

## **Translucency**

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Upwards from the 56<sup>th</sup> parallel north is roughly where, according to the Russian imagination, the "Northern latitudes" start. In this version of the world, the northern latitudes do not run all the way from the equator to the North Pole at equal intervals. These northern latitudes only start from the 56<sup>th</sup> parallel north and up, and here it is about being almost twice closer to the North Pole than to the equator. All the territory south from that is just that - South; and it can't possibly lie in the northern parallels! The peculiar geography of the nation's imaginary is at odds with the grid of the geographic coordinate system (GCS). Poetry doesn't care about GCS: and these northern latitudes are poetic. Indeed, the limpid air of the long summer days of the northern latitudes figures heavily in two hundred years of poetry as well as in the long takes of the younger media of cinema.

How can one describe the sky, the air, the colours, the appearance of things, the sensation of being within this northern summer light? The dictionary gives me limpidity, lucidity, transparency and translucency. It conjures an image that intertwines a sense of place and time, memory - and the hunger of the eye after a long winter - offering a distinct aesthetic and yet one that cannot be pinned down. Translucency of atmosphere is non-figural. It is not a spectacle, like sunset. It doesn't coalesce around clouds, which have sustained substantial attention in studies of fine art (Ruskin, 1884). The sense of lucidity of the high sky descending all around and over the warm continent is waking, like clear cold water. It makes things appear sharper. If this translucent sky is a kind of transparency, it has added qualities of differentiation. While the translucent sky of the northern latitudes belongs to the order of the sensibility of lightness it conjures, it is also wholly abstract, both in the scientific explanation of its composition (latitude, humidity, temperature, qualities of the air mass, pollution) and its poetic life at the margins, as a backdrop.

Translucency is the material capacity to pass light. Unlike transparency, which is about light passing without change, with full preservation of colour, translucency refers to the uneven passage of light. Translucent material consists of components or areas with different indices of refraction. One might think that the effects as various as nacreous clouds, a mother-of-pearl marine sky, or the sense of the "high sky", created by the refraction of light in the atmosphere, which depends on multiple factors, including geography and climate, are indicative of the translucent quality of the sky. The sky appears differently in different places and seasons of the world. Is the Earth's air translucent, composed of different skies? This feels metaphysically right: to be born under a different sky, to suffer the fate of the other... This would explain different worlds, co-existing, overlapping and exterminating each other, under different skies, within different cosmologies.

Despite this poetic inclination, air and water are – scientifically speaking - transparent, while it is human and other bodies that are translucent - for instance, to ultra violet rays. The imperative for the clarity of the modern subject, to self and others, has been unpicked by Édouard Glissant, who praised opacity. Opacity is a continuation of translucency.

Translucency has concentrates of complexity; it produces different intensities of colour, concentrations of light, iridescence. Even symbols can be called translucent: in research on the development of communication, “translucent symbols” are those that are not easily guessable but are learnable. Such translucency augments the struggle between transparency and opacity. In Glissant’s words, the abstract generality of linguistic transparency and the dedication to the clarity of expression are resisted by the irreducible opacity of literature (Glissant, 1990, 111-115). Gaston Bachelard writes that the true image deforms what is perceived and changes it. An operation of translucency, for Bachelard, would be the operation of the imagination, producing alive images, rather than a uniform refraction of stereotypes (Bachelard, 1-4).

Such a reading of translucency readily sprouts in the locale of the 56<sup>th</sup> parallel north, in how the trees seem very green, and there is too much of the sky, in the situation’s geography and climate that makes things look different, a difference one aches for, and takes on a line of thought that relates translucency to thought, imagination, where the situated becomes dynamically abstract and can cross the thresholds of consistency that define national borders and state languages, in ways which can be useful to think with beyond the stereotype of the local and which would be adequate for addressing some of the global forces of evisceration. The dangers of the local are clear in the narrative of the 56<sup>th</sup> parallel north: xenophobia, exceptionalism, climate damage denial. The forces of the local, however, can abstract and together create a globality. Affirmative non-exploitative abstraction can be poetic and political, and translucently feeding through the local, contribute to the illumination of global notions and ways to address large-scale problems.

Eva Horn writes that the cultural and aesthetic understanding of climate serves as an “interface by means of which discourses on identity, social institutions and human bodies could be linked to landscapes, the atmosphere... and the heavens” (Eva Horn). Air, she writes, “used to be understood as the principle of ... place and planet”, something lost in the more general notion of the climate that many experience as unrelated to their sense of place. A sense of place in air is local, but air is global. The danger from the parching of the planet is unequally distributed, but it will eventually come after everyone. The skies are different, and the sky is one.

#### References:

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