

True North

Juhani
Pallasmaa



Käräjäkivet Books



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Two Master of the North

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ed il cerchio si apre...
L. M.

True North

Myth



True North – the Ultima Thule – is a mythical and mystical dimension. The North is not a distinct place; it is rather a direction, orientation, atmosphere, experiential condition and a state of mind. It is also the unknown, a void and emptiness. In classical European cartography and literature it was a location beyond all distance, not a definable place. Virgil used the term “Ultima Thule” as a symbolic reference to a far-off land, a non-place and an unattainable goal. Indeed, it is a concept more than a place, the edge of existence, and it evokes the final shore beyond which nothing is known to exist. Yet, historically, Ultima Thule has also been believed to locate in a number of actual geographic locations from the Orkney islands and Norway to Iceland, Greenland, and even Saaremaa in current Estonia.

It is intriguing, that whereas the dimension of the South usually refers to regions of human cultures, the North points at solitude and night. The Norwegian architectural historian and theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz entitled one of his books on Nordic architecture *Nightlands*, translating the Italian notion “mezzanotte” into English.¹

1. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Nightlands: Nordic Building*, Cambridge MA, and London: MIT Press, 1996. The writer uses the notion “Nightlands” as a synonym for the North, *mezzanotte* (midnight in Italian) in reference to the Nordic countries.

Our imagination acknowledges several mental souths, usually based on climatic and cultural characteristics, and there are also several northern atmospheres: the Polar North, the Alaskan and Canadian norths, and the Siberian and Asian norths, and each of these has its own character, which is likewise an atmosphere rather than a geographic fact. Unexpectedly we encounter the Northern condition also in the ultimate South, the Antarctica. The cold and ice of the Antarctica is paradoxical, as our instinctual logic expects the South Pole to represent maximum southernness, ie. ultimate heat. Our thinking through polarities misguides us here in the same way that our planar maps distort directions and distances that follow Great Circles.

Ultimately, the North is bare ice and snow, and these elements do not have a shape or identity, as they are migrant formations moved about by wind and water. The concept of the North is somehow a pure concept, a mentality rather than a place. North is the condition of the solitary individual, as the notion extends into the dark chill of the Arctic Ocean and turns from geography into metaphysics.

We could speak of the phenomenology of the North, as opposed to the meanings and experiences of the South, West and East, respectively. The basic orientations contain and evoke the deepest human feelings as they arise from our experiences of the course of the sun, the sequence of the seasons and hours of the day. These planetary polarities constitute our primary mythical images, which are mental suggestions rather than material or geographical realities. North feeds imagination endlessly and creates stories and myths. These myths present the solitary hero at the mercy of nature and his own fate.

In the context of my topic, we must distinguish between several geographic norths. The Nordic countries in their entirety denote northernness in today's global context, and this context has also geo-political connotations. Global warming and the human greed for resources have already turned the eyes of the



Harald Sohlberg, Winter
Night in the Mountains.
1914. Photo: Børre Høstland/
Nasjonalmuseet (National
Museum of Norway)



industrial world towards the Arctic region. In architecture, the northern reality is today also drawing increasing attention. In this essay, I will mainly speak of the work and thinking of two brilliant Nordic makers of functional form, Alvar Aalto and Tapio Wirkkala, two fellow academicians, who also happen to be the internationally widest known northern designers. A mutual respect is evident in the photograph of Aalto handing the Lunning Design Prize of 1951 in Copenhagen to Wirkkala, who was seventeen years Aalto's junior.²

Alvar Aalto presenting the Lunning Prize to Tapio Wirkkala. 1951. © LehtiKuva Oy (Press Photo)

2. The author met with Alvar Aalto numerous times since 1961, and became an intimate friend of Tapio Wirkkala in 1968; this friendship lasted until Wirkkala's death in 1985.