

Introduction

Telling the North, a North told?

◇ Raphaël Jamet
◇◇ Marie-Lou Solbach

“There are countless forms of narrative in the world”
(Barthes 1975: 237)

Telling stories is a human characteristic and more than *homo sapiens*, mankind could refer itself as *homo narrans* (Fisher 1985). To narrate is not only a production from and for imagination, but it produces common mythologies that structure societies. Among this innumerable stories, the ones about the Nordic spaces often represent an idealized space (reduce to one expression called “The North”, or moreover “The Far North”), described using the schemes of a geographical imaginary. But North, as several spaces and places, is of course also a geographical, cultural and historical reality where various influences converge, which are articulated within narrative practices. What we aimed to study in this issue.

The concept of North designates a large territory situated to the northern part of the world, starting more or less at the 66° degree north (according to Louis Edmond Hamelin, it begins between the 44° and the 50°, which indicates that even in its geographical definition, this space is subject to interpretation; see Hamelin 2002). Inside this vast space would lay without too many distinction the Nordic countries, the so called Far North, and kind of the end of the earth. It has been considered by Greek civilization as the limit of the *oikouménē* (from the Greek *oikouménē*), which symbolized the limit of the known world, the inhabited part of the planet. *Beyond* that limit the natural and known laws of nature wouldn't function as above: the climate is more rude, the day and night

◇ Raphaël Jamet, Université de Strasbourg.

◇◇ Marie-Lou Solbach, Université de Strasbourg.

alternation is modified and the people living there were fantasized either as monster, or divinity, but not really as human.

Both a direction and a plurality of places, the North thus refers as much to physical contexts and realities as to a concept/idea of place. On the one hand, studied in terms of geographical and climatic characteristics (initially in northern Canada), it is crystallised by the notion of ‘nordicity’ developed by geologist Louis-Edmond Hamelin (2002). When Daniel Chartier continued this research, he demonstrated how the idea of the North, in addition to its spatial reference, carries with it an imaginary constructed on the simplification of its referential constituents, as well as its realities (political, social, ethnic) in favour of the representation of an immense, depopulated and distant space called, for convenience, the Far North. Conceived as a discursive system, this imaginary evolves diachronically and synchronically (Chartier 2018). On the other hand, the idea of a fantasised and imagined place that each person appropriates has been the subject of numerous studies. Peter Davidson shows the lability of this North, which is different each time depending on the person who utters it (2005). For his part, Sylvian Briens develops the concept of *borealism*—borrowed from postcolonial criticism (Broberg 1981-1982, Shram 2011)—as a poetic process of creating a North that has become a surface for subjective projection, rather than representation (Briens 2018; Rasmussen, Briens and Stougaard-Nielsen 2023). Furthermore, the North is also the subject of research from a narratological perspective. Peter Fjågesund has explored the mental horizon represented by the North, not only in a chronological dimension: from Antiquity to the end of the First World War, he studied representations of the North and their effects in European cultural productions, but also in a narrative dimension (2014).¹ He shows how stories about the North, depending on the literary genre in which they were presented, used the location—mainly the Arctic—as a pretext for a didactic, moral and symbolic message in fiction aimed at teenagers. Arctic locations thus served as a reflective surface for human psychology, as well as for axiological reflection. In return, these same locations became a means of questioning the literary genres that hybridised in 19th-century Arctic narratives (Fjågesund 2014: 360-375). Thomas Mohnike has also taken a deep interest in northern locations and motives from a narrative perspective, using the network of mythemes—the smallest narrative units in a story—to develop a theory of a constitutive grammar of stories about the North: a diachronic and synchronic repertoire reflecting representations of places and spaces in an evolving configuration (Mohnike 2020).

Following those hypotheses and concept, one can ask about the will of storytelling the space. It has been indeed researched by Marie-Lou Solbach

¹ In the context of the narration of the Arctic space, we can also refer to the issue of *Nordlit* dedicated to “Narrating the High North I” (2012).

in her PhD thesis. She has demonstrated through the case study of crime fiction that the combination of the narrative's code of a literary *genre* and the representation of a space (the characteristic of an "imagined" Arctic) shows how it creates an editorial, narrative and structural articulation. This indicates that the space is no longer solely a context of the story, it becomes a narrative element, in the continuity of geographic novels, changing the images of the Arctic in contemporary fictions (see Solbach 2022).

The studies in this volume, 'The Telling of a Modern North: Identities, Images and Critics,' develop these ideas further and seek to understand how the idea of place is integrated and narrated according to the genres and medium that tell its story. The origin of this publication is a symposium dedicated to the hypothesis of the transformation of the images of Nordic places throughout the narrative process—a key concept for the papers presented here. Narrative practice is commonly considered in anthropology as a characteristic developed to create understanding about all the mysteries that human faces: complex emotions, natural (and not natural) phenomenon, concepts or situations, etc., but also to develop the ability to live in collectivity, to amuse ourselves, deploying our imagination (see Molino et Lafhail-Molino 1998; 2003).

All type of narratives can refer to three different realities for Jean Molino and Raphael Lafhail-Molino: "it designates first and foremost the set of words, images or gestures that represent a series of events; but it also designates the set of events that the narrative discourse, whatever its material, is supposed to represent; finally, it can designate the act by which the narrative discourse is produced".² In other words, the narration refers to cultural production, the content of a work, and the act of creating or producing a narrative. This tells us that narrative is not just a faculty, but also the result of a cognitive activity whose purpose is to represent or create a representation of the world as perceived by the human mind. For Roland Barthes, narrative is both a structure and a structuration: the combination of its elements produces meaning ordered by language (1974; 1975). In other words, narrative is a 'constant and active process of building up and breaking down structures and order' (Garret (ed.) 2018: 2). The association of representations within the story does not simply depict a place, but integrates it into the construction of meaning. To narrate, to tell a story, seems thus to recount the experience of human time and places in order to understand, explain, distance or even transform reality by questioning it, regardless of the form that narrative takes. We attempt then to focus on the images of Nordic spaces: why do one need to tell stories about

² Our translation of: "désigne d'abord l'ensemble des mots, des images ou des gestes qui représentent une série d'événements ; mais il désigne aussi l'ensemble des événements que le discours narratif, quel que soit son matériau, est censé représenter ; il peut enfin désigner l'acte par lequel est produit le discours narrative" (Molino et Lafhail-Molino 1998: 4).

the (plural) North? And which influence has the stories on the representation of these north? North, as voluntarily vague as this appellation can be, seems to catalyse the construction of specific image networks. As the manner of fact, in their introduction of the collaborative work *De la nordicité au boréalisme*, the editors ask about what could be the type of narratives that comes along with the concept of “nordicity”: “What kinds of narratives go hand in hand with nordicity? We assume that there is a storytelling of northernness: northernness tells a story, and we need to ask which one (or which ones). What are the fictional adventures of northernness?”.³ Following this question we try in this volume to enlarge it to all the cultural productions about the North, in order to not be limited at the sole fiction material, as the North in cultural production seems to be a narrative and constructed product.

The history of these cultural representations underlines this propensity to serve as a site for fantasies and ideals. This is one of the characteristics of the “imagined north” (Chartier 2018). The various media resulting from modern and contemporary cultural forms define Nordic places by their own codes, consequently nourishing the discourses on the North. The emergence of these new media hence allows for a wider diversity of the North representations, due to the different narrative forms they induce. Therefore, we can consider each medium, depending on the place it gives to text, image, sound, interaction and so on, as a way to transform representation of Nordic space, and see how the narrative practice propose new discourses on it. Those projections could serve multiple purpose and no longer be only fantasies, but are also tools and mechanisms to sell product, construct a brand story and turn around public opinion (Salmon 2008) or even help write and revise the history of those places.

The question we wished to address in this issue is the one about the specific narrative characteristics of the Nordic space in the modern and contemporary periods, vectors of a multiplication of media supports and discourses. More precisely the reciprocal influence of a narrative genre or a medium and the images of Nordic places. Or to put it in another way, how does narrative activity relate to representations of the North through text, image, sound, etc.? What do these narrative forms, understood as a medium of communication and representation, say about the place? Do they tend to evolve discursive practices on the images of North? What distinctions are made according to the period in which they are used?

Proposing answers to these questions is the aim of the following contributions. Each one of them explores a time, a Nordic place and a type of

³ Our translation of: “Quels types de récits vont de pair avec la nordicité? Nous présumons d’abord qu’il existerait un *storytelling* de la nordicité: la nordicité nous raconterait une histoire et il conviendra de se demander laquelle (ou lesquelles). Quelles sont les péripéties fictionnelles de la nordicité?”, Ballotti, McKeown, Toudoire-Surlapierre (ed.) 2020: 34.

medium on the relationship between narratives and images of the North, in that they transform each other. More specifically, this thematic issue examines how images and representations of the North in Europe and areas beyond the Arctic Circle are forged, used and recomposed in the context of constructing narratives that constitute and critique a form of modernity : identity crisis, rewriting of history, questioning colonial and gender biased storytelling and power struggle. The critical approaches of the contributors converge to demonstrate how the North can support an ideological discourse of these tensions and the narrative tools that shape it.

To introduce this volume Peter Fjågesund offers a critical study of the narrator's position in a travelogue and broadens the perspective to discuss the systematic anthropocentrism when writing about the Arctic territories. Per Esben Svelstad article shows then how the depiction of Norwegian landscape in decadent literature is the ideal frame for supporting ideas of degeneration, sublime and masculinism. Pehr Engлёn sets out a new reading and interpretation of Kerstin Ekman's *Rövarna i Skuleskogen* (1988) by asking how story and history of the Swedish post-war are interweaved through the study of geographical and scientific margins. Giovanni Za takes the themes of post-war Sweden to the told stories of its urban construction, demonstrating how literature and cinema are using urban planification to portray the Nordic model as it is politically both promoted and criticised. Sasha Richman demonstrates how W. F. Hermans photographs had a significant influence on one of his novel exposing Norway as a narrative tool developing narrator's state of mind, contemplative places and existential crisis simultaneously. Emmanuel Reymond through the case study of a-ha's *True North* (2022) analyse the subjectivisation and deterritorialisation of northern imaginaries in both music and cinema, showing how endogenous creation questions nordic narratives and stereotypes. Sandra Coullenot deepens the critics of the historicization process reflecting on the narration of an Icelandic national history with the support of archeology's discoveries. This contribution takes the shape of a scientific vulgarization paper in order to question the accessibility of those concepts to the general public in our education system.

References

- Ballotti, A., McKeown, C. et Toudoire-Surlapierre, F. (éd.), 2020, *De la nordicité au boréalisme*, Reims, épure.
- Barthes, R., 1975, "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative", Lionel Duisit (trad.), *New Literary History*, vol. 6, n° 2 "On Narrative and Narratives", <https://www.uv.es/fores/Barthes_Structural_Narrative.pdf>.
- Briens, S., 2018, « Boréalisme. Pour un atlas sensible du Nord », *Études Germaniques*, vol. 2, n° 290, p. 151-176, <<http://doi.org/10.3917/eger.290.0151>>.

- Broberg, G., 1981-1982, "Lappkaravaner på villovägar: antropologin och synen på samerna fram mot sekelskiftet 1900", *Lychnos*, Uppsala, Lärdomshistoriska samfundet, p. 27-86.
- Chartier, D., 2018, *Qu'est-ce que l'imaginaire du Nord?: principes éthiques*, Harstad, Norvège, Canada, Arctic arts summit, Imaginaire | Nord.
- Davidson, P., 2005, *The Idea of North*, Londres, Reaktion Books.
- Fisher, W. R., 1985, "The Narrative Paradigm: In the Beginning", *Journal of Communication*, vol. 35, n° 4, p. 74-89, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1985.tb02974.x>>.
- Fjågesund, P., 2014, *The Dream of the North. A Cultural History to 1920*, Amsterdam, New York, Rodopi.
- Garret, M. (ed.), 2018, *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Hamelin, L. E., 2002, *Discours du nord*, Québec, Université de Laval.
- Mohnike, T., 2020, "Narrating the North. Towards a Theory of Mythemes of Social Knowledge in Cultural Circulation", *Deshima*, n° 14, p. 9-36, <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-03020605/document>.
- Molino, J., Lafhail-Molino, R., 1998, « Qu'est-ce qu'un récit? Une perspective anthropologique », *Romantic review*, vol. 89, n° 1, p. 1-20.
- Molino, J., Lafhail-Molino, R., 2003, *Homo fabulator. Théorie et analyse du récit*, Montréal/Arles, Léméac/Actes Sud.
- Rasmussen, V., Briens S., Stougaard-Nielsen, J., 2023, "Borealism: Introducing a Poetics of the North", *Scandinavica*, vol. 62, n° 1, p. 1-6, <<http://doi.org/10.54432/scand/JKVA9217>>.
- Schram, K., 2011, *Borealism: Folkloristic perspectives on transnational performances and the exoticism of the North*. University of Edinburgh.
- Solbach, M.-L., 2022, *L'Arctique des polars polaires : en-quête des représentations et récits d'inquiétudes au XXI^e siècle*, Littérature générale française et comparée, Strasbourg, Université de Strasbourg.
- Wærp, H. H., Drivenes, E.-A., et Friedman, R.-M., 2012, "Narrating the High North I", *Nordlit*, n° 29, <<https://septentrio.uit.no/index.php/nordlit/issue/view/206>>.