

Henrik Saxgren: *Ultima Thule*. Gyldendal, 2107.

Climate theories have for several hundred years had a persistently recurring hold on the appreciation of art. At what is often identified as the very beginning of the discipline of art history, Winckelmann proposes in his *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1764) that the “superiority” which art attained in the culture of the Greeks could “be ascribed partly to the influence of climate, partly due to their constitution and government, and the habits of thinking which originated therefrom...”. It is notable that ‘habits of thinking’ are not only to be associated with but are considered to ‘originate from’, among other factors, the climate. On the other hand a northern climate, in this view, couldn’t have provided the conditions in which an art and culture such as the classical could have developed.

Related to this idea of the temperate climate conducive to great thought, is that of the temperate landscape, regular and well-formed, appreciated for its natural beauty. In the time of Winckelmann, Grand Tourists crossing the snowbound heights of the Mont Cenis Pass to reach Italy and thus the regularity and beauty of classical antiquity, had been educated to see mountains as glorious precisely because of their irregularity and savagery — in other words to see them as sublime. A few years before Winckelmann’s work, Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) had found the cause of the feeling of the sublime in concepts such as vastness and infinity. Even before this, mountains had become associated with chaos and catastrophe, or at least the threat of these, as when Joseph Addison had written that the Alps “fill the mind with an agreeable kind of horror”.

The sublime landscape gradually took on an existence on its own terms. The Romantic conception of landscape became that of a place in which to experience: it was a landscape which might speak to something in the beholder, a place of self-reflection and interpretation. To have been elevated to this status as subject matter in itself, landscape had taken on the quality of something that man encounters — it had been objectified. No beautified backdrop, the sublime landscape, articulating the physical and temporal infinity of nature, also led in contrast to the experience of the smallness of man. A function of self-interpretation in the mirror of the sublime landscape, then, was the idea of man’s dependence on and powerlessness in the face of the forces of nature.

This Romantic trope is at work in Danish photographer Henrik Saxgren’s foreword to his book *Ultima Thule*, a collection of images taken among the Inuit of the most remote settlement in

Greenland, a place where the intemperate climate and the harsh landscape have a decisive effect on the lives and culture of the inhabitants: “The earth calves its icebergs and freezes over the seas as it sees fit. It lets storms rage and the cold bite as it sees fit. It is the earth that dictates the terms and conditions.

“If we wish to be here, we must accommodate ourselves — or be crushed. ...”

Yet the people who live in the Arctic are also something more than pawns in nature’s game: “They know their place in the hierarchy and adjust to it in the knowledge that their destruction is a constant possibility. Every day they have to overcome the fear of nature’s lack of respect and venture into it. Every day they have to demonstrate heroism. It is this dance on the edge of obliteration that is so fascinating. Where destruction is a presence, heroes are made.

“The hunters don’t see themselves as heroes, but I do.”

On the cover is a cropped image from the series, showing a young Inuit with a gun, behind him the ice-covered plateau, while at the bottom left a portion of the animal he has killed has survived the crop. He stares out across what we must presume is a vast expanse to the left of the photographer. It is almost as if Saxgren had sneaked up around the side of Caspar David Friedrich’s famous *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* and caught him from the front, his cane turning out to be a rifle. Where the painting expresses an irresolvable contradiction — is the lone man master of the landscape the peak of which he has ascended, or an insignificant element within it, his omniscience thwarted by the fog — the photograph poses a similar dilemma of interpretation: the young hunter may have laid the seal in his crosshairs low at his feet, but behind him the plain of ice recedes far beyond his long shadow into a hazy horizon, indistinguishable from sky. Cropped close to the man in portrait format, as on the cover, the resolution of this dilemma might seem to favour him, as he fills out the image. A look at the original image, near the end of the book, reveals, in landscape format, a figure much more isolated within the great expanse of ice.

Between this cover and Saxgren’s words quoted above, four images form an overture to the drama that will unfold in the book as a whole. First, an expanse of snow and ice diagonally halved by a black line that traces its way across the image: a nylon line belonging to one of the hunters, or a crack in the ice? It remains unresolved in its semi-abstraction. Second, a double spread showing two images of the same landscape, on the left seen in daylight, the almost Matterhorn-shaped ice flow, mists, strip of blue sky and bank of cloud presenting all the glorious savagery that a Romantic might expect from a sublime landscape; on the right, the same scene at night, the sky a dark menace (begging the Romantic gaze for the adjective ‘lowering’), the Matterhorn-shaped ice flow picked out in bright white against the vastness of the distance. Here are figured the twin self-reflections of man enclosed by the sublime: the majesty of nature in its apparent infinity, and its

menace towards insignificant man. Third, the shock of a bloody, skinned mouth and nose, close to human were it not for the long canines. It is the exposition of the soft flesh — almost jelly-like in closeup and in a hard, rich light — to be found beneath the exterior layer of all animals, the once warm meat already congealing in the freezing climate, which underlines Saxgren's view of life in Thule as a dance on the edge of obliteration.

After this overture the body of the work naturally expands upon the rich red blood and brilliant white ice, the bright snow and the dark skies promising truly foul weather, the large mammals that the human inhabitants wrestle with for sustenance, making hunks of flesh of narwhals and seals or leaving the fatty and furry remains of a skinned polar bear on the ice. Men engaged in cutting lumps of fat out of a still wet seal, or showing their hands that lack fingers, lost to frostbite or the slicing of nylon lines used in hunting. Men with frost in their hair and women curing meat inside their shack-like homes or indulging in moments of pastime with needle and thread. Men sneaking up on sleeping walruses with rifles and harpoons, and a polar bear set upon by the sled's pack of huskies. Particularly striking is an image of the innards of seal, complete with the soft sausages of the intestines and the both fascinating and repulsive detail of different types of tissue: the fine structure of muscles, the toughness of stretched sinew; the whole arrangement of the exposed body uncomfortably close to the human form.

It is a series of images that depicts the continuous fight for survival which fills most of the waking hours. A kind of life which most of us have never known, of which we have little or no sense of the daily realities. It is also a life much changed from its traditional origins, inevitably infiltrated by the inventions of industrial societies. "The cultures of aboriginal peoples can only survive on the fringes of the world", Greenlandic geologist Minik Rosing writes in his foreword, "Thule has moved from being the magical Ultima Thule at the very edge of the world, to finding itself right in the middle of a world of geopolitical and economic interests." That we might do well to take heed both of how harsh life in the grip of an extreme climate can be, and how those very geopolitical and economic interests are accelerating the processes that bring us more extreme climatic conditions, is brought home by the book's Epilogue, four images which focus on the receding of the ice. First, a shot which shows a lake of pale turquoise water that has formed in the middle of the ice sheet, from which a fissure with fuzzy edges zigzags out of the bottom of the frame. Next, two aerial shots of Greenland's coastline, the first showing the strip of rock and silt that has been uncovered between the ice sheet to one side and the sea to the other in a thaw, the second a close up of this terrain, showing the complex delta of streams that lead silt and meltwater into the sea. The last photo shows the landscape which the reader has become familiar with over the course of more than one hundred pages, but here the mountains beyond the bay are devoid of snow and ice, the beige and brown of the underlying rock revealed.

Today, the meeting of climate theories and art is no longer one confined to musings on the superiority of one culture over another. In the Alps, changes in the pattern and amount of snowfall have been registered, but as yet the metamorphosis of the Alps in the human imagination, from scene of chaos and catastrophe to theatre of leisure activities, still speaks of man's at least partial mastery over them. But the savagery of the Arctic landscape and climate depicted in *Ultima Thule*, the drastic change wrought on that landscape during the melting away of snow and ice flows, and the arduous lives of humans who live there, should serve to remind us of what the forces of nature can impose on man.