"Forest for the trees"
Metaphorical and Ethical Geography as a-ha's True North

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As an object of representation, the North appears to be crossed by a great divide. The extent to which it is seen from a distance makes it a good supplier of metaphors when it comes to direction in life, meditative attitude and self-sacrificing virtues. Indeed, a lot of scholarship has been devoted lately to the archaeology, grammar and poetics of such discourses *on* the North (for example Briens, Rasmussen & Stougaard-Nielsen 2023). Yet, as Daniel Chartier expressed in a recent manifest, not only does the North, as an imaginary space, bear the risk of turning into a cliché, but such images also "act as barriers to understanding the complexity of the North and the Arctic," not without consequences sometimes as to how those territories are treated:

> A reading of the history of representations of North convinces […] that the "North" was defined as a "space" and not as a "place:" the insistence on its characteristics linked to emptiness, immensity, and whiteness led to the development of a system of representations that sometimes overlooks the human experience of the territory. Over the centuries, the phenomenological knowledge of the North was not obvious: Westerners preferred to see in the North a territory beyond the ecumene […]. In many of the Western texts, the "North" thus refers to a neutral matrix on which we can situate a text without taking into account the material or phenomenological reality, as long as they respect a series of criteria and characteristics that are unique to the "North" in

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> the imaginary. From exploration narratives to poetry, from popular culture, filmic and commercial, to visual arts, from the song to the adventure novel, a whole imaginary forged on representations and perceptions refers to a "North" which can be considered historically as human and cultural constructions, the whole in a transversal aesthetic coherence that spans eras, genres, techniques, and cultures, all while adapting to the contexts. (Chartier 2018: 15-16)

As "a system of signs," the North shows how any narrative partakes in broader cultural dynamics (which it can affect in return), and bears witness to the complex issue of representation, stretched between metaphor and reality, escapism and commitment, identity and alterity. A recent project by Norwegian pop band a-ha, entitled *True North,* is exemplarily located at the intersection of these opposite dynamics—the North as metaphor and the North as setting where human behaviours get reflected—not least since its multimedia dimension brings forth the tension between representation and ethics; between what it *says* and what it *does*.

True North was released in October 2022 as both a musical album (the band's eleventh, see a-ha 2022) and a feature-film by photographer and director Stian Andersen (Andersen 2022). This double release was partly due to extra-artistic circumstances. The band was stopped in the middle of a world tour early 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic, and given the uncertainties as to whether they would be able to tour again in the near future, the idea of doing a project with a visual dimension emerged as a way to share new music. *True North* was also made possible by funding from the cultural project Bodø2024, linked to the attribution to the northern city of the European Capital of Culture title. The film was shot on location, and the music was partly recorded there, in collaboration with the Arktisk Filharmoni, which plays on every song.

Circumstantial as it may be, this project is accompanied, and for the first time in the band's history, by a thematization of the North (reflected in the cover of the album, a still from the film, from Unstad, Lofoten), linked to a committed stance with regard to some contemporary issues. That is interesting, since a-ha is not a band whose music could be said to fit into a Nordic heritage in terms of aesthetical or identitarian criteria (and not a band known for a politically committed approach to music either).

Formed in Oslo in 1982, the trio composed of Magne Furuholmen, Morten Harket and Pål Waaktaar quickly relocated to London, where they forged their sonic identity in the ebb of the New Wave and recorded their first albums, starting with *Hunting High and Low,* released in 1985 on Warner Bros. Records. The work of a-ha, making good use of the new technologies of the day, was always aimed at an international audience and turned them into the quintessential pop stars of the decade, in the wake of their first single, the massive hit "Take on Me" and its video directed by Steve Barron (For an analysis of that song and its importance, see Hawkins & Broch Ålvik 2019: 77-94).

When it came to distancing themselves from this first era at the turn of the 1990s, the band turned west, towards a phantasmagorical America influenced by the music of The Everly Brothers and The Doors—nothing in common with the black metal scene that was claiming Norwegianness back at the time.

The scattered history of a-ha since then, punctuated by splits and reformations, albums recorded over two continents (two of the members returned to Norway in the mid-1990s while Pål Waaktaar-Savoy—as he renamed himself—settled in the United States, where he still lives) and extensive world tours, makes them an international band *par excellence*, within a global music industry where the band can only appear as the most visible representative from Norway (the most exhaustive biography addressing those issues so far is Omdahl 2010).

Yet, if some elements related to a Nordic cultural universe had surfaced here and there in a-ha's work through the years,[1] reflections on a specifically Norwegian component of their identity started to emerge from the band members themselves around the release of their 2009 album *Foot of the Mountain,* presented as their getting back to basics after a couple more indie pop oriented records (see the press release, a-ha 2009b). One of the most comprehensive statements in that respect, from Magne Furuholmen, is found in the booklet of the live album *Summer Solstice*, released under the *MTV Unplugged* banner in 2017:

> Most of our songs draw inspiration from a childhood directly exposed to Norwegian culture, even the folk music tradition, perhaps more so than we thought. We were constantly faced with questions from journalists implying how our 'Norwegianness' was a unique part of our sound, even though we lived and worked in London. As a creative person it is almost easier to tap into this nordic mindset from a distance. History is full of good examples of how iconic Norwegians in the past did their best work away from home. The writer Henrik Ibsen wrote on universal topics with a strong Norwegian tone while living in Italy. Edvard Munch's melancholic force defined expressionism while living in Berlin—yet he simply couldn't be from anywhere but this country. And of course there is Edvard Grieg, who took a lot of inspiration directly from folk music. His music always felt particularly resonant in our ears growing up. With such strong figures and influences defining what it is to be a Norwegian, it becomes part of what you are. Our darker, melancholic streak definitely harks back to these early influences. (a-ha 2017)

[1] One could argue that the expression "Take on Me," which does not exist as such in English, is a mark of Norwegianness, sounding like an overly literal translation of "ta på meg" ("touch me"). The title of their fourth album *East of the Sun West of the Moon* is taken from one of the Norwegian fairy tales compiled by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe. The video for the title-track of their 2002 album *Lifelines* used footage from the 1991 short film *A Year along the Abandoned Road*, shot in Finmark and directed by Morten Skallerud.

Seemingly aimed at giving a retrospective coherence to a-ha's work, marked by important stylistic changes, at a moment when they release a live album covering the different periods of their career, this quote articulates identity and territory in a way that is not devoid of *hubris* (a-ha has more to do with Edvard Grieg than with Duran Duran), but can also be read as a form of *modesty*, since this identity is characterized as being, at least in the beginning, the product of an unconscious influence. Sure, it boldly fuses cultural and individual history, through the mediation of a few great nineteenth-century artists, both in terms of geographical trajectory (going to make a career outside the country) and artistic expression (around the distinctive feature, frequently noted, when it comes to Scandinavia, of *melancholy*). Yet, the North appears as a *discursive space* that allows ultimately looking back and reclaiming one's own artistic identity and history.

A project entitled *True North* could then be seen as a staging of this identity—especially since it came out only one year after the theatrical release of another film, the documentary *a-ha: The Movie* (Robsahm & Holm 2021), in which the band members candidly confront their ambivalent relationship with fame, their frustration regarding the way their trajectory has been defined by their early image, as well as the constant power struggles between three strong and at times quite diverging views of what their common ground is—leading Magne Furuholmen to clearly state in the film his refusal to record another a-ha album.

If bringing out the Nordic theme made him not just reconsider his position but also take up the reins of the *True North* project, for which he defined the concept, wrote the title-track, and acted as spokesman in the media, it is necessary to question this articulation of identity and territory, in order to see how the way it is done here can offer us an original take on the complex dynamic of narratives, at the crossroads of aesthetics and ethics.

Message

In the first press release announcing the project, in September 2021, Magne Furuholmen expressed the image of the North that he wanted to convey:

> We chose this location as a way to showcase some of Norway's most spectacular nature—where majestic mountains meet the raging sea—far up north, but right at the centre of the dramatic effects of climate-change. […] We want this film to be a poetic homage to the importance that nature holds in Norwegian culture, and in particular the ocean, which has provided us with a privileged life up here, from the early fishing boom to the troublesome riches extracted from the seabed in the form of oil. […] As Norwegians, we are acutely aware that our own welfare has made our hands black from oil. Facing these challenges going forward is a global affair, but also something that we in particular will have to find ways to contribute to. (a-ha 2021)

From the outset, the North appears in this project as an ambivalent space. On the one hand, it provides dramatic images, which also allows seeing the natural environment as an ever-fertile source of inspiration for Norwegian culture and, supposedly, the artistic expression of a-ha. On the other hand, the Nordic space—and the place of the ocean therein—is seen as being at the heart of the ecological crisis, in particular because of the exploitation of oil, leading to a discursive position tinged with self-criticism. Far from being a celebration of belonging, the North works as a way of telling something about the place and culture linked to it, as well as of articulating aesthetic experience and commitment to a change.

The project's most striking characteristic, however, is its fragmentation, which resists any cohesive message. The film juxtaposes a live performance of the album by the band and the Arktisk Filharmoni with spectacular drone views of the ocean and mountains of northern Norway, but also a fiction, made of short vignettes with a few recurring characters over half of the songs. It also includes several moments between songs where the band members speak, separately, in voice-over, while being filmed in the same landscapes. Those different layers tell different stories that contradict each other—and the music itself, equally split between Magne Furuholmen and Pål Waaktaar-Savoy in terms of songwriting and orchestral arrangements, goes in different directions that make it hard to enlist behind a single goal.

On the opening track, the solemn ballad "I'm in" (Furuholmen), the lyrics convey a message of hope for better days ahead, while a Protestant funeral service is pictured in the film after the death of a young man, punctuated by flashbacks of his life and followed by a procession on the shore. The song is followed by reflections from Magne Furuholmen in voice-over, describing how he approached the *True North* project and concluding on a reassessment of his ecological concerns:

> *True North* is maybe some sort of an acknowledgement of how things are changing and how we are in the middle of a dramatic change that in many ways is self-inflicted. We all have the dark stains of oil on our hands, as if we were immune to the wrath of nature. We have gotten rich off this thing and it's our duty to try and point out to solutions and help the change that is needed. I'm 100% confident that our children will look back at this generation and say that we failed. (Andersen 2022: 08:51)

Right after these last words are pronounced the mood changes abruptly, courtesy of two Waaktaar-Savoy's compositions: "Hunter in the Hills," a jazzier and more playful number accompanied with images from the live performance, and "As if," an angular ballad set over shots of surfers riding waves on the beach of Unstad. After some voice-over reflections on pollution and climate change by Morten Harket, the fiction returns on the melancholic "Between the Halo and the Horn" (Furuholmen), with a few scenes from the family life of the deceased. The gravity increases on the title-track, accompanied with wintery

imagery, before a new change of mood occurs, as Pål Waaktaar-Savoy is heard reflecting on his relation to the north of Norway and his own trajectory as a songwriter. Another fictional narrative arc then takes hold over the course of two of his own songs, "Bumblebee" and "Forest for the Trees," as we follow the trials and tribulations of a young arsonist couple, set against lyrics which, in the first case, deal with memories from childhood, and, in the second, seem to comment on the information crisis and the difficulties for the individual to make sense of their place in the contemporary world.

After some more reflections from Magne Furuholmen on his approach to songwriting follows his "Bluest of Blue" and its simple, almost nursery rhyme melody, over images from fishing and sea life, before the mood changes again, with "Make me understand" (Waaktaar-Savoy), a more electronic number accompanied with images from the live performance.

After some final reflections from Morten Harket on the history and legacy of the band, we pick up the fictional thread on the shore during the funeral procession on the last song of the film, "You have what it takes," another Furuholmen ballad built upon a gentle arpeggio pattern played on the acoustic guitar, with lyrics full of faith, hope and love.[2] We recognize the Protestant minister and the two young arsonists who are a part of the congregation, but when the first chorus arrives, the coffin appears to have been put on a boat on fire, relating it to pre-Christian burial rituals in the Viking Age—this boat burning on the sea being the last image of the film.

This juxtaposition of Christian and Old Norse religion generates a synthetic representation with no concern for accuracy. Decontextualized images create a fiction without historical depth, relying more on clichés from contemporary pop culture than on a substantial account on life in the North. The very fragmentary narrative ultimately serves as a pretext for offering beautiful, dark and intense images connected with the great existential themes—life, death, love, faith—without really questioning the cultural background that gives them a meaningful context.

If the images are not illustrative and often contrast with the lyrics of the songs that play simultaneously—only two of which, the title-track and "Bluest of Blue," could be seen as dealing to some extent with Northern concerns and imagery—the words spoken by the band members between the songs are hardly more in tune. Although the ecological theme is evoked by Magne Furuholmen and Morten Harket, it is clear that the three of them do not share the same conception of artistic expression as a platform for getting a message across. Other topics are evoked, and the last words pronounced in the film, by Morten Harket, just before "You have what it takes," are: "We are lucky to be doing it, but at the same time it's not an accident that the three of us are the ones that make up a-ha. It is us and we were the ones to do that." (Andersen 2022: 54:46)

[2] Two more songs, not included in the film, conclude the musical album, "Summer Rain" (Furuholmen) and "Oh my word" (Waaktaar-Savoy).

In that sense, and even though the project is presented as concerned with the outside world, what emerges from the speeches is not so much a unified message as a contrasted reflection on what it means to make music as a conflicted unit. If *True North* is presented by Magne Furuholmen as a "letter from us, from our home, to the world," (Andersen 2022: 01:00) it is a letter that ends up drawing more attention to its sender (the collective entity a-ha) than to its announced ecological content—and even struggles in that context to go beyond the "postcard" status, as long as the Nordic theme provides beautiful images but fails to tell a consistent story. Dark and bleak as they may be, the result remains highly aestheticized, and despite the mention of ocean pollution by Morten Harket at some point in the film, nothing of the like is shown on the screen.

As for Magne Furuholmen's stated ambition to contribute to the debate on the ecological crisis, it can only appear as secondary, or even opportunistic, as long as the real focus becomes *the band*, and not a message for which it would act as mouthpiece—something made all the more evident in a film partly based on a live performance, with many close-ups of the three members (even if they occupy the stage in their rather understated way).

The intention is laudable—and there is no reason to suggest that the commitment is not genuine[3]—but the implementation makes a rod for its own back, as long as the content of the message is rather conventional and does not lead to any concrete proposition beyond the acknowledgment of the shared responsibility in the climate crisis.

Incidentally, Magne Furuholmen's own compositions aim at engaging emotionally rather than intellectually, offering claims of hope rather than calls to act, and the project as a whole, seen from the perspective of its stated intention, can at best appear as compassionate and elegiac, in a way that maybe does not hit as hard as the song "Mother Nature goes to Heaven" from their 2009 album *Foot of the Mountain,* with lyrics such as "And though / You're struggling to get on track / It pales somewhat to the fact / That Mother Nature goes to heaven" (a-ha 2009a).

Medium

If the stated intention is undermined insofar as the object's inner dynamics and aesthetics stand in its way—if the medium contradicts the message—it can be interesting to look beyond this aporia and see how the process of mediation itself affects the content to a positive effect in return. The conditions of production, circulation and reception of an artefact, that we might leave

[3] a-ha is frequently credited for having actively contributed to the introduction of electric cars in Norway in the late 1980s, through acts of civil disobedience in collaboration with the Bellona Foundation (Røstvik 2024).

aside when we focus only on its representational content, deserve to be taken into account, in a media ecology perspective aiming at observing objects not in isolation but in articulation with the environment they are a part of.[4] In that sense, it is necessary to put *True North*'s environmental discourse in perspective with its own media environment, in order to see how the conditions of experience it generates can provide us with another understanding of its ethical dimension.

Worlds apart from the autonomy-of-art discourse, popular music appears indeed as a field where artistic expressions happen to be particularly informed by industry logics that go beyond the proper music. It is crucial to insist, as does sociologist Keith Negus, on the "equally significant social processes that intervene between and across the production—consumption divide" and examine "the ways that popular music is mediated by a series of technological, cultural, historical, geographical and political factors" that prevent it from being reducible to a transparent content:

> studying popular music should not simply involve attempts to follow the linear communication of musical messages from producers to consumers. Instead, it should entail examining processes of 'articulation' in which particular sounds have to seek out, be sought by and connect with particular audiences. In this way, processes of production and consumption can be approached less as discrete, fixed and bounded moments and more as a web of mediated connections. During such a complex social process, the meaning of music and its relationship to cultural identity and any social effects that it may generate arise out of a process in which performer, industry and audience 'articulate' with each other and with the surrounding culture and social-political system. (Negus 1996: 134-135)[5]

In a perspective that includes these mediations, the will to spread an ecological message appears all the more problematic. The capitalist logic of the music industry does not make it an example of virtue, with a strong focus on consumption (an album like *True North* being released on multiple physical and digital versions), and a-ha's carbon footprint is of course very high—especially since the band went back to touring in spring 2022, right between the recording and the release of the album, with a big production over two continents.

But there might also be another way to look at it. The most defining feature of the popular music business is perhaps the focus it puts on the figure of the artist. The music industry operates on a paradoxical apparatus of singularity, in the sense that the artist, while being only a small part of a machinery consisting of producers, managers, directors, A&R, etc.—and having thus limited freedom—remains the definite centre of attention. In the regime of visibility of a certain mainstream pop music, with the importance of videos,

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[4] For a general presentation of this framework, see Citton 2019.

[5] For a more comprehensive approach, see Middleton 1990.

live shows, radio and TV promotion, the real work (or the real product) is the artist—even, the *performer*.[6]

A band like a-ha, whose status and trajectory have so much been defined by image, cannot easily eschew the performative dimension that comes into play in the audience's experience. A band is itself a medium—a common history, oeuvre and public image—*through* which the songs reach their audience, strongly marked by this personified dimension at the crossroads of the sonic and the visual. In that respect, it is anything but a mere vehicle for an artistic expression: a popular music band is not just making music but a staging of the very *fact* of making music, and in that perspective, releasing an a-ha track also is *about* releasing an a-ha track.

What is interesting on *True North* is precisely how this medial dimension is addressed in the film, with the band members formulating, each in their own way, what they consider the heart of their artistic identity, their diverging takes reflected in the music by the contrasted contributions of the two songwriters. The band members have for a long time made no secret of their complex relational dynamics and need to distinguish themselves from each other, and even explored this issue at times in their music, turning it into a reflection of the social environment through which it is released.[7] In that sense, a-ha exhibit their own medium as being artificial and constructed, caught up in logics that go beyond—and their identity as being a very *composite* one.

Recognizing the necessity to take into account this medial dimension and to see the band as an equally significant issue of attention, through which the music gets activated, allows us to question anew the articulation of territory and identity, not so much in the discourse this time, but in the music itself—that is, not so much in what they *say*, but in what they actually *do*—in order to see how this performative space can take on a different meaning.

Melancholy

No matter how unsuccessful Magne Furuholmen's attempt to federate the band around a common goal turns out to be, the fact remains that the North, in his statements, works as a unifying marker for what he sees at the heart of a-ha's *expression*, one of the rare aspects for which a "we" is assumed, insofar as it refers not to an essentialized identity but rather to a mood, namely, melancholy. He states it again at the beginning of the film, linking it to the natural environment of Norway: "The whole sense of melancholy and yearning

[6] For a good survey on that topic, see Frith 1996.

[7] Many songs from the 2000s like "Summer moved on," "Don't do me any favours" and "Butterfly, Butterfly (The Last Hurrah)" deal in a fairly transparent way with the inner dynamics of the band. On *True North*, "Summer Rain" could also be read this way, with lines such as "We can get together if we can see beyond our pride" and "Now what we cannot solve we can set aside / Despite our differences we're intertwined".

that is underpinning everything we do is linked to this experience of living with dramatic nature at the core" (Andersen 2022: 07:57).

If the question of Nordic melancholy is a rather frequent association, what is interesting is how, rather than closing it in on an essence, Magne Furuholmen opens it up to some other place: "If you grow up in Norway, melancholy is (*sic*) nothing to do with being sad: melancholy is a sense of yearning, a longing, and, probably, historically, a transport away from hardship" (Majewski & Bernstein 2014: 221). Being Nordic, in that sense, would mean being open to something else that is as much the object of a lack as of a desire.

In the first part of *Stanzas*, Giorgio Agamben argued that melancholy bears a positive value inasmuch as it generates a space for the relationship of the self to what is out of reach. Following on from the Church fathers' view on *acedia*, Aristotle's theory of the black bile and Freud's analysis of the dynamic mechanism of melancholy, he sees in the withdrawal vis-à-vis the possibility of appropriating the object of desire a way of holding on to the unattainable and maintaining a link with something that may actually not exist:

> From this point of view, melancholy would be not so much the regressive reaction to the loss of the love object as the imaginative capacity to make an unobtainable object appear as if lost. If the libido behaves *as if* a loss had occurred although *nothing* has in fact been lost; this is because the libido stages a simulation where what cannot be lost because it has never been possessed appears as lost, and what could never be possessed because it had never perhaps existed may be appropriated insofar as it is lost. [...] Covering its object with the funereal trappings of mourning, melancholy confers upon it the phantasmagorical reality of what is lost; but insofar as such mourning is for an unobtainable object, the strategy of melancholy opens a space for the existence of the unreal and marks out a scene in which the ego may enter into relation with it and attempt an appropriation such as no other possession could rival and no loss possibly threaten. (Agamben 1993: 20)

If melancholy designates this relation to the unreal, melancholic music can be seen as the quintessential experience of the unreachable, valuable less for what it calls forth than for its resistance to fulfilment and its capacity to create some kind of distance to what it aims at. This is what Norwegian writer and scholar Janne Stigen Drangsholt implies in her book devoted to a-ha's fourth album, where she qualifies "the heart of a-ha's existential project" as having to do with

> this (home) longing which is existential or spiritual and which is basically directed towards something completely different than the other person. Often it may seem that what the subject longs and looks for has more in common with what many post-war theorists and philosophers have referred to as the great problem of modern man, namely that we are in a state of constant longing for something indefinable that does not exist. This idea can be traced back to Freud, who speaks of the 'lost object of desire', but we can also find similar thoughts in the work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in the form of the concept of *l'objet petit a*, of critic Edward Said who calls it 'origin', or of director Alfred

> Hitchcock who refers to it as a 'MacGuffin'. This object does not exist in itself, but rather points towards our deepest longings.[8] (Stigen Drangsholt 2022: 43-44)

Janne Stigen Drangsholt mostly bases her analysis on the lyrics, but her argument in that respect echoes that of Norwegian author Stig Sæterbakken who, in an essay from 1998, not devoted to a-ha but to "sad music," qualified the "melancholic element of music" as that which

> brings us face to face with an enormous chasm, an alluring abyss, where what should have been, which if it were there, would have made us whole, would have satisfied us totally and completely, and given us peace, but which, because it is not there, keeps us longing for something alive. And maybe that is what sad music calls forth in us, just as it brings us to the edge of our inner abyss, a longing to remain standing there, unfulfilled, in this longing, which is a longing for another music than the one we actually hear, a music that resembles it, but which is not identical to it, and which is a music we desperately want to hear, but which at the same time is available to us only through the other that we listen to right now, that which can only be distinguished as a possibility, so to say, in the music we listen to, which is not the music we are longing for, but which resembles it, a similarity that is like a delightful satisfaction and at the same time a frustrating absence of satisfaction. […] Within every piece of music, there is another piece of music, one that we will never hear because it can only attract us by means of its elusiveness, its unattainable nature, imperceptible but for this reminder of it, via the piece of music that resembles it, but which is not it, the feeling of how it *could have been*, a feeling that would have been pulverized in the very moment it was confirmed, and which we therefore do not wish to have confirmed, because that would take from us our deep and heartfelt wish to have it confirmed. (Sæterbakken 2012)

Stretched between what it is and what it calls forth, what it gives and what it takes away, melancholic music, in its way of creating a distance to an object that may be forever out of reach, appears exemplarily as a non-authoritarian space, opening onto something that it cannot fully encompass. This is reflected in the general atmospheric and thoughtful tone of *True North,* which, in tune

[8] "denne (hjem) lengselen som er eksistensiell eller åndelig og som i bunn og grunn er rettet mot noe helt annet enn det andre mennesket. Ofte kan det synes som det subjektet lengter og leter etter har mer til felles med det mange av etterkrigstidens teoretikere og filosofer har omtalt som det moderne menneskets store problem, nemlig at vi er i en tilstand av en konstant lengsel etter noe udefinerbart som ikke finnes. Denne tanken kan spores tilbake til Freud, som snakker om det «tapte objektet for begjær», men vi kan også finne lignende tanker hos den franske psykoanalytikeren Jacques Lacan i form av begrepet *le petit objet a [sic]*, eller kritik Edward Said som kaller det *origin* («opphav»), eller regissør Alfred Hitchcock som refererer til det som en «MacGuffin». Dette objektet finnes altså ikke i seg selv, men peker heller mot våre dypeste lengsler."

with lyrics that often point towards what is not there (be it on a hopeful or nostalgic mode), is aimed at some kind of transportative state.[9]

But this dynamic of non-coincidence is enhanced by the tensions within the musical material itself, which prevent it from coalescing into a unidimensional expression and make it even more fitted to building up to stratified listening experiences of the kind expressed by Stig Sæterbakken. The melodies often stretch the harmony in unexpected directions, creating compositions that resist falling into the codified expression of one assignable feeling. This complex dimension is also at work in the arrangements, which make good use of the orchestra, providing depth, space and variety to the songs through the addition of quite independent melody lines and textures.

This relative autonomy of the diverse elements is also something the two main songwriters in the band seem to agree on seeing as a key component of a-ha's music:

> Paul: 'A good a-ha song plays a trick on you. It's in a minor key when you think it's in a major key, and vice-versa. It has melodies that don't make sense until you've spent a good deal of time with them. I like strange chords. I like to put words or sentences together in a way that makes them seem almost inappropriate to the context. The most beautiful melodies are always those that first scrape against another theme or against a chord in a discordant way. When you resolve it, the reward is all the sweeter. I'm always looking for a surprising door through which the refrain can enter. And I like it when the bridge is the best part of the song.' Magne: 'For me, it's often the encounter between a strong, introspective melody and a catchy, extroverted theme that creates a musical and dramatic tension in an a-ha song. The unpredictable, slightly atonal quality mixed into the harmonies. Then there's the coupling of a Nordic melancholy with the obstinacy of a catchy pop tune.' (Omdahl 2010: 282)

This is especially the case on *True North* as the music often collide with the lyrical content in a way that provides a sense of ambiguity, in tension with the constant precision of the melodic writing and vocal delivery. The way

[9] In a piece written for *Aftenposten*, Magne Furuholmen states: "as long as I can remember, goosebumps have been the guiding principle for both listening and making music. It's been used as a guiding principle throughout a-ha's career, and we still use it. It's the word that best describes what we've been trying to achieve, both for ourselves and for what we've wanted to share. You can read all sorts of things into what it means, but it is of course a kind of transport out of a normal situation and into a eureka moment that is often impossible to induce on purpose." Magne Furuholmen, "Gåsehuden har alltid styrt A-ha" (Furuholmen 2023) "så lenge jeg kan huske, har gåsehud vært det styrende prinsippet både for å høre på og lage musikk. Det har vært brukt som rettesnor i hele A-has karriere, og vi bruker det fremdeles. Det er det ordet som best beskriver det vi har vært ute etter å oppnå, både for vår egen del, og for det vi har hatt lyst til å dele. Så kan du legge alt mulig rart i hva det innebærer, men det er selvfølgelig en slags transport ut av en normalsituasjon og inn i et eurekaøyeblikk som ofte er helt umulig å fremkalle med vilje."

Magne Furuholmen's lyrics, which often express hope in the most direct way, are set upon bittersweet soundscapes, makes them equally reflections on the transience of life, especially on the title-track, where the chorus lines "We'll sail to the end of the world / But good sailors always return" can be read either as a leap of faith (something encouraged by the psalm-like quality of the melody and the following lines: "So hold on to hope / And pray there will be / Fair wind and following sea") or as deceptively upbeat self-persuasion (something the density of the dramatic arrangement could also imply)—in any case as a very fragile light opened in the dark.

Although quite different in tone, Pål Waaktaar-Savoy's lyrics also often contrast with the music, which is placid when they hint at something ominous ("Hunter in the Hills") and catchy when they tend to be desperate ("Make me understand"). On the closing-track, "Oh my word," the contrasting lines "Sad days / Belong to the past / Only a fool / Could expect them to last" and "Heydays / Belong to the past / Only a fool / Could expect it to last" are sung to the exact same melody, pushing the horizon of meaning beyond—or in-between—the positive elements of the music.

In that respect, the overarching expression "true north," referring to a direction rather than a place (Davidson 2005), could be considered a good image of that melancholic tension towards something that the music hints at without fully encapsulating it—and indeed a fitting one to look back on the artistry of a-ha, from the perspective of what they agree on.[10]

Such a use of the North as a metaphor for that which cannot be owned would of course be subject to Daniel Chartier's critique exposed at the beginning of this chapter. But the fact that this aesthetics of non-coincidence is further complicated by the general logic of juxtaposition at work on the album as a whole, and that the question of the band as a specific medium is addressed directly in the film, makes the "true north" a significant figure on another level, more in tune with Chartier's ethical claim.

Meridian

If melancholic music consists precisely in not fully coinciding with itself and bringing out a part that resists appropriation, then the diversity within the band disseminates it in multiple directions on the record. *True North* is, like the few preceding a-ha albums, composed with a minimal degree of collaboration. Side by side, and with the lack of an authoritarian position, the songs enter though in some kind of a dialogue. The sometimes contradictory

[10] It is also interesting in that respect to see how a-ha themselves often refer to their frustration at not having succeeded to catch the essence of their songs in the process of materializing them. See for example the multiple comments by Pål Waaktaar-Savoy on that topic in Nilsson 2017.

ways of referring to the passing of time, the real and imaginary, solace and a possible transcendence, echo each other; the almost ritualistic perspective of Magne Furuholmen's secular psalms and nursery rhymes is nuanced by the more idiosyncratic figures of Pål Waaktaar-Savoy's tunes, offering a layered structure in which the songs can refract each other.[11]

Above all, this logic of juxtaposition brings out the common denominator *in* the music itself. It has to do with Morten Harket's distinctive grain of voice and high-pitched delivery, with its ability to create cohesiveness while turning every note into a potential event, but also with a shared conception of the pop song as combining sharp melodic writing and immersive atmosphere (particularly with regard to the detailed orchestral arrangements that often lean towards musical stylization).

The tension between a recognizable essence (amplified within the strong presence effect generated by the popular music apparatus) and the plurality that shapes it from within is made all the more evident on *True North,* which juxtaposes songs that reflect on the history of the band through a web of self-references,[12] with songs that push new boundaries in terms of moods and influences.[13] The individualized contents stand out against the backdrop of a shared territory, but this common ground emerges simultaneously from the variety of these contents, making a-ha's identity appear negatively, as the space of non-coincidence between the whole and the parts.

In that respect, the way this tension plays out on *True North*, not only on an aesthetic level (through its capacity to produce something both recognizable and multiple—something recognizable out of multiplicity), but in the actual space between the individuals that make up a-ha, also allows us to see how this project can point towards another model for understanding the "true north" image.

If we choose to see the way this project uses the North as having more to do with a way of referring to the common territory of the band than with a real geographic place,[14] the procedures of juxtaposition and non-coincidence at

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[11] See for example the contradictory uses of the word "afterglow" in "As if" and "Between the Halo and the Horn".

[12] This appears most evidently on the title-track, which refers heavily to the title-track of their third record, *Stay on these Roads*, from 1988, in terms of chords progression and building (making its "We'll sail to the end of the world / But good sailors always return" lines also a possible nostalgic image of the days where the band was a tighter unit, collaborating more closely together) and on "Forest for the Trees," which harks back to "Here I stand and face the Rain," the closing-track of *Hunting High and Low*, with which it shares a G-C#-Em-Bm cadence at the end of the chorus.

[13] This being particularly true of the three Waaktaar-Savoy songs with a Burt Bacharach-flavour: "Hunter in the Hills," "Bumblebee" and "Oh my word".

[14] As Magne Furuholmen states at some point in the film: "The sort of shared fate of a-ha is always there in the background. Any melody I write, it's difficult not to hear Morten's voice singing it" (Andersen 2022: 43:01).

work become an acknowledgement of how identity works as a field of tension rather than a predetermined substance, opened onto the alterity within and without.

It is fitting that the expression "true north," directed towards a place beyond reach, should relate to the image of the *meridian*, used by Paul Celan to refer to "what connects and leads, like the poem, to an encounter, something—like language—immaterial, yet terrestrial, something circular that returns to itself across both poles while—cheerfully—even crossing the tropics" (that is, for Paul Celan, the tropes of creation taken in its constructivist, rhetorical, sense) (Celan 2011: 12).

The "true north" image conveys that movement that passes each individual's expression through the mediation of the band but also singularizes them in return, turning the album into the implementation of how the *encounter* is a praxis that commits to the other within a space that no longer belongs to anyone.

In their own field, where the focus on the performers takes precedence over the meaning of the artistic expression, a-ha's refusal (or incapacity) to adhere to one message forces them to explore the dynamics between the Same and the Other, turning the band itself into a figure of the inappropriable, more consistent ethically than the very content of their discourse *on* the North.[15]

In the tension between an elusive whole and the individualized parts lies a strong potential for emancipation—of oneself in relation to oneself through the mediation of the whole; of oneself in relation to the whole; of the whole in relation to the entities that make it. Insofar as it is crossed by ever new differences, a common territory deactivates power—to the point where even the forest can no longer hide the trees.

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[15] For a political take on that figure, in which "the locus of power is an empty place" and democracy is equated with the refusal of "the authority of the One," see Lefort 1988.

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