also implies the long-lasting desire of representing the powers of Nature in order to position ourselves through them.

As commonly referred to and widely analysed, by among others Alexander von Humboldt or Schelling in Romanticism, and later scrutinised by Joachim Ritter, man in the modern era has been alienated from Nature; however this should not automatically mean that we cannot find a new stance for ourselves.[31] Humboldt and Ritter were right when affirming that after Nature became object of practical use and of exploitation, it is the responsibility of the aesthetic to make Nature perceptible – actually, through the landscape representation. However, even if they describe the situation perfectly, we might perhaps reduce the unconditionally negative tone; what is more, can we perhaps interpret it as an opportunity? Facing and showing the wild landscape, as well as the immense Nature and its sublime powers might not be purely and solely frightening, but also a possibility to redefine ourselves, in relationship with this alienated Nature. This is what we can learn from the Northern artists' "close examination of Nature." And this might have at the end a kind of calming feature too: what we can see or "feel" in these representations as "closeness" to Nature is not the regained harmony – that is, as we know, not possible anymore –, much more the constant enquiry of these Natural powers that give us the opportunity and strength of finding our new position. We might not be in (harmony with) Nature, but have at least a new affinity to (re)define our present state through and by being exposed to Nature. Therefore, it is definitely worth visiting "Mother Nature's exhibition," once we are invited.

NOTES

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23. Heinrich Lützeler, "Vom Wesen der Landschaftsmalerei," *Studium Generale* 3 (1950): 215.
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30. Martin Seel, "Landscapes of Human Experience," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 13 (2015), accessed August 26, 2016, http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=731
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