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# Imagining Northern Norway Visual configurations of the North in the art of Kaare Espolin Johnson and Bjarne Holst

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## **ABSTRACT**

The formative processes of collective identity and belonging inspired Benedict Anderson to write his ground-breaking *Imagined Communities* (1983). His emphasis on imagination and sodality in these processes also resonates in contemporary artistic presentations of life in northern Norway. A rereading of Anderson's thesis in relation to the arts in northern Norway, in particular the visual arts, may offer some new insights, both into the blind spots of Anderson's analyses, and into the ways in which people of the North have recently imagined themselves. This article is the first to relate the art of Bjarne Holst (1944–1993) and Kaare Espolin Johnson (1907–1994) to Anderson's theories of imagined communities. These reflections are also among the very first to focus in depth on Holst's art, and to conduct a critical analysis of these artists' work. The two artists complement and contrast each other in subject matter and in their idiosyncratic stylistics of scraping to light from soot (Espolin) and colourful *anthropomorph-icing*.

**Keywords:** *North, art, imagined communities, Benedict Anderson, Kaare Espolin Johnson, Bjarne Holst, anthropomorph-icing*

## IMAGININGS

The idea to this article emerged from an exhibition of two visionary artists from the North. Curated by Knut Ljøgodt, *To visjonære kunstnere fra nord. Kaare Espolin Johnson (1907–1994) og Bjarne Holst (1944–1993)* (*Two Visionary Artists from the North. Kaare Espolin Johnson (1907-1994) and Bjarne Holst (1944-1993)*) was displayed at Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum in Tromsø, Norway, in 2007. Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum's exhibition and acquisition of many of Holst's paintings, and Ljøgodt's (2003) exemplary book, *Trollfuglen: Bjarne Holst 1944–1993* (*The Bird of Sorcery: Bjarne Holst 1944–1993*), have helped to promote Holst's position as an important artist of northern Norway. Espolin Johnson's artistic position has long been well-established, and he has to some extent been included in the national canon. This essay focuses on the visual arts of these two artists who present complementary imaginaries of life in northern Norway throughout most of the twentieth century. They also offer two interesting case studies in relation to Anderson's ideas of imagined communities. Espolin Johnson's art in fact fills the hermeneutic vacuum in Anderson's thesis, both as a concrete case study of painting that Anderson's theoretical discussion is devoid of, and as a lucid example of the powers born of the cross-generic encounter of image and text in popular print. Holst, on the other hand, reveals obvious deficiencies in Anderson's theories of community, and delves into a new visual topography and imaginary of northern regions.

## BORDERS OF BELONGING

“Do human beings need belonging?,” Stråth (2008, 21) asks pertinently in his essay on belonging and European identity at a time of rapid change in small communities, major capitals, and transnational projects. For all its lucid argumentation on religion, neoliberalism, and multiculturalism, and for all its integrationist stance, this theoretical essay treads the conventional path of Eurocentrism. As the title suggests, belonging is predicated upon a dyadic relation to European centrality. The two aspects of the title are mutually interdependent, and belonging is unthinkable outside of the idea of the larger transnational project. The discussion, sensibly and convincingly, centres on the ideological discourses and social transformations of the European project. Stråth, like most of the essays in *Identity, Belonging and Migration* (Delanty, Wodak, and Jones 2008), subscribe to the principles that Anderson (2006, 141) had 30 years before already found “so common for progressive, cosmopolitan intellectuals (particularly in Europe?)”. Many communities in northern Norway and elsewhere in and beyond Europe recognize Anderson's evaluation that “an unselfconscious provincialism had long skewed

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and distorted theorizing on the subject [national communities]” and that European scholars are “accustomed to the conceit that everything important in the world originated in Europe” (2006, xiii). Eurocentrism has not only excluded large parts of the world in European scholars’ theories, but this ideologically proscribed vision has also ignored large fields of knowledge and creativity within its own parameters, not to mention all the marginal space delimited by its own definitions. That is to say, centrism, at its best, ignores the dialectical processes from which it rises, or, far more frequently, acts as its own “unselfconscious provincialism”.

Several influential analyses gravitate towards an intellectual discourse which Anderson finds geopolitically lopsided, philistine, and myopic, including *Identity, Belonging and Migration* by Delanty, Wodak, and Jones (2008); *Europe: An Unfinished Adventure* by Bauman (2004); *Rethinking Europe* by Delanty and Rumford (2005); and *Postnationalist Ireland* by Kearney (1997). Anderson elaborates:

*In an age when it is so common for progressive, cosmopolitan intellectuals (particularly in Europe?) to insist on the near-pathological character of nationalism, its roots in fear and hatred of the Other, and its affinities with racism, it is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love. The cultural products of nationalism – poetry, prose fiction, music, plastic arts – show this love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles. (Anderson 2006, 141)*

If Anderson, in the wake of Foucault and Said, delivers a critical corrective to Eurocentric discourses, he also introduces the importance of the imagination to the construction of political communities. The various discourses on collective belonging – be they historical, ideological, social, or linguistic – tend to sacrifice the significance of human imagination on the altar of instrumental reasoning. Anderson reminds us that human imagination, particularly as it manifests itself in writing, public installations, maps, and museums, contributes considerably to the constitution of communities. The conceptual construction of modern communities is based not only on academic discourses and the ideas of constant transgression of time and space, but also on the imagining of a place of emotions and belonging. Such a place, frequently imagined by the arts and by cultural activity, tends to go unnoticed by much of the analytic activity in the field.

### REREADING ANDERSON'S *IMAGINED COMMUNITIES*

The reference to Anderson's classic book in this essay is not accidental. His critique of European-centred discourses and his emphasis on the imaginative still retain intellectual potential for the dynamic hermeneutics of the concept of community. A rereading of Anderson's thesis in relation to the arts in northern Norway, in particular the visual arts of Kaare Espolin Johnson and Bjarne Holst, may offer some new insights, both into the ways in which people of the North have recently imagined themselves, and into the blind spots of Anderson's illuminating analyses.

While Anderson discusses nationalism, focusing on Asia and writing his analysis as an immediate response to the armed conflicts in Indochina in 1978–1979, this groundbreaking book on the logics of constructing political communities also offers interesting perspectives on the creative and productive processes of collective identity and forms of belonging in the northern hemisphere. For this essay on the visual imaginings of northern Norway in the art of Kaare Espolin Johnson and Bjarne Holst, the thrust of Anderson's analysis, as the title of his book indicates, lies in the power of the imagination in the formation of communities. His analyses disclose the importance of artistic imaginings in the cognitive formations of communal identity – both the political discourses of definition, control, and containment, and the creative arts of the anomalous, the liberal, and the transgressive.

Anderson's imagined community is “an integrated political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (2006, 6). First of all, the national community is “imagined” because people who have never met consider themselves to have so much in common that they are willing to die for this shared idea of communality. Secondly, Anderson's imagined community is “limited” because it acknowledges other nations in its vicinity and beyond. Thirdly, it is “sovereign” because it assumes freedom and recognizes no superior authority. Furthermore, Anderson identifies military death and religion as two of the principal cultural roots of imagined communities (2006, 9–19), and his discussion draws on a Marxist approach (2006, 1–4).

Anderson's community is a national one. Clearly, northern Norway is not. Still, however much regionalism may be contrasted with nationalism, it subscribes to many of the same principles of imagination, limitation, and political authority. Sometimes, regionalism is the stepping stone to nationalism; most times, regionalism defines itself in geopolitical terms along a continuum from separatism and autonomy to decentralization and local authority. Within the imperial worldview that Anderson discusses, the

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nation constitutes an entity in a larger network of political control, not unlike northern Norway functions within Norway, Russia–Nordic cooperation, and the EU. Anderson's concept of community is also based upon unity, whereas northern Norway today cultivates diversity. The region includes Sápmi and border relations with Russia, Finland, and Sweden as integral to the understanding of themselves. The Sami population, who are frequently controversial in many districts of northern Norway, and who sometimes have closer links with Sami in Sweden, Finland, and Russia than with their compatriots, were granted their own parliament in 1989. Since the liberation of northern Norway by the Soviet Union at the end of the Second World War, the sodality of spirit has in parts of the population been much closer to this neighbouring nation than to fellow Norwegians down south.

Northern Norway is a region rooted in diversity. The diversity straddles both the regional and the national community, and the fervour of self-determination in northern Norway does not reach the sacrificial standards of Anderson's nations; regionalism in northern Norway has entertained hardly any militant separatist impetus. Amid all these differences between Anderson's premises and the contemporary status of northern Norway, the great legacy of his theories for the imagining of these regions, in the future as much as in the past, is the enabling powers he grants the imagination in the construction of future communities. Also, in contrast to some of his fellow theorists around the same time, such as Nairn (1977), Gellner (1983), and Hobsbawm (1990), Anderson appreciates the utopian aspect of collective self-determination in local areas, nor does he regard the ideas of commonality and belonging obsolete in an increasingly globalizing world.<sup>1</sup>

If Anderson appears to be the last advocate of national consciousness, he equally much appears a pioneer in exploring the imaginative in the foundation of communities. Yet, it is disappointing how little he delves into imaginative artefacts. Music is never discussed and painting is given extremely short shrift.<sup>2</sup> His neglect of music and painting ensues from the preponderant Marxist leanings of the analysis. For Anderson, visual arts, even after the revolution of mechanical reproduction, hold but little radical potential for the masses compared to the revolution of the book. If art *per se*, with all its implications of capitalism and individual enjoyment, sits uneasily with any radical discourse in general, and most certainly in *Imagined Communities* in particular, its absence from Anderson's examination nevertheless leaves a hermeneutic space. Despite all the ideas and self-serving rhetoric of high art, art never belonged solely to the high and mighty. In addition to the might of the word, the powers of music and visual arts, not to men-

tion those of the stage, have time and time again engendered change and reform, and challenged aristocratic classifications and defining discourses of art. In the contexts of northern Norway, the visual imaginings ignored by Anderson offer a complementary and critical perspective to his theoretical thesis. A particular interesting imaginative site in this respect, one which Anderson disregards entirely, is the powerful combination of written and visual art in popular print.

### ARTS IN THE NORTH

Communities of northern Norway depend upon their own imaginings. While Anderson's treatise has empowered the decentred and the unacknowledged, much of the theoretical discussions of belonging and the prevailing theories of visual arts have their few centres at a far distance from most communities. Kaare Espolin Johnson and Bjarne Holst are only two of the patriotic artists in northern Norway who have imagined this region with affection and complexity, and two of those who, in the words of Anderson, "show this love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles" (2006, 141). Northern Norway has an age-old and abundant history of art, however much these local traditions have been excluded from the defining discourses of art and culture at the centres of aesthetic authority. From yoik to Mari Boine, Biosphere, Röyksopp, and the cacophony of contemporary music; from petroglyphs to the films of Knut Erik Jensen, the Kill Buljo group, and the plethora of current prize-winning directors; from runes to Peter Dass, Knut Hamsun, Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, Liv Lundberg, and the panorama of contemporary writers, northern Norway has fostered a diversity of arts that has to a large extent only entered the national and international stage fairly recently. This listing of arts in northern Norway is not meant to establish a rigid dichotomy of difference with other places, national or international, or to deny that arts in the North Cape have always developed within a circumpolar perspective as much as a Barents and southern one, or to eschew the debates of defining the North and the South in all their plurality. It is merely meant to illustrate something of the imaginative activity that can be amalgamated under a protean idea of North.<sup>3</sup>

### THE ART OF KAARE ESPOLIN JOHNSON AND BJARNE HOLST

For all their thematic and stylistic differences, the art of Kaare Espolin Johnson (1907–1994) and Bjarne Holst (1944–1993) in many ways engages with Anderson's principles in being "imagined", "limited", and "sovereign". Their many paintings, lithographs, murals, and illustrations create in the people of the region a sense of sodality and com-

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monality beyond the factual borders of geography, history, and language, or the statistical ones of census. Their imaginative inventions are limited in the way they present a distinct sense of the local, even if the diversity of the local differs in the two. Their art is sovereign, not only in the sense of aesthetic autonomy and individual creativity, but also in the manner the two different artists develop outside the most predominant central European ideas of art and community, as in Espolin Johnson's art, or in complex relations with them, as in Holst's art. Both artists attend to the life and the landscapes that characterize the overlapping regions of northern Norway, Sápmi and the Barents Region from around 1930 to 1994. In drawing upon the local and the regional, Espolin Johnson tends to develop his vision and techniques in close contact with a place beyond the ordinary centres of aesthetic themes and theories, while Holst rather combines the local sources of imagination with the continental currents of aesthetic development.

Many scenes in Espolin Johnson's art engage explicitly with the complex relations specific to the northern region – the many cultural encounters between different groups of people in small-knit communities on the margins of the Norwegian society, not to mention the European one. His wide range of motifs is almost always presented within a sense of collectivity, and the many images of hardship and distress evoke empathy, identification, and solidarity; – they suggest struggle and survivability. The many depictions of Russian culture across the borders, the portraits of Sami people, and the pictures of fishermen and life on the coast inhabit locality, and Espolin Johnson's development of idiosyncratic techniques and styles emphasizes this sense of indigeneity.

Holst's art is one of far more decontextualized scenes of individual subjects, in which he integrates the local with the alien, the uncanny, and the unknown. Winter, snow, darkness, and cold imply a northern climate in many of his paintings. These and other images frequently explore the dark and interior landscapes of the local community and the individual mind. The pictures incite wonder and shock, and they engender disintegration, death, and repulsion. They prise open macabre moods and individual interiors which have had no place in the traditional visual imagining of communities up north, nor in the art of Espolin Johnson. Consequently, Espolin Johnson and Holst frequently imagine contrary and complementary contours of the same communities.

Espolin Johnson's and Holst's art not only concur with the three major principles of Anderson's imagined communities, but their visual imaginations also interact with his other discursive positions. Religion is part of their cultural roots, however differently the two artists relate to this institutionalization of the metaphysical dimension. A reli-

rious spirit informs many of Espolin Johnson's images, whereas the visual universe of Holst acts in opposition to religious dogma, doctrines, and orthodoxy. Some of Espolin Johnson's visuals attend directly to Anderson's emphasis on military death; in Holst's imagination death only exists as an individual event. The art of both artists, however, can be interpreted in close relation to the ideas and spirit of Marx, which is also so important to the theories of Anderson. Despite this triangular hermeneutic relationship between the political theorist and the two painters, the art of Espolin Johnson and Holst, both in contents and form, appears worlds apart – a fact which emphasizes the plural form of Anderson's imagined communities.

Throughout his career, Espolin Johnson's striking motifs and personal technique evolved outside the centres of art-defining discourses, especially the strands of modernism. A popular painter and lithographer, Espolin Johnson was not unaware of the development in a wider world of art at the time. His early explorations of his own medium reveal artistic associations with Edward Munch, German expressionism, Marc Chagall, and possibly cubism.<sup>4</sup> Yet his highly original technique of distilling light and life from self-sooted canvasses through strenuous labour and meticulous scraping suits the shifts from winter darkness to summer light, and the spirit of many coastal communities in northern Norway throughout long periods of the previous century. The crude work to get hold of light in swarth and darkness retains an obvious existential and moral symbolism, and the strenuous search for light and vision also captures Espolin Johnson's Miltonic fate: he struggled with impaired eyesight all his life and grew gradually blind. Espolin Johnson's inimitable technique imbues his many motifs with a very actual sense of human hardship and strenuous life. Consequently, the imagined communities of northern Norway in the thematic concerns, the stylistic techniques, and the personal life of Espolin Johnson are developed in close contact with local life and culture, and his own fate.

Conversely, the far lesser known artist Holst complemented his background from northern Norway by living in Oslo (1966–1968), Vienna (1970–1973), Hamburg (1973–1978), and Nesteng in southeastern Norway (1978–1993). In the continental cities he encountered and engaged with the central artistic trends of his time; pop art, German critical art, and photorealism. All these stylistic characteristics can be traced in his art, but above all Holst immersed himself in surrealism, particularly the visual legacy of great painters such as Salvador Dalí, Rene Magritte, Paul Delvaux, and Yves Tanguy. His life and his themes and techniques thus evolved in exchange with a dominant strand of central European modernism. This reflection of mainstream



Europeanism may have alienated the general public in northern Norway, and is one likely reason for, until very recently, his largely unknown status. The disregard for his art may have been aggravated by his peregrinations, Bohemian lifestyle, and male partnership. Surrealism's uneasy balancing on the borders of the real and the unreal, its complex introversion and frequent exhibition of the sexual and the morbid, and its emergence from the urban, experimental, and intellectual centres of Europe challenged the prevailing spirit and self-identification of many communities in the north, and the images of these communities in the art of Espolin Johnson. In its focus on psychology and interiority, Holst's art also discloses the suppressed and excluded in Anderson's thesis. Espolin Johnson's imagined communities, what Jørgensen calls "visualisations of rural Norway" and "the quiet symbolism of deprived conditions" (2007, 85), are always based upon unity and implicit labour class collectivity, an obvious legacy of Marx. The socialist sympathies underlying Espolin Johnson's art are buttressed by his twenty-year engagement with *Arbeidermagasinet* (*The Worker*), a hugely popular journal among workers and the unemployed. These are communities, both in Anderson's academic treatise and Espolin Johnson's visual work, which leave little room for the imagination of individual human complexity, or for issues of gender, sexuality, and age. In Anderson in particular, but also in Espolin Johnson to some extent, singularity is elided into a collective based on a higher unity: "Finally, it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship." (Anderson 2006, 7)

While Holst populates his universe with individuality and private issues as opposed to social solidarity and public concerns, his art vibrates with other imperatives in the legacy of Marx. Derrida's *hauntology* in *Spectres of Marx* (1994) articulates precisely how the spirits of responsibility, radical critique, and emancipatory promise in Marx's areligious internationalist communism eclipse the spectres of historical materialism, class struggle, and revolution. The former spirits in Marx's legacy inspire Holst's art. Additionally, the uneasy synthesis of Marxist radicalism and Freudian psychoanalysis formed the intellectual basis of continental surrealism from the very beginning (Nadau 1989; Alexandrian 1970; Waldberg 1965), and Holst's art also stalks the artistic climate of his time with radical critique of suppressive social conventions and emancipatory promise of an areligious international community for the individual. Not least do his visions overlap with Marx in his socio-critical exposition of bourgeois decadence. In their themes, techniques, and lives, then, Espolin Johnson and Holst offer dissimilar visions of life in the North, which run parallel and contrary to Anderson's imagined communities, but which also enable a diversity of people in different places and different times to identify with each other

and to establish a conceptual sense of belonging – imagined communities of northern Norway. The imagination of both artists, and its importance, require closer analysis.

### THE ART OF ESPOLIN JOHNSON

“The result was an imaginary, psychedelic, shamanistic, romantic fatherland, a crypto-Norway, which is not exactly a country or a nation, but much more an Arctic Dreamcircle”, Mendes (2007, 16) writes of Espolin’s art, in words that reverberate with the ideas of Anderson.<sup>5</sup> Mendes also argues for the much wider significance of this “Arctic Dreamcircle”, Espolin Johnson’s imagined community of the north: “The Nordic as the legendary inhabitation of the Norwegian nation. Or its narcissistic, moral reserve” (2007, 19). Mendes’s article functions as a useful reminder of the importance of the region which has historically been ignored by the “unselfconscious provincialism” (Anderson 2006, xiii) of the centres of power. Shipping and fishing have historically created national pride and iconography, both promoted by the capital, which for long periods appeared oblivious of where the tradition of sea-faring was still alive and where the vast quantities of fish were and are actually caught. Espolin Johnson’s enduring images presented in art the life up north to the northerners themselves. In an article in the daily newspaper *Nordlys* (2012, 3) the retired legendary editor and writer Ivan Kristoffersen declares the indelible impact of Espolin Johnson’s art: “like the pictures of Kåre Espolin Johnson are still imprinted on the mind of all northerners”. The phenomenal power of Espolin Johnson’s art testifies to the significance of visual arts in the processes of imagi(ni)ng communities, and to the mind-blowing effects of its combination with printed text, two of the aspects to which Anderson gives very short shrift.

Espolin Johnson’s artistic achievement appears tantamount to a revolution of the mind to people up north. Arntzen (Espolin Johnson and Arntzen 1994) attributes the coming of visual art per se in northern Norway to Espolin Johnson’s accomplishment. His introduction to *Og langsomt kom lyset (And slowly came the light)* pays tribute to Espolin Johnson not only as a great artist, but also as the herald of art itself in the north. Before him, art, theories of art, and aesthetic discourse belonged to the “unselfconscious provincialism” (Anderson 2007, xiii) and those accustomed to the conceit that everything important stems from the capitals and centres of power. Arntzen explains:

*For most northerners, the word “art” was almost foreign for centuries. While the newspapers in the capital in the last century wrote long articles and hefty debates about art, we up north still had little*

*to say about this side of human existence.*

*Behold, “your man Espolin” emerged. He came from Jarfforn in Finnmark. Nothing special about that, but the peculiar thing was that he was a visual artist. Or whatever they call it.*

*They talked in big words about him down south, whereas we in the north met him first and foremost through **Arbeidermagasinet** and **Vett og Uvett [Sense and Nonsense]**. And were proud of him. (Espolin Johnson and Arntzen 1994, 4)*

In northern Norway art arrives as a concept independently of defining discourses, and only in concurrence with Espolin Johnson’s images, particularly in the magazine *Arbeidermagasinet* and the popular collection of humorous folk tales from northern Norway, *Vett og Uvett (Sense and Nonsense)*.<sup>6</sup> Bye (2000, 10) agrees and regards Espolin Johnson’s art as one of self-assured local integrity in a nation of “people unsure of their own culture, uncritically aping any impulse from abroad, a country staggering under the immense pressure from an increasingly globalized world”. As a concept and as an imaginative practice, art emerges from Espolin Johnson and an increasingly self-conscious region. “Thank God you do not need to be an ‘art expert’ to take Kaare’s works to heart”, Bye (2010, 8) confesses. However much the popular power of Espolin Johnson’s art ensued from his wide range of thematic concerns, stylistic peculiarity, biographical facts, historical events, and cultural changes, Arntzen’s emphasis on the publication of Espolin Johnson’s art in *Arbeidermagasinet* and *Vett og Uvett* relates directly to Anderson’s point of print-capitalism “which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways” (Anderson 2006, 36).

Anderson (2006, 37–46) rehearses the established fact that the printing revolution changed the appearance, state, and our imaginings of the world, but his print capitalism bases itself on books, and text-based books only. He pays no attention to the wider plethora of print products such as journals, magazines, periodicals, fanzines, and broadsheets, which often present a more immediately subversive impact given their interest-driven and low-cost mode of production. Neither does he consider the potential power of illustrated texts. In terms of imagining northern Norway, Espolin Johnson offered his artistic visions in a large number of books, Christmas magazines, exhibitions, murals, and journals.<sup>7</sup> “We in the north met him first and foremost through *Arbeidermagasinet*”, Arntzen (1994, 4) explains, and Espolin Johnson’s enduring engagement with the popular magazine is indeed a special case.

Espolin Johnson became an important and popular illustrator in *Arbeidermagasinet* early on, contributing with 496 illustrations and 45 covers from 1932 to 1952, and with 71 illustrations in 28 issues in 1933 and 6 covers and 47 illustrations in 33 issues in 1940, which were his peak years of participation (Pedersen 2000, 343–346). The weekly magazine held strong socialist, even communist, leanings and gained increasing popularity throughout the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> During the recessions of the 1930s northern Norway suffered an even higher rate of unemployment than most other places, and the vast majority of the few available jobs were all in primary industries. National resources gravitated towards Oslo and central Norway, whereas people up north oriented themselves in circumpolar directions, towards Sápmi, the neighbouring Nordic countries, and the Soviet Union. The Russian connection grew ever stronger during the Second World War and the liberation of Finnmark by the Russians. Finnmark, Troms, and Nordland, the three northernmost counties, were known as the red region until the 1980s. Espolin Johnson's thematic concerns and stylistic techniques provided the diverse population of northern Norway, who might never meet, with acutely recognizable visions of their own situation.

“You cannot only watch, you also need to listen to his pictures, to hear his voice”, Bye (2000, 9) says of Espolin Johnson's images. His visuals speak the idiom of the *Arbeidermagasinet* and are attentive to the many language varieties of the authors with whom he cooperated closely, Zappfe and Arntzen in particular. In this respect, his illustrations have what Anderson (2006, 39) calls the “revolutionary vernacularizing thrust”. The publication in books and periodicals of a written and a visual language that was instantly recognized and enjoyed by different people in different places up north, and which was sometimes, especially in the case of *Vett og Uvett*, barely understood elsewhere in Norway, was radically empowering to a region ignored by the centres of language, arts, and power. “And what does not this voice tell us?” Bye (2000, 9) asks and continues:

*of people, landscape, events and ideas that have filled him with awe and joy, with tears and laughter, and with anger – the latter in the gripping picture of Russian prisoners of war used as donkeys during the withdrawal of the German army from Finnmark in 1944 ... Of human greatness, will to live and ability to survive ... Of life at sea.*

Bye explains with inimitable insight the achievement of Espolin Johnson's art, and with great empathy the power of imagined communities. Bye was born in Brooklyn, worked some years in England, and lived most of his life near Oslo, and yet he appears to be both a subject and co-creator of Espolin Johnson's imagined northern

Norway. Bye's meditations could be read as a hermeneutic index to Espolin Johnson's wide-ranging catalogue. Almost all of his images include people, integrated into the northern topography of inclement nature, and into the history of the region. With great compassion and solidarity, Espolin Johnson portrays the people of the north in their hardships and joys. A very limited selection of his large production will have to represent the imagined communities his art portrays.

Some of the artist's own words about his art articulate many of Anderson's ideas in another idiom:

*My heart remains in northern Norway. That is where I spent my childhood and youth. You never get done with childhood. The memories and impressions have stayed with me all my life. They are now part of my pictures. Nature, wild life, and the common people up north. Poverty and struggle for the daily bread. The faith and hope among the people I got to know and love so much. The enormous forces of nature, the drama, the greatness, the beauty, and the mystery were my breathing ground. (Espolin Johnson and Arntzen 1994, 2)*

Religion, probably the largest of any imagined communities, at least before the arrival of the internet community that Anderson's book predates, constitutes the primary cultural root of Anderson's imagined communities. "The great merit of traditional religious world-views ... has been their concern with man-in-the-cosmos, man as species being, and the contingency of life", Anderson contends (2006, 10). In such a world-view, Espolin Johnson's art is religious. Again, his own words parallel those of Anderson: "The simple and the rough of the nature and the people have nonetheless concerned me the most. You do not know where man ends and nature starts. To me, they are woven together in a *holy union*" (Espolin Johnson and Arntzen 1994, 2, emphasis mine). Arntzen also testifies to the religious dimension in Espolin Johnson's art: "He let the light of the Almighty fall upon the pallid faces in the dark night. He painted hope in hopelessness" (Espolin Johnson and Arntzen 1994, 4). Many of his motifs accentuate a religious dimension, others exude the sacredness of human life in cosmos. The grieving couple among the crosses in *Kirkegården ved havet (The Churchyard by the Sea, 1949)* and the kneeling fisherman amidst the mountains in *Bønn (Prayer, 1972)* point directly to the religious dimension of man's life on earth and sea (Espolin Johnson and Arntzen 1994, 89, 91). Several images also integrate a spiritual realm beyond life. The brightly-lit boys in *Fylgje (Guardian Angel, 1949)* could be a guardian angel as much as a friend. In the spectral chiaroscuro of *Enken (The Widow,*



*Kaare Espolin Johnson, Fylgje (Guardian Angel), 1949, lithograph,  
39 x 53 cm, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo, Norway*

1979) and *Lysbroen (The Light Bridge)*, 1986), the dead at sea haunt the seascapes and the bereaved (Espolin Johnson and Arntzen 1994, 7, 23, 55). Religious leaders and sacred buildings are presented in the many portraits of Petter Dass and in the many motifs of the Boris Gleb community (G. Espolin Johnson 1997, 25–29, 140–141). Furthermore, several images place man in a random universe. Life is fragile, and the imbalance between human frailty and the sheer force of the elements is so immense that this disproportion produces metaphysical awe. Man is constantly overpowered, frequently to the point of death and beyond, by powers that appear mightier than their obvious physical force.

In Espolin Johnson's cosmos the elements and the panoramic dimensions also put the existence of man into a metaphysical perspective. Several scenes depict encounters with the unfathomable. The dilemma of man and metaphysics is a universal one, although these images include north Norwegian characteristics in landscape and historical refer-





ence. The doubt and the turning away from light and scripture in *Den gamle prest* (*The Old Priest*, 1949) reveals clearly that traditional religion, such as Christianity, may not account for all speculations on human existence (Espolin Johnson and Arntzen 1994, 11). However, the sea dominates as omnipotence in the human condition of Espolin Johnson's imaginative universe. Many of the scenes from the sea, such as most of the illustrations to Bojer's *Den siste viking* (*The Last Viking*, 1972), reveal the capacity of man to master the sea,<sup>9</sup> but several also pit man against its formidable powers. The praying youngster alone in the small boat in storm in *I havsnød* (*Distress at Sea*, 1967) portrays mortal danger, as does *På hvelvet* (*On the Keel*, 1980) (Espolin Johnson and Arntzen 1994, 83; and G. Espolin Johnson 1997, 103, 136). Many of Espolin Johnson's pictures are religious in their sheer focus on the limits of human existence, in "their concern with man-in-the-cosmos, man as species being, and the contingency of life", as Anderson argues in another context (2006, 10).

Man's grave is the cradle of gods. Espolin Johnson's art often portrays the contingencies of human existence in a vast cosmos, the situations of life and death. *Himmelskipet* (*The Skyship*, 1982) offers an iconic illustration of man's relations to the metaphysical powers (Espolin Johnson and Arntzen 1994, 47; G. Espolin Johnson 1997, 116). In this image the ship sails in suspension between this world and the next. The six oarsmen in the Nordland hooker row strenuously against the waves and the winds. The composition does not reveal whether this is just another ordinary workday or a moment of deep distress – frequently the same situation, as life at sea could turn dangerous in a matter of minutes, even seconds, at any time of any day. The oarsmen row on unperturbed in their battle with the sea. Inured by a lifetime and previous generations' combat with the sea and the weather, the sturdy fishermen tackle the cosmic powers with quotidian poise and pathos. The title – *Himmelskipet* (*The Skyship*) – adds a metaphysical dimension to the picture. The fishermen are possibly already heading for higher realms, from death by drowning at sea to a spiritual haven for their souls. A metaphysical dimension

Kaare Espolin Jonson, *Himmelskipet* (*The Skyship*). Lithograph,  
1982, 65 cm x 45 cm.  
National Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo, Norway



appears imbricated from the beginning in their daily work as the prow takes the shape of a cross. The heavenly dimension is enhanced by a “God’s eye” perspective: the boat is seen from above. The metaphysical importance of the cross is striking, however much this religious symbol belongs to the enabling wave-cutting design of the boat itself. An illuminated halo of salty froth or heavenly light surrounds the prow cross in order to stress the journey between the sea and the sky, between the worldly and the spiritual, between man’s daily cross and the unknown of the cosmos. Espolin Johnson drew inspiration from Harry Martinson’s poetic space epic *Aniara* (1956), and explains: “in this work the human beings have made a spaceship in order to escape from a ruined Mother Earth. I thought of our future and made a picture where we are all in the same boat” (Espolin Johnson and Arntzen 1994, 48). A myriad of possible allusions in the picture to parables of fishing and wonders at sea in the Bible, to interior church architecture, and to journeys of life symbolism in all arts augment the metaphysical dimension of this mundane sea scene in Espolin Johnson’s cosmic universe.

Hardly anybody in northern Norway, especially in the coastal communities, has remained untouched by the immense powers of the sea. In the shape of the Nordland hooker, *Himmelskipet* is instantly recognizable to people of northern Norway, as is the image’s metaphysical awe. Life along the coast and at sea looms large in the history, identity, and contemporary conceptualizations of Norway. The conditions of fragile human existence upon the crux of the mundane and the divine dimension, Anderson’s “man-in-the-cosmos” (2006, 10), create a universal perspective. Rooted in the culture of religion, Espolin Johnson’s *Himmelskipet* imagines a northern Norwegian community which appeals far beyond its own borders.<sup>10</sup>

Anderson (2006, 9–10) claims that the importance of military action is one of the cultural roots for patriotism. The population in northern Norway took the brunt of the German occupation in Norway and suffered mass evacuation, executions, and large-scale destruction. “The war is physical, palpably omnipresent in the collective memory up north”, Mendes (2007, 39) argues in his analysis of the historical backdrop for Espolin’s visual imagination. Anderson stresses in particular the significance of cenotaphs and tombs of unknown soldiers. This emphasis on war memorials strikes a raw nerve in Espolin Johnson’s illustration to Gunnar Reiss-Andersen’s poem ‘*Ukjente Soldater*’ (*Unknown Soldiers*) in *Arbeidermagasinet* (8, 1934).<sup>11</sup> In a black, white, and red triangular-shaped print centrally placed in Reiss-Andersen’s stanzas, a rising or setting sun and clusters of ramshackle crosses reign over deformed bodies – which look spectacularly alive despite their obvious deceased state – scattered across a diverse

landscape of hills and rail tracks. A body being racked on Ixion's wheel occupies a central place, a graphic symbol of torture and eternity. The conspicuous absence of military paraphernalia, the socialist realism of the picture, and the contents of the poem reveal that the unknown soldiers also include all workers who have given their lives in the hard labour of society-building. Yet any traditional type of monumental presentation of heroic bodies in social realism has been broken, and a seminal type of cubistic decomposition undermines order and decorum – a stylistic crossroads that charges physical strength with deterioration, and marks historical transitions on a stylistic level. Forcefully, the image exudes antiheroic heroism. The tragic heroism of war and labour lies with the countless anonymous dead. Nevertheless, the agile spirit of the picture adds life to the deceased; a veneration and commemoration of all the men who gave their lives for the protection and development of their community. In war and work, the dead heroes outcount the living, and they entomb the survivors in grief. Espolin Johnson's vigorous and vigilant lithographic cenotaph appears as much a prophetic vision of the wars and horrors to come as an artistic document of those past.

In a wider context the image also comments on the totalitarian marches in contemporary Europe. This harrowing illustration captures imaginatively the grief for fallen heroes of war and work, the worries for the political drama of contemporary Europe, and the armies of the anonymous dead on the front and in labour camps during the 1930s up to 1945. *Ukjente soldater* constitutes one of Anderson's "arresting emblems" (2006, 9), a graphic version of the cenotaphs of all those who died for community and cause that Anderson deems a primary root for his imagined communities.

As a vision of war, work, and the march of ideologies at the time, and of an imminent world war, Espolin Johnson's harrowing image of the unknown soldiers connects closely with *Fangetog (Train of Prisoners)*, 1969; Espolin Johnson and Arntzen 1994, 27; appendix 4). In this depiction of Russian prisoners of war on Norwegian soil, historical specificity, geographical locality, and communal solidarity complement the anonymity and universality of *Ukjente soldater*. In one of his few images of war Espolin Johnson foregrounds the fate of Russian prisoners in Finnmark in 1944.<sup>12</sup> Two thirds of the 100,000 Russian war prisoners in Norway were encamped in the North, and the region holds several mass graves of unknown soldiers.<sup>13</sup> Espolin Johnson's lithography also includes apposite artistic reference to the great Russian realist painter and sculptor Ilya Repin's large oil on canvas, the *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1873). These works converge in their portrayal of solidarity labour in a local community. *Fangetog (Train of Prisoners)*, 1969) is also one of the images Bye singles out for specific attention, conveying as it does



*Kaare Espolin Johnson, Fangetog (Train of Prisoners), 1969, lithograph, 48 x 56 cm,  
Private, Galleri Espolin, Nyvågar, (BONO), Norway*

the people, landscape, history, and anger that large parts of the population in northern Norway suffered during the last convulsions of the Second World War in Finnmark. In this illustration to Hølmebakk's *Fimbulvinter (Hard Winter)*, the exhausted Russian prisoners are driven like donkeys to facilitate the scorched earth tactics of the German withdrawal: they are exploited and dehumanized in the war machinery. The almost black and white imagery emphasizes the clear-cut opposition of good and evil, soldiers and prisoners, Germans and Russians, war and peace. Individual suffering and the clash of oppositional powers are integrated in the combat of indifferent elements that add cosmic scale to the scene.<sup>14</sup> The human convoy treads the earth under the dark sky, while the flames from destruction of war trail the train, and the ferocious sea appears to threaten them all. It is significant that Espolin Johnson focuses on Soviet prisoners in his images of war. This haunting commemoration also testifies to the humble compas-

sion people in northern Norway hold for the long-standing Russian fellow northerners in the midst of the crisis and suffering in Finnmark, “the palpably omnipresent in the collective memory up north” (Mendes 2007, 39). The suffering and death of Russian soldiers in northern Norway during the war in Espolin Johnson’s *Fangetog* unites the war generation all over the region and preserves the spirit of commemoration and neighbourly solidarity for future generations. Together with his religious images, Espolin Johnson’s images of war and death draw upon the two cultural bases Anderson finds underpinning so many imaginative communities.

As an immediate response to the armed conflicts in Indochina in 1978–1979, Anderson’s treatise naturally retains a conflict-ridden history and geography as a point of departure. In this respect, he excludes many other significant roots for the imagining of communities. Peaceful coexistence is as important a cultural base as religion and war in the imagining of northern Norway, and *Grenselandet* (*The Borderland* 1964, 1980, 1990; G. Espolin Johnson 1997, 26–28) assumes an iconic position in the presentation of imagined communities in Espolin Johnson’s art.<sup>15</sup> The title predicts a specific contested zone, as the definite article implies. With a view to Espolin Johnson’s childhood, the themes and styles of the image, as well as its cultural, historical, and political context, the geographical borderland is bound to be that between Russia and Norway.<sup>16</sup> Yet the image counteracts the title’s standard expectations of binary opposition, national borders, and geographical demarcations. In its boundless perspective and comprehensive integrationism, it also counteracts topographical divisions, the more generic ones of spatial separation and temporal differentiation, and even those of aesthetic categorization.

In Espolin Johnson’s borderland, multinational communities defy conventional divisions in a boundless place of distilled infinity. The image presents constellations of four groups of people. At the forefront three old men rest piously in front of an onion-domed church, while to the left a couple of children stick together. To the right a mother watches over a baby in her cradle, and below another mother plays with a child on her shoulders. These four groups exist next to each other in peaceful harmony, transcending any expected divisions. The three old men are likely to be Russian parishioners or clergy, possibly travellers, in front of the Boris Gleb church. They are easily recognizable from a previous image, *De tre hellige gamle men* (*The Three Old Holy Men*), which was first made as an illustration to an eponymous story by Leo Tolstoy in a Christmas magazine in 1950 (G. Espolin Johnson 1997, 25). As well as reinforcing the link to Russian culture, this fact also reveals the creative inspiration Espolin Johnson receives

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from the sister arts. The church, in front of which the three men are placed, manifests a couple of border crossings itself; first and foremost as a religious institution during the Marxist secularization after 1917, and secondly, as being a Russian enclave on the Norwegian side of the Pasvik river that otherwise demarcates the border between the two nations. The two children in the painting, judged by their clothing, appear to be Norwegian. The Sami cradle of the child on the far right indicates the background of this mother and child. The mother with the child on her shoulders appears less identifiable. Are they Finnish, Swedish, Russian, Sami, Norwegian, or travellers? Or possibly Kven people, another group of Finno-Swedish-Norwegian people in northern Scandinavia, who were granted minority status in Norway in 1996 and whose language was recognized as a minority language in 2005.

In a bigger picture, these four groups of people in the painting point to the four geographical directions and to a global dimension. All the traditional four ages of man – childhood, adolescence, maturity, old age – are included; the four groups complete the circle of life. They also balance on the borders of established families. The old men could be family, but also members of a homo-gendered community, religious or secular. The two children could be family – Espolin Johnson and his sister? – or friends, even from different communities. The women may be widows or single mothers as much as wives with absent husbands. In the indeterminate civil status of all the people, the image embraces the established and the estranged. The people are placed on the moors, a landscape that is generic to many nations in the Northern Cape. In the background the moon and the rainbow indicate both day and night in order to compress all time into the same scene, in the same manner as the scene compresses global dimensions. A sense of peace and harmony, accentuated by the many smiling faces, the restful postures, and the subtle blend of colours, reigns over the people.

The integrationist stance and conciliatory spirit of these encounters of people, nations, religions, cultures, and ethnicities are empowered by the painting's stylistics. The mixed techniques of traditional scrapes and the unusual addition of colouration present on a formal level the motif's integrationist stance. Similarly, the supplementation of colours adds a rare optimistic, idyllic, and Romantic touch to the characteristic black-and-white harshness. The stylistics of the painting also cross boundaries in its obvious homage to Marc Chagall. The, for Espolin Jonson, unusual application of bright colours and the dreamlike pleasantness consolidate the theme of amicable coexistence in its reverential reference to the great modernist from Vitebsk. This tribute to the Russian-French artist also reinforces the sympathy for Russian people in *Fangetog*.





*Kaare Espolin Johnson, Grenslandet (The Borderland), 1980,  
lithograph, 59 x 73 cm,  
Private, Galleri Espolin, Nyvågar, (BONO), Norway*

In its title and theme, *Grenslandet (The Borderland)* also presents itself as an icon of Espolin Johnson's border-breaking position in the central discourses of Norwegian art history. Danbolt (2007) demonstrates in his brilliant essay how Espolin Johnson's idiosyncratic art defied and endured the aesthetic principles of classical composition and traditional conventions of the twentieth century's central discourses of Greenberg's modernism and Adorno's aesthetic autonomy, as well as the calls for political commitment in the late 1960s and 1970s. *Grenslandet* epitomizes how Espolin Johnson's art eschews the aesthetic imperatives from the centres of art and theory, just like the painting opposes the political directives of its own time. In its undefinability, it makes its own borders of aesthetic autonomy and political commitment.

However idyllic and Romantic *Grenslandet* appears, its themes and techniques are political within the borders the image sets for itself. This imagined community is based

on human compassion and the peaceful coexistence of a plurality of different people beyond the traditional factors of identity and belonging: nation, religion, territory, ethnicity, gender, age. These people coexist in opposition to all the defining discourses, often from the centres of power which categorize and compartmentalize people. To visualize a community of diversity beyond the conventional criteria of social structures is by far not an apolitical act. Moreover, Espolin Johnson made the first version of this motif in 1964, at a time of the Cold War, when northern Norway constituted one of the fronts. The companionship in the picture across the many Russian borders challenges the contemporary stigmatizations of “the red scare” and the official policies of the central political powers of NATO-associated Oslo and Europe. *Grenselandet* was first painted as a mural in Kirkenes police station. Thus, the image has always worked as a daily reminder of coexistence across the many boundaries in one of the central institutions for controlling the operations of so many of the borders which the image transcends. Espolin Johnson’s motif of integration must also have offered the many visitors of all types to the police station from different nations, cultures, and categories a warm welcome.

Both in subject matter and context, *Grenselandet* envisions a community where borders are drawn differently, in line with human compassion, care, and integration. Peaceful coexistence, which often receives little attention in Anderson’s thesis, exists as one of the cultural bases for imagining communities in northern Norway. In 1964 this imagined community challenged the official policies concerning the Cold War, the Sami population, migratory cultures, and conventional family constellations. When Espolin Johnson rereleased new versions of the motif in 1980 and 1990, the image preceded and coincided with Mikhail Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika in 1985–1991. Espolin Johnson’s vision anticipated the reforms that were to come in Norwegian policies and the Barents cooperation, the new Sami Parliament, and family reforms. His powerful vision still has a bearing on today’s discourses on multiculturalism.

Espolin Johnson’s art, of which *Himmelskipet* (*The Skyship*), *Ukjente soldater* (*Unknown Soldiers*), *Fangetog* (*Train of Prisoners*), and *Grenselandet* (*The Borderland*) are prime examples, demonstrates in the visual realm many of Anderson’s ideas. His art imagines a collective sense of belonging and identity to numerous people who have never met and will perhaps never meet, but still conceive of themselves as members of a “deep, horizontal comradeship”. His art is both “sovereign” and “limited” (Anderson 2006, 7) as its spirit and subject matter defy the official discourse from the many centres of power. Most of the members of this community are aware of their position in the

cosmos and of the greater powers that might be. They are harrowed by war and united by their unprivileged situation and hard work. As Espolin Johnson's works open our eyes to the significance of visual arts in the processes of imagining communities, his art, *Grenselandet* in particular, also depicts a community of multicultural coexistence, which obviously belongs to the North.

### THE ART OF BJARNE HOLST

Holst and Espolin Johnson's art has much in common. Both are figurative and largely narrative and markedly northern. Their universe is basically masculine. Many of their images also overlap in portraying man's combat with overwhelming forces. Despite these similarities, the two differ distinctly in styles, themes, and moods. Holst's use of striking colours, the loneliness, madness, and death of his many detached individuals, and the *animus* of shock, repulsion, and rebellion distinguish drastically his imaginings of northern Norway from those of Espolin Johnson. Whereas critics discuss Espolin Johnson's art as entirely idiosyncratic (Danbolt 2007), realistic and magic (Jørgensen 2007), multistylistic (Vaa 2007), ingenious in its details (Mathisen 2007), popular (Gulowsen 2007), and universal (Lie 2006), all critics tend to corroborate Ljøgodt's definition of Holst as a "surrealist from the North" (Ljøgodt 2003, 67) – a term never attributed to Espolin Johnson's art. The art of both relates, however differently, to Anderson's ideas of imagined communities, but Holst's alternative visions present stark versions of otherworldly landscapes and dark regions of interior psychology as opposed to Espolin Johnson's integrated communities of unanimous spirit. Holst's art offers an imagined community for all the people up North who are not easily integrated or who resist integration; all the people who feel and think differently from their immediate environment. Consequently, Holst's visions are not much concerned with religion or heroic militarism, two of the dominant characteristics of many northern locations and Espolin Johnson's images. When they do occur in Holst's oeuvre, as in *Barndâp* (*Baptism*, 1970) as a scathing attack on clergy, church rituals, and established religion, or in *Krigsfugl* (*Bird of War*, 1976) as a play on birds of war (hawks and eagles) and as a humorous disclosure of military order and affectation, they present entirely different modes from Espolin Johnson's treatment of the same themes (Ljøgodt 2003, 21, 36).

The moods of both Espolin Johnson and Holst relate to the traditional and the Derridean legacy of Marx's ideas. Holst's art rallies for radical critique of moral and social structures of suppression and retains an emancipatory promise for social equality for the many outcasts and dissenters, where Espolin Johnson's is more defined by ordinary



social struggles. In a Marx-like spirit, Holst's art often derides the double standards and decadence of the well-to-do and the established order, while Espolin Johnson sides with the poor and the deprived. Holst's surrealism offers an alternative imagined community to the many individuals who identify themselves by unusual thinking and unconventional emotions, and who place their sense of belonging elsewhere than their immediate community and outside its dominant collective concerns.

"Surrealism never came to Norway, it only existed as life itself without so many noticing", Jensen argues (2003, 16). As a well-known international film director from the North, Jensen understands better than most people the *unheimlich* and uncanny universe of Holst's imagination, and his enigmatic comment speaks to the quality of surrealism. Jensen's quip primarily refers to surrealism as a particular type of aesthetic modernism that developed on the continent in the 1920s and 1930s, and to the many absurdities that sometimes afflict human life. Surrealism – the encounter of Marxist radicalism and Freudian psychology in the aesthetic realm – constitutes Holst's imaginary: his stylistic choices, alogicalities, and emotional ambivalences of life and a landscape a place apart complement Espolin Johnson's visions. Holst's art presents an imagined community that includes the psychological interior of many individuals in northern Norway and the parapsychical qualities of the landscape in which they live.

As an arctic surrealist, Holst's landscapes are generally circumpolar. Yet many viewers will recognize in the contours, climate, and perspectives of his art the specifics of Magerøya, the northernmost island in Norway with the North Cape plateau. "My Magerøy landscape I can conjure up at any time", Holst said (Ljøgodt 2003, 42). Surrealism is the true nature, often literally, of Holst's images. *Hvitt land (Whiteland, 1988; Ljøgodt 2003, 15)* designates the colours and delineates the sculptural contours of the snowscapes that appear unreal to many people who have not experienced the optical tricks of nature in northern Norway. This is where the northern lights and the chiaroscuro of blue in winter, the midnight sun and the palette of glow in summer, the blindness of whiteouts and the sublimity of panoramic landscape imbue daily existence with an aura of magic and almost palpable metaphysicality.

The metaphysicality in Holst's art is coupled with an idiosyncratic artistic vision that we might call *anthropomorph-icing*. The anthropomorphic nature of the arctic and the polar topography that unfold within the metaphysical dimension reflect the temperament of the human mind as much as the cold and wintry environment. This *anthropomorph-icing* runs as a characteristic throughout much of Holst's art. Holst's haunting anthro-

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pomorfixing marks his visions with individual peculiarity in the manner that scraping to light from soot characterizes the art of Espolin Johnson.

The *anthropomorphicing* in Holst's art imagines icy soulscapes for all those in northern Norway who feel estranged from the brutal elements of nature, frozen out from their community, or alienated from themselves. The haunting face in the deep dark below the snow and sky in the image in *Untitled* from 1993 (Ljøgodt 2003, 48) illustrates vividly that the surreal landscapes that exist in so many of Holst's images also reflect an interior psychological and emotional landscape. *Vinterhave* (*Winter Garden*, 1980; Ljøgodt 2003, 43), in its depopulated and petrified atmosphere, belongs to the same surrealist topography, but as far as Holst's images are concerned, with an unusual warm human temperature. The insulated trees in the garden illustrate cultivation, care, and wintering out – typical human moods of survival in arctic climates, of both the physical and the psychological type.

This anthropomorphicing, the bizarre confluence of the natural and the human in Holst's arctic climate, reaches an apogee in *Mann med slips* (*Man with Tie*, 1975; Ljøgodt 2003, 31). In what could be described as a polarmorphic human being or anthropomorphic iceberg, a Nordic landscape of night, ice, snow, and sea makes up a phallic human figure. The human and the natural conflate to suggest an otherworldly state of shock, sterility, frigidity, and death. The apprehensive image possibly represents *pibloktoq*, the contested psychological diagnosis of social withdrawal, excitement, convulsion, and recovery frequently associated with people (mostly women) in Inuit communities, an arctic version of Freud's *hysteria* that some scholars attribute to indigenous personality and culture, and others to the penetration into this culture by foreigners. Most certainly, the icy image presents psychological states of emotional paralysis, masculine anxiety, homoerotic fear, and autoerotic abjection. Furthermore, the image envisions the dark and the cold of the human mind as much as the austerity and the barrenness of the arctic land. While personifying aspects of the arctic, the psycho-topographical vision *Mann med slips* explores human psychology – the hidden realm in Espolin Johnson's imaginings of northern Norway, and the dimension absent in Anderson's theories of imagined communities.

*Død linerle* (*Dead Wagtail*, 1972; Ljøgodt 2003, 27) illustrates Holst's idiosyncratic feature most vividly and corresponds with Espolin's art and Anderson's theories. In this image the exterior landscape crashes into the room of a double-imagined man. Elements of nature – water, snow, stone, and ice – which precipitate into the elegant room, are

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symbolic of the disruptive forces of the mind which take control of the man holding the dead wagtail in his hands, and which upset the atmosphere of the affluent home. The lifeless wagtail, a dead summer bird in a winter landscape, is an obvious *memento mori*. Probably, the bird also symbolizes the death of emotions, soul, and art. The wide-staring eyes of the man exude shock and horror. He is terrified by the elements and the dead bird. Perhaps he has killed the bird himself and is shocked by his own cruelty. Perhaps the bird embodies a number of deaths in his own life, of innocence and of expectations, and of accepted emotions and ordinary life, as well as relationships, more than the passing away of family and friends. That the man is portrayed twice, the one at the back crying on his own shoulder, imbues the painting with psychomachia and schizophrenia. The whiteness that brings the man, the bird, the elegant room, and the landscape crashing in, and which posits an anthropomorphizing symbol of purity and innocence as much as frigidity and death, unites uncontrollable human and natural forces in a paranormal state.

Holst's *Død linerle (Dead Wagtail)* supplements Espolin Jonson's motif of man versus nature with man versus himself. Whether the man's deportation from himself results from incongeniality with the harsh natural conditions, some narcissistic obsession of bourgeois decadence, or personal psychological disturbances, or all three, the image contrasts strongly with those of Espolin Jonson's of team spirit and indomitable survival. *Død linerle* offers an image of identification to the many dispersed individuals in northern Norway and the arctic region who feel alienated from the location into which they were born, and from themselves. These anthropomorphizing states imagine some of the subcultural groups that are suppressed, or even excluded, by the predominance of collectivity, religion, and war in Anderson's imagined communities.

Most of Holst's paintings include mixed landscapes of environment and emotions where arctic nature assumes human features, and where desolate landscapes, frost, and barrenness parallel individual loneliness, mental climate, and human frigidity. All the scenes in the longer series *Trollfuglen i Gwais Kun's by (The Bird of Sorcery in Gwais Kun's City, 1977; Ljøgodt 2007, 38–39)*, which present fantastical contours of bizarre sexuality, reliefs of grotesqueries, and strands of derangement and death, reveal the *ultima thule* of this anthropomorphizing. Like this series, many of Holst's anthropomorphizing paintings extend from individual introspection to human relationships, and *Gestillte Sehnsucht. Ella og Johannes Brahms ('Gestillte Sehnsucht. Ella and Johannes Brahms', 1974; Ljøgodt 2003, 24)* could serve as an example of all the anthropomorphizing of relationships that also occurs in *Eight Hot Sisters' (1972; Ljøgodt 2003, 34);*



*Trollfuglen i Gwais Kuns* by (The Bird of Sorcery in Gwais Kun's City), 1977, acrylic painting, 24 x 32 cm, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo, Norway

*Parlek* (Coupled Games, 1990–1991; Ljøgodt 2003, 34); *Vintersang* (Winter Song, 1980; Ljøgodt 2003, 44); *Fløy en liten blåfugl* (At Flight Little Bluebird, 1973; Ljøgodt 2003, 56); and *I sykeværelset II* (In the Sick Room II, 1975; Ljøgodt 2003, 57). These images and many others connect the anthropomorphizing aspects of Holst's art to emotional states between two people; often the personally unacknowledged socially suppressed, and morally forbidden passions and fantasies between them: the frozen forces of mind and self.

In *Gestillte Sehnsucht* a glaring sunlight and a littoral landscape invade a prosperous living room of an elderly couple. The lady in the white dress up front, bathed in sunlight, reads a letter, whereas the man in a black suit at the back playing the grand piano is integrated into the black pebbles that invade his corner. The scene exudes jealousy and impotence, but most of all the married couple are placed in entirely opposite emotional states. The binary distinction of light and landscape in the scene indicates divorce, the



Bjarne Holst, *Kjærlighet til en snemann* (Love for a Snowman), 1988, acrylic painting, 60 x 80 cm, Private, Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum

duality of physical desire and spiritual interests, the gender battle of woman and man, the power struggle between wife and husband, the oppositions of nature and culture. A superimposition upon the couple's situation – husband and wife? – of the arctic nature creates an emotional topography beyond the physical and corporeal.

Holst's painting charts the deterioration from love, marital passion, and companionship to cold division and divorce. Perhaps the scene presents one or two homosexuals confined in a conventional marriage. While the title refers to Ella Adayevskaya and Johannes Brahms, Holst's painting obviously plays on emotional relations between the German composer and the Russian pianist. The manner in which the moods and divisions of Holst's *Gestillte Sehnsucht* enacts the counterpoint technique, the complex and highly disciplined type of music for which the great German composer and musician of the Romantic period is so well known, is also significant. In a hermeneutic



possibility liberated from the title, the man at the piano, by his looks and appearance, could also be Marx. In this context, the binary structures in Holst's painting enact the Hegelian dynamics of Marx's philosophy. Holst's image also replays the enigmatic combination of Marxist politics and Freudian psychology at the heart of traditional surrealism, and possibly questions whether Marxist ideas were in or out of tune at the time of the painting, in 1974. The anthropomorphizing surrealism in *Gestillte Sehnsucht* incorporates aesthetic dimensions and political reorientations as well as individual soulscapes and emotional states between people. On top of, underneath, and in the shadows of Espolin Johnson's imagination, Holst's radical art attends to a wide range of unexpected and unacknowledged aspects of communities in northern Norway, and in those of Anderson's treatise.

*Kjærligheten til en snemann* (*The Love for a Snowman*, 1985; Ljøgodt 2003, 45; appendix 7) proposes the most chilling anthropomorphizing relationship in Holst's oeuvre. *Endymion* (1984; Ljøgodt 2003, 44) and *Leda med svanen* (*Leda and the Swan*, 1984; Ljøgodt 2003, 45), with their classical reference to mythical legends of unconventional love and their icy geographical and psychological topography belong to the same category. These three chillers can also be seen as visual meditations upon the neo-Freudian term *pibloktoq*. *The Love for a Snowman* also alludes to classical myth, i.e. the enigmatic story of Galatea known from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* where the sculptor Pygmalion falls in love with his own statue Galatea who then comes alive, as well as the numerous reconfigurations of this myth in the shape of Salvador Dalí's muse and wife Gala in the Catalan artist's surrealist oeuvre. Holst's snowman, a paragon of the arctic anthropomorphicy figure in both visuality and language, appears here as a disfigured lump of human-shaped snow. The lover, most likely a man, appears like an apparition out of ice, with a white, snowy face and back skull under a red cap, and with a black hole for an eye and a tongue dispassionately caressing the snowman's neck. The lover is unable to lift his arms to embrace the snowman, and the snowman stands with his back to the lover. Their proximity includes no intimacy nor reciprocity, no warm feelings nor passion; they are utterly alone next to each other, frozen stiff in a black and white, arctic landscape. Both figures are cast as torsos, which adds classical posture and pathos to the painting, but also excludes the sexual part of the body, to add a strong sense of incompleteness and sterility to the situation.

In all its lifeless atmosphere, *Kjærligheten til en snemann* exudes desperate love, flawed love, emotional thwartedness, frigidity, sterility, failure, death. This para-polaric topography, which is excluded from Espolin Johnson's paintings, captures forcefully the range



*Bjarne Holst: Endymion, 1984, acrylic painting, 80 x 100 cm,  
Nordkappmuseet, Honningsvåg, Norway*

of human emotions that ploughed their way into the imagining of northern Norway with Holst's remarkable achievement. Furthermore, the painting charts the icy climate for homosexuality and same-sex marriages at the time.<sup>17</sup> As the title suggests, the image also portrays the determinate love for any man of snow – the image implies obsession, fetish, and fixation. In all these respects, the haunting anthropomorphizing power of the painting imagines the many other communities in northern Norway, the soulscapes of all individuals who were not emotionally and legally included in the prevailing fabric of their immediate location, or their nation's. As such, Holst's visual art imagines the singular identities and belongings within community, a focus on the individual that Anderson's theories lacks, and Espolin Johnson's art often ignores.

"Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity / genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined", Anderson argues (2007, 6). Espolin Johnson, in

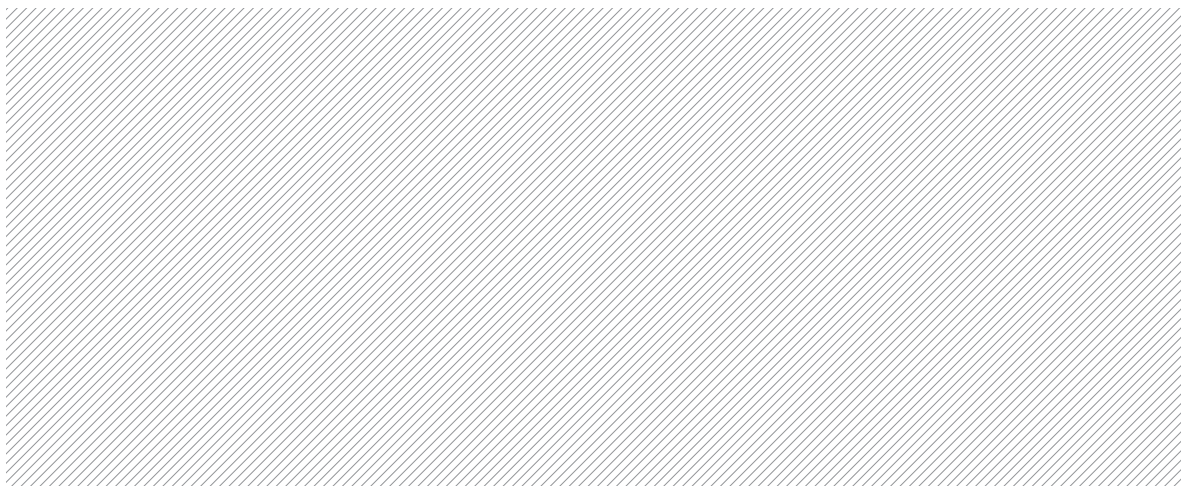
idiosyncratic scraping to light and life from sooth and darkness, and Holst, in his anthropomorphizing topography and states, imagined the lives in northern Norway in the 20th century. In their striking visual arts, and in their many illustrations to books, magazines, Christmas calendars, and public arenas, both painters testify to the power visual arts, which add to Anderson's print capitalism in the process of imagining communities. How the communities in northern Norway will be imagined in the future, not least in relations to the state, the neighbouring nations, and the EU during this period of great transformations under the national Nordområdepolitikken (Northern regional policies), remains to be seen. Anderson's theories, particularly their focus on imagination, are likely to retain some relevance for future processes, and new artists need to evolve from the visions of Espolin Johnson and Holst in the discourses and imaginings of future communities in northern Norway, the North and the Arctic world.

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Nairn (1977, 359) writes: “Nationalism’ is the pathology of modern developmental history, as inescapable as ‘neurosis’ in the individual, with much the same essential ambiguity attaching to it, a similar built-in capacity for descent into dementia, rooted in the dilemmas of helplessness thrust upon most of the world (the equivalent of infantilism for societies) and largely incurable.”

<sup>2</sup> Anderson refers to “God Save the Queen” in a footnote, but only to the text of the anthem (2006, 142). Painting is only referred to once, when he writes off the ecclesiastic and high society paintings of the Renaissance as examples of homogenous empty time (22–23).

<sup>3</sup> For recent and multiple approaches to the concept of the North, see Niemi 2007 and Kuiper, 2, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Sorg (Sorrow, 1932), Oppover (Upwards, 1933), and *Lördagskveld Romedal* (Saturday Night Romedal, 1937) for relations with Munch; and *Straussvalsen* (The Strauss Waltz, 1933) and *Prosessen* (The Trial, 1933) for engagement with German expressionism. The colours and oneiric quality of such works as *Eventyr* (Adventure, 1949), *Vår i Telemark* (Spring in Telemark, 1951), and *Grenselandet* (The Borderland, 1964, 1980, 1990) are strongly reminiscent of Chagall’s visions. *Ukjente soldater* (Unknown Soldiers, 1934) suggests potential cubism. See Pedersen (2000), 76, 77, 69, 82, 98, 100 and 134; Vaa (2007), 74–75.

<sup>5</sup> All translations from Norwegian to English in this article are by the author.

<sup>6</sup> Knutsen (2005, 76) explains the nature and position of this collection, which Espolin Johnson’s illustrations fit like salt in sea: “In its format, *Vett og Uvett* is quite a small little book, but it towers as a great work in northern Norwegian literature. And it holds a position in people’s lives and the north Norwegian consciousness that no other secular book has had – perhaps apart from *Nordlands trompet* (The Trumpet of Nordland). Its material size is pretty modest, but it is a cultural landmark that northerners can depart from in several directions. It is not something any science or university or custodian or culture vulture has decided, but something we northerners have decided ourselves, and we have so decided by using the book, by cultivating it, by quoting from it, by allowing it to enter our imagination, and by letting it entertain us and lift us when things look dark.”

<sup>7</sup> Espolin Johnson provided covers and illustrations to many books, such as Kafka’s *Prosessen* (The Trial, 1934), Zappfe and Aas’ *Vett og Uvett* (Sense and Nonsense, 1942), Regine Norman’s *Ringelihorn og andre eventyr* (Ringelihorn and Other Tales, 1967), Sigbjørn Hølmekvakk’s *Fimbulvinter* (Hard Winter, 1969), and Johan Bojer’s *Den siste viking* (The Last Viking, 1972), to mention some of the best-known titles. He contributed to 62 exhibitions in 1932–1995 and decorated public arenas, among them *Hurtigruten* (The Coastal Express), the police station in Kirkenes, and schools. The National Gallery in Oslo has collected 46 individual visual works, and Gallery Espolin was established in Nyvågar in Lofoten in 1992 (Pedersen 2000, 341–349). For personal testimonies on the importance of Espolin Johnson’s illustrations and public art, see Nilsen (2002 and 2006) and Holm (2007).

<sup>8</sup> The magazine ran from 1927 to 1970, with 40,000 subscribers in 1931 and as many as 100,000 in 1935, but its circulation was much, much wider. A reader’s letter indicates the popularity and position of the magazine: “First the whole lot of our family reads it, then we lend it to three of my siblings who are all out of work, and finally it ends up at my mother’s to be read by my youngest son and his brother. My husband is out of work too, he has some odd jobs to barely manage the rent, coal, and shoes – food we need to get on the dole. We can never indulge in having a good time, but we just need *Arbeidermagasinet*, both of us.” (Pedersen 2000, 79). In his review of *Arbeidermagasinet*, the author Tor Johnson singles out only one name of all the contributors to the journal: Espolin Johnson. (Pedersen 2000, 81.)

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<sup>9</sup> Many of these 29 images are reproduced in Espolin Johnson and Arntzen (1994), G. Espolin Johnson (1997), and Pedersen (2000).

<sup>10</sup> For a longer discussion of Espolin Johnson's art in a theological perspective, see Nordeval (2007).

<sup>11</sup> For a more accessible reproduction of the print, see Vaa (2007, 74–75).

<sup>12</sup> Images of war are at the core of Espolin Johnson's illustrations to Hølmebakk's *Fimbulvinter* (Hard Winter). In *Rusefanger* (Russian Prisoners, 1969), accessible in reproduction, the cowed – and dead? – prisoners on the ground are huddled together in the shape of a simplified Russian cross. G. Espolin Johnson, 1997, 75.

<sup>13</sup> For recent reports on the living memory of the tragic fate of so many Russian prisoners of war in northern Norway, see Jaklin (2012) and Solheim (2011).

<sup>14</sup> Another existent hand-coloured version underscores the drama and nightmarish quality of the scene. See G. Espolin Johnson 1997, 70–71.

<sup>15</sup> This motif in Espolin Johnson's art was so significant that at least four different versions exist: a mural at the police station in Kirkenes from 1964, two lithographs from 1980 and one from 1990.

<sup>16</sup> Espolin Johnson lived in Vadsø from the age of two to eight (1909–1917). It is even more important that he spent long periods and vacations in Jarfjord, east of Kirkenes, and enjoyed a childhood kingdom on both sides of the Russian-Norwegian border.

<sup>17</sup> Homosexuality was illegal in Norway until 1972 and was regarded as a mental disease until 1977. Same-sex marriages were legalized in 2009.

