

Jan Garnert

On the cultural history of Nordic light and lighting

Man is no creature of the night, but is dependent on light or lighting in order to be socially active and functional. Before the electric light, lighting always emanated from a flame – in Nordic climes often the flame of an oil lamp or tallow candle. In the richly forested areas of Scandinavia, the fire of the open hearth remained the most usual source of lighting until the emergence of the paraffin, or kerosene, lamp in the 1860s.

In the era of the living flame, when darkness had descended, perhaps a few hours would ensue with a gathering by the lit source of lighting before it was time for rest and sleep. All round the world, it was natural to follow the rhythm of night and day; deviation was often for reasons of money. Opportunities for being extravagant with lighting, and for treating oneself to a rhythm of one's own, were a matter of economic standing, of class.

It was only with the advent of electric lighting that man was able to exploit all hours of the day and night for active life. The implications of that were written about by the American sociologist Murray Melbin in a book in the 1980s. Melbin saw it as a process in which man, during the twentieth century, conquered the hours of darkness to make them available for his purposes. Melbin entitled his book, appropriately enough, "Night as Frontier".

The Nordic region is in a way an exception to this, as the light varies more here than elsewhere on the planet, with the dark of winter being relieved by a summer light which even illuminates parts of the North throughout the night.

Even if today's dwellers of the North in November and December yearn for the light of summer evenings, their existential conditions differ radically from the conditions of light and darkness of the pre-electric centuries. Today there is seldom a shortage of light during the hours of dark; earlier, lighting consisted of a meagre flame enshrouded in darkness. In those

days darkness was an inevitable source of strain on the soul and body, which is why the lighter months of the year were seen as an elixir of life.

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At Stockholm latitude, in mid-June the sun sets at 10 p.m. (GMT+1). Earlier in the evening, the sky to the north and north-west will have altered its colouring; it gradually affects the landscape too. Close to midnight, the twilight turns to dusk and semi-darkness until dawn breaks at 2 a.m.; the sun rises at about 3.30 a.m. and daylight returns. The dusky light of Stockholm's summer nights is shared by Helsinki and Oslo, too. The three capitals all lie close to the 60th parallel north.

This light is an ethereal phenomenon of the heavens; yet it returns, night after night, lingering until sunrise, sometimes pale, in an almost white night, sometimes denser. The further north one goes, the longer this Nordic light reigns – seen as unique in a world perspective – from twilight to dusk and night through to dawn. In June, north of 61° N, night never falls, though dusk and dawn do. North of the Arctic Circle at that time of year the sun never drops below the horizon. In towns like Tromsø and Narvik in Norway, and Kiruna in Sweden, the sun shines constantly from the end of May until mid-July. In the world's most northerly capital, Reykjavik, there is daylight for nearly 21 hours of the day in mid-June; 3 hours and 20 minutes consist of dusk and dawn.

Nordic light is unique in the sense that only a fraction of the world's population experience similar conditions of light. Moving east along the Oslo-Stockholm-Helsinki parallel, you admittedly pass through St. Petersburg, but beyond that metropolis you soon encounter the relative wilderness of Siberia. Further east, the same line takes you south of Alaska, across the wilds of Canada and the Hudson Bay to the southern tip of Greenland, then south of Iceland and on to the Shetland Isles

before regaining Scandinavia at the western Norwegian coast of Hordaland.

At the southern hemisphere’s corresponding parallel, 60° south of the Equator, Nordic light has its equivalent in southern light; yet no one lives there. The southernmost point of mainland South America is at the 55th parallel, south of which lie the Great Southern Ocean and Antarctica.

Nordic light, with its dusk and dawn glow, is as old as the planet; its intensity must have been felt over the millennia. But it is not until the last two decades of the nineteenth century that it appears with a vengeance in literature and art. And that happens when several Nordic painters spend time in France and on the Continent where they not only encounter the modern “isms” of art, but a light which differs from the Nordic. Once home again, a significant period of Nordic art ensues in which several artists express experiences of light in their works. Among them are the Norwegian Harald Sohlberg (1869-1935), the Swede Eugène Jansson (1862-1915) and the Icelander Thórarinn B. Thorláksson (1867-1924). One of the greatest and most successful painters was Sweden’s Anders Zorn (1860-1920).

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Anders Zorn began painting “Midsummer Dance” after the sunset one late July evening in 1897. He was in the Swedish village of Mora which lies 60.34° north of the Equator. He was at home in the landscape of his childhood. In his painting the dancing couples move about by the maypole and in among the farm buildings, dancing a polka. Zorn leads our eyes in between the dancers to the fiddler with his violin and the music, driving the swirling dance. It is night time; the weather is fine. And it is light.

In Zorn’s painting, the sun’s beams, reaching in from one side among the buildings, are clear to see. A window on the upper floor of the red farmhouse is shimmering like a reflector. The light, as it comes from a sun close to the horizon, brings out the warm red of the farmhouse façade. Entering from one side, the light, refracted by the atmosphere, tints the dancers’ faces and clothes, too – almost like stage lighting. It is especially vis-

ible in all the garment details which a midday sun would have rendered white; twelve hours later Zorn certainly needed to call on all his competence to be able to evoke, on his canvas, the richness of nuance in the white textiles.

Dusk can, of course, be experienced anywhere the sun sets. What distinguishes Nordic climes is that, even when indoors, one can sense the sun lingering for so long, just above or just below the horizon.

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Anders Zorn often tackled the daring task of capturing the experience of the ephemeral light of dusk as an image. He did not, though, embark on an inventory, with the conditions of light as his objective. Art historian Hans Henrik Brummer points out that Zorn’s striving was for art concerned with the transmitting of sensation, the painting of mood.

“Midnight” was painted in the summer of 1891 in Mora. The title of the work tells us that the woman is in the rowing boat at dusk, the sun having set. Here there would seem to be no direct sunlight; rather, the landscape appears to be lit by a sky acting reflector to the sun’s glow. The sun’s a-sheddin’ light although he’s out of sight; so no sharp borders, separating shadow from light, are to be seen. But night’s spectrum of nuances from the palette of the dusk sky are certainly visible. It is in that pale light that we see the rower in her boat turn to face the shore, as if asking herself: “Where shall I moor?”

Anders Zorn’s own description of the occasion is one of “a bright, cold, Nordic summer night.” To a northerner, the calm can undoubtedly indicate night cold, just as the all but cloudless sky does. The cold is also possibly hinted at by its nuances of blue – an opal sky, as Brummer has called it. Midnight’s redness, the climatologist Sverker Hellström suggests, could be an appropriate term for the phenomenon of light caused by the atmospheric conditions that dusk can produce.

But from the light of the painting it seems that at least some of the warmth of the night is still present. It tints the port hull red and for a moment touches one of the rower’s arms and her hands, nape and back. She is enfolded in an ephemeral light, now warming, now chilling.



Midsommandans / Midsummer Dance

Anders Zorn

Oil on canvas, 1903

Zorn painted two versions of “Midsummer Dance”, the first in 1897. In private ownership.

Summer is also the season of the year when nature is in flower, thriving in the Nordic light. Tradition saw long working days, with people toiling from early morning to late evening. An effective day's work of ten or twelve hours was not at all unusual. But when darkness fell earlier and earlier with the approach of autumn, longer working days gave way to shorter, and by mid-winter they had been reduced to six or seven hours.

Though aware of all this, we cannot know at all clearly why the woman is out rowing at such a late hour. Perhaps she is on her way home; maybe she is going to see friends on the other side of the water; it could be that there is still work to be done before a new day breaks. In the province of Dalarna in midsummer there could be several reasons. In this way, Zorn's painting can be seen as a reminder that habits of life in the Nordic region were not merely affected by the rhythm of day and night. A distinctive annual rhythm also influenced everyday life, governed by an accentuated difference in the seasons' varied periods of light and dark over the twenty-four hours of a day.

In point of fact, the lighter half of the year enabled people to stay awake and manage the longer working days. The light of high summer effectively blocked the sleep hormone melatonin. Secretary Pehr Wargentin (1717 - 1783) of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences was unaware of melatonin, which was first named in 1958; but he was an observer of nature and noticed how "the spring and early time of summer, which enliven all Nature, do also encourage Man to love, more so than other seasons of the year." Wargentin presumed that that was a possible explanation of why so many births occurred nine months after summer. In many parts of northern Scandinavia, summer also marked the time for grazing cattle in wooded areas during the long working days and, more particularly, it marked the time when young adults would gather in numbers for the day's work, hay-making and harvesting.

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The season of the most light meant the need for lighting to be lit was small from spring to late summer. In many parts of the country everything in the way of candlesticks and lamps was stowed away in March or April. They were not necessary now that the daylight sufficed for evening chores, or for seeing one's way to bed at night. In several regions, it was from the Feast of the Annunciation (Lady Day), that lamp and candle

lighting was relieved by daylight. In August or early September, candlesticks and lamps were brought out again; autumn had returned.

In towns and cities, the daylight of evenings had a bearing on the hours of street lighting. In as late as the early twentieth century, the street lighting in a city like Stockholm remained unlit from 15 June to 15 July.

The dusk of the North consists of a liminal zone, a border zone, of light and darkness. Those who were able to used to enjoy a moment of relaxation in a "twilight sit"; the Swedish term (kura skymning) is one of several expressions for the habit of pausing in one's duties when it had become too murky to see, for a quiet talk, for relaxation in silence, or quite simply for meditative tranquillity.

There is even a technological reason for the habit: the available sources of light, before the break-through in the early 1900s of household electrification and the metal-filament light, provided so little light that there was no point in lighting them before darkness had fallen. Not until then was the contrast great enough for a tallow light or paraffin or kerosene lamp to manage any illumination.

With modern electric lighting, pausing at the twilight hour became something of the past. Nature could hardly offer a reason any more, now that 40- and 60-watt bulbs could light up a whole room. Today, daylight and electric light live side by side in many a building.



Midnatt / Midnight

Anders Zorn

Oil on canvas, 1891

Zorn Collection, Mora, Sweden.

“Glowing Embers at Dusk” was painted by Björn Ahlgrensson (1872-1918) in 1903 in the Arvika neighbourhood in the Swedish province of Värmland, close to Lake Racken. The hepaticas in their glass suggest that the picture was painted in late April or early May. The sun here, at this time of year, sets at about 9 p.m.

The evening light seems to enter the room from a window to the right. The woman at the table is the artist’s wife, her eyes resting on the dying embers of a hearth fire. The daylight reaches her as if some aura were stroking her hair.

We do not know if she is having a “twilight sit”. But we do know that we’ve reached that time of year when the standard home lighting of the time – the paraffin or kerosene lamp – is beginning to find it hard to compete with nature’s own light. The hearth fire, the normal source of lighting in the countryside, until the 1860s, is still alight though. Its warmth would have been necessary in April, even if, at that time of year, its light was not.

The conditions of light that prevailed at the time of Ahlgrensson are the same as today’s conditions. House-builders through the ages in the Nordic countries have had that light to deal with. In historical terms the need to lead light into a building has been greater than the need to prevent daylight from entering rooms. With modern building materials – glass walls of what were once unimaginable proportions, the new sources of light of the twenty-first century and several other factors, including modern interior design – it is possible that the light of the North is all that remains of the days when Zorn, Ahlgrensson and their colleagues painted their dusks.

Moreover, there is another denominator common to Anders Zorn’s generation and the architects and lighting planners of the twenty-first century: the conditions of Nordic light have provided them all, as it were, with a congenital understanding of the varied, complex, natural flow of light. To what extent such experiences of the body and of nature can be transformed into competence to illuminate our world is beyond the issue of light and dark.

Hans Henrik Brummer, Anders Zorn. 1994.

Hans Henrik Brummer, Midsommardans, 1897. i: Zorns mästerverk (Midsummer Dance, 1897 – Zorn’s Masterpieces). 2010. Jan Garnert, Anden i lampan. Etnologiska perspektiv på ljus och mörker. (The Genie of the Lamp. Ethnological Perspectives on Light and Darkness.) 1993. For a summary in English, and Chinese; see www.jangarnert.se

Murray Melbin, Night as Frontier. Colonizing the World After Dark. 1987.

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Skymningsglöden / Glowing Embers at Dusk

Björn Ahlgrensson

Tempera on canvas, 1903

Göteborg Museum of Art.